

Strengthening Human Capital in

Akron Public Schools

An outdated teacher evaluation process in Akron Public Schools has created a culture of rating inflation in which excellence goes unrecognized, teacher development is stymied, and schools are unable to address poor performance among either novice or veteran teachers.

Introduction

In 2008 and 2009, Akron Public Schools (APS) participated in The New Teacher Project's research for a national study, *The Widget Effect*, published in June 2009. TNTP conducted its analysis with the cooperation of the district and the Akron Education Association (AEA). The analysis consisted of the following components:

- Analysis of district data on teacher evaluation, non-renewals, transfers, and dismissals.
- Online surveys of current APS principals and current and former APS teachers. A total of 36 current APS principals, 1,010 current APS teachers, and 41 former APS teachers responded to the surveys (response rates of 65 percent, 58 percent, and 10 percent, respectively).
- Interviews with a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives from the central administration and AEA, school principals, and teachers.

Findings

1. Evaluation ratings suggest a dramatically inflated view of teacher performance.

APS has a restrictive, outdated evaluation process that places minimal emphasis on a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom and limits the number of times a principal can observe a teacher. As a result, the process yields a dramatically inflated view of teacher performance. More than 90 percent of continuing contract teachers received one of the top two evaluation ratings over the last three years, even though principals say that only 57 percent of their continuing contract teachers actually perform at the "Outstanding" or "Very Good" level. Moreover, teachers at the lowest-performing schools tend to receive the highest evaluation ratings. Principals and teachers lack faith in the evaluation process: just 39 percent of teachers and 34 percent of principals believe it provides an accurate assessment of teacher performance.

2. Rating inflation obscures true excellence and prevents rewards for the district's top performers.

Although 60 percent of continuing-contract teachers have received an evaluation rating of “Outstanding” over the last three years, principals report that only 26 percent of their continuing contract teachers actually perform at that level. This group of truly excellent educators disappears into the larger group receiving inflated ratings, making it impossible to recognize and reward the top performers. A clear majority of teachers and more than three-quarters of principals say that APS fails to adequately identify, recognize, compensate, promote and retain its most effective teachers.

3. Rating inflation undercuts teacher effectiveness by giving teachers an unrealistic view of their own performance and limiting constructive feedback.

In APS' culture of inflation, teachers come to expect the highest evaluation ratings, even in their first few years on the job. The result is that teachers who receive lower ratings feel they have been treated unfairly, and principals are reluctant to give critical feedback that could help teachers improve. In all, 96 percent of teachers – including 86 percent of those in their first three years – believe they should have received one of the top two ratings on their most recent evaluation. Only one in four teachers received critical feedback on any area of their performance on their most recent evaluation, and fewer than half of those teachers received support that helped them improve in that area. Not surprisingly, only 38 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals believe the evaluation process helps teachers improve their instructional performance.

4. APS misses a critical opportunity to differentiate strong and weak novice teachers by excluding performance from consideration in granting continuing contracts.

Ohio state law allows districts to non-renew teachers with limited contracts – typically those with less than three years of experience – for any reason, but allows dismissal of teachers with continuing contracts for only a limited number of specific reasons. As a result, most districts view the limited-contract period as a time to assess new teachers’ effectiveness before awarding them continuing contracts. But APS has specifically excluded performance from consideration in awarding continuing contracts. APS principals lack authority to recommend denial of continuing contracts, and 41 percent of principals report that one of their teachers earned a continuing contract even though they thought his or her performance was unsatisfactory.

5. Poor performance goes unaddressed.

Sixty-four percent of teachers and 72 percent of principals say there are continuing contract teachers in their school who deliver poor instruction – often poor enough to warrant dismissal. However, poor performance is never formally identified or addressed: over the last three years, 0 of 1,062 continuing-contract teacher evaluations resulted in an “Unsatisfactory” evaluation rating, and no continuing-contract teachers were formally dismissed for poor instructional performance. Principals cite a cumbersome Plan of Assistance, a complicated dismissal process and a lack of confidence that Human Resources will support a recommendation for dismissal as reasons they don’t address poor performance. Evidence suggests that APS simply transfers poor performers from school to school, never actually helping them improve or removing those who don’t.

Recommendations

To address these challenges and raise the quality of instruction throughout the district, TNTP recommends APS implement the following reforms:

Short-term reforms (by the end of the 2009-10 school year)

- Revise the teacher evaluation tool and incorporate student performance data into teacher evaluation.
- Norm evaluation ratings to ensure fair and accurate implementation of the tool across the district.
- Eliminate burdensome and unnecessary restrictions related to the teacher evaluation process.
- Track teacher evaluation data electronically, and use the data to provide targeted support and professional development.
- Train and empower principals to manage the instructional quality in their buildings, and rigorously hold them accountable for doing so.
- Use teacher evaluation data to inform key human capital decisions, including retention, compensation, layoffs, and staff displacements.

Long-term reforms (school years 2010-11 and 2011-12)

- Adopt dismissal policies and practices that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to leave the district.
- Implement an advanced technology platform to support best practices in teacher performance management.

TNTP's full analysis of teacher performance management in APS is available online at <http://widgeteffect.org/district-reports/>.

About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) works to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that although great teachers are the best solution to educational inequality, the nation's education systems do not sufficiently prioritize the goal of effective teachers for all. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers and achieve reforms that promote effective teaching in every classroom. 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.