

Selecting Teachers: The Best, The Known, and The Persistent

Case studies of six school districts point to ineffective, even detrimental, teacher selection practices and suggest ways, including the creation of induction schools, that districts can attract, employ, and keep talented teachers.

Most of the teachers who will be teaching in American classrooms in 1995 have not yet been hired. Over the next decade, our public school systems will need to hire nearly two million new teachers to meet a growing demand being created by increasing student enrollments, teacher turnover and retirements, and reform initiatives. At the same time, the supply of new entrants to teaching has been declining for the past 15 years.

The potential teacher shortage is exacerbated by public concern over teaching quality and increasing calls for the schools to attract, select, and retain the most talented recruits. With these conditions in mind, how well are current teacher selection procedures likely to serve school district needs over the next decade?

We undertook intensive case studies to analyze how teachers are selected by, and select themselves into, school districts and to trace the effects of these processes on the composition of

the teaching force and the operation of schools.¹ To frame the specific questions for our investigation, we first examined the research literature. Then with the assistance of a panel of national experts, we selected six school districts to study. Our study—essentially the first systematic look at the operation of teacher selection procedures—has revealed that school systems may be unintentionally impeding selection and discouraging retention of talented teachers.

The Case Studies

Our investigation revealed that to understand teacher selection, close attention must be paid to a set of closely linked processes: recruitment, screening, hiring, placement, induction, and evaluation. Teacher selection does not end with placing qualified teachers where their skills are most needed. School districts must also strengthen, evaluate, and retain their new hires—especially during the early years when they are most likely to leave. If not, the

resources expended throughout the selection process will have been spent for naught.

An effective teacher selection system is characterized by tight linkages among these critical selection processes. These linkages include:

- casting a wide recruitment net to expand the depth and quality of the applicant pool—by employing a variety of marketing strategies, offering competitive incentives and professional working conditions, and combating disincentives;

- timely decision making that closely links recruitment and hiring processes by establishing and maintaining clear and open lines of communication among central office administrators, principals, and teachers;

- using cost-effective screening tools that measure academic qualifications, interpersonal skills, and teaching performance; reflect the district's definition of the "good" teacher; and consider the specific characteristics of vacancies;

• communicating to candidates that they are viewed as and valued as professionals;

• involving senior teachers in developing job descriptions, scrutinizing candidates' qualifications, and instructing new hires;

• tight coupling of selection, curriculum and staff development, and evaluation processes so that the organization clearly defines the district's expectations of teachers;

• appropriately placing new hires in vacancies that are congruent with their experiences, skills, qualifications, and interests, and providing an adequate support system to assist them in their initial years in the district;

• establishing an evaluation system for new hires that will engender confidence in the quality of the entire teacher selection process;

• exhibiting leadership that promotes commitment on the part of new hires to the district and of staff to new hires, professional norms for teaching, and the creation of shared values.

Unfortunately, as policymakers and practitioners embark on increasingly ambitious efforts to make teaching more attractive to talented individuals, our case studies reveal that many current practices limit school districts' ability to recruit, screen, hire, and retain teachers.

Limitations on recruitment. Many states place severe restraints on the interstate mobility of teachers. For example, they may have complex and, in some cases, provincial certification requirements that local teachers can more easily meet. In addition, some states place arbitrary limitations on salaries that can be offered to experienced out-of-state or out-of-district teachers. One state in our study has placed a limit of only five years that can be credited for experience. Furthermore, in some states, a complete ban may exist on reimbursement for travel and moving expenses as well as on the transferability of retirement benefits. As David Berliner has suggested, anticompetitive collusion may, in effect, exist among states and school districts to prevent the development of "free agents" in public school teaching. Without a "free market," school districts are more likely to fill their vacancies with teachers who choose

them rather than with teachers they might otherwise choose.

Biases in screening criteria. A district's operational definition of the "good" teacher depends on the tools used, the values and influence of decision makers, and the nature of a particular vacancy. In addition, personnel offices use a variety of information to screen candidates. Because school districts usually commit few resources to the selection process, administrators tend to use low-cost (e.g., transcripts, references, etc.) to medium-cost (e.g., tests and structured interviews, etc.) information. Generally they do not use high-cost approaches such as on-the-job assessments or demonstration teaching.

