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The Best for the Neediest

*Attracting top teachers to low-income, poor-performing schools is a challenge,
but it can be done*

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Since the 1950s and “Blackboard Jungle,” movies and television shows have described for the American public what it is like to be in a school suffering from poverty and neglect. Although rebellious and out of control, students are faced down and changed by one amazing teacher.

We like to see this triumph of ideals over circumstance but believe such a portrayal is always in someone else’s neighborhood or some other state. However, as superintendents and board members know, almost every district has these struggling schools.

With both federal and state initiatives pressing for visible improvement, you must make essential decisions. It’s tempting to initiate broad changes and hope for the best. The reality, however, is that we must change the district’s ecology by changing each school one classroom at a time, one semester at a time.

Critical to this change is the presence of committed teachers who care deeply about the students and the communities they serve. These teachers must be at all levels -- elementary, middle, and especially high school.

Getting good teachers

During the high school years, students face decisions that will shape their lives and impact society. Passing comprehensive state exams, transitioning to GED programs, or rerouting to technical training are age-linked to this stage of schooling.

Why should we emphasize the aggressive recruitment and retention of good teachers to needy high schools? Today, national commission after national commission reports that students are not graduating with the skills that are necessary to succeed in the workforce. This is especially true in high-need, low-income schools.

As good teachers gain experience, they typically move to schools they perceive as better, schools where they can more easily build a positive climate and challenge students to do successful academic work. Good teachers deserve good students; chronically unruly or unmotivated students sap the energy from even the most ambitious teachers. Those who don’t move to better schools often leave the profession.

But what if we could reverse this pattern? Although schools and classrooms are unique, some characteristics delineate differences between low- and high-performing schools.

What do districts need to know about attracting highly qualified teachers to difficult schools? Once there, how can individual schools support these teachers, who -- notwithstanding their expertise -- will undoubtedly experience a learning curve?

Let's take a look at two experiences that I observed in my work as a teacher, administrator, and university professor in Florida. I have changed the names of the school and the teachers to protect their identities.

A slow path to success

Fairlawn is a large, metropolitan high school, situated close to upper and middle class neighborhoods, but drawing more than 65 percent of its 2,000 students from the city's low-income areas. The school receives Cs and Ds on its state assessments and more than half of students are below grade level in reading and math.

About one-third of the school's 700 ninth-graders are repeaters. With a minority population of more than 50 percent, the school holds the district's largest population of special education students and second language speakers.

An ambitious new principal has attracted several star teachers, two of whom agreed that daily journal writing would help them identify and reflect on their experiences and adjustments. While their motivations were different, their experiences by the end of the first year proved tellingly similar.

Meg, who transferred to Fairlawn from an affluent suburban school, was recruited after completing a district-sponsored technology training program. A National Board Certified language arts teacher, Meg brought substantial experience to Fairlawn's grant-funded computer lab and bright, roomy classroom. Her students were retained 10th-graders who performed poorly on standardized tests.

At the outset, Meg's plan was to design Internet search projects and use new modes of presentation. She wondered, however, if she could maintain discipline in the class. Could she inspire students to work hard at new skills?

Meg's high expectations were accepted at her previous high-performing school. Her students recognized the implicit politics of instruction. Typically, students did their homework and cooperated with in-class activities. They acknowledged her authority, completed their work, and met deadlines. By contrast, as Meg began the academic year at Fairlawn, she realized that most of her previous classroom experience would not transfer smoothly.

Already retained a grade, Meg's students were not interested in school. They disliked reading and resisted the computerized vocabulary and reading program. When transitioning from seat work to computer activities, they did so noisily. If Meg timed their work or prodded them, students were verbally aggressive. Several refused to do any work at all, putting their heads down on their desks. When Meg forced the issue, their emotional outbursts escalated into face-to-face challenges.

For a time Meg was baffled. Behind her back, students defaced others' work, threw paper balls and markers, stole objects from her desk, sent instant messages on their cell phones, and walked around at will. In side conversations, they used profanity and insults to describe her.

Clearly, Meg was not successful in establishing the positive climate so necessary to school success. As the year progressed, she became dispirited and exhausted.

Meg knew her approach was ineffective, and she searched for concrete ways to communicate her expectations. As fundamental as it seemed, she began to guide the students in procedural rules such as speaking “one at a time.” Checklist charts helped students log how well they listened during periodic class meetings. Class rules were posted and consequences for violating them were listed.

