

What Keeps Good Teachers in the Classroom

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Teacher Networks: Supporting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teacher Leaders for High-Needs Schools

A Preliminary Research Summary of Findings & Implications

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November 2009

Creating and Nurturing Effective Teachers - for All Schools

Over the last decade, policy and business leaders have come to know what parents have always known: teachers make the most difference in student achievement.¹ Yet not all schools have equal access to the most effective teachers. High-needs schools that serve large proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students are least likely to recruit and retain teachers who are experienced, National Board Certified or most effective in boosting student test scores.²

Thus, high-needs schools are more likely to be beset with teaching vacancies in math and special education,³ and much more likely to fill classrooms with out-of-field, inexperienced, and less prepared teachers.⁴ The strong links established between student learning gains and effective teaching practice suggest that the achievement gap might be better described as an effective teaching gap.

However, the quality of teaching may have less to do with the academic qualifications of individual teachers and far more to do with the extent to which teachers work with each other and provide leadership for their schools and communities. Indeed, researchers have shown that the main reason American students do not perform as well as many of their international peers on achievement measures in math and science is that their teachers are not given the kinds of opportunities they need to learn from each other.⁵ In addition, a recent study using 11 years of matched teacher and student achievement data was able to isolate and quantify the added value brought by such collective expertise, finding that most value-added gains are attributed to teachers who are more experienced (and qualified), and stay together as teams. Drawing on very sophisticated analyses, the researchers found that peer learning among small groups of teachers seems to be the most powerful predictor of student achievement over time.⁶ *Education Week*, in reporting on this groundbreaking study, concluded, “[T]eachers raise their games when the quality of their colleagues improves.”⁷ However, most of the current policy focus is on recruiting academically able teachers, but not on the conditions under which they can teach effectively.

The Teachers Network Approach

Teachers Network (www.teachersnetwork.org) has logged nearly three decades of experience in helping teachers and schools create professional learning communities that feed cultures of effectiveness and excellence – in both teaching and learning – in public schools nationwide. More than 1.5 million teachers (leading classrooms that include over 40 million students) have joined TN’s communities, which have focused on helping teachers improve classroom practice by providing grants to further develop and disseminate “tried-and-true” exemplary lesson plans and curriculum units with colleagues and peers throughout the nation and beyond— all developed *by teachers, for teachers*; integrating technology into everyday instruction; and developing teacher capacities as leaders in the profession through engagement in action

research and policy analysis. TN's work with 25 affiliates – across the United States and abroad – has revolutionized online professional development and networking for teachers, and positioned the organization as an acknowledged leader in these areas.

In this policy brief, Teachers Network and the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) offer a powerful perspective on teaching effectiveness and teacher leadership. Drawing on a unique survey of and interviews with teacher leaders, we offer evidence to show that when teachers are given voice, agency, and the training and collaborative tools to lead, they can develop informed solutions to transform public education and improve student achievement.

Study Findings

With the support of the Ford Foundation, Teachers Network undertook a major national survey. In total, 2,530 surveys were sent out, and 1,210 responses were received—resulting in an astonishing 47.8% return rate, including 175 teachers who had left the classroom, which is exceptional in such a dataset. Specifically, a primary purpose of this survey was to better understand the role that participation in teacher leadership networks plays in supporting and retaining effective teachers in high-needs urban schools. Follow-up interviews with 29 participants provided a more nuanced view of ways in which opportunities for collaboration and leadership (within and beyond the classroom) can increase teacher efficacy and effectiveness, and improve the retention of the classroom experts students deserve.

The survey sample was drawn from a diverse and accomplished group of PK-12 teacher leaders in every subject area: 93 percent were fully state-certified in their subject area and grade level at the time of the survey, and 78 percent held a master's degree or above. A majority reported that they worked in high-needs schools, where more than 75 percent of the student body was comprised of low-income or minority students.

While a great deal of attention has focused on recruiting talented individuals to high-needs schools, this study is unique in addressing the dynamics of leadership networks in promoting teacher retention and effectiveness. The Center for Teaching Quality's initial analysis shows that teachers' participation in professional networks:

- ✍ Improves their perceived effectiveness of their teaching practice;
- ✍ Advances and elevates their own perceptions of the teaching profession;
- ✍ Develops their leadership and advanced professional skills; and
- ✍ Increases the likelihood that they plan to remain in teaching positions, even in high-needs, “hard-to-staff” schools.