In addition to lack of resources, administrators lament logistical problems, including the need to handle large numbers of candidates evenhandedly and the lack of coordination and timing between recruiting and screening, which inhibit the use of data on teaching performance. Thus, some districts turn to other types of information. One medium-cost approach is the commercially developed, standardized screening interview instrument, which is relatively inexpensive to administer, allows comparison across candidates, and provides a quantitative ranking of prospective teachers.

However, no publicly available scientific evidence supports the validity of virtually any of the instruments in use. Some instruments may, in fact, eliminate well-qualified candidates. In one case we examined, some of the questions posed and the scoring procedures used systematically discriminate against candidates who are cognitively oriented. For example, an interviewer asks two candidates, "Why should we hire you?" The first candidate answers that she can make the most difficult concepts easy to understand, and the second one answers that he loves children. The scoring procedures require the interviewer to rate the former response negatively and the latter response positively.

Second, our investigation revealed "anti-intellectualism" among some school district decision makers. The research literature confirms that the most academically able teachers are

not necessarily the most likely to be hired (Weaver 1979, Perry 1981, Berry 1984). While some districts do pay considerable attention to the academic qualifications of teacher candidates, other administrators report that they prefer teachers with average academic ability because they have seen "too many straight A students who didn't know anything" about teaching. Some administrators believe that the most academically able teachers do not possess the ability to work with diverse students and parent groups, the desire to work in extracurricular assignments (especially athletics), and attitudes that mesh with local community expectations (Berry and Hare 1985).

Third, we have found that even when school districts attempt to uphold high academic standards in the screening process, the needs of a particular vacancy may actually determine who gets hired. For example, a principal who needs a football coach and a math teacher may hire a less-qualified math teacher who can also coach. Or a principal who needs an English teacher and a sponsor for the junior-senior prom may hire a less-qualified English teacher who is willing to sponsor the prom. Extracurricular demands and limited staff allocations are realities for principals and schools.

Havoc in hiring. The process and the logistics of teacher hiring may have at least as much influence on the quality of the staff hired as do formal screening mechanisms. First, a school district's discourteous treatment of candidates may indicate to some prospective teachers that they are not valued. Teachers report considerable difficulty in obtaining vacancy information from district personnel offices, many of which are understaffed. When applicants are able to "get through," it is generally to a secretary who may not be able to respond to their queries. Papers are lost; vital information is often not conveyed. Prospective teachers may wait months for any indication of whether or not they will be hired.

Second, a school district's management information system must satisfy the logistical demands of reporting vacancies, analyzing data, and communicating the data to decision makers. However, inaccurate projections of teacher vacancies, delays associated

with district and other governmental budget decisions, late resignations of teachers, and, most significantly, the lengthy process of emptying the internal transfer pool can create this unfortunate scenario: a school district has found an excellent candidate but cannot hire him or her immediately because there is a question of whether or not there will be a vacancy to be filled. Often when the question is answered, the candidate is no longer available.

In addition, in large school systems with thousands of applications, an antiquated system of "piles of files" often makes it difficult to match applicants' skills with job specifications efficiently and effectively. Not all school decision makers have easy and equal access to the information and therefore are forced to choose the first candidate who seems good enough.

Talented teachers, who may have a greater range of employment options, are less likely to tolerate discourteous treatment and cumbersome hiring processes; they often select themselves out of the pool. Persistent, tolerant, and local candidates are most likely to get hired. In many cases, an aide, a volunteer, or a substitute may have the best chance of filling the vacancy. While the practice of hiring on this basis may result in suboptimal teacher selection, principals often prefer these candidates, about whose performance they know something, to others about whose performance they have no firsthand information.

Discouraging retention. Initial school district experiences consist of "traumatic events" (McDonald 1980) that critically affect new teachers' sense of efficacy (Ryan 1979) and influence whether or not they will remain in teaching (McLaughlin et al. 1986). In fact, approximately 40 percent of the "new hires" in many school districts leave within their first two years of teaching. This high dropout rate also results in part from the common practice of placing beginning teachers in the least attractive schools and often with the most disadvantaged students. This practice is driven by local district policies and the intradistrict mobility patterns of senior teachers. Because

most districts grant them transfers to vacancies of their choice, senior teachers, with no incentives to remain in the district's difficult schools, often leave for schools with strong reputations, good working conditions, and "easy" students. Thus, when novices are hired, they are placed in difficult assignments with few experienced teachers around to help them adjust to the immense demands of their jobs. Thus, new hires, with less experience and fewer skills, face the initial years of teaching in the most challenging assignments. For new teachers, this selection practice is akin to "being thrown to the wolves."

