



Missed Opportunities:

How We Keep
High-Quality
Teachers
Out of Urban
Classrooms

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How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms

It is widely recognized that no factor under school control affects student achievement more than the quality of the teacher in the classroom.¹ Yet, on average, low-income and minority children have lower-quality teachers who are far more likely to be uncertified, to have scored poorly on college and licensure exams, and to be teaching outside of their field.²

Conventional wisdom attributes this disparity to the inability of large city school systems to attract high-caliber teachers. But the reality is that, thanks to stepped-up recruitment efforts, high-quality teacher candidates regularly apply in large numbers to teach in hard-to-staff districts. The problem is, they do not get hired.

The failure of many large urban districts to make job offers to new teachers until July or August is largely to blame for this problem. Because of hiring delays, these districts lose substantial numbers of teacher candidates—including the most promising and those who can teach in high-demand shortage areas—to suburban classrooms that typically hire earlier.

As a result, urban districts lose the very candidates they need in their classrooms to meet the No Child Left Behind mandates, and millions of disadvantaged students in America's cities pay the price with lower-quality teachers than their suburban peers.

To date, the evidence on the consequences of late hiring timelines has been largely anecdotal.³ In this report, The New Teacher Project provides an in-depth study of urban district hiring practices and their effect on applicant attrition and teacher quality by analyzing data from four “hard-to-staff” urban districts. These representative districts, which agreed to let us gather extensive data on the condition of anonymity, comprise three large districts in the Southwest, Midwest, and Eastern regions and a mid-size district in the Midwest. The districts average just fewer than 73,000 students each, and the largest district has more than 150,000 students. The percentage of non-white students in these districts ranges from 62 percent to 85 percent. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.⁴

The report relies on a wealth of sources—applicant tracking data, telephone surveys with applicants who left for other districts, written surveys, and focus groups—to quantify the length of hiring delays, the subsequent scale of applicant attrition, and its very real effect on teacher quality in urban schools.

What Our Data Show About Late Hiring and the Loss of High-Quality Applicants

With aggressive recruitment, teachers apply in large numbers:

By implementing targeted, high-impact recruitment strategies, all four urban districts received hundreds, if not thousands, of applicants—many more than they needed to successfully fill their existing vacancies. One district received 4,000 applications for fewer than 200 spots. The other three districts received roughly 750 to 800 applications—five to seven times as many applicants as available positions. Equally significant, given these high recruitment figures, is that up to 37 percent of the candidates applied to teach in high-need areas, including math, science, special education, and education for English Language Learners.⁵ But despite having hundreds of applicants in high-need areas and many more total applicants than vacancies to fill, each district was left scrambling at the 11th hour to fill its openings.

Applicants withdraw after months in limbo:

Each of the four districts failed to make job offers until mid-to-late summer. This left applicants hanging in limbo for months, not knowing if or where they would teach. Fed up with waiting, anywhere from 31 percent to almost 60 percent of applicants withdrew from the hiring process, often to accept jobs with districts that made offers earlier. Of those who withdrew, the majority (50 percent to 70 percent) cited the late hiring timeline as a major reason they took other jobs.

Districts lose stronger applicants and hire weaker ones:

The most serious issue is that many of the best candidates, who have the most options, were the most likely to abandon hard-to-staff districts in the face of hiring delays. This forced these districts to fill their vacancies from an applicant pool with higher percentages of unqualified and uncertified teachers. In fact, the initial findings of this study reveal that applicants who withdrew from the hiring process had significantly higher undergraduate GPAs, were 40 percent more likely to have a degree in their teaching field, and were significantly more likely to have completed educational coursework than new hires.⁶

Most of the teachers who withdraw their applications are committed to teaching in urban schools, and many want jobs in high-need areas:

Withdrawers were serious applicants. Despite the difficulties and delays they experienced, four out of five of them said they would like to be considered again for a teaching position with the urban district. Almost half said they definitely or probably would have accepted an offer from the urban district if it had come earlier. Equally significant, between 37 percent and 69 percent of the known withdrawers were candidates for hard-to-fill positions.

Three Hiring Policies Drive Hiring Failures

The prevalent explanations for late hiring are poor design and execution by district human resources offices: a cumbersome application process, too many layers of bureaucracy, inadequate customer service, poor data systems, and an overall lack of urgency. Many urban districts do indeed suffer from these problems that not only delay hiring but also anger applicants. However, The New Teacher Project observed three widespread hiring policies that would tie the hands of even the most competent human resources department. They include:

- 1. Vacancy notification requirements**, which typically allow retiring or resigning teachers to provide very late notice of their intent to depart, thereby making it very difficult to know which vacancies will exist in September. Three of the four districts had a summer notification deadline for departing teachers or none at all, while the fourth had a mid-May requirement that was rarely enforced.
- 2. Teachers union transfer requirements**, which often further stall hiring by giving existing teachers the first pick of openings before any new teacher can be hired. Timetables provided in union contracts and local laws frequently undermine expedited transfer processes by extending transfer decisions until a few months, weeks, or—in some cases—days before schools reopen. Collective bargaining policies that require schools to hire transferring teachers create additional delays by making principals reluctant to post vacancies and interview for fear of being forced to accept a transferring teacher they do not want.
- 3. Late budget timetables and inadequate forecasting**, which foster chronic budget uncertainties and leave administrators unsure about which positions will be funded in their schools. State budget timelines are a major source of the budget delay and uncertainty. In 46 states, the fiscal year does not end until June 30; even then, states may not need to pass a budget if they seek an extension.

