



National Council on
Teacher Quality

BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

How districts nationwide are stacking up

Too many of the nation's largest school districts have made only halting progress in adopting practices that foster teacher effectiveness. Many districts are hiring smarter, and half now give extra pay to teachers who take jobs that are hard to fill.

Yet high barriers to managing teachers' careers for the best performance remain:

- Principals do not have full power over which teachers work in their buildings, and teacher prerogatives take precedence over student needs when it comes to teacher assignments
- Teacher evaluation does not identify the best teachers nor does it weed out the weakest ones
- Tenure continues to protect teacher jobs without helping to raise the bar on teacher quality
- The official work day for teachers is too short, reducing opportunities for collaboration and meeting with students individually
- Pay systems give outsized rewards for experience and advanced degrees while not doing enough to get and keep the best teachers, especially in hard-to-fill assignments.

Staffing each classroom with an effective teacher is the most important function of a school district. Doing so requires strategic personnel policies and smart practices.

This paper summarizes the current picture and national trends in four areas key to managing teachers careers for high performance: 1) hiring, assignment and transfer 2) evaluations and tenure 3) professional time and 4) compensation.

The data we present here are obtained from NCTQ's TR³ database of the teacher contracts, board policies and state laws that provide teacher governance for 100 large school districts in the United States

(www.nctq.org/tr3). We draw, too, on research that grounds the education reform movement as well as our more in-depth examinations of teacher management in the Hartford, Seattle and Boston school districts.

HIRING, ASSIGNMENT AND TRANSFER

Most districts continue to give their HR offices, and not their school principals, the power to decide where teachers will be assigned to teach.

The trend in districts has been toward giving principals more say over who teaches in their buildings. But the principal's power most often applies to choosing among



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teachers new to the district. When the careers of tenured, veteran teachers are involved, seniority protections often still hold sway.

In fact, district HR offices routinely force their principals to take teachers who lose their current teaching assignment because of shifts in enrollment or program. In only one out of five districts in our 100 district database do teachers whose positions have been cut even have to interview for a new job. In nearly all of the 100 districts, if no principal wants to hire a teacher whose job has been eliminated, the district eventually “force places” them anyway.

Such transfers often play out as part of school “restitutions”—when a school is either closed or restructured due to chronic poor performance. The result is that teachers who are deemed unfit for a turnaround effort at one underperforming school can easily end up at an almost similarly needy school.

In one district we examined, where seniority prerogatives are minimal for most teachers seeking transfers, an exception is made for tenured teachers wishing to transfer from schools designated as “low performing” or “failing.” Such teachers can pick an opening at another school, regardless of the principal’s view on the matter. In another district, teachers returning from leave are among those guaranteed to get one of the three positions they have put on a preference list.

It is well understood by principals that routine drops in staffing requirements are an easy way to get rid of a weak teacher. Underperforming teachers are more often than not assigned to another school rather than shown the door, setting the stage for “the dance of the lemons.” More resourceful principals know how to work the system so that they can unload their weak teachers onto other schools, even giving a teacher a satisfactory evaluation rating if they’ll agree to a transfer. It’s not unlike a

black market, in this case involving agreements and trades that tend to benefit the strongest schools headed by the savviest principals. Consequently the schools with the most challenging students and often the highest teacher turnover rates get more than their share of weak teachers.

Why don’t bad teachers just get fired? Because state law and local teachers’ contracts have made firing a teacher too involved, too lengthy and too costly.

EVALUATION

Teacher evaluations contribute to the harmful fiction that all tenured teachers are equally competent. Evaluation systems are dysfunctional, failing to recognize teachers who are exemplary, providing little help to average teachers and skimping on the evidence needed to dismiss the weakest teachers.

