

Strengthening Human Capital in

Pueblo City Schools, CO

Flimsy teacher performance management policies and practices in Pueblo City Schools result in 99 percent of teachers being rated “satisfactory.” Consequently, teacher development is unfocused, new talent is disadvantaged and poor performance is overlooked—leading to a culture of mistrust among teachers.

Introduction

In the winter and spring of 2008, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with Pueblo City Schools (PCS) and the Pueblo Education Association (PEA) in Pueblo, Colorado to assess the impact of the district’s policies and practices on the ability of schools to build and maintain strong instructional teams. The outcome of this study was TNTP’s 2008 report *Teacher Hiring, Transfer, and Evaluation in Pueblo City Schools*.¹ In addition, PCS was one of 12 school districts nationwide to participate in TNTP’s study of teacher performance management policies and practices, which resulted in the June 2009 report *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (www.widgeteffect.org). Data collected in PCS for this study included the following components:

- Interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including central leadership, union leadership, principals and teachers;
- Analysis of district teacher hiring, transfer, evaluation, non-renewal, and dismissal data; and
- Online surveys of principals and teachers (565 teachers and 34 principals responded to the survey, for response rates of 51 percent and 103 percent,² respectively).

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 PCS through a weak evaluation process that rates nearly all teachers the same. It is exacerbated by longstanding district policies and practices that prevent adequate teacher development, purge the district of new talent year after year, and allow poor performance to fester, all of which contribute to teacher perceptions of unfairness.

Findings

The PCS teacher evaluation process fails to differentiate teacher effectiveness and provide individual teachers feedback to improve their instructional performance.

As mandated by state policy, the PCS teacher evaluation process offers only two final ratings: Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory.

99.7% of non-probationary teacher evaluations between 2005 and 2008 resulted in a rating of “Satisfactory”.

¹ Report available for download at www.tntp.org/publications/otherpublications.html

² PCS distributed an email survey invitation to 33 principals; 34 complete responses were received. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, TNTP and PCS were unable to determine the source of the additional response.

Between 2005 and 2008, 99.7 percent of non-probationary teacher evaluations resulted in a rating of “Satisfactory,” ignoring virtually all differences in effectiveness among the teaching force. Further, the evaluation process fails to differentiate individual development needs, as only 29 percent of teachers had areas in need of improvement identified in any of their last three evaluations. Survey data point to lack of evaluator training, cursory observations of the teachers being evaluated, and a weak evaluation tool as three likely factors in the ineffectiveness of the current evaluation process. Together, these shortcomings disrespect teachers by failing to provide them with the feedback, support and ongoing development necessary to help them maximize their effectiveness.

Probationary teachers receive no special scrutiny in the evaluation process, while staffing policies uniformly disadvantage junior teachers, regardless of individual performance.

Research demonstrates that teachers in their first few years in the job are less effective than their more experienced colleagues.³ However, the evaluation process in PCS yields the same results for probationary teachers as for non-probationers: 98 percent of probationary teacher evaluations between 2005 and 2008 resulted in a rating of “Satisfactory” and only 36 percent of probationary teachers had an area rated as need of improvement. Equal indifference to variations in effectiveness among probationary teachers was found in PCS’ historic

“We need to figure things out before we blanket the district in pink. It’s archaic and forces good people to look elsewhere for a job.”

- PCS teacher

practice of blanket non-renewals, or “pinkslipping,” to address possible budget shortfalls. Between 2005 and 2008, an average of 77 percent of teachers hired each year were “non-renewed,” without consideration of their effectiveness (e.g., to ensure that strong teachers were protected and weak teachers were not rehired). This practice likely resulted in a significant loss of talent in PCS, as only 17 percent of non-renewed teachers were rehired each year.

Poor performers have traditionally been transferred from school to school instead of being held accountable through formal means, breeding dissatisfaction among principals and mistrust among teachers.

As noted above, less than 1 percent of teacher evaluations in PCS result in a rating of “Unsatisfactory,” but this rate underestimates the true number of poor performers, as 34 percent of teachers and 46 percent of principals say there is a non-probationary teacher in their school who should be dismissed for poor instructional performance. PCS principals point to a cumbersome dismissal process that they believe is unlikely to result in a successful termination. In lieu of dismissal, PCS has traditionally moved poor performers from school to school via the involuntary transfer process. This practice appears to have a negative impact on student learning, as 66 percent of principals describe the quality of teachers who have been involuntarily transferred to their school as unsatisfactory. Moreover, the illegitimate use of involuntary transfers to address poor performance has contributed to the perception among teachers that they may be subject to unfair treatment. Thirty-seven percent of PCS teachers believe that the level of protection from unfair treatment provided by non-probationary status is too low, the highest rate of any district studied by TNTP for *The Widget Effect*.

³ See, for example, Steven G. Rivkin, Eric Hanushek and John F. Kain, “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement,” *Econometrica* 73, no. 2 (2005)

Recommendations

To address these challenges and provide all students with the high-quality teachers they need, TNTP recommends that PCS adopt the following set of short- and long-term reforms to policy and practice:

- **Short-Term Reforms**
 - Abolish longstanding district policies and practices that undermine teacher effectiveness and breed teacher mistrust, such as blanket non-renewals and involuntary transfers of poor performers;
 - Develop and clearly communicate district teaching standards and align evaluation and professional development with those standards;
 - Invest in high-quality training for evaluators and hold them accountable for implementing the teacher evaluation system correctly;
 - Norm teacher evaluation ratings to ensure consistency across the district.

- **Long-Term Reforms**
 - Overhaul the evaluation system by introducing a multiple rating system, expanding the range of data sources that can be considered in evaluation, and transitioning to a system in which all teachers are evaluated annually;
 - Track evaluation data electronically and use it as a primary factor in multiple human capital decisions, including recruitment, staffing, professional development, and compensation;
 - Implement low-stakes alternatives to teacher dismissal, including multi-year, unpaid sabbaticals for veteran teachers;
 - Lobby the state of Colorado to cap the length of teacher dismissal hearings at one day and to limit the scope of the hearing to questions regarding due process, not quasi-judicial consideration of teacher performance.

The New Teacher Project's full Pueblo City Schools analysis is available online, at www.widgeteffect.org.

About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap by ensuring that poor and minority students get outstanding teachers. Founded by teachers in 1997, TNTP partners with school districts and states to implement scalable responses to their most acute teacher quality challenges. TNTP recruits and trains thousands of exceptional new teachers annually, supports school principals in staffing their classrooms, provides teacher certification in high-need subjects, and documents the policy barriers that keep students from getting the teachers they need. Since its inception, TNTP has trained or hired approximately 33,000 teachers, benefiting an estimated 4.8 million students nationwide. It has established more than 70 programs and initiatives in 28 states and released a series of seminal studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation's teachers. This year, its clients include school districts in 26 cities, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Memphis, St. Paul, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, San Antonio, and Washington, DC, among others. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.