

# Retaining Top Teaching Talent in Memphis' High-Need Schools

## Introduction

The Tennessee Department of Education has identified the bottom five percent of schools as Priority Schools, eligible for inclusion in the Achievement School District (ASD) or in district Innovation Zones (I-Zone), which in Memphis are part of the Shelby County Schools. These schools may also plan and adopt turnaround models for school improvement. The Teach Plus Policy Fellows—a diverse group of teachers who teach in Memphis public and charter schools—are deeply invested in the success of Tennessee’s students. Many of us who teach in ASD or I-Zone schools recognize how important it is to retain effective teachers in our schools and that teacher turnover can be extremely costly for schools, the district, and student achievement. To learn more about effective strategies towards improving teacher retention, we conducted research examining policies intended to recruit and retain effective teachers, focusing on teachers in these high-need schools.

For this report, we interviewed 10 high-performing teachers, identified as level 4 or level 5 teachers by Shelby County Schools. Interviewees were selected based on two criteria: their teacher evaluation score, placing them in the top two evaluation tiers, and their current or former status as teachers in priority schools, either the ASD or I-Zone schools in Shelby County. Teachers’ responses were then analyzed for common trends and to help generate a set of findings regarding incentives attractive to teachers in high-need schools. While we do not assume that all our data is necessarily reflective of all high-performing teachers’ perspectives in Shelby County, we believe that this qualitative research, as well as our own experiences as teachers in high-need schools, is a valuable first step towards designing policies to attract and retain high-performing teachers.

This report is organized as follows:

- First, we examine the issue of teacher retention in high-need schools in Shelby County and the related policies that could influence retention;
- Second, we present the feedback from teachers on each policy, organized by their impact on compensation and teaching profession;
- Third, we present key findings related to the teacher perspectives;
- And finally, we present recommendations that stem from our findings.

## **Findings**

*Finding 1: Leadership and compensation, specifically base salary increases, are vital for attracting high-performing teachers.*

*Finding 2: Leadership and career opportunities are most important for retaining high-performing teachers.*

*Finding 3: Quality of school culture and school leadership are paramount to retaining high-performing teachers.*

## **Recommendations**

*Recommendation 1: Create opportunities for hybrid teacher leadership roles*

*Recommendation 2: Build a leadership pipeline for current teachers, and incorporate leadership training that includes teacher feedback and a focus on school culture.*

*Recommendation 3: Design a compensation structure that includes a performance pay component.*

*Recommendation 4: Conduct a district-wide survey to gain better understanding of teacher retention issues and needs.*

## **Teacher Retention in High-Priority Schools: The Issue and Potential Solutions**

Most high-performing teachers in Tennessee and across the country are concentrated in low-poverty schools. Just 16.2 percent of Tennessee’s students in high-poverty schools are taught by high-performing teachers, while 28.2 percent of low-poverty students are taught by high-performing teachers. High-performing teachers also leave high-need schools at a rate much higher than that of other teachers, estimated at 47 percent by TNTP.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research by a Memphis organization, Teacher Town, also examines the importance of teacher retention policies. In 2014, Teacher Town conducted a survey of 480 Memphis teachers. Their findings suggest that teachers in high-need schools view compensation, school leadership, professional development, and career ladder issues as areas to further explore as levers to recruiting and retaining great teachers in these schools. We therefore focused our research on exploring these ideas with highly-effective teachers in ASD and I-Zone schools.

In this report, we looked at eight Shelby County policies designed to positively impact teacher recruitment and retention. These policies come from a survey of the academic research around specific policies frequently cited as effective at retaining and recruiting high-quality teachers, and from policies already under consideration by schools and districts in Shelby County. Specifically, we examined two groups of policies: those that are compensation-based and those that are more focused on changing the school conditions or the teaching profession.