More importantly, Meg worked with the school’s behavior specialist to abbreviate her explanations, include more specific praise, and use hand signals and short cues to redirect behavior. She designed more differentiated activities and established a class rubric for better behavior.

At the end of an often-painful year, Meg recognized what a “rookie” she had been. She knew what elements of her teaching style needed to change as well as the personal strengths she could depend on in a crisis. Although exhausted, she now knew how to structure the classroom for success. She depended on her professional pride and a highly developed sense of humor to commit to another year.

The social approach

Terry had a reputation as a charismatic, hard-driving American history teacher whose students loved and feared him. He was known for assigning high-level research papers and systematically overseeing the whole process. He set the pace for accelerated learning by winning over the administration and parents.

After an unexpected relocation, Terry was hired at Fairlawn, the only high school still looking for teachers as classes began. He knew he was walking into a troubled school and had misgivings. He was not concerned about discipline, but believed that providing a rigorous curriculum would be impossible. Parental involvement appeared to be low; test scores, reported according to demographics, sent up another red flag.

Terry knew he could not be successful unless he understood the community. His new colleagues were pessimistic about his chances for success. They told him about the parents working two jobs, of the high student mobility, of student crime. With misgivings, Terry adjusted his curriculum. He reverted to chapter worksheets and prepared notes.

He also wrote detailed letters to his students’ parents. For Back to School Night, he prepared a PowerPoint and talked up family participation to his students. His optimism faltered, however, when fewer than 10 percent of his students’ families showed up.

Few of Terry’s students read on grade level and they could not manage the required textbook. Fewer still did their assignments conscientiously. Students were absorbed in part-time jobs or their social lives. Terry decided to go a step further, and he found unexpected help in technology.

Despite economic deprivation, at least a third of parents used cell phones and responded to voice mail. Another third used e-mail at work or in the public libraries. For the final, inaccessible group, Terry found he needed to do more than connect physically. He needed to rethink his beliefs about the students’ family life and culture.

For example, some students assumed responsibilities beyond normal expectations. Family violence, lack of food, and disruption of utilities contributed to the high mobility. Some students

became solely responsible for younger siblings or a disabled parent. Used to being in control, these students found a teacher's calls to be intrusive and thought they could intensify problems already brewing in the home. Terry learned to clearly discuss academic or behavior problems with students well before calling homes.

In addition, Terry expanded his definition of legitimate family contact to include guardian, foster parent, grandparent, adult siblings, parole officer, group home, or shelter director. Terry thought carefully how he would word a message about confidential academic or behavioral progress to live-in boyfriends, neighbors, and step parents.

His perseverance resulted in more support than he expected. Often a parent would volunteer their own dilemmas about raising their child. Some provided Terry with additional information to round out his perceptions. With new insight, Terry resolved to find a way to upgrade the curriculum, even introduce the research paper that had long been the core of his instructional approach.

Lessons learned

Ultimately, all improvement converges in the classroom where students and teachers are the chief actors. It becomes imperative to find answers to both questions: How do we attract the best teachers, like Meg and Terry, who are up to the challenges posed by difficult classroom and school situations? And how can we retain them?

To answer the first question, districts can consider three strategies: financial incentives, charismatic leadership, and collegial synergy.

First, financial incentives are persuasive in attracting outstanding personnel. Salaries carry both practical benefits and symbolic messages of respect. If school boards are courageous about improving their D- and F-rated schools, they should adopt a system of alternative pay scales for highly qualified teachers willing to work in difficult circumstances.

Second, teachers readily follow a trusted or charismatic principal who considers learning a dynamic force for change and ensures that students hear the same message. Such school leaders enable faculty to take intellectual and emotional risks associated with raising the bar for underachieving students.

Finally, highly successful teachers nurture a lifelong passion for learning in their chosen fields of study. Schools providing new program configurations, well-equipped classrooms, and essential support services for disciplinary problems allow teachers to focus on what they do best: teach.

Collegial support grows where teachers share planning time, concentrate on curriculum, and exchange experiences. Small learning communities typically foster these outcomes. Most of all, schools intent on improving academic performance must recognize that a social contract exists between teachers and learners. School leaders should do everything possible to support a culture of responsibility in students by intensively promoting high standards in behavior and attitude.

As leaders, principals can create an environment of hope that recognizes well-qualified teachers' potential to learn and become increasingly more flexible, compassionate, practical, and culturally savvy.

Teachers transferring to problem schools will, with support, create their own learning momentum, much as Meg and Terry did. It is the job of district and school personnel to help them maintain it. Doing so brings rewards to everyone, especially students in dire need of good teachers.

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