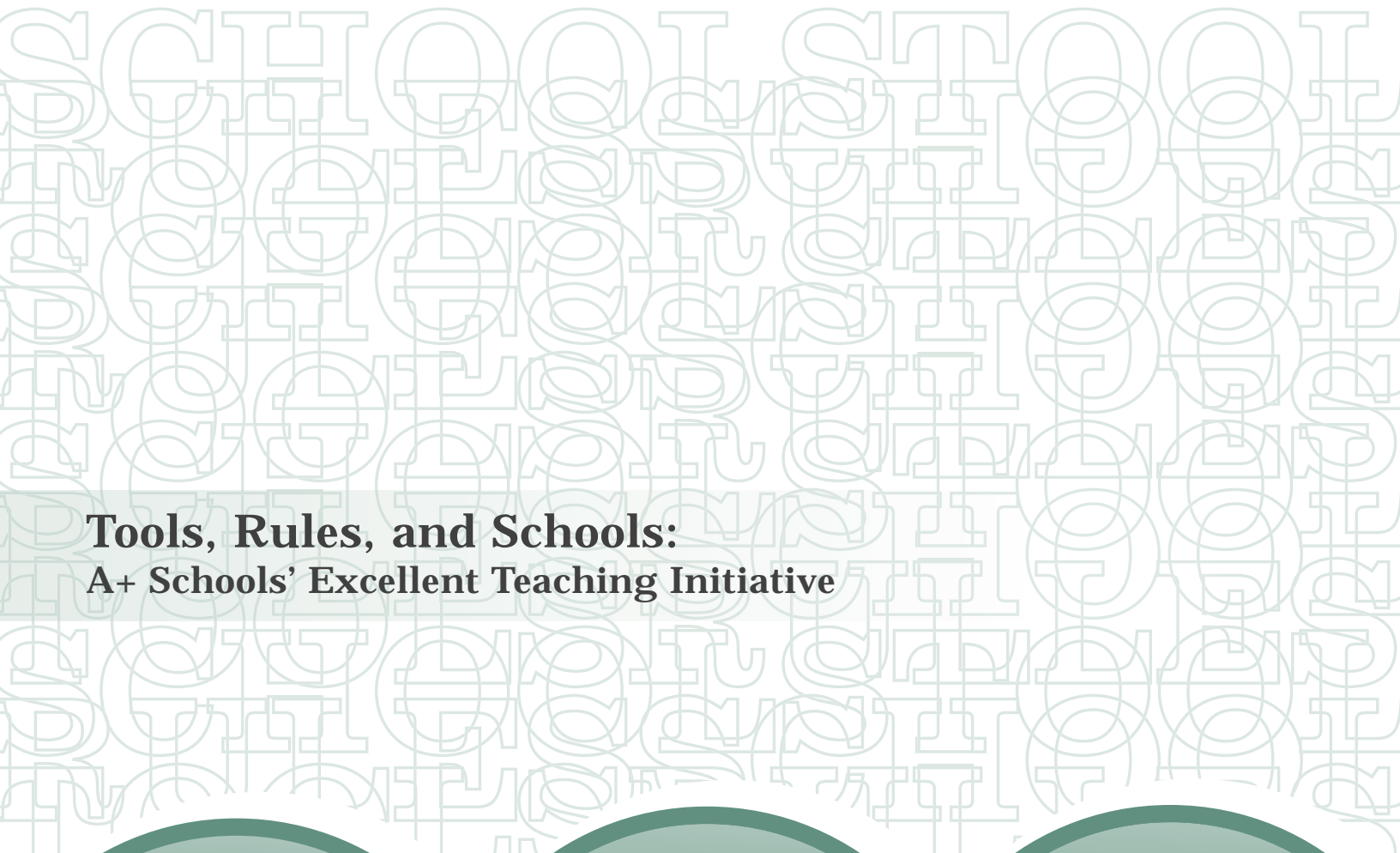




Schools

Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education



Tools, Rules, and Schools: A+ Schools' Excellent Teaching Initiative





Tools, Rules, and Schools: A+ Schools' Excellent Teaching Initiative

A+ Schools is an independent community advocate for the improvement of public education. Our vision is a community mobilized to improve the educational system to produce successive generations of young people who thrive and build their families and futures in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) are currently pursuing an ambitious reform agenda under the banner “Excellence for All.” We believe that excellent teaching in every classroom is a necessary cornerstone of that work and have thus made it one of our three organizational priorities (along with good governance and family/community empowerment). In this brief introduction to our Excellent Teaching Initiative, we discuss:

