

Teacher Hiring, Support and Evaluation in

Thompson School District, CO

Applicant shortages, delayed hiring, and ineffective support and evaluation mechanisms keep the Thompson School District from fully capitalizing on its ability to give all students high-quality teachers.

Introduction

In the spring of 2008, TNTP partnered with the Thompson School District (TSD) in Loveland, Colorado to analyze current teacher staffing practices in the district and make recommendations to further build the concentration of highly effective teachers in TSD schools. TNTP's analysis of policy and practice in TSD included the following components:

- Interviews with a diverse range of district stakeholders, including central leadership, principals and teachers
- Analysis of district employee transaction data
- Online surveys of principals and teachers (784 teachers and 28 principals responded to the survey, response rates of 75 percent and 100 percent, respectively).

TSD has a strong record of academic performance that reflects the district's ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. The district has avoided some of the common staffing challenges that The New Teacher Project (TNTP) has documented in other districts across the country. However, TNTP's analysis reveals that TSD's recruitment, hiring, new teacher support and evaluation policies and practices require reform in four key areas to comprehensively meet the needs of all teachers and schools.

Findings

Recruitment: Despite TSD's status as a geographically desirable district, a large majority of middle and high school principals report an inadequate applicant pool (quality and/or quantity) for recent vacancies.

Principals try to combat shortages by recruiting candidates themselves, but more than half report that when faced with an inadequate pool, they have hired a lower quality candidate than preferred.

Survey responses from TSD recent hires point to two clear strategies for combating applicant shortages: using financial recruitment incentives and better communicating with applicants about district needs and shortages. More than half (52 percent) of recent hires in non-shortage areas said they would have been more likely to pursue licensure in a high-need area if there had been a financial incentive to do so. More than a third (38 percent) would have been more inclined to pursue licensure in a shortage area if they had received better information about district needs.

By expanding the number of teachers eligible for recruitment incentives and using multiple outreach efforts to give prospective teachers clear guidance on high-need subject areas, TSD can bolster its applicant pool and position schools to fill each vacancy with a high-quality teacher of their choice.

Hiring: District policy governing the hiring timeline has a mixed impact on schools' ability to hire early and capture the highest-quality new teacher candidates.

Although TSD's highly effective retirement notification deadline allows for the identification of 25-30 vacancies by February of each year, vacancies are held for posting until after the spring caucus (an annual event in which vacancies are reconciled and displaced non-probationary teachers are assigned to new positions) occurs in March; additional late vacancies occur due to late approval of a large number of non-renewals of teachers and the absence of a deadline for resignations. As a result, hiring is pushed into the late summer. Over the last four years, more than half of new hires occurred after July 1 and nearly one-fifth occurred after the start of school. Principal survey data confirm that this timeline causes their schools to lose high-quality candidates.

To compete effectively for the highest quality new teacher applicants, TSD should make a high-level commitment to finalizing school-level FTE's and holding the spring caucus by February 1. In addition, the number of late vacancies can be reduced by moving up the timeline for approving non-renewals and by implementing a deadline to give notification of resignation by March. Freeing schools to consider and extend contracts to new teacher candidates in March will lead to a marked improvement in candidate quality and overall satisfaction with the hiring process.

Support: Current new teacher support offerings, especially the induction program, do not appear to meet the needs of recent hires, who desire increased opportunities for professional collaboration.

Recent TSD hires, especially those at the middle and high school level, rated the district's induction program as the least beneficial support available to new teachers; fewer than 6 in 10 (59 percent) said the induction program addressed their needs as new teachers. Large majorities of recent hires rated the district's mentoring program and instructional coaches as successful in increasing job satisfaction and effectiveness, but survey data show that new teachers have had uneven access to these resources. When asked what additional forms of support would have been most helpful, recent hires most frequently cited increased opportunities for professional collaboration such as team teaching, team planning, and grade level or subject area meetings.

To provide comprehensive support for all new teachers, TSD should reform its induction program to ensure efficacy for each grade level, subject area, and specialty position. Working with the Thompson Education Association (TEA), the district should implement subject area and grade level "affinity groups" and offer regularly scheduled new teacher networking opportunities. If possible, these new supports should be built into the induction program so that they do not present an additional burden for teachers. Oversight of the district's mentoring program should be tightened to ensure that all mentor/mentee pairs meet regularly and that the relationship meets development objectives for the mentee. Likewise, by expanding opportunities for new teachers to work with instructional coaches, TSD can maximize this effective source of new teacher support.

Evaluation: Weaknesses in the evaluation system undermine its purpose of providing all teachers with meaningful and relevant feedback.

Principal and teacher survey data identified four key weaknesses in TSD's evaluation system:

- Evaluators rarely identify areas of needed improvement: Only 14 percent of teachers reported that their evaluator had identified areas of improvement in their last three evaluations.
- Non-probationary teachers do not find the evaluation process as helpful: Probationary teachers were 21 percent more likely than non-probationary teachers to say the evaluation process helped them improve their teaching practice.
- The evaluation tool is out of alignment with schools' instructional priorities and strategies, according to one in four principals (25 percent).
- The evaluation tool does not allow for adequate differentiation for teachers in various roles. Teachers in non-classroom positions were least likely to agree that the evaluation tool allowed evaluators to tailor their evaluation to a teacher's unique needs and circumstances.

Addressing these issues will require the central administration, schools, and the TEA to work together to develop a new evaluation tool and process. A new tool and process should be flexible enough to allow adequate differentiation for all schools and teachers, and rigorous enough to accurately measure performance and identify areas of improvement for novice and veteran teachers alike. TSD should further invest in electronic tracking of evaluations, providing a rich data source that can be used to understand performance trends across the district, compare individual evaluators and norm evaluation ratings.

Recommendations

To address challenges and provide all schools with the best possible teachers, TNTP recommends that TSD adopt the following reforms:

- **Recruitment:** Increase the applicant pool in shortage areas by providing better information about district needs to prospective teachers and expanding financial recruitment incentives.
- **Hiring:** Move up the hiring timeline to allow schools to capture the best new teacher candidates.
- **Support:** Strengthen new teacher support by reforming the induction program and expanding opportunities for new teachers to engage in professional collaboration with colleagues.
- **Evaluation:** Address weaknesses in the evaluation system to ensure that all teachers receive meaningful feedback about their performance and get the support they need to improve.

In adopting these reforms, TSD will be well positioned to build upon past successes and bolster the quality of its teaching force. Improving recruitment strategies and moving up the hiring timeline will enable the district to better capitalize on its status as a district of choice and free schools to capture excellent teacher candidates. Thoughtful retooling of new teacher support and evaluation systems will ensure that these systems add clear value for all participants. By committing to enact reforms in collaboration with the TEA, Thompson School District can become a model for districts across Colorado seeking to maximize teacher quality in every school, for every student.

About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap by ensuring that poor and minority students get outstanding teachers. Founded by teachers in 1997, TNTP partners with school districts and states to implement scalable responses to their most acute teacher quality challenges. TNTP recruits and trains thousands of exceptional new teachers annually, supports school principals in staffing their classrooms, provides teacher certification in high-need subjects, and documents the policy barriers that keep students from getting the teachers they need. Since its inception, TNTP has trained or hired approximately 33,000 teachers, benefiting an estimated 4.8 million students nationwide. It has established more than 70 programs and initiatives in 28 states and published three seminal studies on urban teacher hiring and school staffing. This year, its clients include school districts in 26 cities, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Memphis, St. Paul, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, San Antonio, and Washington, DC, among others. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.