

Spotlight on Teacher and Principal Preferences

In the spring of 2006, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a national non-profit organization, reviewed the teacher hiring and school staffing policies and practices in Milwaukee Public Schools with collaboration from the district and the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association. To learn more about the experiences of teachers and principals with Milwaukee's teacher transfer and new hire policies, as well as with the school interview team process, TNTP surveyed all MPS teachers and principals. More than 2,000 teacher responses and 100 principal responses were received. This document summarizes the primary findings of this analysis.

40%
of MPS teachers and
70%
of MPS principals
provided feedback

What We Heard

TNTP learned from this feedback that 1) human capital processes can be improved to better serve all schools, teachers and students; and 2) the aims of teachers and administrators are largely compatible. Teachers and principals are the backbone of the school system, more integral to student achievement than any other factor. Yet, many aspects of current practice in MPS are not aligned to support the peak performance of principals and teachers. TNTP's in-depth analysis of MPS practices led to the several observations:

Nearly all MPS schools have voted to participate in the option School Interview Team process.

(1) While Milwaukee has made strides by introducing more collaborative teacher staffing rules, a large number of vacancies continue to be filled through assignment by HR, without the consent of teachers or schools. Two placement processes exist in MPS: school interview teams (which allow teachers, administrators, and parents to select the teacher applicants who will receive offers) and Assignment by HR (a process of slotting teachers into vacancies). The interview team process has become overwhelmingly popular.

Yet by contract, interview teams cease at the end of June and must observe a moratorium through the end of September. During that time, teachers are placed by Human Resources—a non-consensual process that results in dissatisfaction and increased teacher movement. TNTP found that *94% of teachers hired through the school interview process were satisfied with their new positions; only 51% of teachers placed by Human Resources were satisfied with their positions.* After nearly a year in their new positions, 52% of teachers assigned by HR said that they might change placements again; for teachers selected through interviews, the figure was only 22%. Unfortunately, HR placements are neither rare nor last resorts: *During the 2006 staffing season, 41% of new MPS teacher placements occurred through HR slotting.*

51%
Of teachers placed
by HR were
satisfied
After a year,
52%
considered
changing
positions.

1 in 4
teachers believe the
incompatibility
transfer process helps
them locate a position
that is a good fit.

(2) The transfer option known as an "incompatibility transfer" (also called a Q9 transfer) is not successful, despite best intentions. The incompatibility transfer is intended to release teachers from placements with which they are incompatible, at any point during the school year. Unfortunately, this transfer usually does not meet its goal of providing a more suitable position for the teachers who exercise it. On the whole,

teachers who file for incompatibility transfers are deeply dissatisfied with the outcome and are twice as likely to transfer schools again the following year. According to survey of MPS principals, high-poverty schools are receiving a disproportionate share of incompatibility transfers. The practice of allowing teachers to leave their placements midyear is highly unusual in urban districts – to date, The New Teacher Project has not studied another district with such a provision.

(3) MPS does not compete effectively for new teachers. TNTP’s national research has shown that the pool of new teachers available for hire is strongest in March and April. In Milwaukee, a restrictive hiring process prevents the district from hiring early enough to vie for the best new graduates. By the time schools can consider new hires, many have been lost to surrounding suburbs and private schools.

63%
of principals have lost a promising new teacher due to the district’s late hiring timeline.

80%
of teachers hired into high-poverty schools by school interview teams believe their school is a good fit
49%
of teachers placed by Human Resources feel that way

(4) MPS staffing rules and processes do not allow schools to select the teachers they need. High-poverty schools in particular face a shortage of quality applicants, making building strong instructional teams difficult. These schools have a disproportionate number of vacancies and receive fewer voluntary transfer applications. As a result, many of their positions are filled through HR slotting. Neither teachers nor principals are happy or satisfied with this process. Teaching in a high-poverty school is a challenging assignment, and it is essential that teachers choose to work in such an environment voluntarily. Teachers selected into these schools through the school interview process are more satisfied with their positions than those who are involuntarily placed, suggesting that the problem is with the process, not the schools.

(5) The Teacher Evaluation and Mentoring (TEAM) process is well regarded but rarely used. Principals agree that the TEAM remediation process is an effective way to help a struggling teacher improve, yet the process is rarely used, and teachers can decline to participate. Lack of a universal remediation process has negative effects for the whole system. Over half of MPS principals admitted in a confidential survey to “excessing” (or cutting from their school) a teacher who was not performing well. Excessed teachers who do not find new positions through the interview process are slotted by HR – resulting in a cycle of passing around a small number of poor performers.

(6) HR must take steps to improve its new teacher hiring and teacher transfer processes. Open-ended survey comments from MPS teachers and principals have suggested a number of ways that HR can improve services. Many of these comments point to a more streamlined and clear application process, more effective and efficient communication and clarity on the hiring and transfer processes. HR can also better support the school interview team process by providing useful and effective training and resources to interview teams. Currently, 33% of teachers on school interview teams say they are satisfied with the quality of selection training provided by HR; only 37% are satisfied with the communication they receive from HR on the interview team process. Finally, TNTP recommends investments in stronger HR data tracking, reporting, and analysis.

37%
of teachers reported satisfaction with communication and support received from HR during the interview process

What Next?

The New Teacher Project strongly recommends several steps—taking into account the feedback from teachers and principals—that can be accomplished through collaboration between the district and the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association. These reforms can lead to stronger instructional teams and more positive working conditions for all MPS staff.

(1) Require mutual consent from schools and teachers in all cases of teacher placement. Teachers and principals should both have a say in placement and no teacher should be forced into any school. School interview teams should govern all school-based teacher selections, and there should be no placements directly by Human Resources.

(2) Eliminate the incompatibility transfer process. This transfer option does not serve schools or teachers well. Allow any teacher not engaged in the TEAM process to seek a voluntary transfer at the end of a given school year, but not during a school year.

(3) Eliminate barriers that prevent MPS from selecting the best new hires. Move up retirement and voluntary transfer notification deadlines, and allow new teachers to apply for positions concurrently with incumbent teachers. Data from other districts suggests that this policy will have no detrimental impact on incumbent teachers, and may actually improve transfer options for them.

(4) Provide additional staffing support for high-poverty schools. Ensure all MPS schools can assemble strong instructional teams by lending support to those schools – instead of forcing teachers into those vacancies.

(5) Improve and build upon the successful TEAM program by making participation in the process mandatory for teachers referred by their principals. Expansion of the TEAM program could make Milwaukee a model for other districts.

(6) Improve services provided by HR, including better communication and customer service. HR must revamp and improve its new teacher hiring process, more effectively communicate with teachers and schools, and provide support and resources to school interview teams.

Since these reforms build and improve upon practices already in place, they can be realized without substantial new expenditures or dramatic shifts. The foundation for change has already been laid with the widespread adoption of school interview teams. Ultimately, teachers and principals will be more satisfied with a school staffing and evaluation system that better respects the importance of cohesive, high-performing school instruction teams.