1. The importance of excellent teaching for overall school improvement;
2. Elements of the system that enables excellent teaching to occur:
 - TOOLS and Training
 - Staffing RULES
 - Working conditions in SCHOOLS;
3. Potential strategies for using each of these system components to increase both the overall level and the equitable distribution of excellent teaching; and
4. Where we go from here with this initiative and how you can get involved.

Our goal in this document is to lay the groundwork for a community discussion of how we can create a system that facilitates quality teaching in every PPS classroom.

Why are we focusing on “excellent teaching”?

When it comes to school improvement, research confirms what common sense suggests: of all the factors controlled by schools, it is the quality of classroom teaching that matters the most. Some researchers estimate that the most effective teaching can be three times as effective in increasing student test scores as the least effective. Not only does teaching have the biggest impact on student success, it is by far the biggest investment our education system makes. “Instruction” makes up 53% of the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ projected \$526 million budget for 2009-10, and “Instructional Support” another 5%. Ultimately, all of the other factors reformers may try to change—class size, curriculum, accountability systems, the amount of time that students spend in school—just create the context in which the central act of teaching occurs. And if teaching is not high quality, little else matters.

Excellent teaching is also an equity issue, indeed a civil rights issue. In city after city, studies have demonstrated that the schools with the highest percentages of poor and minority students also have teachers with the lowest levels of experience and credentials, the highest rates of teacher turnover, and the most difficult working conditions. Later policy briefs in this series will provide hard evidence around the level and distribution of teacher qualifications and working conditions within the PPS, but it is safe to say that ensuring excellent teaching in every classroom will require not just raising the overall level but ensuring equitable distribution.

What systemic factors enable “excellent teaching”?

The A+ Schools Excellent Teaching Initiative is deliberately focused on understanding and elevating the quality of teaching, not the quality of teachers. The goal of this initiative is by no means to say that issues of instructional quality would be solved by simply hiring “better teachers.” We understand that individual teachers work within a system—a system of hiring, compensation, and staffing rules, a system of resources, mandates, policies and procedures that frame their daily work—and that these things as well as the knowledge and skills of teachers themselves influence the effectiveness of their instruction.

There are three major components of a system that ensures quality teaching in every classroom:

1. **TOOLS and Training:** Giving all teachers the resources they need to do their jobs;
2. **Staffing RULES:** Matching teacher skills to school needs and rewarding performance; and
3. **Working Conditions in SCHOOLS:** Providing an environment in every building that promotes teacher professionalism and allows all teachers to operate at their most effective.

Of all the factors controlled by schools, it is the quality of classroom teaching that matters the most.

Because these components work as a system, manipulating one piece without understanding how it connects to others can lead to unintended consequences. Through this initiative we seek to suggest ways that PPS can maximize excellent teaching by improving the overall system in which teachers work.

Teachers in the PPS are equipped with a standard set of tools—the curriculum they teach and the training they receive. And they bring these tools into a common system of staffing rules that governs who teaches at which schools and how they are rewarded. However, because the working conditions at individual schools are highly variable, these common elements of the system can have very different impacts at the school level. Like seeds planted in poor soil, the best tools and training do little to promote excellent instruction in a school environment that is chaotic or unsupportive. Similarly, staffing rules may unintentionally compound the problems of schools with difficult working conditions by facilitating a revolving door of the least experienced teachers.

In the following section we unpack the three major elements of the system, identifying some of the specific factors that impact teaching quality. We urge, however, that changes to individual factors be considered in terms of the incentives and dynamics created in the overall system.

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How can “excellent teaching” be maximized?