More and more school districts have begun to address the experiences of new hires through induction programs. However, most newly developed programs focus on a prescribed set of instructional behaviors that new teachers should exhibit. In doing so, these programs ignore the broader context of teaching and thereby fail to help new teachers adjust to the demands and challenges they face (Fox and Singletary 1986). We found that poor communication, inadequate planning, and overwhelming paperwork contributed to programs' falling short of their goals. The critical factor in an effective induction program is not skills training but the availability of a cadre of senior teachers whose expertise can assist the professional development of novices.

Policy Conclusions

Improving teacher selection, especially in the face of increasing demand for talented teachers, will not be easy. Nevertheless, the following recommendations are meant to inform policymakers at local and state levels.

First, states and local school districts must remove regulations blocking a free teacher labor market and eliminate arbitrary limits on salary schedule placement and on other recruitment incentives. The opening up of a market, by recognizing talent and experience, will foster the development of the profession.

School districts must also engage in more careful planning and require

tighter management so that bureaucratic processing does not result in the loss of applicants because of lack of coordination throughout the various selection stages.

Next, school districts must pay greater attention to aligning selection criteria to the goals of the system and to the needs of individual schools. In particular, as school districts adopt new selection instruments, they should ensure that the instruments and the weights given to their scores do not eliminate qualified candidates.

In addition, school districts should pay careful attention to the sequencing and logistics of the selection process as well as to the adequate staffing of their personnel offices. Steps must be taken to ensure that personnel staff provide appropriate, timely feedback to candidates throughout the selection process. Prompt, courteous, and responsive treatment of candidates goes a long way toward determining who is available for hiring.

School districts may also wish to reexamine the multiple roles they expect teachers to play. To streamline the criteria for specific vacancies, districts may decide to assign auxiliary staff to perform some extracurricular responsibilities now required of teachers.

Additionally, school districts should maximize the participation of experienced teachers in all phases of the selection process. Significant teacher input permits a more thorough scrutiny of a candidate's teaching philosophy and teaching competence. Teacher input also increases the validity of the selection process since local practitioners understand fully the demands and responsibilities associated with a particular vacancy. Finally, involving veteran teachers in selection heightens the investment they feel in the success of their new colleagues, thus decreasing the isolation of, and increasing the collegial supports available to, the new teacher.

School districts must also alter personnel policies that result in the placement of novices in the most difficult schools by, for instance, changing the incentive structure so that teachers, as

they gain seniority, will not opt to transfer from unattractive to attractive schools.

Finally, school districts should establish supervised induction programs. They can do so in several ways: by dispersing senior and beginning teachers so that supervisory resources available in each school are adequate; by creating mentor teacher programs, with provisions for released time, to increase the district's capacity for supervised induction; or by establishing specially staffed induction schools. For example, school districts could designate high turnover schools as induction schools, which would then be heavily staffed with a mix of seasoned professionals and novices.

Such an approach to induction would have several benefits. First, beginning teachers would have more opportunities for a successful initiation into teaching. Also, students in these induction schools, who are disproportionately disadvantaged, need and require the best teachers the school can offer, not struggling novices. Given that school districts have few opportunities to assess teachers' performance prior to hiring, an induction school would also allow for closer scrutiny of beginning teachers by senior teachers, creating a powerful mechanism to evaluate teachers prior to the granting of tenure.

The induction school, modeled along the lines of a teaching hospital, can also extend the education of novice and veteran teachers. With proper induction and evaluation, school districts can adequately determine whether or not to allow new teachers to operate as independent professionals. By allowing senior teachers to demonstrate best practice and to assist new colleagues, teaching can develop standards of professional practice that are transmitted to new entrants. But, perhaps, most importantly, the induction school can create an entry to teaching that will be sufficiently selective and well supported to sustain a teaching force that will capture public confidence. In the process, schools will be better able to attract, hire, and retain the talented teachers needed to

prepare students for the 21st century. □

1. Arthur E. Wise, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Barnett Berry, *Effective Teacher Selection: From Recruitment to Retention*, The RAND Corporation, R-3462-NIE/CSTP, January 1987. Also see Arthur E. Wise et al., *Effective Teacher Selection: From Recruitment to Retention—Case Studies*, The RAND Corporation, N-2513-NIE/CSTP, January 1987.

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