Unlike the standard practice in workplaces of all kinds, most districts do not require annual evaluations of any but the newest teachers. Only a third of the 100 districts in our database require annual evaluations of tenured teachers, even though tenure occurs very early in a teacher’s career—usually after two or three years. In fact, one in five districts requires teachers to be evaluated by their principal only once every three years. A few go as long as to require evaluations only every five years.

It is also common for teachers to be allowed to decide when they will be observed in the classroom as part of their evaluation, virtually guaranteeing a “dog and pony” show rather than a slice of classroom life.

Too often, districts fail to hold teachers accountable for poor performance. For example, in one school system we recently reviewed, one half of 1 percent of all teachers received an unsatisfactory evaluation rating. The New Teacher Project’s recent report, *The Widget Effect*, found much the same absence of negative rat-



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ings. On average, in the 12 school districts they examined, less than 1 percent of all teachers had received an unsatisfactory evaluation, even in schools where students were chronically underperforming.

A teacher's main job is to increase student learning, yet many evaluation instruments are structured so that teachers can earn an overall satisfactory rating without any evidence that they are contributing to student achievement. In fact, some districts prohibit standardized test scores from even being considered in an evaluation. Districts often ignore the need for any means of gauging how much students are learning, such as district tests, examples of student work or a collection of a teacher's assignments. Many evaluation instruments give as much weight, or more, to factors that may not

influence student performance, such as taking college courses, assuming extra duties like sponsoring a club or collaborating with colleagues. Only a handful of districts make student performance the preponderant criterion of teacher evaluation.

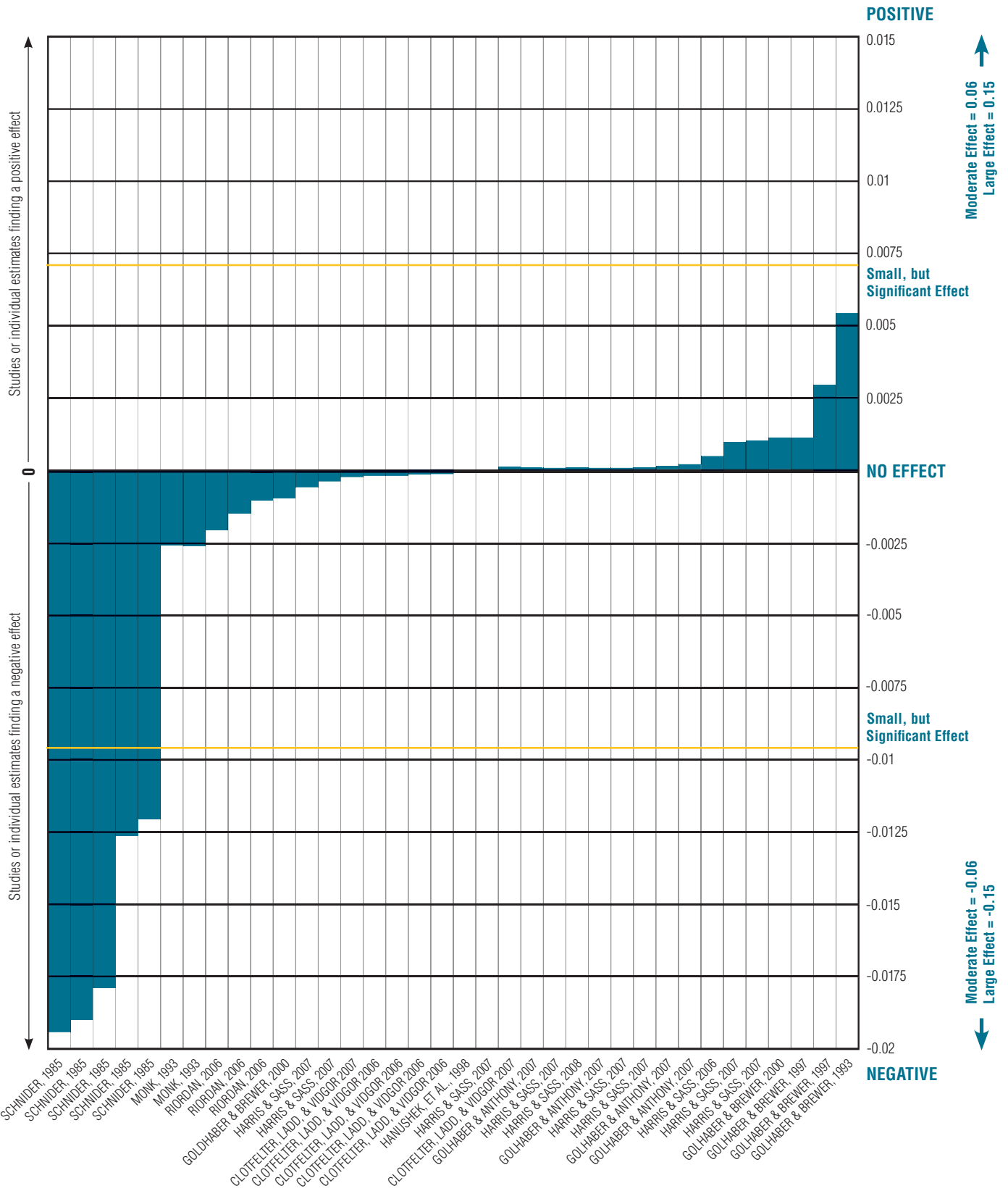
Tenure. Following the pattern set in higher education, teachers might be awarded tenure only after having met the standards of a rigorous assessment. In fact, tenure in the K-12 context almost never works that way. Nontenured teachers may by law be observed in the classroom more frequently than tenured ones, and principals are somewhat more likely to rate them as unsatisfactory. Yet in all but two states tenure is virtually automatic for teachers who get satisfactory evaluations for the required number of years. Only seven states even