This last finding has enormous implications, as policymakers begin to recognize that the key to improving student achievement in high-needs schools is a stable corps of teacher leaders who work together over time to advance reforms in teaching and learning. A forthcoming series of briefs from the Center for Teaching Quality this winter will offer a more thematic exploration of key findings on the importance of collaboration, leadership and preparation to teacher

effectiveness and retention. Ken Futernick of WestEd will produce solutions-focused commentary to accompany each brief, and will contribute to the development of recommendations in the final report. The full study report, which will be released in February 2010, will provide in-depth analyses of the survey and interview data.

Collaboration

Teaching effectiveness, as defined by teachers themselves, is a collective activity. Teachers— who know the diverse learning needs of their students, know they cannot do it alone. Teacher collaboration has been established as a key element in promoting effective teaching and improving student learning outcomes in math, reading and science.⁸ A study earlier this year found that 20 percent of a teacher’s “value added” effects, as measured by student test score gains, was attributable to shared expertise.⁹ CTQ’s seven years of research into teacher working conditions in urban districts nationwide also points to how well-structured collaboration increases teachers’ satisfaction with their schools and their planned retention – even in high-needs communities.¹⁰ Similar patterns emerged in preliminary analyses of Teachers Network survey data.

- ✍ **Sixty-four percent of respondents said they joined their networks because they “wanted a professional community.”** This hunger for collaboration far outstripped any other reason for joining networks – including opportunities for fellowships or grant support, or recommendations from their principals.
- ✍ **Eight in ten responding teachers agreed that network participation encouraged them to remain in the classroom. Nine in ten reported that it has improved their teaching practice.** For these teacher leaders, opportunities for collaboration are directly linked both to more effective teaching and to planned retention as full-time classroom teachers.
- ✍ **A majority of respondents (59 percent) also reported that network participation prompted them to develop better relationships with students’ parents.** Such expansions of collaboration beyond the school walls are also strongly associated with better educational and life outcomes for urban students.¹¹
- ✍ **In addition, our regression analysis revealed that – controlling for a variety of school factors – colleagues’ support was the *only* school culture factor significantly associated with teachers’ planned long-term retention.** Teachers who planned to stay in the classroom for up to 5 years cited opportunities for professional learning or high standards among staff as most important. But collaboration was by far the dominant factor in retaining teacher leaders for 10 ($p<.05$) or 15 ($p<.01$) years.

Leadership

A rich literature – both within education circles and in other kinds of labor markets – links staff members’ sense of “self-efficacy” or agency to their effectiveness and success on the job. Prior research has found that a teacher’s self-efficacy as an instructional leader is strongly and positively associated with soliciting parent involvement, communicating positive expectations

for student learning, improved instructional practice, and willingness (and ability) to innovate successfully in the classroom.¹² Thus, increased opportunities to lead build on one another, and translate into increased leadership success.

Moreover, teaching is a traditionally “flat” profession. An aging workforce, the availability of more and more highly paid career options for educated women and minorities, and the increasing mobility of the workforce in general all contribute to teacher shortages in high-needs schools. “Movers” cite working conditions – specifically, the opportunity for better teaching assignments, increased collaboration with colleagues, increased time, and an improved climate for teaching and learning – as a key component of their decision to change schools.¹³ Teachers who report more control over the policies in their schools and autonomy in their jobs are more likely to remain in teaching and to feel invested in their careers and schools.¹⁴

Other findings from the Teachers Network survey include:

- ✎ **Over a quarter of respondents said that they initially joined a leadership network at a colleague’s suggestion.** This finding suggests that existing, if informal, professional communities may have given rise to more formal and structured involvements as teacher leaders. While the current survey data cannot tell us which comes first – professional community and collaboration or leadership – the relationship is nonetheless clear and compelling.
- ✎ **More than two-thirds of surveyed teachers reported multiple roles in their schools beyond regular classroom teaching responsibilities, such as school-level administration duties, union leadership roles or work as a department or grade level chair.** Our current analyses suggest that teachers’ holding leadership opportunities was associated with significant increases in planned short-run retention.
- ✎ **Teachers who reported having a non-teaching leadership role in their schools were more likely to say that they planned to remain as teachers over the coming 3 years ($p < .001$).** Our initial analyses suggest that teacher leadership matters more than the *shape* of that leadership – and the preferred mode of leadership likely varies widely among individual teachers.

Implications

More sophisticated analyses – forthcoming in the briefings series and report this winter – will explore these themes, and others related to preparation for teaching in high-needs schools, in greater detail. However, our early examinations of the data suggest strong, statistically significant links between the kinds of collaboration, leadership and professional development available through Teachers Network communities, and improved teacher efficacy and retention in high-needs schools. These findings suggest that serious “turnaround” initiatives should include these strategies and opportunities for teachers in order to not only reform, but transform, high-needs schools and districts, and to advance and elevate the teaching profession.

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