

Keep Great Teachers: The Case for Using Multiple Measures to Make Staffing Decisions in Pittsburgh Public Schools

Why Our Students Need Urgent Action

Together, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) set a goal for at least 80% of all students to obtain a post-secondary degree or workforce certification by 2021. In a public call to action led by A+ Schools on March 24, 2012, the same leaders, along with families, community members, and students, **committed to achieving equity for Pittsburgh students and doing what it takes to ensure all students have the individual supports they need in order to achieve success.**

Quality classroom teaching is the most important factor that schools contribute to individual student success. Three sobering realities underscore why Pittsburgh Public Schools must act sooner rather than later to selectively keep its most effective teachers in the classroom:

- The difference between black and white student achievements in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is nearly 30 percentage points.¹ Our black students are our majority population, yet they are less likely to graduate² and, if they do, less likely to be prepared for college or other career training. These disparities have enormous implications for the future of individual students and our region. If leaders of Pittsburgh's education community are serious about closing this racial achievement gap, they must make decisions that will increase black students' access to teachers who advance their learning.
- Recent budget cuts will lead to nearly 400 reductions in school-based professionals in 2012—about 20% of the current teaching force—and possibly more in years to come. In light of this reality it is even more imperative that Pittsburgh keep its most effective teachers in the classroom while making cuts.
- The current seniority-based layoff system for Pittsburgh Public Schools teachers puts schools with high poverty, high racial achievement gaps, and high numbers of black students at greater risk of losing teachers because they have high

numbers of relatively new teachers. Yet, research has found that, in general, some teachers dismissed due to seniority are more effective than some teachers who are retained.³

The most consequential decision to be made - in light of these realities and in order to follow through with our commitments to students - is the decision to put an effective teacher in every classroom, every day. None of our students can afford to spend another day where he or she is not learning, and our schools cannot afford to support policies that fail to put educators' performance first. For that reason, we urge PPS and PFT to act quickly to factor comprehensive measure of effective teaching into staffing decisions that will result in greater numbers of highly effective teachers and greater achievement for all of our students.

Effective Teachers Are Critical to Student Success

Decades of research have shown that the quality of education received by a student depends more on the quality of his or her teacher than on any other in-school factor.⁴ Numerous studies document large differences in effectiveness from one teacher to another, even after adjusting for student characteristics such as baseline test performance, race/ethnicity, family income, and gender.⁵ These differences are also clear in Pittsburgh, where research on multiple years of teacher data by Mathematica has led to the following conclusion:

"The most effective teachers in PPS produce gains in achievement that, if accumulated over several years without decay, could erase achievement gaps between black and white students, or between Pittsburgh averages and statewide averages."⁶

These differences can have a lifelong impact on students. A recent study tracking 2.5 million students over 20 years determined that those with highly effective teachers were more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, and save more for retirement.⁷

¹ A+ Schools. (2011). 2011 Report to the Community on Public School Progress in Pittsburgh.

² Engberg, J., & Gill, B. (2006, July). Estimating Graduation and Dropout Rates with Longitudinal Data: A Case Study in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. RAND Education Working Paper.

³ Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2010). Assessing the Determinants and Implications of Teacher Layoffs. Center for Education Data & Research, University of Washington-Bothell.

⁴ Staiger, D., Gordon, R., & Kane, T. (2009). Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

⁵ Staiger et al., 2009.

⁶ Empowering Effective Teachers. (2012). Groundbreaking Research. Retrieved April 11, 2012, from <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/148320410162544410/site/default.asp>. (referencing Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (2010). Estimating Teacher and School Effectiveness in Pittsburgh: Value-Added Modeling and Results.)

⁷ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., & Rockoff, J. (2011). The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17699, December 2011.

Teacher Evaluations Can Fairly, Accurately and Reliably Measure Effectiveness.

A teacher's effectiveness ultimately depends upon whether he or she delivers instruction that helps students learn and succeed. Identifying effective teachers, as well as ones who need to improve, requires a fair evaluation system that has clear and rigorous expectations, provides meaningful feedback to help improve teaching and learning, and utilizes multiple measures of performance.⁸

Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers have been building such an evaluation system since 2009. The Research-based Inclusive System of Evaluation (RISE) rubric, based on the Danielson Framework for Teaching, is a classroom observation tool that uses a four-point scale to evaluate teaching practice. RISE was developed collaboratively by Pittsburgh Public Schools, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, and hundreds of classroom teachers.

This past fall, over 80% of teachers interviewed as part of A+ Schools' School Works research reported that their RISE evaluations have been fair and are helping them to improve their practice, compared to only 15% of teachers agreeing that "teacher evaluation in my building is rigorous and reveals what is true about teachers' practice" under the old single cumulative satisfactory or unsatisfactory rating.

The RISE observation and evaluation system is a great improvement over the previous system in its ability to provide teachers with clear expectations, meaningful feedback, and a framework for reaching their full potential in the classroom. Yet recent findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, conducted with over 3,000 teachers in 6 school districts across the country, show that teacher evaluations are most accurate when they combine rigorous classroom observations with value-added data and student perceptions.⁹ The three measures together gave a more reliable assessment of a teacher's future success than any one measure on its own and together represent the strongest combination of predictive power, reliability, and diagnostic usefulness in teacher evaluations.¹⁰

⁸ Weisberg, D., S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*. Brooklyn, NY: The New Teacher Project.

