

Teacher Performance Management and Staffing in El Dorado Public Schools

To raise student achievement, El Dorado Public Schools must consistently evaluate all teachers based on student learning outcomes, provide all teachers with the feedback they need to do their best work, and formally address poor performance in the classroom.

Introduction

In the fall of 2008, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with El Dorado Public Schools (EPS) in Arkansas to assess the impact of the district's policies and practices on the ability of schools to hire, develop and keep effective teachers. EPS was also one of 12 school districts nationwide that participated in TNTP's study of teacher evaluation policies, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* which published in June 2009. TNTP conducted its analysis of EPS using the following data:

- Interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including district leadership, board members, principals and teachers;
- Analysis of the district's personnel and evaluation policies and teacher evaluation data; and
- Online surveys of teachers and administrators (341 teachers and 13 principals and assistant principals responded to the survey).

TNTP's analysis reveals that the “widget effect” – the tendency of the nation's public school systems to ignore differences in teacher effectiveness – plays out in EPS through an evaluation process that makes it virtually impossible to differentiate teachers based on their performance in the classroom. EPS does not maintain sufficient records of teacher performance; poor performance usually goes unaddressed; and most importantly, teachers rarely receive the constructive feedback they need in order to do their best work.

Findings

EPS' current evaluation process does not provide teachers – particularly those in need of remediation – with the support they need to develop and improve their instructional practice.

Compared to other districts TNTP has studied, a relatively high percentage of EPS teachers receive lower performance rating. One in four EPS teachers report receiving “unacceptable” or “needs improvement” ratings on their most recent evaluations. Fewer than half of these teachers, however, also say that their evaluator identified specific areas of improvement or provided resources to help them improve in those areas, and most who did receive support say it wasn't useful. Only half of teachers and a slight majority

of principals believe that the Professional Assistance Track—the evaluation process for teachers identified as needing additional assistance—is effective in improving poor instructional performance. This may explain why no administrator has put more than one teacher a year, on average, on the Professional Assistance Track. In addition, only 36 percent of principals are satisfied with the evaluation process overall and agree that the process is clear and easy to carry out. This skepticism could be due in part to insufficient training: only 18 percent of principals report that they have received extensive training on conducting effective evaluations.

Only 36 percent of principals are “satisfied” with the current teacher evaluation process. None are “very satisfied”.

The evaluation process does not provide all teachers with a formal performance rating. As a result, poor performance goes unaddressed.

In EPS, the vast majority of non-probationary teachers (those who are not identified as needing additional assistance) are not required to have their instructional performance observed, nor do they receive a performance rating. Without formal evaluation ratings for all teachers, it is impossible to track teacher performance across the district and respond to poor performance. Teachers and principals confirm that poor performance is going unaddressed: nearly a quarter of EPS teachers believe that there are teachers in their school who should be dismissed for poor instructional performance but have not been, and half of administrators report “unacceptable” performance from 5 to 10 percent of their teachers. Despite evidence of poor teaching performance, only 36 percent of administrators have actually initiated the dismissal of a non-probationary teacher for poor instructional performance in the last five years.

Principals report that an inadequate applicant pool and delayed hiring timelines make it difficult for EPS to recruit and hire high-quality new teachers.

100 percent of principals are satisfied with their level of discretion to hire the teachers they want and agree that the new teacher hiring process allows them to hire the best possible teachers for their schools. Despite that, only 43 percent agree that the hiring timeline allows them to hire early enough to capture the highest quality new teacher applicants. In fact, two-thirds of principals report having lost a desirable candidate because they were not able to make an offer in a timely fashion, mostly due to delayed resignation and retirement notification timelines. In addition, only 2 out of 7 principals are satisfied with the overall quantity of applicants in EPS, and only 1 out of 7 believes that the pool of available new hires includes enough teachers in high-need subject areas. And only 57 percent of EPS principals are satisfied with the quality of new teacher hires, compared to nearly 100 percent of principals in other Arkansas districts TNTP studied.

Although EPS tries to fill many teacher vacancies through the best practice of “mutual consent,” this effort is undermined when principals use the transfer process to move poor performers out of their schools.

Nearly three out of four EPS teachers who transfer schools are assigned to their new positions after interviewing with and being selected by their new principal. Overall, 82 percent of transferring teachers are satisfied with this process. However, more than half of principals say they have encouraged a teacher to transfer because they thought he or she was not performing well—a practice that undermines mutual consent hiring and may explain why only 57 percent of principals believe that the transfer process allows them to hire the teachers that create the best possible instructional team for their schools.

Recommendations

In order to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes, El Dorado Public Schools should strive to meet two overarching goals:

1. Rigorously and accurately evaluate teacher performance so that all EPS students are taught by effective teachers; and
2. Collect and use teacher applicant, employment and performance data to make key human capital decisions, such as hiring and professional development.

Specific recommendations include:

- Develop and adopt a new teacher evaluation system that incorporates student learning outcomes as the primary determinant of teacher effectiveness.
- Articulate and promote teacher effectiveness standards and performance expectations through increased communication and district-level policy changes.
- Train and provide ongoing support for principals to effectively evaluate teacher performance and hold them accountable for faithfully implementing the system.
- Develop a system that will facilitate the electronic collection and use of applicant, employment and performance data.
- Revise the teacher application to include additional data points and use the data to make strategic recruitment and hiring decisions.

To view the full report, including more detailed data and a full description of the recommendations, please visit <http://widgeteffect.org/district-reports/eldorado>.

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 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 37,000 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 40 cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, among others. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.