

New Teacher Distribution Methods Hold Promise

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With effective teaching a top policy priority, certain school districts, the federal government, and nonprofit groups are renewing efforts to pilot and study strategies for pairing effective teachers with students in low-performing, high-poverty schools.

The results could offer clues about how to rectify an imbalance in the distribution of the best teachers within districts—a requirement of both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the 2009 economic-stimulus law, and one of K-12 education's most intractable problems.

The initiatives differ from earlier attempts to equalize teacher talent by using more sophisticated techniques to identify and target top teachers, including the use of value-added data.

They also go beyond narrow transfer incentives to include targeted retention strategies, improved professional development, and a focus on the caliber of the school leaders and peers that teachers new to such schools will be working with every day.

Some of the districts are even working to place whole teams of educators—rather than just individuals—in challenging schools, a promising approach, some scholars say, at a time when individual teacher performance has galvanized much policy attention.

“All this focus on individuals, on getting the best and brightest and placing them into schools, is a limited strategy,” said Susan Moore Johnson, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “It is driving so much of what’s going on right now, that we risk neglecting the context of these people’s work.”

Testing Theories

For years, studies have shown that low-income and minority students have teachers with lesser qualifications. The new efforts are among the first to approach the issue of teacher distribution by looking at teachers’ ability to boost their students’ academic achievement, an area that is only

now generating significant research.

Many variables in the equation remain unclear. Researchers have found evidence to suggest, for instance, that school factors play an important role in a teacher’s success.

In a recent study of teachers and students in North Carolina, C. Kirabo Jackson, an assistant professor of labor economics at Cornell University, found that up to a quarter of a teacher’s estimated ability to raise his or her students’ academic achievement could be explained by what he called “match quality”—school-level factors such as differences in curricula or the demographics of the population being taught.

A federal research project, called the Talent Transfer Initiative, aims to provide insights into the question of what happens when effective teachers are assigned to schools with greater challenges.

Financed by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, the initiative offers high-performing teachers in select districts \$10,000 a year for up to two years to transfer to a low-performing school in the district, and \$5,000 to effective teachers already in such schools to stay put. The teachers are identified using three years of student-achievement data.

“These are teachers who have demonstrated a consistent ability to raise student achievement,” said Steven M. Glazerman, a senior researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, the Princeton, N.J.-based nonprofit group that is conducting the analysis. “The question is whether they can produce similar results in their new setting.”

Researchers identified job openings in low-performing schools, and high-performing teachers were randomly assigned to half those vacancies. The results will be compared with those for a control group of regular hires filling the remaining vacancies.

The project covers schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, N.C.; Knoxville, Tenn.;

Mobile, Ala.; Tucson, Ariz.; and Houston. Three additional, yet-to-be-announced districts have signed on to join the project.

Holly Barzar is one of 63 teachers now taking part in the initiative. The 27-year-old transferred from a school she called her “comfort zone” to one in which most students are part of the Pasqua Yaqui Tribe, qualify for federally subsidized lunches, and live in troubled neighborhoods.

Students in her new school in Tucson, the 5th grade teacher said, lacked skills, were all over the board academically, and had had “experiences no kid that age should ever have to experience—drugs, gangs, violence. They come to school not being 10-year-olds.”

With her new colleagues aware of the incentive pay, she felt the pressure to perform. Some days were excruciating.

But Ms. Barzar also found that many students had simply never been challenged academically before.

“A lot of them thought writing a paragraph was three lines on a paper. Remediating that—those were some of the longest days of my life,” she said. “But now they can write a five-paragraph essay, and they will do a good job, too.”

Despite the challenges of the school, Ms. Barzar said she wants to continue to work in similar schools.

“As corny as it sounds, I feel like I’m really making a difference here,” she said. “I tell my kids, ‘I want to see you in middle school, see your grades, meet your friends. Because if they’re not good, I’m going to tell you.’”

Offering Support

If effective teachers embody certain characteristics, such as Ms. Barzar’s perseverance, researchers say that the context of the schools and support offered there are important ingredients that can help attract higher-caliber teachers.

Research on teacher-transfer patterns shows that some schools, despite serving populations that are traditionally difficult to educate, aren’t hard to staff, according to Susanna Loeb, a professor of education at Stanford University who has studied teacher-transfer issues for nearly a decade.

“Schools with lots of low-achieving students lose more teachers in general, but there are a fair number of high-poverty schools that are appealing places to teach,” Ms. Loeb said.

In his recent study, Mr. Jackson also found that the teachers studied tended to be more effective in mathematics after they transferred to a new school, suggesting they actively sought out schools that were a better match for their talents.

“Teachers aren’t as effective in environments they don’t want to be in, and they don’t stay in environments they don’t want to be in,” he said.