⁹ Kane, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2012). *Gathering Feedback for Teaching: Combining High-Quality Observations with Student Surveys and Achievement Gains*. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

¹⁰ Kane et al., 2012.

PPS continues to refine a measure of effective teaching that combines multiple performance measures, including student feedback and value-added measures. PPS is on the right track and must continue this effort to expand beyond classroom observation so that it may more fully assess the degree to which teachers help their students learn.

Value-Added Analysis – Very Useful Despite Challenges

Value-added analysis, which uses student test data over multiple years to gauge an individual teacher's contribution to his or her students' academic growth, has received criticism regarding its reliability. While it is not perfect, value-added analysis is still more accurate than any other single measure in predicting success over the course of a teacher's career. Two promising findings from MET showed that (1) teachers with high value-added scores helped their students master higher-level thinking skills in addition to helping them score well on standardized tests, and (2) although value-added scores may fluctuate from year to year, the relationship between any individual year's score and the teacher's long-term success is strong.

In Pittsburgh, Mathematica's analysis showed that the top seven percent of grades 4-8 teachers produce enough value-added to raise student achievement by 10 percentile points relative to statewide achievement in one school year, whereas the bottom seven to eight percent leave students with declines of about 10 percentile points.

This research, combined with newly released data from Harvard and Columbia Universities showing that teachers with high value-added scores have a major influence on their students' life outcomes, suggest that a high value-added score is a strong indicator of a great teacher and should be included in a measure of teaching effectiveness.

Sources:

Kane et al., 2012.

Empowering Effective Teachers, 2012. Groundbreaking Research. Retrieved on April 11, 2012.

Chetty et al., 2011.

Effectiveness Matters More to Student Learning than Seniority

Seniority-based layoffs overlook the fact that more senior teachers are not always the most effective ones. According to a study conducted in 2010, more than 80 percent of seniority-based layoffs would result in better teachers leaving classrooms and less effective teachers staying.¹¹ In that study only 13-16% of teachers laid off would also have been cut under a system based on effectiveness. The resulting effects on student achievement could be quite harmful: over a school year, students of less effective teachers make

¹¹ Goldhaber et al., 2010.

2.5-3.5 fewer months of academic progress than students of average teachers.¹² If this is the case in Pittsburgh, students in our most vulnerable schools who lose teachers this year stand to fall even more behind in learning.

While we know that individual teachers can improve with experience, not all teachers begin with the same skills or rise to the same level. Studies have also shown that most of the effects of experience occur during the first year and that teachers reach a plateau after about 3-5 years.¹³ At that point, teachers vary widely in effectiveness, and those who have made the greatest gains are more likely to continue improving at a faster rate than their colleagues who made fewer gains in their first years teaching. In fact, one study found that teachers with twenty years of experience are not much more effective on average than teachers with five years of experience.¹⁴ We must acknowledge that experience is important to becoming a more effective teacher, but experience alone cannot tell us a teacher's level of effectiveness.

Pennsylvania is one of 13 states where state law stipulates that only a teacher's length of service be considered when making layoff decisions unless other factors are mutually agreed to by the local bargaining unit and district.¹⁵ In all other states, teacher performance must either be a major factor in layoff decisions or may be considered along with other factors. In 2011, Illinois passed a law requiring teacher performance ratings to be considered before seniority in layoff decisions, and there is pending legislation in at least three other states that would prohibit layoffs based solely on seniority.

The current system for laying off teachers, based on seniority, disproportionately affects our most vulnerable schools which have high student poverty, low achievement, and high racial achievement gaps. These schools also have high percentages of black students. For example, schools such as King, Faison and Arlington could lose between 30-50% of teachers to layoffs because they have higher numbers of new teachers. Ironically, these schools were just re-staffed with new teachers because of federal mandates and school improvement strategies. Teacher layoffs based on seniority only will mean that these schools will

have to re-staff again; most likely with more senior teachers who have been displaced and may not feel equipped to teach in these schools.

Seniority should be a factor in teacher layoffs, but not the only one. Factors most highly correlated with student achievement should matter the most, and other factors such as attendance, classroom management, experience, and extra school responsibilities should also be considered. Teachers themselves agree that multiple factors should be considered in layoff decisions—in a survey conducted in two major urban school districts where over 3,800 teachers participated, about 75% of teachers answered “yes” when asked if additional factors besides seniority should be considered to determine which teachers get laid off during a reduction in force.¹⁶

In Pittsburgh the majority of the public and approximately half of teachers support using factors other than seniority when dismissing teachers.

