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Human Capital Framework for K-12 Urban Education: Organizing for Success

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Thinking and acting strategically about human capital development and management is the lifeblood of most high-performing businesses and organizations. This commitment reflects an understanding that an organization's success is defined in large part by the performance of its employees and the quality of the service or product they produce. In education, the "product" of the organization is the education and future success of children, the future of their communities, the economic and social well being of the country. The evidence shows that principals' and teachers' performance has more effect on student achievement than any other factor and that teachers' effectiveness in increasing student performance varies widely. Given the stakes, there is a moral imperative to act on that knowledge and strengthen the education workforce to better serve students.

Urban school districts have long realized that their people are their most significant resource, with staff salaries and benefits accounting for more than 80% of their budgets. Yet, increasing accountability for student performance coupled with the work of entrepreneurial organizations, such as Teach For America and The New Teacher Project that attract and nurture new sources of talent for urban districts, have sparked more aggressive attempts to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the education workforce. In most urban districts, however, the approach has been piecemeal, looking only at components of the system (e.g. preparation, sourcing, compensation or professional development) or specific subsets of the employee population, most commonly new teachers.

The efforts to date point to the promise of a strategic approach to human capital development. Some urban districts are increasing the qualifications of those entering teaching and the principalship, retaining a higher percentage of high performers for longer periods of time, eliminating poor performers, and creating the working conditions and performance-oriented culture that motivates and supports high performance. Yet, the limited reach of efforts to date also suggests that significant improvement at scale will require dramatic changes. To execute new approaches to human capital management, school systems will need to be clear about their mission and goals, identify and prioritize the strategies that will help accomplish them, and then align their central office and school support structures, their labor-management partnerships, and their partnerships with outside organizations and higher education.

A systemic approach to building human capital in large urban districts requires an understanding of the components of a robust human capital system and a strategy that ultimately addresses each component and their interrelationships to create a comprehensive system. To support this work, the Aspen Institute has developed a

human capital development and management framework that provides one approach for thinking systematically about these issues, with particular attention to teachers, the largest segment of the education workforce.

Drawing on best practices within education and other sectors, the framework lays out the context in which human capital management takes place and identifies eight essential components:

Components

- Preparation
- Sourcing
- Certification
- Induction
- Tenure
- Training and Development
- Performance Management
- Compensation and Non-Monetary Rewards

While the framework is organized by components, each component should be considered in relation to the others and in relation to the district's mission and goals. For example, creating a performance management system that recognizes high performing teachers requires rethinking teacher evaluation, compensation and non-monetary rewards for performance, the career development opportunities for exemplary teachers, and the creation of a professional culture that celebrates excellence and continuous improvement. Likewise, a preparation and sourcing strategy that brings in a large number of non-traditional and alternatively certified teachers requires significant investments in induction to support new teachers. It also requires new approaches to career ladders both to retain non-traditional teachers who want rapid opportunities for growth and leadership and to provide additional school-based expertise to support untrained new teachers.

Thinking systemically also requires that human capital development and management be considered in the larger context of schools, districts, the labor market and local, state and federal policy that can either support or impede high quality teaching and school leadership. For example, a district could address every component of the framework without realizing significant improvements if it did not address student learning needs, school working conditions, allocation of resources or the development of robust data systems that track and inform improvement efforts. While districts must prioritize and cannot or should not address all of the components and contextual issues simultaneously, they must keep the entire terrain in mind as they identify their highest leverage strategies.

By laying out a picture of the full terrain of human capital development and management for teachers, the framework can provoke fundamentally different conversations about this issue. It is intended as a tool that helps districts, their higher education, philanthropic and community partners, and policymakers organize their thinking about

the full scope of the issue, assess the work they are currently doing, determine where and how to first focus their efforts, and develop a long-term strategy that ultimately addresses all elements. By outlining current conditions and best practices, the framework provides a clear picture of the current state of affairs, a vision for what is possible and the implications of that vision for districts, their partners and policymakers. At the end of the framework, we have included a simple self-assessment tool that districts and their partners can use to assess their work in any given component of the framework or across the entire framework.

It is impossible to capture the full complexity of the human capital issue in K-12 urban education in a single framework. Outlined below are some of the realities and tensions that exist in the sector which should inform use of this framework and any human capital strategy:

- **Teachers work in schools and schools are in school districts.** Teachers' experiences and effectiveness depend greatly on the quality of school leadership. In turn, the quality of school leadership depends in large part on the district central office and its capacity to effectively recruit, develop, support and manage great principals. While this framework focuses on teachers and is less applicable to principals and central office staff and management, strengthening human capital requires approaches that address the multi-dimensional nature of the challenge.
- **Making the job appealing.** Talented professionals want jobs in which they understand their mission, they have the skills and tools to succeed, they feel valued and fairly treated, and they have great leaders and great colleagues. The education sector is no different. Teachers identify school working conditions as the single greatest factor in their job satisfaction and their tenure in the profession. This framework identifies these issues both as context factors and in the sections on non-monetary rewards and training and development. However, the framework does not fully address all that is required to create these conditions. Obviously, principals play a pivotal role in shaping school culture and working conditions. To do this work, principals will need to become human capital managers who are adept at hiring great teachers who fit the schools mission and culture and can think creatively about how to differentiate roles for teachers, encourage collaboration that taps the expertise of individual teachers, and hold all teachers accountable to high standards. This vision has significant implications for the preparation and ongoing training of principals.
- **The reality of turnover.** The employment patterns of the generation entering the workforce indicate that the trend towards changing jobs every three to five years is one that will continue across sectors, including in education. A robust human capital strategy must recruit the highest quality people, maximize their contributions to improving student achievement quickly and create opportunities to retain them, all while anticipating that no matter how attractive the job and career advancement opportunities, a significant number of new teachers will