We should note several policies that we did not include in this analysis. We chose to leave out the following policies identified by research as instrumental in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers to priority schools: building strong school culture, building teacher cohorts within schools, creating opportunities for collaboration, and reductions in class size. We excluded these policies not because we believe them to be unimportant, but because in our experience these ideas should be considered “best practices,” that is, most schools and districts recognize their merit and work to implement them.

### **Eight Policies Designed to Impact Teacher Recruitment and Retentions in Shelby County**

The eight policies outlined in our paper can be categorized into those that have to do with how teachers are compensated or the financial incentives inherent in teaching; and those that have to do with school conditions or the teaching profession. The policies we examined include: **increasing teacher base salaries; offering teachers a**

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<sup>1</sup>The New Teacher Project. “The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools.” 2012.

signing bonus; offering individual or school-wide performance pay; expanding teacher career roles; updating school technology; improving professional development opportunities; and improving school leadership. In the following section, we discuss our findings around each policy and present key responses from teachers who were interviewed.

**Policy 1: Increase Teacher Base Salaries: provide teachers with a one-time salary increase for teaching in a priority school.**

With this policy, we asked teachers how a \$3,000, one-time salary increase would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

The responses from teachers suggest that while a one-time salary increase is a factor in decision-making about where to teach for some high-performing teachers, it is not one of the determining factors when it comes to making that decision. One of the most common responses we heard was that money alone would not be a compelling enough incentive because teachers recognize that so much of what happens in teaching goes beyond the money. However, some teachers did indicate that a \$3,000 bonus could play a role as one factor in many for attracting and retaining high-quality teachers. However, this was conditional on it being based on teacher quality and not just given to any teacher. Most teachers also noted that \$3,000 was too low an amount. Six of the 10 teachers stated that they would need a higher salary bump to change their minds. When asked what that number would be, those six teachers named amounts between \$4,500 and \$5,000.

*\$3,000 is a significant enough amount to create a more enticing salary to stay in the ASD, as long as it is given to teachers who demonstrate good results. This would put you closer to the salary of a starting administrator role. – Former ASD high school math teacher, ASD-run school.*

**Policy 2: Signing Bonuses: provide teachers with additional cash for choosing to teach in a priority school.**

With this policy, we asked teachers how a \$1,000 signing bonus to come teach at a priority school, plus a \$1,000 bonus each year they remained, would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

Most teachers did not believe that a \$1,000 signing bonus would be enough to make a difference in attracting high-quality teachers. For six of the teachers, \$1,000 was too low. When asked what their ideal signing bonus would be, those six teachers gave amounts ranging from \$1,500 to \$2,000 as enough to influence their behavior. Some teachers also noted that a signing bonus, regardless of the amount, might not be a positive policy to attract and incentivize high-performing teachers to continue to perform at a high level.

*If they are not performing where they need to be, then a \$1,000 increase monthly shouldn't be there...the teacher needs to be set up for success and continue to demonstrate their success to keep getting it. – Current ASD elementary school SPED teacher, charter school.*

**Policy 3: Individualized Performance Pay: provide additional pay to high-performing teachers based on test scores.**

With this policy, we asked teachers how a yearly salary increase of \$200 or \$600 above the average teacher-expected increase based on performance would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

As we suspected, this policy had some of the most mixed results of any presented to our participants. Some high-quality teachers again made note of the fact that money alone is not enough to change their decision. Several also expressed concern that a level 4 or 5 teacher may not be able to continue to achieve the same performance in a priority school, reducing the effectiveness of this policy tool. That said, the high-performing teachers whom we interviewed were generally open to the idea of performance pay. Only one teacher saw it as a negative factor in their decision-making. However, the majority of teachers said that the proposed \$200 or \$600 increase was not enough to change their mind. When asked about the amount, these teachers indicated that they would need a raise of between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a year tied to performance to really make a difference in their decision-making.