In a recent survey of 500 registered voters and 150 teachers in Pittsburgh, four out of five—80%—of the public in Pittsburgh and 48% of Pittsburgh teachers believe that when it comes to making decisions about which teachers to let go first, the school district should be able to take things other than seniority into account.¹⁷

Teacher Evaluations Must Matter

Even the best evaluation system will fail to achieve student gains if the information it produces has no consequence. As it is in most professional settings, an effective evaluation system should be a primary factor in decisions such as when teachers receive tenure, how teachers are assigned and retained, how teachers are compensated and advanced, what professional development teachers receive, and when and how teachers are dismissed.¹⁸

Evaluation systems that have clear performance standards, frequent feedback and enough support for teachers failing to meet the standards are fair for all teachers, including those teachers whose performance ratings are unsatisfactory. Teachers accepting an unsatisfactory appraisal may choose to exit the district on their own. PPS could also facilitate the voluntary departure of unsatisfactory performers by providing low-stakes options to teachers, such as multi-year unpaid sabbaticals. Similarly, when faced with staffing reductions as unprecedented and extraordinary as Pittsburgh is currently, evaluation systems are a justified basis for making difficult layoff decisions.

¹² Boyd, D., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2010). Teacher Layoffs: An Empirical Illustration of Seniority v. Measures of Effectiveness. The Urban Institute, National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER).

¹³ The New Teacher Project. (2012). Teacher Experience: What Does the Research Say?

¹⁴ Ladd, H. F. (2008). Value-Added Modeling of Teacher Credentials: Policy Implications.

¹⁵ The New Teacher Project. (2011). The Case Against Quality-Blind Teacher Layoffs: Why Layoff Policies that Ignore Teacher Quality Need to End Now.

¹⁶ The New Teacher Project, 2011.

¹⁷ The Winston Group, November 2011

¹⁸ Weisberg et al., 2009.

Currently, Pittsburgh offers salary increases for a number of specific career ladder positions, as well as financial awards for teachers in Promise Readiness Corps teams and in schools where students achieve certain gains in test scores. These positions and performance incentives recognize and reward teachers for working with vulnerable students and for taking on greater responsibilities toward fostering effective teaching in their schools. If performance is a strong enough basis on which to determine rewards, it must also be a strong enough basis on which to base staffing decisions. We support these efforts by the district and union to value and reward effective teaching, and we hope these performance measures will be used in the future to make decisions about who teaches and where.

Effective Teaching Relies on More than Just Teachers

Although teachers have a greater impact on their students' learning than any other school factor, the responsibility of student learning cannot rest on teachers' shoulders alone. Results of three years of Schools Works interviews conducted by community volunteers with middle and high school principals, counselors, and teachers in Pittsburgh underscore the critical role that school practices play in student success, especially the creation of systems for supporting positive learning environments, student interventions, and teachers collaborating with one another.

School leadership must prioritize, protect, and help develop great teaching in their schools. Groundbreaking new research with 4,800 teachers in almost 250 schools across the country over the past two years shows that schools with strong instructional cultures that foster great teaching retain more of their top teachers and help students achieve higher proficiency in math and reading.¹⁹ In these schools, teachers agreed that their fellow teachers shared a common vision of what effective teaching looks like, that the expectations for effective teaching were clearly defined at their school, and that their schools were committed to improving their instructional practice. Creating strong instructional cultures in schools must happen in parallel with integrating a teacher evaluation system into the district's policies and practices.

We cannot hold teachers to high standards without also holding school and district leadership, families, and students to high standards. On March 24, 2012—after listening to the responses of teachers who

participated in School Works interviews—members of the education community made commitments that will support teachers to do their jobs more effectively: PPS will provide books and materials for all students and make sure that every school begins the 2012-13 year with a behavior management system in place, families and students will communicate more regularly with school staff, students will help implement behavior management plans and positively engage their peers in education, and community members will increase their involvement and support for teachers, students, and schools. A+ Schools will hold these groups accountable to their commitments by continuing to engage district and school leadership, teachers, students, hundreds of families, and thousands of community members in this work.

Call to Action

Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers—with the assistance of hundreds of teachers—have invested an enormous amount of time, money, and energy for the past three years to develop a teacher evaluation system that includes rewarding teachers for the advancement of their student's learning. We now call these leaders to take a courageous stand to do what is best for their students' success—and therefore, their teachers' success—by:

- Using performance-based evaluation as a primary factor—in addition to seniority—in staffing decisions, especially when layoffs must be made. Doing so will ensure that the teachers who help their students learn the most are the ones who continue teaching.

Our students need the educational leaders of Pittsburgh Public Schools to act quickly and with determination, making clear their high expectations for current and future teachers. Taking these steps now will show true commitment to Pittsburgh's students, both to eliminating inequities that contribute to the racial achievement gap and to supporting students to succeed in PPS and beyond.

About A+ Schools | A+ Schools is an independent community advocate for improvement in student achievement. A+ Schools works to ensure that all public school students in Pittsburgh achieve at a high level and strives to eliminate the racial achievement gap by advocating for low-income African American students to have access to the supports they need in order to advance their educational achievement. Learn more at www.aplsschools.org

¹⁹ The New Teacher Project. (2012). *Greenhouse Schools: How Schools Can Build Cultures Where Teachers and Students Thrive*.