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Inadequate support and flawed performance evaluations hamper Rockford Public Schools' efforts to improve teacher effectiveness

Study identifies challenges in the district's approach to managing teacher certification, mentoring, evaluation and layoffs

ROCKFORD, IL - A new study finds that Rockford Public Schools (RPS) fails to provide teachers with the constructive feedback and high-quality support they need to improve their instructional performance. Further, the study finds that nearly all teachers receive an "excellent" evaluation rating and poor performance goes unaddressed. These and other policy challenges hamper the school system's ongoing efforts to ensure that every student receives a highly effective teacher.

The study was conducted by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a nonprofit dedicated to improving teacher quality, in collaboration with RPS and the Rockford Education Association (REA). The research was part of a four-state, multi-year study of teacher evaluation and dismissal policies and practices. TNTP published its national findings in its June 2009 report, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act Upon Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (www.widgeteffect.org).

In RPS, one of three Illinois districts to participate in the study, TNTP focused on understanding the impact of both state and local policies on teacher quality. TNTP surveyed nearly 950 RPS teachers and 92 administrators, reviewed state, district and contractual policies, and analyzed data on teacher performance and layoffs. The organization's final analysis shows that:

- 1. Performance evaluation ratings are inflated.** Teacher evaluations are based upon brief and infrequent classroom observations and result in 80 percent of tenured teachers being rated "excellent."
- 2. Poor performance goes unaddressed.** Since the 2005-06 school year, only two tenured teachers have been dismissed for poor performance.
- 3. Reductions in force cause unnecessary disruption.** Most teachers are recalled soon after being laid off, and nearly half return to the same school.
- 4. Certification is confusing and cumbersome.** RPS does not provide teachers with the support they need to maintain their teaching certificate, and has trouble filling high-need vacancies because of cumbersome state certification rules.
- 5. Mentoring programs are inadequate.** RPS successfully enrolls most new teachers with no prior experience in the district's mentor program. Yet only 42 percent of all participants report being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the program.

“We applaud Rockford Public Schools and the Rockford Education Association for their willingness to examine these difficult issues and their commitment to improvement,” said Daniel Weisberg, TNTP’s Vice President of Policy and General Counsel. “Now comes the hard work of tackling the necessary reforms. Rockford’s educators deserve support, meaningful feedback, and stable instructional teams. Teachers and students both stand to benefit from an honest evaluation system and effective staffing rules that treat teachers like individual professionals, not interchangeable parts.”

The report advises RPS and the REA to collaborate in order to:

1. Implement a rigorous teacher evaluation process that differentiates teachers based upon performance, and provides them with feedback to strengthen their instruction;
2. Limit the number of unnecessary layoffs by using improved forecasting methods;
3. Improve the quality of support provided to teachers as they renew their teaching certificates, and develop strategies to increase the number of candidates in high-need subject areas;
4. Ensure that new teachers have increased access to mentoring activities they find most helpful in improving their instruction and evaluate the mentor program by tracking its impact on improved teacher performance.

The New Teacher Project’s full analysis and an executive summary are available on the organization’s website, at <http://widgeteffect.org/district-reports/Rockford>.

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About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) helps school districts and states fulfill the promise of public education by ensuring that all students – especially those from high-need communities – get excellent teachers. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP recognizes that although teachers matter more than any other school factor in student success, the nation’s education systems are not aligned with the goal of an effective teacher in every classroom. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to diagnose their teacher quality challenges and find, develop and keep great teachers. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 33,000 teachers – mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows™ programs – benefiting an estimated 4.8 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation’s teacher workforce, most recently including *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (2009). Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, among others. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.