

Help Wanted

Urban school districts need quality teachers, but hiring policies make it too difficult to land top talent.

By Andrew J. Rotherham and Jessica Levin

Contrary to conventional wisdom, high-quality teacher candidates are not out of reach for large urban school systems. But tapping into this talent pool requires a more ambitious approach to hiring. Urban school districts suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers in such critical areas as math, science, and special education. But they could go a long way toward solving the problem by retooling hiring practices and making job offers just a few months earlier -- before the best candidates are locked into new jobs elsewhere.

That's the conclusion of a recent study by The New Teacher Project (TNP), a nonprofit organization committed to working with schools to improve teacher recruitment and retention. The study, "Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms," examined hiring practices in four large and representative urban school districts. It found that hundreds, if not thousands, of top-notch candidates want to teach in these high-need districts, but ultimately don't, because they don't receive job offers until mid- to late summer, several months after the most promising applicants have already agreed to take jobs in other school districts.

Blame the bureaucrats? Not necessarily. According to the study, state and local hiring requirements, union policies, and budget timetables are the real culprits. Together, they conspire to slow down the hiring process and keep highly qualified teaching candidates away. The solution lies in revamping these policies so that local school officials can hire new teachers by May of the previous school year.

Losing the War for Teacher Talent

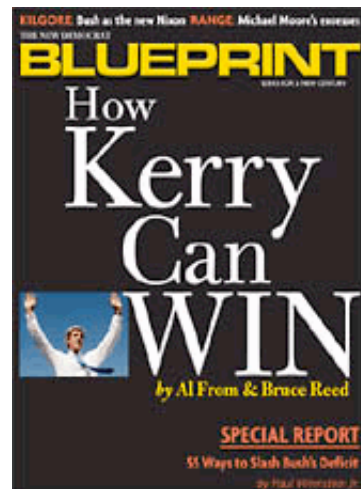
Too often, urban school districts define the success of their teacher-hiring seasons in singular terms: "Did we fill our vacancies?" These school districts don't believe they have the luxury of focusing on high-quality teacher candidates, so scant attention is paid to the quality of individual applicants. That's unfortunate because, as TNP found, many good candidates are interested in these jobs, but they won't wait indefinitely for offers to materialize.

Through targeted recruitment strategies, all four urban school districts in the study were able to generate more applications than they had actual vacancies -- in one case, up to 20 for every available position. The others received between five and seven applications for each vacancy. Up to 37 percent of these candidates applied to teach in high-need subjects, such as math, science, special education, and bilingual education.

However, because these school districts failed to make job placement offers until mid- to late summer, one-third to more than one-half of the applicants had already withdrawn from the hiring process. A majority of those who withdrew cited the lateness of the job offers as a reason for taking other positions, and about one-half said they would have "definitely or probably" accepted an offer from the urban school district if it had come earlier. Equally disturbing, these were among the most qualified candidates. They had significantly higher grade-point averages than the candidates who were eventually hired. They were 40 percent more likely to have degrees in their teaching fields. And from 37 percent to 69 percent of them, among the four districts, were candidates for hard-to-fill positions, such as math and science.

Teacher Hiring: Three Primary Policy Issues

School administrators don't deserve all the blame for letting the best teaching candidates fall



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through the cracks. In the four districts studied and, in fact, in large urban school districts across the country, three elements of the teacher-hiring process tie the hands of even the most determined administrators, complicating their efforts to hire more effectively.

- Vacancy notification requirements allow retiring or resigning teachers to provide last-minute notice of their departures. Three of the four districts in the study had either a summer notification deadline for departing teachers or no deadline at all. Such late notice requirements make it difficult to forecast vacancies for the next school year and nearly impossible to offer early placements -- a must for the highest caliber and most in-demand candidates.
- Teachers' union transfer requirements grant incumbent teachers first pick of any new openings. Timetables outlined in union contracts can delay these transfer decisions for a few months, or, in some cases, until just weeks or days before schools reopen. Policies negotiated during collective bargaining that require schools to hire transferring and "excessed" teachers create additional complications; principals fear being forced to accept a transferring teacher they don't want and are therefore reluctant to post new vacancies.
- Late budget timetables and inadequate forecasting fuel budget uncertainty and leave administrators unsure about which positions in their schools will be funded. State budget time lines are the major problem. In 46 states, the fiscal year does not end until June 30. Even then, states may not need to pass a budget if they seek an extension.

What Can School Districts and States Do?

To compete for the best new talent, large urban school systems need to overhaul their hiring policies so that they can be in a position to hire and place new teachers by the beginning of May. That means local school districts will have to examine collective bargaining agreements, memoranda of understanding, and other arrangements to make sure these policies don't work at cross-purposes with teacher-hiring efforts. They must work with teachers' unions to ensure early notification by resigning or retiring teachers.

Likewise, they should revamp their collective bargaining agreements with an eye toward speeding up the teacher transfer process and giving external candidates a fair and early shot at new vacancies. And, to help all school districts, state policymakers need to work with superintendents to move up budget timelines that create uncertainty or, at a minimum, offer better and timelier budget forecasting to help with planning.

The good news is that the problems identified in the TNTP study are solvable, and fixing them won't require new funding. Given the strong and proven connection between teacher quality and student learning, addressing these problems will pay substantial and immediate dividends, particularly for poor and minority students who are most adversely affected. Effective teachers are the single most important school-based determinant of students' academic growth. We simply can't improve struggling schools without them.

It's past time for urban districts to overhaul their teacher hiring practices and do what is necessary to hire -- rather than lose -- their best teaching candidates.

Andrew J. Rotherham is director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute. Jessica Levin is the chief knowledge officer of The New Teacher Project and co-author of its "Missed Opportunities" report (www.tntp.org/report.html).