

The Impact of State and Local Human Capital Policies on Illinois School District U-46

In the fall and winter of 2008, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with Illinois School District U-46 and the Elgin Teachers Association (ETA), to assess how state and local policies and practices affect the teacher workforce and to make recommendations to increase the concentration of highly effective teachers in U-46 schools. TNTP's analysis included the following components:

- Review of current Illinois state laws, Illinois State Board of Education regulations, U-46 procedures, the agreement between U-46 and the ETA, and other relevant documents;
- Stakeholder interviews with district administrators, Human Resources staff members, ETA officials, principals and teachers;
- Online surveys of district teachers and administrators (1,677 teachers and 78 administrators surveyed, with response rates of 84 percent and 99 percent respectively); and
- Analysis of teacher performance management data from the 2003-04 through 2007-08 school years.

TNTP's analysis reveals limitations in state policy and both strengths and weaknesses in the district's approach to managing its teaching workforces. While District U-46 provides strong support to teachers throughout the certification process and their first year of teaching, the district's evaluation process fails to rigorously review teacher performance and provide teachers with the feedback they need to improve their instruction.

Findings

1. State certification rules hamper U-46's efforts to fill vacancies in its hardest to staff subject areas and cause confusion among teachers as they navigate a cumbersome renewal process.

Fifty-one percent of school administrators report having trouble filling vacancies because of strict certification requirements and roughly the same amount have lost desirable candidates for subject areas such as special education and bilingual education because candidates were unable to fulfill the state's requirements. The state of Illinois has been adapting its certification renewal process over the past ten years, which has led to confusion among teachers and administrators alike. Forty-two percent of District U-46 teachers find the renewal process confusing and are unsure of the requirements needed to maintain their certification. However, 75 percent of teachers with one to four years of experience teaching in Illinois agree that U-46 offers them the support they need when navigating the process (compared to 59 and 52 percent in other Illinois districts studied by TNTP).

2. New teachers are highly satisfied with the district's mentoring program.

Seventy percent of teachers who have participated in the U-46 mentoring program are "Very Satisfied" or "Satisfied" with their experience, compared to 52 and 42 percent in other Illinois districts.

Administrators and teachers believe the program helped to improve instruction, and teachers value the opportunity to observe experienced teachers and be observed the most. The district could improve the program by increasing new teachers' observation activities, as over two-thirds report being observed or observing another teacher three or fewer times during their first year of teaching.

3. Teacher evaluations are based on few classroom observations and result in almost all teachers being rated as excellent.

Almost all tenured teachers, 88 percent, received a performance rating of "Excellent" between the 2003-2004 and 2006-2007 school years. And nearly three out of four (74 percent) of District U-46's novice teachers report receiving an "Excellent" rating on their last evaluation. Moreover, District U-46 has more teachers receiving fewer classroom observations than other Illinois districts: nearly half of all teachers surveyed (48 percent) report they were observed only once for evaluation purposes, while in other Illinois districts studied, only 24 percent of teachers at most reported the same.

4. Inflated evaluation ratings do not provide teachers with the constructive feedback they need to improve their instruction. As a result, poor performance goes unaddressed.

Only 24 percent of District U-46 teachers surveyed had areas of performance identified as "Unsatisfactory" or "In Need of Improvement" on their last three evaluations. While the district struggles to ensure that all teachers receive constructive feedback on their performance, it is encouraging that among those few teachers who had areas identified for improvement, 60 percent "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that the support they received helped them improve their instruction. Despite these efforts, however, poor performance still goes unaddressed in the district; 43 percent of teachers report there are tenured teachers in their schools who should be dismissed for performance concerns but have not been.

Recommendations

To ensure that every District U-46 teacher receives the support and feedback they need to be successful in the classroom, the report advises the district and the Elgin Teacher's Association to work together to:

- Continue to provide a high level of support to teachers as they renew their teaching certificates and develop strategies for increasing the number of candidates in high-need subject areas;
- Ensure that new teachers have increased access to mentoring activities they find most helpful in improving their instruction, classroom observations in particular; and
- Review the newly implemented teacher appraisal system to ensure that it is fair, credible, and rigorous; differentiates teachers based upon performance; and provides them with continuous feedback and support in order to promote student learning.

To view the report in its entirety, including more detailed data and a full description of the recommendations, please visit <http://widgeteffect.org/district-reports/elgin-U46/>.

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 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.