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TEACHER TURNOVER HIGH AT THE 'TAKEOVER SCHOOLS' EXTERNAL MANAGERS STRUGGLE WITH STAFFING INSTABILITY

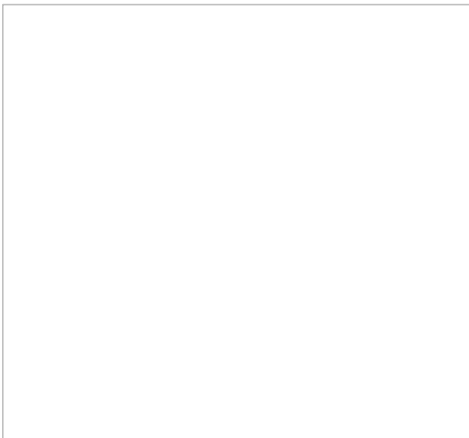
Kurt Spiridakis

Teacher turnover increased between June and September 2002 at most of the schools in Philadelphia that were assigned to external managers or subject to special intervention.

This pattern among schools was evident across all types of interventions and managers, including for-profit education management organizations (EMOs), nonprofit entities, the District-run "restructured schools," and schools designated to become charter schools.

The problem of staffing instability was especially severe at the conversion charter schools and those run by three of the external management groups -- Universal, Edison, and Victory. Data on anticipated vacancies for the fall of 2003 indicate that teacher turnover may continue to be a problem next year in the schools subject to external intervention.

An examination of School District staffing data indicates that the state takeover and implementation of a multiple provider model intensified the longstanding difficulty among most of the low-performing "partnership" schools in retaining their teachers and in attracting fully certified teachers.



Historically, schools serving the poorest students in the District experience high levels of teacher turnover. Some of the departing teachers leave the District entirely; many teachers seek transfers to lower-poverty schools within the District once they have enough seniority. These schools also have higher rates of emergency-certified teachers who are not yet fully licensed to teach.

The problem has always been most severe at high-poverty middle schools, which were among the schools targeted for the interventions implemented this year.

Some administrators affected by the high turnover are not so sure it was a bad thing. Representatives of some EMOs say they welcome new teachers who embrace their reform model and add that young teachers can bring new energy to a school.

But ongoing turnover and teacher instability is a problem for schools. Schools with high turnover have a hard time implementing a coherent academic program since many staff have no history of working with each other. High turnover generally also implies the arrival of many inexperienced new teachers each year, presenting an annual mentoring challenge for senior teachers.

Partnership schools hit by turnover

Education experts in Philadelphia wondered if there would be a mass exodus of teachers from schools once the takeover list was announced back in April 2002. According to data provided by the School District of Philadelphia, these fears have been confirmed.

Between the spring and fall of 2002, an unusually large number of teachers left schools that were slated for management by external partners or that were ordered to become independent charter schools.

Teacher turnover rates more than doubled in schools newly managed by Edison (19 percent to 40 percent), Victory (17 percent

to 40 percent), and Universal (14 percent to 36 percent). The Universal school turnover rate exceeded 40 percent when Vare Middle School, a transitional charter managed by Universal, was counted in the Universal category.

Seven of the 20 Edison-managed schools had over 40 percent of their teachers leave before the school year started. Stoddart-Fleisher Middle School and Comegys Elementary School both lost at least half of their full-time teaching staff.

Turnover rates from last year to the current school year were not as high in schools assisted by the University of Pennsylvania or Temple or that were targeted to be a District-run restructured school. These schools had turnover rates between 23 and 28 percent. Only four of the 21 restructured schools lost as many as 40 percent of their teachers.

None of the schools managed by Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania lost more than 35 percent of their teachers.

The lowest average turnover rate of any category of schools on the District's list of 86 low-scoring schools belonged to the 16 schools that, because of a history of improvement, were not assigned to an external manager.

These 16 schools (dubbed by some as "the sweet sixteen") were instead given extra per-pupil funds to further their efforts to raise student achievement. Their turnover rate was 22 percent, and their turnover rate increased less than the schools with outside managers.