*Some teachers are unhappy with their school. More money isn't going to make them stay. They are working "too hard" and it is "too demanding for them." The leadership isn't giving them enough support, it isn't about the money, and circumstances aren't going to change. – Current ASD elementary school SPED teacher, charter school.*

**Policy 4: School-Wide Performance Pay: provide additional pay to the entire school for demonstrated effectiveness in improving student achievement.**

With this policy, we asked teachers how a yearly salary bonus of \$1,500 for improved student growth would influence their decision on where to teach the following year. We did not name a specific level of student growth to earn the bonus, leaving that to the teachers to consider.

Teachers generally perceived this idea in a positive light. All 10 teachers were open to the policy and none of them named it as one that would negatively impact their decision about teaching in a priority school. Four of our interviewees thought that \$1,500 would be enough, and six said that it would be too low. Additional amounts named by this second group ranged from \$2,000 to \$4,000. When asked why this

policy would impact their decision, some teachers noted that it would show what they have accomplished and allow them to see some expected results from their performance. Like most other compensation policies, teachers generally saw it as a policy that would impact their decision, but not one that would be the determining factor for them.

*... If I know I'll be doing that [teaching] over several years, and I know I can get a \$1,500 bonus, it might be enough, but I don't think it would alone be enough to make me stay or go. – Former ASD high school math teacher, ASD-run school.*

**Policy 5: Expanded Career Roles: give teachers the capacity to step into new leadership roles and provide other opportunities for growth within their school while remaining in the classroom.**

With this policy, we asked teachers whether additional career option offerings at their school, such as serving as teacher mentors, part-time administrators, or curriculum design specialists, would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

Interviewees generally saw this as a positive policy, with nine of the 10 interviewees viewing this as a reason they would have stayed or would consider staying if still employed at an ASD or I-Zone school. This suggests that high-performing teachers are actively seeking out such opportunities. That said, four interviewees mentioned that fact that current roles offered would not have been enough to have kept them or keep them if they were still employed at an ASD or I-Zone school.

A common theme from the interview data was centered on the need for part-time, realistic roles that are clearly defined and adequately compensated. Teachers overwhelmingly desired split-duty roles between a leadership position and teaching duties. Additionally, teachers frequently noted that the opportunities for teacher leadership must not only be manageable from a time standpoint, but the roles must also be diverse. Not all roles will be right for every teacher. The interviewees' sentiments implied that they desire roles beyond simply mentoring and/or coaching.

*I think that teachers are the ones in the trenches and have the most expertise about what is effective and how to move students. But so often, teachers don't get a chance to spread their expertise in a way that is effective. Knowing I'd have an opportunity to expand my effectiveness and manage adults would absolutely make it more attractive. – Current ASD elementary SPED teacher, charter school*

**Policy 6: Technology Updates: ensure that teachers at high-need schools have up-to-date technology resources.**

With this policy, we asked teachers whether the opportunity to work in an environment with the technological capabilities they wanted (e.g. Smart Boards, document cameras, laptops, tablets, classroom response systems, etc.) would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

Interviewees had a split view of this particular policy, with seven interviewees saying it would have no impact on their decision to stay or leave the school, and three interviewees stating that it would influence their decision to stay or leave their current school. However, no teacher viewed this as the most important policy for recruitment or retention purposes. One special education teacher did note that technology would impact her decision but this viewpoint represented an outlier among our interviewees, even among the other special education teachers we interviewed.

*I value technology and get a lot of it at my school, but I have not found it to be a hugely transformational factor in classrooms from management to instruction. – Current ASD elementary SPED teacher, charter school.*

**Policy 7: Improved Professional Development Opportunities: provide teachers with built-in opportunities to receive specific PD towards meeting the needs of students in high-need schools.**

With this policy, we asked teachers whether offering free monthly professional development sessions (assuming high-quality and in addition to traditional professional developments) to train staff to work specifically with students who are behind academically and from low-income backgrounds would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

The idea of high-quality professional development was attractive to five of the 10 interviewees. They suggested that this would be an important consideration in determining whether they would stay or leave their current school. The sentiment from those five interviewees was that the professional development must be authentic and focused on preparing them to function within the environments they face every day. A common theme that ran through many of our respondents' thoughts was the reality that high-quality PD needs to reflect the environmental climate and culture of a priority school, which can differ significantly from that of a non-priority school.