That’s one of the reasons that the Mission Possible program in Guilford County, N.C., pairs recruitment and retention incentive pay with a focus on professional development for educators in the 30 participating schools, in an attempt to make them places where teachers want to stay.

The program uses information generated by the state’s value-added system, which connects individual teachers and their students’ test scores. Those data help principals in the participating schools identify promising candidates across the district—as well as teachers already at the schools who are getting strong learning gains from students. They’re then offered cash incentives to transfer to, or remain in, the schools.

Once in the schools, all the teachers in their first two years in Mission Possible receive specialized professional-development courses on subjects such as differentiated learning and cultural competency.

“Often, it’s a majority-race teacher going into a minority-race school, and there are some cultural differences teachers have found difficult to overcome,” said Amy Holcombe, the executive director of talent development for the 72,000-student district.

As an added incentive, Mission Possible pays more if teachers are effective in raising student achievement, as measured by the state’s value-added data system, and as the new teachers stay put.

Data gathered on the initiative over three years, Ms. Holcombe said, suggest that the program may be changing the culture of the schools involved. As of the 2008-09 school year, the rate of teacher turnover in the Mission Possible schools was, on average, lower than that in the district as a whole.

Team Approach

Increasingly, new initiatives designed to move exceptional teachers into challenging schools also are responding to the idea that even the most eager and effective of teacher risks burning out in a more difficult school setting—and

leaving—unless supported by a capable principal and like-minded peers.

Surveys have shown that effective leadership and time to work with colleagues are often cited as crucial conditions for teachers, over and above issues of salary incentives.

And recent research suggests that a teacher's effectiveness can be shaped by the caliber of his or her colleagues. ("Effective Teachers Found to Improve Peers' Performance," Sept. 16, 2009.)

"I don't think this issue of distribution will be resolved by thinking of it as a process of moving an individual and expecting him or her to affect a whole school," said Ms. Johnson of Harvard. "You really need a mechanism for the whole school to improve with the influx of new teachers."

The Boston-based nonprofit organization Teach Plus thinks it has hit on one promising mechanism for doing so. It is beginning a venture to turn around three schools in the 56,000-student Boston district by using teams of effective educators, rather than relying on individual transfers.

Under the initiative—dubbed "Turnaround Teacher Teams," or T3—the teachers will make up a quarter to a third of the staff members in the schools, along with a new principal.

"The colleague piece is the crux of why this program appeals to teachers," said Celine Coggins, the founder and chief executive officer of Teach Plus. "Many teachers come into the profession on a social-justice mission, and part of what they're looking for are colleagues who have the same idea as they do about getting the job done."

As part of the selection process, cohorts of teacher-applicants are brought in and must work with several other prospective teachers to analyze and come up with an action plan around a fictitious set of data.

For Andrew J. Bott, a principal in the district who will head up one of the turnaround schools this fall, it's a crucial exercise.

"Recruiting a cohort of people who have that skill and are excited about it will make a difference," he said. "School districts do a great job of collecting data. Where many of us fall down is in using it."

Based on its finding that highly effective teachers often leave classroom teaching because of a lack of growth opportunities, the Teach Plus group has arranged for its recruits to take on leadership roles in their new schools—as teacher-leaders, department chairs, or on school leader-

ship teams—in addition to classroom teaching, and to earn extra pay for doing so.

Results Coming

The teacher-distribution initiatives are largely still under way, and they haven't all produced findings yet.

The federally underwritten Talent Transfer Initiative's first findings are scheduled for release next year. Before then, officials hope to put out an analysis looking at the participating districts to determine which schools seem to have an abundance—or a shortage—of the most effective teachers.

It could be an important starting point for larger discussions of teacher distribution, because most such analyses so far have been performed looking at observable characteristics of teachers, such as licensing-test scores, credentials, "highly qualified" status, or selectivity of teacher-training institution, rather than student outcomes.

In Boston, Ms. Coggins of Teach Plus reports that 150 teachers applied for positions in the three turnaround schools—including some already working in those schools who relished the idea of better opportunities to take on leadership roles.

For now, she said, the project's goal is to ensure that the teams stay in place for at least three years.

Guilford County's Mission Possible program, with three years of data now collected, has the longest track record. Although those data are not causal, officials in the North Carolina district say they're confident that the project has benefited students.

Among the data are higher levels of student achievement overall in the cohort of schools, including some double-digit gains in test scores.

"I think when you see increases like that, you cannot attribute it to one thing alone. Those are significant gains, and many strategies were used," the district's Ms. Holcombe said. "But there's enough of a research base to conclude that when you have a higher percentage of effective teachers in a school, the student achievement goes up, and that's a pattern we've seen consistently in our schools."

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