

Focusing Teacher Preparation on At-Risk and Hard-to-Staff Schools: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Many teachers begin their careers in at-risk or hard-to-staff schools because these schools have the most openings. For a variety of reasons, these teachers often leave their positions at these schools at the first available opportunity. One explanation for this early departure is that their teacher preparation programs have not adequately prepared them for teaching in challenging urban or isolated rural areas.

On September 21, 2006, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (NCCTQ) hosted a live, interactive webcast that provided insight into the real roots of the problem and offered the promising efforts being undertaken to address it at the national, state, and district levels. The expert panel included Michael Barry Allen, National Academies; Susan Moore Johnson, Harvard Graduate School of Education; C. Kent McGuire, Temple University; and Michelle Rhee, The New Teacher Project.

The following questions, with answers provided by the expert panelists, were submitted by participants as part of the webcast.

Teacher Preparation

What are things teacher educators can do to better prepare preservice teachers to teach effectively in at-risk, hard-to-staff schools?

C. Kent McGuire: Knowing your students is key. From a curricular point of view, this could mean a number of things but certainly means addressing issues ranging from child or youth development to the interplay of parent and family dynamics on readiness and school performance. Developing assessment and diagnostic skills is also important because if you can't pinpoint what is getting in the way of learning, you can't develop instructional strategies to address these impediments. And developing a broad repertoire of instructional strategies is key. While we might not expect a brand-new teacher to master differentiated instruction, we do think preparing teachers with both a sense of these strategies and when and how to employ them is important. The good news is there are strategies we know are effective in, for instance, reading instruction or mathematics; and we can—through a combination of practicum and classroom instruction—help candidates develop these techniques. There is no substitute, however, for practice. So we think getting in the field early and often is important. We're spending a great deal more energy at Temple [University] guiding students toward the field setting where we think they will get a challenging but well-supported experience. Practically speaking, we get a great deal of feedback that teachers need more help with classroom management. We—like I imagine a number of places—run practicum courses on this to prepare our students for the challenges they will no doubt face when they first start teaching.

What are the most salient, critical skills and knowledge that need to be addressed in teacher preparation?

Michael Barry Allen: To some extent, this depends upon the grade level being taught. Strong subject-matter knowledge is certainly critical for secondary teachers. Also important is the ability to teach subjects effectively, some of which may be learnable preservice and much of which probably needs to be honed on the job. Elementary teachers need this same knowledge about how to teach basic subject matter effectively. In addition, they need to have a solid understanding of child development and be able to recognize the learning needs of students who may still be at different developmental stages. Good teachers at all levels know how to make learning interesting and rewarding and how to provide feedback that motivates students to learn.

Susan Moore Johnson: New teachers not only have to know their subjects but also know how to teach them. They need to know basic strategies for having a well-organized classroom in which everyone focuses on learning. They need to know how to use a curriculum effectively—if they have one—and how to develop one from available resources if they don't. They need to know how to teach to students who learn in different ways or at different rates. They need to be familiar with communities in which they might work and personally aware of the assumptions [they] bring as individuals—particularly when they are working in communities that differ significantly from the ones they have experience with. If new teachers are to influence their own working environment, they need to understand their school as an organization. Most teacher education programs ignore this, and most teachers are focused only on their own classrooms. But understanding the school as a workplace can give new teachers great insight into the difficulties and opportunities they may encounter.

What are the most important experiences for a preservice teacher to have prior to student teaching?

Michael Barry Allen: This depends to a large extent on the structure of the program. But, in general, it's helpful if teacher candidates have enough exposure to the real-world classroom—either through observation or actual practice teaching—that they can be confident that teaching is the right career choice for them. Students probably also should observe really good teachers in action, especially in challenging urban classrooms so they have a sense that successful teaching under those circumstances is possible. But, in addition to “experiences,” teacher candidates have to have a good grasp of the subject they're teaching.