*We have a lot of PDs in SCS and I-Zone, and the models we use are great but there's nothing that identifies with the classrooms we teach in. If they were to offer PDs that were geared to our classrooms and the backgrounds our*

*students come from that would be something I'd like to see to develop my skills in that area. – Current I-Zone high school social studies teacher, public school.*

**Policy 8: High-Quality School Leadership: work to ensure that high-quality leaders operate schools.**

With this policy, we asked teachers whether a school advertising that its leader carries a strong teacher-based reputation for raising student achievement and supporting adults in the building would influence their decision on where to teach the following year.

The interviewees saw this policy as the most important of any of the policies we presented to them. All 10 interviewees deemed it as a policy that would influence their decision on whether to stay at their current school next year. In fact, this factor was so important that many noted that without it, nothing else would matter to them, not even the money or career opportunities. Many of the interviewees spoke to the need to feel supported professionally and emotionally as essential to their success, especially when it eventually loops back to the conversation on compensation.



*It wouldn't be my school without the leadership. Without our principal we wouldn't have been able to make the changes we've had. For me, the people I work for have impacted it 100%. I believe that most teachers don't get this support from their administration, and I'm in a position where my admins are very willing to help teachers fix problems rather than chastise them. My leadership plays a huge role on impacting where I teach and where I would stay. – Current I-Zone high school social studies teacher, public school.*



**Findings**

In our analysis of the interviews, we saw several trends within both the compensation and the school-quality policies targeted towards attracting and retaining high-performing teachers. We have organized our results into three key findings.

***Finding 1: Leadership and compensation, specifically base salary increases, are vital for attracting high-performing teachers.***

Overall, leadership and compensation were frequently cited as the most important policies for attracting high-quality teachers to priority schools. That said, many interviewees cautioned that, without other factors in place such as leadership and school culture, compensation will only go so far in influencing a teacher's decision about where to teach.

Five of the 10 teachers cited leadership as the most important policy, and the remaining five of the 10 cited some form of compensation as most important. However, this trend also coincides with what many teachers told us about compensation—namely that teaching is about much more than money. One teacher informed us that compensation would only account for about “10 percent” of his decision. Others also confirmed this.

***Finding 2: Leadership and career opportunities are most important for retaining high-performing teachers.***

Overall, leadership and career opportunities were seen as important for a teacher to remain in their current school. The two were invariably linked in that participants saw a correlation between solid leadership and career opportunities.

Seven out of 10 listed either leadership or career opportunities as the most important policies for remaining at their current school. Also, eight of the 10 interviewees saw career opportunities as the policy that would influence them to remain at their current school, and all of the interviewees saw school leadership as the policy that would help them remain at their current school.

Within career opportunities, interviewees wanted more than the current offerings of coaching/mentoring. Many stated that they have aspirations outside of the classroom and want to be able to perform a dual role (half teaching/half leadership opportunity) beyond the instructional aspect.

***Finding 3: Quality of school culture and school leadership are paramount to retaining high-performing teachers.***

Overall, the school’s culture, and the impact that the school leader had on it, were a determining factor in whether teachers chose to remain at their schools. Overwhelmingly, teachers viewed the policies on career opportunities and leadership as those that would influence them the most.

First, ten out of 10 interviewees said that school leadership was an influence on their decision to remain at their current school. Additionally, it was the most important policy for five of the 10 interviewees. For the interviewees, the most desired and effective school leaders were those who were supportive and had a clear vision.

Second, the culture of the school had to be such that teachers felt welcomed, supported, and appreciated by their administrators. Teachers also wanted to know that their school had ample opportunities for career advancement and meaningful PD.