Teacher turnover rates for all categories of school interventions during this first year of reform were still substantially higher than the districtwide turnover rate of 12 percent.

"Teachers left the schools on the low-performing list in higher numbers than usual, partly because of the uncertainty and confusion of the state takeover and the move to a diverse provider model," said Elizabeth Useem, director of research at the Philadelphia Education Fund. Useem has followed trends in staffing in Philadelphia schools over a number of years.

"In some of the partnership schools, turnover accelerated because of the transfer -- sometimes voluntary, sometimes forced -- of a well-regarded principal," Useem said.

"With the departure of the leader, teachers started looking elsewhere too. One school experienced a triple whammy -- a good principal left, the school was designated to become a charter, and an EMO with whom the teachers were unfamiliar was assigned to manage the school," she added. "It is not surprising that many veteran teachers transferred out. When strong principals stayed in place, most of their teachers stayed with them."

The two most extreme cases of teacher flight occurred in Belmont Elementary School, which was converted to a charter school, and FitzSimons Middle School, which changed to single-sex classrooms under the management of Victory Schools. These two schools registered an 80 percent teacher turnover rate.

Overall, the four schools assigned to charter status or transitional charter status averaged the highest teacher departure rate -- 47 percent compared to 17 percent the previous year.

Teachers in these schools feared the potential loss of their status as School District employees and as members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers.

More new teachers

The School District hired 650 new teachers in the fall, constituting about 6 percent of all full-time teachers. But new teachers made up a higher proportion of faculties at schools with outside managers.

Edison and Victory Schools, with the highest percentage of new teachers at their schools, had over three times as many new teachers as District schools that were not on the takeover list.

In Philadelphia schools that have not been subject to an external intervention, the average teacher has been teaching for 17

years, whereas the average teacher in a Chancellor Beacon, Universal, or Edison school in Philadelphia has been teaching for 11 years. These schools fit the historical pattern of lower teacher experience in many of Philadelphia's high-poverty schools.

Certification rates vary

Teacher certification rates varied widely from school to school during the 2002-03 school year. Certification is an indication that the teacher has taken all necessary coursework and passed the required state exam. (However, high certification rates do not necessarily mean that teachers are teaching a subject in which they have expertise.) The percentage of certified teachers has been slowly declining in Philadelphia over the past three years, from a high of 92 percent in 1999 to about 84 percent for the current school year.

Certification rates of the teaching staff remained about the same or improved slightly overall compared to the previous school year at schools run by Edison, Chancellor Beacon, Victory, Temple, University of Pennsylvania, Foundations, and the District's restructured schools.

The proportions of certified teachers were highest at Foundations-run schools (85 percent) and schools that had formed a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania (83 percent) and Temple University (82 percent).

Restructured schools had about an 80 percent overall certification rate in the fall of 2002.

The most serious declines in the percentage of certified teachers occurred at the four conversion charter schools, where rates dropped from 83 to 73 percent, and at the two schools managed by Universal, where the proportion certified decreased from 82 to 72 percent.

While overall rates of certification were low at schools managed by Edison, Victory, and Chancellor Beacon (ranging from 70 to 77 percent), these rates were no worse than they had been during the year prior to the state takeover and external management of schools.

According to Elizabeth Useem, outside educational managers will need to make attracting and retaining new teachers a priority in the current school year.

"They inherited a chronic problem, and it was made worse by all the tumult surrounding the state takeover and the complex, rushed process in which schools were assigned to a variety of radical interventions," Useem said. "[The 2003-04 school year] staffing trends will give us more reliable indicators of how teachers assess these interventions."

The data for this article were provided by the School District of Philadelphia and were analyzed and summarized by Kurt Spiridakis, a researcher formerly with the Philadelphia Education Fund. PEF is a local education fund committed to improving the quality of public education for all children in Philadelphia through direct student services, professional development for teachers, research, and advocacy.

This article was first printed in the Summer 2003 edition of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook and was part of a series that explored the theme: "The takeover-one year later." The Notebook is an independent quarterly newspaper that serves as a voice for parents, students, teachers, and other members of the community who are working for quality and equity in Philadelphia's public schools.

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