How can the PPS create a system which supports excellent teaching in every classroom? Research and the experience of other large urban districts suggests that attention must be paid simultaneously to the tools teachers are given, the rules which govern where they work and how they are rewarded, and the specific day-to-day working conditions in schools which allow them to put their tools and training to best use. Within each of these three broad categories, our review of the research points to particular factors that support excellent teaching, as spelled out in the table below.



TOOLS AND TRAINING

- Curriculum
- Assessment
- Professional Development and Coaching
- Mentoring/Induction



STAFFING RULES

- Recruitment/Hiring
- School Assignment
- Performance Evaluation
- Compensation
- Tenure
- Career Ladder



WORKING CONDITIONS IN SCHOOLS

- Classroom climate
- School leadership
- Respect for teaching time
- Provision of planning time
- Faculty collegiality
- Teacher influence on decisions
- Parental support

Think of each item in the illustrations above as a lever in a complex machine—adjustments to any of these levers will impact the overall quality of teaching in the system. In the remainder of this document we briefly describe why some of these factors have such influence on quality teaching, and how considering them in isolation can sometimes have consequences that work against the broad goal of raising achievement in the PPS. We conclude the discussion of each system component with some important questions to consider as the community moves forward with this effort to ensure quality teaching in every classroom.



SYSTEM COMPONENT #1: DISTRICT-PROVIDED TOOLS AND TRAINING

Much of the work under “Excellence for All” has focused on this component of upgrading the resources that PPS teachers bring into their classrooms. In the last three school years there have been major overhauls in almost every area of the curriculum, with an overall goal of bringing more consistency and focus on standards throughout the district. In support of the new core curriculum, the PPS has made major investments in curriculum-specific professional development as well as instructional coaches to support curriculum roll-out at the school level. Because there is already so much activity within PPS to upgrade this component of the teaching system, our Excellent Teaching Initiative will focus primarily on the other two components, district-level HR policies and building-level working conditions. Of course our analysis of PPS’ current status on these factors and any recommendations for change will have to consider interactions with the new strategic investments in instructional resources.

Critical Questions

TOOLS

1. Is ongoing training sustained, collaborative, and focused on specific curriculum and/or instruction goals?
2. Are teachers being given the training and resources to adapt the curriculum to the needs of diverse learners?
3. Do teachers have good building-level support to implement the ambitious curricular changes underway?

Think of each item in the illustrations (*see page 3*) as a lever in a complex machine—adjustments to any of these levers will impact the overall quality of teaching in the system.



SYSTEM COMPONENT #2: DISTRICT-LEVEL STAFFING RULES

Much attention is currently being paid in the policy and research worlds to the “strategic management of human capital” in education—a phrase referring to the whole pipeline by which districts hire, allocate to specific schools, train, reward and retain their teachers. The overwhelming consensus of this work is that current human resources systems in education are often not strategic, operating under rules and creating incentives that can undermine the educational goals of districts. Any revamp of the teaching system in the PPS must consider the following factors:

- **Recruitment and hiring practices:** Because they focus on paper qualifications over demonstrated performance, standard hiring procedures may unnecessarily screen out candidates who might be excellent teachers. A recent study also found that urban districts, partly due to complex staffing rules, consistently post job openings later than suburban districts, putting them at a competitive disadvantage. Districts with more efficient and agile hiring practices have a head start on quality teaching.
- **Staffing rules and school assignment:** Once teachers are hired, current policies governing school assignment and transfer give great weight to teacher seniority. This makes it difficult for talented teachers to end up where their expertise is needed most and for principals to assemble coherent, like-minded instructional teams. One result is that schools with the lowest achievement, often seen as having the most difficult working conditions, face a revolving door of inexperienced and frustrated teachers.
- **Teacher evaluation:** Ironically, the hiring process screens teachers based on qualifications which have little demonstrated impact on effectiveness, but once hired little is done to collect or use information about their actual performance on the job. Teacher evaluation systems are often described as “pro forma” or “drive by.” Research documents that most evaluations are simple satisfactory/unsatisfactory checklists, completed based on a sometimes rushed and unrepresentative classroom visit from an administrator. Few unsatisfactory ratings are ever given. Moreover, such generic systems do little if anything to help teachers learn and develop. Any shift to a more thoughtful, multi-measure system of teacher evaluation will yield more powerful information.
- **Tenure:** In most school districts tenure is relatively automatic, awarded based on survival of the inevitably challenging first few years of teaching and on the basis of superficial classroom evaluations. Even 69% of teachers in a national survey agreed with the statement that tenure is “just a formality—it has very little to do with whether a teacher is good or not.” Yet tenure is perhaps the most consequential personnel decision districts make. Given the difficulty and cost of firing poorly performing teachers once tenured, it is a potentially multi-million dollar commitment to job security with minimal relationship to performance or quality. Making tenure a meaningful reward for demonstrated performance could be one of the most powerful levers for increasing and rewarding quality teaching.



