Want to Improve Teaching?
Create Collaborative, Supportive Schools

BY ELAINE ALLENSWORTH

Imagine trying to be an effective teacher at a school where the average student misses two months of class time out of nine months of the school year—a common situation in urban high schools. Further, imagine that your fellow teachers and school leaders refuse to work together to prevent students from skipping class or support struggling students in a coordinated way. You may stay, but probably not for long, and not if you have other options. Teachers tend to leave schools where they feel ineffective. At the same time, it’s harder to be effective in schools with the lowest levels of student performance, schools that are most in need of effective teaching.

There is a pressing need to improve the quality of instruction in urban schools to reduce long-standing inequities in educational performance by race and economic status. The current policy context acknowledges the importance of teaching quality for student achievement, but the most popular policy strategies for improving teaching focus on individual teachers, using incentives to attract and reward strong teachers, and developing methods to identify and remove those who are weak. The work my colleagues and I have done at the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows that the context in which teachers work sets the stage for them to be effective and want to stay in their school. It does little good to put highly qualified teachers in a weak school if they are unlikely to stay there, or if they are not able to put their skills to good use because of larger problems in that school environment. There is a role for examining individual teachers’ performance, and for using performance management to build the professional capacity of a school, but it is unlikely to be effective if it narrowly focuses on individual teachers. Without broader work on the school as an organization, schools serving the most disadvantaged students will face high rates of teacher turnover and little chance of sustained instructional improvement.

In our study on teacher mobility in Chicago, The Schools Teachers Leave, we found that the quality of the work environment was strongly predictive of whether teachers remained in their schools. One key element in teacher retention is teachers’ perceptions of their colleagues as collaborators. Teachers are more likely to stay in a school if they see themselves as part of a team that is working together toward making their school better, supported by school leadership. Teachers are also more likely to stay in schools where they feel they have influence over their work environment and they trust their principal as an instructional leader.

These are the same elements of schools that are most predictive of improvements in student learning; schools that show the largest improvements in student learning over time are those where teachers work collectively on improving instruction, and where school leadership is inclusive and focused on instruction.

Two further working conditions account for most of the differences in teacher mobility rates by school racial composition. One is teachers’ relationships with parents. Especially in elementary schools, teachers are more likely to stay in schools where they feel that parents support their work as partners in educating students. The other, which is particularly critical in high schools, is the learning climate at the school. Teachers are more likely to stay at schools where students feel safe, and where students report that their classroom peers engage in appropriate academic behavior. Research outside of Chicago has likewise found that working conditions seem to affect whether teachers remain teaching in their school. For example,

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Elaine Allensworth is the interim executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, where she previously was the senior director and chief research officer. Currently, she is working on several studies of high school curriculum; she was once a high school Spanish and science teacher. This article is adapted, with permission, from “Teacher Performance in the Context of Truly Disadvantaged Schools in Chicago” by Elaine Allensworth, which appeared in the Fall 2011 issue of Voices in Urban Education (www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE), published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Susan Moore Johnson, the lead researcher on the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, found that novice teachers are more likely to stay in their schools when they are engaged in a collaborative way with more experienced colleagues. And a 2008–2009 follow-up study to the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey found that teachers who changed schools tended to report better working conditions in their new school than their old school: more support from administrators, more opportunities for working with colleagues, better availability of resources and materials, and more influence over workplace policies and practices. Other studies have found that strong principal leadership reduced turnover.

School and Classroom Context

In 2010, my colleagues and I documented the findings from a large study in Chicago that examined the ways in which school practices and school and community conditions promote or inhibit improvements in mathematics and reading. We found that schools that are effective in improving student learning tend to have strong organizational structures across five areas: leadership, professional capacity, partnerships with parents and community, learning climate, and instruction. When examining professional capacity in the
school, we found that the individual qualifications of teachers were not nearly as important as the ways in which teachers worked together. When tied to strong instructional practices, the extent to which teachers took collective responsibility for the school and formed a professional community were the most important elements for increasing learning gains. Schools with strong collaboration were more effective as a whole than schools with strong individuals but little collaboration. While a strong professional community seemed to lead teachers to be more effective than they would be on their own, a poor learning climate limited the effectiveness of even the most qualified teachers. Another study in effectiveness of even the most qualified teachers assumed that instructional quality is inherent in the teacher. If teachers were working in the same context, this might be true, but teachers face very different working conditions in different schools. Teacher evaluation systems that judge teachers without regard to context can further disincentivize teaching in the hardest environments.

Some value-added models consider peer effects or student composition. However, many do not. They often compare students with similar prior performance to each other—which shows which schools and teachers produce the highest learning gains. But they do not adjust for the fact that it is harder to create a strong environment in some contexts than in others. Teacher evaluations based on observations are not any more fair for teachers in the most difficult contexts—commonly used protocols make no adjustments for the types of students being served. Yet, we know that instructional quality is determined not only by the skills teachers bring to the classroom, but by the interaction of those skills with the students being served and the larger school context. If we base incentives and employment decisions entirely on performance, without regard to context, we risk increasing turnover rates in schools that already have little stability. At the same time, our research shows that it is critical to have systems that support teachers that struggle with low achievement, but especially those serving the most impoverished communities, face extraordinary challenges in developing strong organizations that can maintain a strong teaching staff. But building those organizational supports is what is needed to provide a high-quality instructional environment for all students and improve equity in educational outcomes.

**Endnotes**

3. Allensworth, Ponsiak, and Mazzeo, The Schools Teachers Leave.
6. Charles Clotfelter, Elizabeth  
7. Bryk et al., Organizing Schools for Improvement.
9. Bryk et al., Organizing Schools for Improvement; and Allensworth, Ponsiak, and Mazzeo, The Schools Teachers Leave.
10. It is not just the teacher that determines the quality of instruction in a classroom, but the interaction of the teacher and the students together around the material technologies. See Deborah Loewenberg Ball and David K. Cohen, “Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Education,” in Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice, ed. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 3–32.