Susan Moore Johnson: I'd suggest working informally with students of the age the teacher hopes to teach—tutoring, coaching, etc. Also, many new teachers have never observed a large number of teachers at work. Observing in a school before beginning teacher education can enhance the learning while in the program.

What are some tactics for preparing teachers for difficult schools without scaring them away from teaching?

Michael Barry Allen: My sense is that teacher candidates have to want to teach in challenging schools, or they'll find themselves too stressed to cope well. So they first have to know what they're getting into. They have to see examples of successful teaching in those schools. And they have to have the opportunity to work with low-income, minority students either one-on-one or in small groups. But some schools are dysfunctional, and veteran teachers would have a tough time teaching in them, let alone inexperienced teachers. It is not a good idea to place inexperienced teachers in schools that are really difficult. It's hard enough to learn how to teach in schools with high-performing students and good support. Once beginning teachers have mastered the basics of teaching and feel some confidence, then it might be the time to think about teaching in more difficult environments.

What are current best practices from the field and from research on preparation and retention for teachers in at-risk and hard-to-staff schools?

Michael Allen: The research is very thin. We know that teachers leave principally because they experience poor leadership support and a lack of autonomy. There's also some evidence that good induction and mentoring programs are successful in increasing teacher retention. Placing beginning teachers in dysfunctional schools with poor mentoring support is a recipe for disaster, so this practice should be avoided. Some schools refuse to place student teachers in tough schools, reasoning that it's hard enough to learn to teach well in an average environment.

Susan Moore Johnson: Good preparation calls for strong subject-based pedagogy and the ability to differentiate instruction. Having a good clinical experience that allows a prospective teacher to try out strategies for classroom management, group work, or discussions is very valuable. Retaining teachers in hard-to-staff schools rests on having a well-organized and -managed school where the experienced teachers work closely with new teachers both in their induction and in school improvement generally.

How will these fast-track preparation programs address issues of ELL [English language learner]/ESL [English as a second language] learners?

Susan Moore Johnson: For the most part, these programs do not address ELL/ESL issues. But this is not strictly a shortcoming of fast-track programs. Many traditional programs offer little assistance to teachers on this. Given the variation in school composition, it seems likely that the best support for teachers would be at the school or district level in appropriate professional development opportunities that are tailored to the local situation.

What is being done to make teacher preparation programs accessible to low-income students, especially when they will become the first generation of college students?

Michael Barry Allen: There are, of course, programs in colleges that cater to low-income students, such as [those at] many of the City College of New York campuses. In addition, there is an increasing number of community colleges offering some courses in teacher preparation and providing vocational support for students contemplating teaching careers.

How can teacher preparation institutions fundamentally change the way teacher education faculty are selected, developed, and rewarded?

Michael Barry Allen: They will only fundamentally change these when they fundamentally change the way they *teach* teacher preparation. Moreover, it's not only teacher educators who need to be considered. Most teacher candidates receive their subject-matter courses in the college of arts and sciences, and faculty there also probably need to change the way they approach their subject—at least for prospective teachers.

How can teacher candidates get experiences working with students and teachers in hard-to-staff schools before they become employed by one?

Michael Barry Allen: Some teacher candidates attended such schools and are at least comfortable in the climate and understand what to expect. Some programs provide teacher candidates with opportunities to observe teachers in at-risk schools or to tutor students in those schools one-on-one or in small groups. And some programs arrange student teaching in those schools, though without top-notch cooperating teachers and mentors, this could be counterproductive.

Can you provide one or more exemplary examples of a residency-type approach to teacher training? And are there any good examples of such an approach being integrated into a district- or school-based induction program?

Susan Moore Johnson: [The] [Boston Teacher Residency](#) program is several years old and seems to be working well. Information about it is available on the Boston Public Schools website.

Michelle Rhee: The New Teacher Project's Teaching Fellows programs utilize a residency-type approach to teacher training to prepare career changers to become teachers in some of the country's largest cities. More information about these programs is available at www.tntp.org.