SYSTEM COMPONENT #2: DISTRICT-LEVEL STAFFING RULES...continued

- Compensation schemes:** Currently, we hire and compensate teachers almost entirely on the basis of qualifications, not quality. The distinction is crucial. Research indicates that teacher qualifications (including courses, degrees, certifications, and years of experience) have little relationship to the quality of instructional practice and account for only a small percentage of the variation in student achievement growth. Yet these are the major factors considered in teacher hiring and the only factors considered in teacher compensation. Performance on the job—which in some form determines advancement and compensation in nearly every other white collar/professional job—does not factor into the rate at which teachers climb the ladder of “salary steps.” Lockstep compensation systems based on credentials and years in the system can work against quality teaching in a number of ways. The lack of differentiated pay based on performance could push individuals who want to be rewarded for hard work and results away from the profession. The lack of differentiated pay based on the need or challenge of the teaching assignment creates shortages in areas like math, science, technology, and special education and prevents districts from incentivizing strong teachers for serving the most challenging schools. Numerous urban districts, including Chicago under now-U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, are currently experimenting with differentiated compensation.
- Career ladders:** Another way in which teaching differs strikingly from other occupations requiring a college degree or more is that the job is more or less the same on the last day of the 30th year as it is on the first day of the 1st year. More opportunities for successful teachers to move into positions where they can use their expertise to coach other teachers or lead professional development would boost the quality of teaching both by “spreading the wealth” of the most successful practitioners and by keeping those strong performers motivated and in the classroom.

Critical Questions

RULES

1. Are we attracting, selecting, and hiring the highest quality candidates in a timely and efficient manner?
2. Are we strategically matching instructional talent with student needs?
3. How can we align teacher evaluation and tenure decisions with our substantive vision of instructional quality?
4. How can we reward performance and incentivize teachers to reach their full potential and to teach where they are needed most?



SYSTEM COMPONENT #3: SCHOOL-LEVEL WORKING CONDITIONS

Working conditions constrain excellent teaching through their impact on teacher satisfaction and motivation, the ability of even the most talented teacher to deliver effective instruction, and the decisions of teachers to work in certain schools and remain in the teaching profession. Research suggests that among the working conditions most important to teachers are:

- **Classroom climate:** Schools where clear expectations are set, rewarded, and enforced, allowing teachers to spend more of their time teaching and less of it managing.
- **School leadership:** Having a principal who makes the building run smoothly, promotes a clear vision of what good teaching and learning should look like, and establishes a climate of trust, respect, and support. Developing and deploying teacher leadership is also a critical component of effective school leadership.
- **Respect for teaching time:** Minimizing intrusions that disrupt the flow and focus of learning, for example from announcements, special programs, and students being pulled in and out of class.
- **Provision of planning time:** Giving teachers the time they need out of class to develop high quality lessons and collaborate with their peers. Studies in Pittsburgh and elsewhere find huge variation in how principals work the schedule to carve out time for teachers to collaborate and in how they ensure that time is used productively. International comparisons suggest that it can be done and that it matters significantly for the quality of instruction and student achievement.
- **Faculty collegiality:** A school culture where teachers share high expectations and support and learn from each other versus being isolated in their classrooms.
- **Parental support:** Parents who are empowered to act as partners in supporting their children's education.