leave in the first three to five years. The challenges are to do a better job of organizing schools and classrooms to take advantage of short-termers and increase the likelihood that highly effective teachers will stay and less effective teachers will not continue to teach.

- **Challenges in performance measurement.** Fundamental to implementing a human capital system is defining good performance and then acting on that knowledge to build aligned support and accountability systems. In education, to the maximum extent technically and practically feasible, evidence of impact on student learning should be the primary criterion of performance. At issue is what measures of student learning should be counted (e.g. value added measures based on standardized test scores, other student performance measures), what in addition to student achievement results should be included in the definition and measure of good performance (e.g. observable teacher behaviors, contributions to school improvement), and what levels of reliability and validity are necessary for making consequential decisions.
- **Lack of evidence about the utility of investing in upfront preparation.** Research suggests that there are no definitive predictors of who will be an effective teacher before they enter the classroom (e.g., SAT scores, credential). Likewise, there is no evidence that teachers who enter through traditional preparation pathways are, in general, more effective or stay longer than those who enter through alternative routes. As a result, this framework suggests that a high functioning district would pursue a robust “portfolio” of preparation options, provide multiple pathways into the classroom, hold providers accountable for results, and over time hire from and direct resources only to providers that produce results.
- **Changing relationships.** Long-held arrangements, particularly as they relate to higher education and unions, will need to be renegotiated in order for this work to be comprehensive and brought to scale. Higher education’s monopoly on teacher preparation will be challenged. Its demonstrated inability to meet market demands and ensure the quality of its product raises fundamental questions about the value of higher education preparation and will continue to spawn alternative preparation strategies. Union contracts that honor seniority and the accrual of graduate credits over demonstrated competence and continuous improvement will need to be reconsidered.
- **Equity.** In many urban districts, more qualified and senior teachers gravitate to schools and classes that are less poor, less racially mixed, and more academically advanced than the district is as a whole. The distribution of resources and the capacity of schools and communities to make effective use of resources often follow these same patterns. For these reasons human capital strategies require a focus on equity as well as excellence.
- **Ensuring a diverse workforce.** In the design of a human capital system it is critical to consider the impact on recruiting and retaining a talented, diverse workforce. High demand for talented professionals of color makes it challenging

for schools to attract high quality minority candidates. At the same time, strategies intended to improve teacher quality, such as recruiting students from selective colleges and with high SAT scores, may raise barriers to attaining a diverse workforce. Raising entry standards demands a strategy to ensure aspiring teachers of color have access to high-quality preparation. In many urban areas teachers of color are graduates of the very schools that we are trying to improve, schools that undereducated them.

- **Fostering individual *and* organizational improvement.** Finding talented people and rewarding them for their individual contributions is a critical strategy for improving the caliber of people in any organization. At the same time, effective schools and school improvement are grounded in collaborative work, collective effort, and trust. A human capital system that attracts and rewards teachers who are highly effective behind the closed doors of their classroom but provides no incentives or accountability for collective improvement makes it unlikely that other teachers and students will benefit from their expertise and that the organization will improve overtime. Human capital strategies must seek to balance the focus on individual and organizational improvement. Thus, while this framework focuses primarily on the career trajectories of individual teachers, to substantially improve outcomes for students over time, human capital strategies should focus as well on fostering organizational learning and improvement is critical to ensuring that it leads to improved outcomes for students.
- **Human capital is bigger than human resources.** School systems traditionally reduce human capital issues to basic human resource functions e.g. hiring, evaluations, compensation. To develop and manage human capital in a systemic way requires the leadership of the teaching and learning side of the house, finance, the people who supervise principals, information technology, and the superintendent, to name a few. Identifying and nurturing talent, allocating resources, providing support to ensure principals are well prepared to serve as human capital managers, holding them accountable for this work, defining the metrics to be used to assess teacher performance and developing an information management system to track it are just a few of the components of an effective human capital system. HR can be a strategic resource for this work but the work must be owned and championed by a cross-functional team of district leaders.

Building a comprehensive human capital development and management system will require a dramatic shift from a system that currently measures its performance by how many people apply for positions and its ability to have an adult in every classroom on the first day of school to one that values demonstrated success and is explicitly organized to recruit, develop and retain such talent. The way this shift is managed will be informed by the district's local context and unique needs as a district facing rapid growth in student enrollment will have different priorities and strategy from a district that is experiencing a decline in student enrollment. The approaches will vary but the fundamental goal of an effective teacher in every classroom is universal.