How long before a teacher earns tenure?

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Maryland	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		Virginia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Source: NCTQ State Teacher Policy Yearbook 2008.

The impact of teachers' advanced degrees on student learning





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require teachers to wait until they have at least four years of experience under their belt, meaning that most decisions to award tenure are made without much data on a teacher's performance.

Once a teacher has tenure, the district and state will invest over \$2 million in that individual in salary, benefits and pension alone. And because the process for terminating a tenured teacher is arduous, tenure confers lifetime job protection provided the teacher commits no crime or moral infraction.

How long before teachers are awarded tenure?

PROFESSIONAL TIME

The work rules and schedules currently found in most teachers' contracts do little to foster professionalism. They are both too inflexible and too lax to help teachers do their complex job.

Many districts require teachers to be on site for only a few minutes longer than the student school day, providing little time for teachers to plan lessons, work collaboratively with colleagues or meet with students. Highly successful schools in this country, such as the KIPP charter schools, require a longer teacher day, while nations with high performing schools, such as Japan and Singapore, build in more preparation and collaboration time for teachers.

Just 16 districts in our 100 district database require teachers to work an 8-hour day. If there is a trend toward lengthening the teacher's day, so few minutes are added at any one time that a routine 8-hour day is still far off.

The student school year and school day vary significantly across the U.S., result-

ing in significant variations in instructional time. Students in New York City, for example, have *nine more weeks* of instruction than students in Chicago, due to the combination of a longer school day (6 hours and 50 minutes versus 5 hours and 45 minutes) and year (186 days versus 174 days).

COMPENSATION

Pay structures provide the wrong incentives. In nearly all school districts teacher pay is based on two factors that bear little connection to teacher effectiveness: their years of experience and if they hold an advanced degree.

Teachers earn annual "step increases" for each additional year of experience they accumulate and receive even larger increases for earning a master's or doctorate. In many districts, teachers receive salary increases simply for *progressing* towards a degree.