The variable working conditions at individual schools unbalance the teaching quality system, undercutting the effective implementation of tools and training, and creating negative incentives in the way schools are staffed. Deficits in the areas identified above are what make some schools “hard to staff,” leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of inexperienced teachers, challenging learning environments, and low performance.

Critical Questions**SCHOOLS**

1. How can we make all of our schools desirable places for professionals to work?
2. How can we give teachers more opportunities to work more collaboratively with each other and administrators?
3. How can school climates and operations be improved to protect teaching time?
4. How can school leadership support excellent teaching?

Any new policies or systems must be considered in terms of the total pipeline of the teacher experience and package of incentives and disincentives they face.

In the final analysis what influences the decisions of teachers about where to work and even whether to stay in teaching is a combination of monetary and non-monetary “compensation”—such as opportunities for career advancement, working conditions conducive to effective teaching, and the ability to function like a professional. A system that seeks to maximize effective teaching must consider how to manipulate all of these variables to promote and reward effectiveness and eliminate some of the current misaligned incentives. Any new policies or systems must be considered in terms of the total pipeline of the teacher experience and package of incentives and disincentives they face. For example, salary incentives for effective teachers to work in the most challenging schools may make sense, but only in the presence of meaningful measures of effectiveness. Similarly, if the standards by which teachers would be evaluated are undermined by working conditions that not even the most effective teachers can overcome, monetary incentives are unlikely to entice teachers to work in difficult schools.

Where do we go from here?

This brief review was intended to map the territory for our new Excellent Teaching Initiative and begin a community conversation on this crucial issue. To frame that conversation, the table below recaps some of the most important questions to consider about the tools, rules, and schools that influence teaching quality, and outlines our specific next steps.

In the coming months, we will release data analyzing the current status of PPS in terms of staffing rules and working conditions, and how these factors may be impacting the level and distribution of quality instruction. This data will help us have an informed community conversation about where PPS stands in terms of teaching quality and what pieces of the system have the most potential to move us to the next level. Having defined the scope and significance of the issue, analyzed the current status of PPS, and gathered community input, we will culminate this phase of our work with recommendations for strengthening the system to ensure that every PPS student benefits from excellent classroom instruction.

	CRITICAL QUESTIONS	OUR NEXT STEPS
TOOLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is ongoing training sustained, collaborative, and focused on specific curriculum and/or instruction goals? • Do teachers have good building-level support to implement the ambitious curricular changes underway? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor how changes underway interact with staffing rules and working conditions to influence teaching quality
RULES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we attracting, selecting, and hiring the highest quality candidates in a timely and efficient manner? • Are we strategically matching instructional talent with student needs? • How can we align teacher evaluation and tenure decisions with our substantive vision of instructional quality? • How can we reward performance and incentivize teachers to reach their full potential and to teach where they are needed most? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to the public on the distribution of teachers in Pittsburgh Public Schools and the impact of current staffing rules • Identify any staffing policies whose unintended consequences undermine the quality teaching system and make recommendations for policy changes • Provide opportunities to learn about key findings, participate in discussions and take action as a result
SCHOOLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we make all of our schools desirable places for professionals to work? • How can we give teachers more opportunities to work collaboratively with each other and administrators? • How can school climates and operations be improved to protect teaching time? • How can school leadership support excellent teaching? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to the public on the working conditions that matter to Pittsburgh Public School personnel in making schools hard or easy to staff • Identify working conditions which undermine the quality teaching system and make recommendations for policy changes • Provide opportunities to learn about key findings, participate in discussions and volunteer to participate in a school-level visit and survey of working conditions

A large sunburst graphic with many rays emanating from a central white circle, filling the background of the page. The rays are in various shades of green and white.

Excellent Teaching Needs **YOUR** Support

- Make sure you're on our mailing list to **get updates** on events and publications
- Participate in the **community conversations** to be held in the upcoming months
- **Talk** to people at work, in your neighborhood and at your school about these issues
- Stay tuned for opportunities to **take action** on specific recommendations for changes that will support a quality teaching system
- Visit our website at www.aplusschools.org to sign up for the mailing list, **get more information** and see the list of upcoming events and opportunities for action



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