After examining all the trends, a common theme emerged. High-performing educators place a higher value on measures such as performance pay, career opportunities, school culture, and leadership over one-time bonuses, salary bumps, and student achievement bonuses. A majority of interviewees believed that all these other policies would come into place with an effective school leader.

## Recommendations

Based on our research, we recommend the following to help recruit and retain top teaching talent in Memphis' high-need schools:

### *Recommendation 1: Create opportunities for hybrid teacher leadership roles.*

While many of the teachers we interviewed were involved in additional roles, such as learning coaches and master teachers, they indicated that these roles are difficult to maintain while teaching full-time.

We recommend creating hybrid roles that allow teachers to teach part-time and fill other leadership roles in the building part-time. The teachers also suggested that these roles could be either instructional or operational. These roles could include: data specialist; community and parent liaison; operations coordinator; instructional coach; and professional development coordinator. While these roles are just suggestions, we strongly urge schools to think deeply about different ways that teachers, through hybrid roles, could fill existing gaps.

### *Recommendation 2: Build a leadership training and pipeline for current, high-performing teachers, and incorporate leadership training that includes teacher feedback and a focus on school culture.*

School leadership was identified by teachers as the most important of the policies discussed for both their recruitment and retention. Teachers stated that they were more compelled to stay in schools with a strong culture and supportive leadership.

#### **Building a pipeline:**

The majority of teachers we interviewed highlighted the importance of school leadership and of the opportunities to develop as leaders. We propose building a pipeline program that would focus on retention and development of teachers through leadership opportunities. This would ensure that teachers are more invested in staying at their current schools and in developing a positive culture for themselves and their peers.

#### **Leadership training:**

Our interviews suggest that teachers know how to identify good building leaders. We recommend a leadership training structure that ties in teacher feedback. In addition, leadership training should have a large focus on school culture, vision, and teacher support, all of which were identified by teachers as important for their retention.

***Recommendation 3: Design a compensation structure that includes a performance pay component.***

Our interviewees indicated that they wanted compensation to reflect the extra effort and time required to teach in a high-priority environment. We recommend a compensation structure that includes a performance pay component. Since the teachers we interviewed indicated that a \$200-\$600 increase would not be a sufficient raise, we recommend an individual performance pay increase between \$1,500 and \$2,000 for high-performing teachers.

If schools elect to include a one-time salary increase for teaching in a priority school, our research suggests that the bonus would need to be at least \$4,500 to have an impact on teacher recruitment and retention.

***Recommendation 4: Conduct a district-wide survey to gain better understanding of teacher retention issues and needs.***

We recognize that our first three recommendations might require a shift in not only compensation but leadership structures. To that point, we recommend SCS and ASD to conduct a larger scale study to gain a better understanding of what policies are effective in retaining highly-effective teachers in their particular high-need schools. Our study should be a starting point, but more research is needed to help craft meaningful teacher recruitment and retention policies. One possible way to continue this work would be through exit surveys or interviews similar to the interviews we conducted.

Furthermore, a similar study of school principals across the district should be conducted. Such a study would empower both SCS and ASD to better draw top principal talent to our highest-need schools, which will, in turn, draw our top teaching talent to those schools.

## **Conclusion**

Our qualitative research has highlighted ten teacher voices as it relates to teacher retention in high-priority schools. Our findings suggest that high-performing teachers place a high value on school leadership, leadership opportunities, and opportunities for growth, as well as on receiving salary increases that match commitment and effort. We make these recommendations recognizing that funds are limited in school environments. The ASD and I-Zone could consider using funds from the recent school improvement grants to help implement these recommendations.

As teachers, we believe that the need for high-quality leaders must be our number one priority in Memphis and throughout the state of Tennessee. There is no way to address the under-representation of high-performing teachers in priority schools

without putting this policy into place. High-performing teachers want and need additional teacher leadership opportunities to keep them in priority schools. Our study looks at a small sampling of teachers within priority schools. This study should serve as a starting point for policymakers, but more in-depth research may be needed before embarking on wholesale policy change.

