

OVERVIEW

January 11, 2010

A+ Schools' Tools, Rules and Schools Initiative Learning Policy Center Technical Report

Introduction

Tools, Rules and Schools is a research project commissioned by A+ Schools to examine the distribution and mobility of teachers across the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) and to analyze the policies, practices and learning environment that influence where and how teachers are able to teach.

A+ Schools is an independent community advocate for improvement in public education. The goal of our research project was to focus on elevating the quality of teaching in the PPS. Our recommendations are intended to move the District closer to its goal of empowering excellent committed teachers in every classroom.

The research project encompassed a 15-month study conducted by the Learning Policy Center (LPC) at the University of Pittsburgh at the request of A+ Schools. The LPC utilizes the resources of the University's School of Education, the Learning Research and Development Center, the Institute for Learning and other regional assets to connect high quality learning research with education policy decision-makers. Their research included a quantitative analysis of three years of staffing data, as well as interviews with District administrators and human resources personnel, school board and union representatives, principals and teachers.

NOTE: The **Tools, Rules and Schools** initiative was launched in July 2008, before the PPS and Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) released its very comprehensive and excellent **Empowering Effective Teachers (EET) Plan**, which was funded recently by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

We are pleased to note that the recommendations offered in **Tools, Rules and Schools** are being put in place in the District's EET Plan and related initiatives. We believe that the findings and recommendations made in this report substantiate the need for change and support the EET Plan's goal of focusing attention on our most vulnerable schools.

Structure of the Report

This report looks at the **tools** and training support provided to teachers, the staffing **rules** involved in recruitment and hiring, and the learning environment in the District's **schools**. The report addresses these key elements in three sections:

1. The System as It Existed: Status Report on Teacher Distribution and Mobility in PPS.
2. Reasons Why the System Existed: Barriers to Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Teachers in the Most Vulnerable Schools.
3. How the System Could Work: Our Vision and Recommendations.

Key Findings

Our primary finding from this study of the Pittsburgh Public Schools echoes that of research conducted in public schools across the United States: **Students with the highest needs attend schools with the highest teacher turnover.**

Researchers determined that:

- **The District's most vulnerable schools have the highest teacher turnover rate.** The report identifies "vulnerable schools" as those with the highest percentage of low-income students, higher number of disciplinary incidents and lower student achievement.
- **When teachers move** from one school to another within the District, **they most often opt to move from more vulnerable to less vulnerable schools.**
- The District's hiring and retention policies prior to the Empowering Effective Teachers Plan indirectly worked against staffing the most vulnerable schools with teachers best suited for those schools and their students. For example:
 - Because teachers often move to less vulnerable schools as positions open at those schools, positions at more vulnerable schools that have been vacated have to be filled later in the summer.
 - Thus, positions in the most vulnerable schools are generally filled by teachers with less experience and credentials or by displaced teachers who may not have expressed an interest in those positions.

- Teachers placed in the most vulnerable schools often have less time to adjust to a school and grade-level before school begins because of their later hire date.
- The absence of school-specific induction for new teachers especially impacts teachers at the most vulnerable schools who often need more training and support.

Collectively, the research indicates that these factors are working against having well-supported, committed, and effective teachers at the most vulnerable schools.

Recommendations

A+ Schools strongly endorses the District’s “Empowering Effective Teachers Plan”, which includes the goals of 1) increasing the number of highly-effective teachers, 2) increasing the exposure of high-need students to highly-effective teachers, and 3) ensuring that all teachers work in learning environments that support their ability to be highly effective.

To achieve these goals, we recommend that the Pittsburgh Public School District and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers focus efforts on:

- **Changing the hiring process** to give candidates and schools more time, information and freedom of choice;
- **Establishing a core team of highly effective and committed teachers** at the most vulnerable schools; and
- **Addressing specific needs at vulnerable schools** to provide teachers there with the learning environment and resources they need to deliver quality instruction.

Additionally, because of the critical role of school administrators in this process, principals may need more direction and knowledge about how to be responsive to these needs and be given the freedom to take different approaches in providing more support in Pittsburgh’s most vulnerable schools.

As noted at the start of this report, a number of specific initiatives contained in the District’s EET plan and related initiatives were developed apart from — but substantiated by — our research. They include the following:

- Post job openings earlier and fill vacancies by July 1 to allow more time to prepare for the school year.
- Screen teacher candidates for their passion for teaching high-need students and ability to effectively teach these students in a highly vulnerable school.

- Institute an efficient and fair process for dismissing teachers who are not teaching effectively.
- Offer information to teacher candidates regarding a school's strategic plan, leadership team and existing teacher support.
- Provide leadership development support for a core team of highly-effective teachers in every Pittsburgh public school.
- Allow that core team to participate in the hiring, training and socializing of new teachers, including introducing them to the school's students, community and culture, holding meetings and mentoring them over the school year.
- Conduct additional research to determine what added qualities and skills are needed to teach effectively in the most vulnerable schools and how to select those teachers during the recruiting and hiring process.
- Discontinue the late-summer placement of teachers in open positions in schools based solely on their seniority or displacement status.
- Give all teachers in more vulnerable schools the extra support needed to teach effectively.

These and other District initiatives provide strong direction and support for the Pittsburgh Public School system as a whole — including the proposed teacher academy for training and development and the new teacher evaluation system known as Rise. **We encourage the PPS and PFT to implement these initiatives, paying particular attention to the real need for increased school-specific support — particularly at our most vulnerable schools.**

Conclusion

The Gates Foundation grant has put a spotlight on work to increase the effectiveness of teachers in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. We are confident that these recommendations — as part of the District's ambitious plan — can lead to empowering effective teachers in our most vulnerable schools and making these schools a place where teachers want to stay.