Teacher Induction, Retention, and Motivation

Pay-for-performance and other compensation issues often are raised as major barriers to getting high-quality candidates to enter the teaching field. What are some good incentives that both state policymakers and district administrators should consider to recruit and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools?

Michael Barry Allen: The Chattanooga, Tennessee, experience is instructive. They offered positions at their low-performing schools only to top teachers so it became a badge of honor to be selected. They gave these teachers a lot of public recognition. And they gave them substantial salary increases. Many experts believe that increases of \$10,000 annually or more are necessary; small incentives are not adequate to attract and retain good teachers in those schools. Even more fundamental, especially for younger teachers for whom salary is a little less important, are opportunities to develop their careers. This means providing good school leadership and strong support for instruction that includes mentoring and work-related professional development.

Beyond induction and mentoring for new teachers in hard-to-staff schools, how can we keep them inspired?

Michael Barry Allen: Strong school leadership, opportunities to participate in important decisions that affect their teaching, [and] good work-related professional development [are important]; also important appears to be strong peer-networking groups.

How can teacher empowerment in decision making assist in retention efforts?

Michael Barry Allen: Research by Richard Ingersoll, in particular, indicates that perceived lack of autonomy is one of the principal reasons teachers leave schools. So, particularly when issues of instruction are involved, it's important for school administrators to bring the faculty into key decisions. This increases their buy-in, their sense of autonomy, and their sense of self-worth. And it makes good sense; teachers, after all, are the ones who know the most about what is and isn't working in the classrooms.

What does the research say regarding what has worked in regard to improving the working conditions in hard-to-staff schools?

Michael Barry Allen: Some research indicates that lack of autonomy and poor support from school leadership are the principal complaints teachers have about school climates. Addressing these would be critical. Also important is enabling hard-to-staff schools to be environments where teachers can learn to improve their teaching. This requires building the instructional capacity of those schools, either ensuring that there is a cadre of more accomplished senior teachers who can share their knowledge with less experienced teachers or creating regular opportunities for mentoring and instructionally focused professional development by skilled teachers and teacher educators from the outside.

How does district and school administration influence teacher satisfaction and retention in hard-to-staff schools?

Michael Barry Allen: By ensuring there [are] strong leaders in those schools who are supportive of teachers and involve them in important decisions that affect classroom instruction. By setting up strong peer support and induction and mentoring programs. By

trying to erase the stigma attached to those schools and recognizing teachers for their good efforts and, where possible, their success. One city, Chattanooga, was able to turn teaching in its lowest performing schools into a status assignment by allowing only top teachers to teach in those schools, paying them a higher salary, and [giving] them a good deal of praise and recognition.

How do we motivate aspiring teachers to commit to hard-to-staff schools?

Michelle Rhee: The New Teacher Project has found that the key to this is targeting recruitment messages to the types of people who are motivated by the challenge of teaching in hard-to-staff schools. In order to attract these individuals, recruitment messages must be honest about the challenges and the need for excellent teachers, rather than painting a falsely rosy picture. We have also found that creating highly selective programs to recruit teachers to hard-to-staff schools tends to attract high achievers who are drawn to these programs' aura of selectivity and professionalism.

What contributes to a teacher's decision to leave or stay in a hard-to-staff school?

Michael Barry Allen: A variety of factors [contribute]. Difficult working conditions, poor support from the school principal, and poor student achievement are commonly cited as factors motivating teachers to leave.

Michelle Rhee: The New Teacher Project's internal research has shown that some of the key factors cited by those who choose to leave are student discipline, stress, and school leadership.

What kinds of support and incentives are being offered (or should be offered) to teachers who choose to teach in hard-to-staff schools, particularly in an era of high accountability and high-stakes testing?