Experience. A teacher with 20 years of experience is not apt to be any more effective than a teacher with five years of experience. A body of research has conclusively shown that teachers improve dramatically between their first and second years of teaching, considerably so between their second and third, and relatively little in subsequent years. In sum, many teachers become about as effective as they ever will be by their fifth year. In most districts, though, the most experienced teachers qualify for the highest increases.¹ If pay schedules reflected research findings and served district goals, they would be configured to award the largest raises to teachers with less experience. It is in the first few years of a teacher's career when the greatest gains in effectiveness are made and also when turnover is highest—such raises could be used as a retention

1 These disproportionate pay raises that more experienced teachers often receive cannot be explained as a result of the increases being tied to a percentage of current salary, meaning the more a teacher earns, the larger the pay increase. The step increases that districts award teachers each year are not calculated in this manner and bear no mathematical relationship to the current salary. However, when teachers receive cost of living increases, these raises are calculated as a percentage of current salary.



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incentive for the teachers who earn tenure. Further, more experienced teachers are less likely to leave the profession because of the relatively generous pension that awaits them, making it less necessary to use pay increases to keep them in teaching.

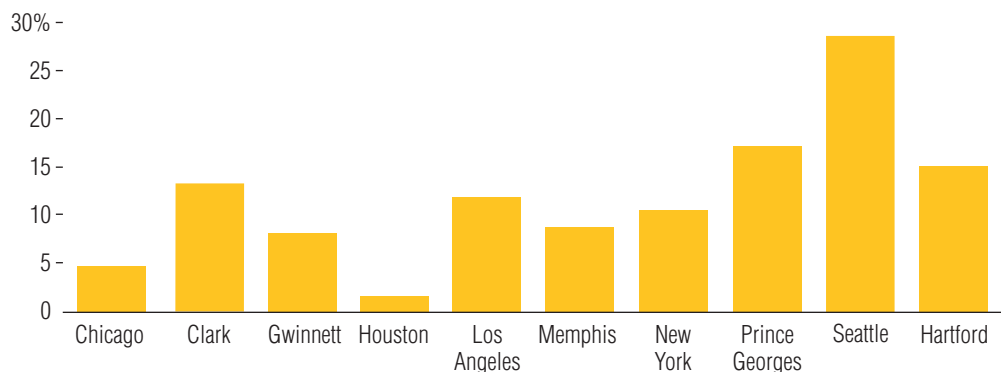
Advanced degrees. While one might assume advanced degrees help teachers to be more effective, the education research over the last 50 years has found little to no evidence to support this. Yet districts continue to provide incentives with very few restrictions for teachers to get a degree.

Most districts (often mandated by state law) boost a teacher's pay for any advanced degree, regardless of whether the degree is likely to help a teacher improve. Busy and cash-strapped teachers take the

fastest, easiest and cheapest route to a degree. Nationally, even at the secondary level, less than one in four degrees is in the teachers' subject area. At the elementary level, only a small fraction of the degrees (7 percent) is in a content area.

Despite those figures, two-thirds of districts reimburse teachers for taking coursework toward an advanced degree and all districts boost pay for obtaining the credential. Teachers with a master's degree earn on average \$6,000 more a year than their colleagues without a master's degree. Money spent on master's degrees could be targeted to pay that would reward the highest performing teachers and attract teachers to fields or schools that are hard to staff.

Percentage of teacher payroll rewarding coursework



Pay reform. Many of the districts in our 100 district database are experimenting with different ways to pay teachers. Yet virtually none of the changes fundamentally reworks a pay structure skewed toward rewarding advanced degrees and lengthy service. Instead, districts have provided incentives for teachers to accept hard-to-staff assignments. Half of the nation's districts offer more money for working in shortage fields, such as special

education or physical science. About 30 percent attach additional money to working in challenging schools.

Another set of pay reforms are aimed at rewarding top performance. Twenty-eight districts offer some form of performance pay. The vast majority of districts provide bonuses to teachers who have earned certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.