## **2014-2015 Memphis Teaching Policy Fellows**

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# APPENDIX

## Methodology

**Teacher Selection:** To conduct our research, we selected a group of ten teachers who either currently teach in a priority school or have taught previously in a priority school in Shelby County. We specifically selected teachers from two types of priority schools, knowing that they would be in the bottom five percent of schools in the state. These schools included the I-Zone, a local school improvement initiative by Shelby County Schools striving to improve the performance of a segment of the bottom five percent of schools in the state and the Achievement School District (ASD), a state turnaround effort designed to bring the bottom five percent of schools in the state into the top 25 percent in five years' time.

We also strove to find several teachers who had worked in either an I-Zone or ASD school previously, but had already left that school. Teachers were recruited by reaching out to the team's personal acquaintances or staff at the schools in question who helped identify teachers who could meet our qualifications.

The teachers we selected also needed to be rated as having above-average effectiveness or highly-effective by their school's teacher evaluation system. Teacher quality data can be found in the following section.

**Data Collection:** To collect our data, we designed an interview protocol to be administered to each interviewee in a 30-40 minute interview. The protocol asked a series of questions on the eight policies outlined above and asked each participant to comment on whether or not that policy would impact their choice about where to teach in the coming year. For teachers who had already left the district, we reframed the question to ask if these policies would have impacted their decision.

The interviews were conducted between March 16th and April 4th, 2015 utilizing this protocol. Responses were recorded by the interviewer and sent to the interviewee for the opportunity to clarify and add to their statements. All interviews were conducted over the phone between the dates highlighted above.

We then reviewed the information in two manners. We compiled the descriptive data and all yes' and no's together to discern general trends across all ten interviewees. We then read through the quotes and identified specific quotations that we felt would provide valuable insights into the individual responses and overall trends seen across our interviews.

## Who We Interviewed - Individual Profiles

Of the 10 teachers we interviewed, four teachers were rated as having above-average effectiveness by their schools. Six teachers were rated as highly-effective, earning the highest level possible. Five teachers were either current or former I-Zone teachers, and five teachers were either current

or former ASD teachers. Teachers interviewed ranged from one to seven years of teaching experience. The median years of teaching experience in our sample was four years. In terms of career plans, we interviewed four teachers who indicated that they plan to return to their current school next year, four teachers who indicated that they plan to leave their current school (ASD or I-Zone) at the end of this year, and two teachers who had already left their school. Both teachers who left their school had previously worked in the ASD. Of the two teachers who left, one was still a classroom teacher, and the other had moved on to a curriculum support role.

The teachers came from a variety of different grades and subjects. Five of the 10 interviewees teach or taught in elementary school, three in middle school and two in high school. Four of our interviewees teach or taught special education, four mathematics only, and one social studies only. One elementary school teacher taught all subjects.

### Interviewee School Profiles

Interviewees came from eight different schools across the ASD and I-Zone. Throughout the interview process we emphasized to our interviewees that their answers would remain confidential, and as such we have chosen not to identify these schools. However, we can share specific descriptive data trends about these schools in the aggregate. All numbers are from the 2013-2014 Tennessee Department of Education Report Card.

The number of students in each school ranged from 112 to 825. The median number of students across all eight schools was 380. The percentage of economically-disadvantaged students in each school ranged from 90.2 percent up to 98.1 percent. The median percent of economically-disadvantaged students was 94.9 percent. The previous year's achievement in each school varied between a one and a five composite. Three schools had a composite TVAAS of 1, five schools had a TVAAS composite of 5.

Four schools in our sample were current I-Zone schools. Three were current ASD schools. One school was scheduled to become an ASD school at the time of our interview, but has since been taken out of the ASD for the following year. However, this interviewee was still included in the sample as they had previously worked in another ASD school.