Michael Barry Allen: Financial incentives tend to play a larger role for older teachers than they do for younger teachers. Younger teachers are often overwhelmed by the challenge of teaching, period; and placing them in hard-to-staff schools may increase that challenge. So strong support and opportunities to grow professionally are very valuable for younger teachers, in particular. Ultimately, what's critical for all teachers is that their work be satisfying, and, to the extent that working conditions in a school thwart that satisfaction, teachers will be reluctant to remain there.

What strategies are most important for teachers who will be working in these settings?

Michelle Rhee: The New Teacher Project believes it is critical first for these teachers to understand the realities of the situation they will be facing. It is essential for these teachers to receive training in what to expect in a hard-to-staff school and how to overcome challenges. We base our curriculum on real experiences teaching in hard-to-staff schools, and we focus on real situations—What happens when your classroom

management system fails on Day 2? What happens when a fight breaks out in the room? What happens when it is the fourth week of school and you still have no books?

Specific Programs

Is there longitudinal information about the success of The New Teacher Project measured in terms of how long the teachers recruited stay in the profession and, more importantly, how long those teachers teach in hard-to-staff schools in urban districts?

Michelle Rhee: Two recent studies of teacher certification pathways and teacher effectiveness [Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006] in New York City showed that NYC Teaching Fellows recruited by The New Teacher Project demonstrate retention rates that are comparable to, or better than, those of traditionally certified teachers. In addition, these studies showed that Teaching Fellows perform just as well as or even better than traditionally certified teachers in all subjects and grades studied by their second or third year in the classroom. Both findings are especially remarkable given the fact that Teaching Fellows are much more likely than other teachers to work in high-poverty schools with disproportionately low rates of academic success and disproportionately high rates of absenteeism.

Did the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers research include Teach For America? And if so, what were the findings for this specific organization?

Susan Moore Johnson: Although there are some Teach For America teachers who have participated in our surveys, we haven't yet studied them as a group.

Is Temple University doing anything to encourage mid-career professionals or students who are noneducation majors to consider teaching in hard-to-staff schools?

C. Kent McGuire: Temple University has a number of students at the master's level who are coming to teaching as a second career. Temple has not designed anything specific (e.g., alternative certification) for these students, except in the areas of math and science where they are hoping to join forces with the biotech and pharmaceutical firms in our region to create efficient pathways to teaching.

Hard-to-Staff Rural Schools

How do the topics addressed regarding teacher preparation for entering urban high-need schools compare to staffing preparation strategies in high-need rural schools?

Michael Barry Allen: There are similarities and differences, and not all rural schools are the same. There are still a few rural schools with multigrade classrooms. Other rural schools may require teachers to teach both middle and high school students. A related challenge in many rural schools is the lack of adequate faculty to have specialists in all

subjects and especially to give Advanced Placement classes in high school. So this may imply the need for rural teachers to be more interdisciplinary, to be more comfortable with multiage classrooms or with a variety of grade levels, and to be creative in using technology (e.g., online courses) in the classroom. Increasingly, there are ethnically diverse classrooms in rural areas, with a significant number of English language learners.

Are special policies and strategies necessary to serve the needs of hard-to-staff schools in isolated rural areas?

Michael Barry Allen: Some experts believe there are. These include (1) the need to offer appropriate recruitment incentives for teachers to teach in rural schools in what has become an increasingly urban culture; (2) the need to offer both professional and social support to rural teachers who often feel isolated from other teachers and from the members of the community to whom they may seem like perpetual outsiders (some rural areas have attempted to set up networks of support between rural teachers in different districts or counties); (3) the need to help prospective rural teachers from outside the region understand more about the culture into which they will be moving; (4) efforts to focus teacher recruitment on individuals who grew up in the area so that they will be better able to relate to students and the community and feel more at home; and (5) training in teaching in multilingual classrooms, as rural school districts increasingly enroll children of Hispanic, Asian, and other immigrant [populations].

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Michelle Rhee serves as chief executive officer and president of The New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization that partners with school districts, state departments of education, and other educational entities to enhance their capacity to recruit, select, train, and support highly qualified teachers for hard-to-staff schools.