Although frequently overlooked by policymakers and education reformers alike, these three policy barriers seriously undermine efforts by urban school systems to turn quality applicants into teachers.

Working Toward a Solution: Removing Barriers to Earlier Hiring

Given the nature of the problem, the solutions are more complex than those commonly proposed. Stepped-up recruitment campaigns and additional incentives to attract high-quality applicants, while essential, will not solve the teacher quality gap as long as urban districts' own hiring processes, policies and contractual rules prevent them from hiring the right teachers.

Key district, teachers union, school and state stakeholders must unite around the aggressive goal of hiring and providing specific school placements for the vast majority of new teachers by May 1 each year. We know this will be difficult and that a phase-in period may be necessary. During this phase-in period, these stakeholders must commit to hiring and placing at least 30 percent to 40 percent of new teachers by May 1, and the remainder by June 1.

Meeting these timelines will require changing the policies and practices currently responsible for late and ineffective hiring.

Revise teacher notification requirements

States, districts, and unions must ensure early notification by resigning or retiring teachers and must remove disincentives for providing early notice.

Reform collective bargaining transfer requirements

Unions and management must agree to move up and expedite teacher transfer processes and work toward enabling principals and schools to consider external and internal candidates equally.

Address budget barriers

State and local budget-makers must promote earlier and more predictable budgets and must insulate the highest-need schools from budget fluctuations.

Revamp the roles and systems of human resources departments

To take advantage of the above-mentioned policy changes to accelerate hiring, HR departments must develop effective and efficient systems for receiving, processing, tracking, and placing applicants. They must also give schools an earlier and larger role in the hiring process.

This report acknowledges that any district seeking to address these challenges will have to overcome significant hurdles. Recommendations affecting union protections, such as vacancy notification and teacher transfer requirements, may be particularly difficult to achieve. In all four areas, however, reform will be essential to enabling large urban districts to match the aggressive mid-spring hiring schedules of many suburban districts and to fill their classrooms with the best teachers available.

Hiring Reform: Essential for Closing the Achievement Gap

We have seen the same phenomenon of late summer hiring and significant applicant attrition in large urban districts across the country. As high-need urban districts struggle to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind law and hire “highly qualified” teachers, they must understand that their yearly ritual of staffing schools with whomever remains in the applicant pool at the summer’s end is not inevitable. Academically stronger and better-prepared teacher candidates want to teach in these districts, including in the highest-need schools. Getting them into the classrooms, however, will depend on reversing the slow-moving, half-paralyzed hiring processes that effectively turn them away and leave districts to hire from a depleted and far weaker applicant pool.

The good news is that late urban teacher hiring is a solvable problem. Of course, high-need schools require multiple reforms to close the achievement gap. Nonetheless, given the strong and proven connection between high-quality teachers and student achievement, when urban districts make the changes necessary to hire—rather than lose—their best teacher candidates, we believe they will be making one of the wisest investments they can toward improving outcomes for children.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation



The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to partnering with educational entities to enhance their capacity to recruit, select, train, and support new teachers effectively. With the conviction that the recruitment and retention of effective new teachers must be an integral aspect of any school reform movement, The New Teacher Project is dedicated to ensuring that all of our schools are staffed with highly qualified teachers.

TNTP was formed in 1997 to address the growing issues of teacher shortages and teacher quality throughout the country. TNTP has a diverse staff of more than 60 people, including former educators, education policy experts, and strategy consultants from top-tier private sector firms. Since its inception, it has worked with school districts and state departments of education to significantly improve the quality of their teaching forces. It has attracted and prepared more than 10,000 new, high-quality teachers and launched 39 programs in 19 states.

Endnotes

¹ Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (1) (2000); Kati Haycock, “Good Teaching Matters . . . A Lot,” *Thinking K-16*, 3 (2), (The Education Trust, 1998), 1-5.

² Craig D. Jerald, “All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching,” (The Education Trust, 2002), 9.

³ “Quality Counts 2003: Ensuring a Highly Qualified Teacher for Every Classroom,” *Education Week*, (January 2003), 43-44; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996), 34-39; Edward Liu, “New Teachers’ Experiences of Hiring: Preliminary Findings From a Four-State Study (a paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 2003), 9.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. Data are for the 2001-2 school year.

⁵ In the Southwestern District, for which we had the most complete information, more than 250 applicants—or 37 percent of the total applicants—were certified to teach in a shortage area. The Eastern District’s percentage, also 37 percent, was for the pool of applicants who had passed an initial district paper screen and interview (“prescreened” applicants). The percentage of high-need applicants in the total application pool was unavailable.

⁶ These data are from an in-depth analysis by The New Teacher Project of the files of hires and withdrawers in one district.

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