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COMMENTARY

For Better Teachers, Build Better Personnel Practices



—Susan Sanford

By Tim Pawlenty & James B. Hunt Jr.

Imagine this: You are a smart, idealistic 23-year-old with a bachelor's degree from a top university, two years of successful on-the-job training, and a heartfelt commitment to becoming a highly successful educator in a school district that's been making headlines over its dire shortage of qualified teachers.

Now imagine that you waited months to learn whether or not you would be hired. Every other paycheck arrives late, and they're often for the wrong amount. Your visits to the personnel office feel like a foray into chaos and, after a year at the front of the classroom, you still have absolutely no idea exactly how your performance is being measured.

This is the situation facing thousands of teachers. It has a major impact on efforts to address the nation's severe teacher shortage—particularly in high-need fields such as mathematics and science—and it could prove to be a real obstacle to those who answer President Barack Obama's call to become teachers in this "new era of responsibility."

Fortunately, five of the nation's largest school districts—Boston; Chicago; Fairfax County, Va.; Long Beach, Calif.; and New York City—are instituting practices that are proving to be effective for addressing the problem. These districts demonstrate the ability of urban schools to respond to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's clear interest in recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining top teacher and principal talent. Secretary Duncan's

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he launched a comprehensive teacher- and principal-recruitment strategy that included partnerships with entrepreneurial organizations and the creation of induction and mentoring programs for new teachers.

As representatives of the **Strategic Management of Human Capital Task Force**, a nonprofit action project that has studied the management-system improvements in these five districts, we have identified the following measures as models for districts nationwide.

One: Cast a wide net and don't let top talent get away.

The districts we studied began by seeking strong candidates in two places where they are most apt to be found: national organizations with a track record for recruiting and training top educators, and universities that can provide and nurture talented teachers and principals. Those districts seeking candidates from national organizations turned to groups such as the New Teacher Project, Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools, and the Academy for Urban School Leadership. In Fairfax County, where recruitment goes on nonstop throughout the year, the net was cast directly to colleges in East Coast states that produce a surplus of well-prepared teachers.

The result: All five districts found talent pools teeming with top prospects, and each opened the 2008 school year with virtually no vacancies.

In several districts, partnerships with local universities strengthened the pipeline of candidates who received special training and tuition reimbursements for that training. New York City, for example, provides tuition reimbursement at the City University of New York for teachers willing to become certified in shortage areas such as math and science.

Two: Get online to turn human-resources departments into customer-service centers.

Many school systems are plagued with dysfunctional human-resources-management systems that can't keep track of where employees work or pay them on time. In contrast, the districts profiled in this study are using proven technology to automate the application and selection process, and are linking application and payroll systems. Chicago, for example, through a reorganization of its human-resources office, reduced the amount of time from receiving a candidate's teaching application to first contact by the district from 61 days to two.

Three: Focus on rigorous training and retention.

Nationwide, 30 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years. But each of these districts offers intense mentoring during teachers' first two years, with benchmarks connected to state teaching standards and online support. Their message: We're glad to have you here, and we're going to build a foundation for a long-term career to ensure that more of our students are taught by veteran teachers with insight and experience.

While we cannot yet quantify the impact of these mentoring approaches, if they are coupled with support from committees of mentors specifically dedicated to addressing issues faced by new teachers, we believe such approaches will enable all of these districts to attract and retain dedicated teachers.

Four: Keep strong leadership at the top.

Like ocean liners with no one at the helm, many foundering urban and suburban school districts have run off course because they've lacked stable leadership for a sustained period of time. (Remember Franklin L. Smith, Julius W. Becton Jr., Arlene Ackerman, Paul L. Vance, and Clifford B. Janey? That's how many superintendents headed the District of Columbia schools between 1991 and 2007.) Yet all five of the districts studied by the Strategic Management of Human Capital Task Force had stable leaders for several years, such as Superintendents Jack D. Dale, now into his fifth year in Fairfax County, and Thomas W. Payzant in Boston, who served for 11 years (with Carol Johnson now continuing with his vision). All of the school systems also had strong ties between the districts' chief executives and their local mayors.

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in education reform.

Five: Get unions and management to work together.

Chances are the struggling economy will exacerbate seemingly perennial union-management tensions, but solutions to recruitment and retention challenges can only come about through long-term collaboration. In all of the studied school districts except Fairfax County, teachers elected a single organization to represent them and to negotiate with the district a legally binding contract to cover wages, hours, and conditions of employment, which included evaluation and compensation procedures.

With continuing efforts for clarity and benchmarks, teachers will no longer travel uncharted territory in their quest to improve their performance, and districts will have a clear set of criteria to ensure teachers are measuring up. The human-capital study notes significant room for improvement in this area—particularly when it comes to sustained professional development for teachers, ongoing and effective management of their performance, and compensation practices that effectively reward those who perform the best.

The bottom-line message is clear: If we want to attract and retain the best possible teachers for 21st-century students and schools, we need to use 21st-century human-resources practices. Make it easy for highly qualified applicants to secure teaching and principal positions. Give them opportunities and incentives to strengthen their abilities throughout their careers. Provide the leadership that continues to inspire over time. And establish clear standards to provide every educator a road map for success.

Tim Pawlenty is the governor of Minnesota and chairs the Strategic Management of Human Capital Task Force. James B. Hunt Jr. is a former governor of North Carolina and serves as a member of the task force.

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