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Human Capital in Boston Public Schools: Attracting and Retaining Effective Teachers

Boston, Mass.—Today the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) issued a report on Boston Public School policies that have an impact on teacher quality, concluding that while the district has many smart, strategic policies already in place, improving teacher rules could help the district do a better job attracting and retaining effective teachers.

Undertaken in partnership with the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), the report focuses largely on Boston’s current collective bargaining agreement with its teachers, up for negotiation this spring.

“Across the educational spectrum, the Boston Public Schools and the state of Massachusetts often serve as national models for smart policies,” commented Kate Walsh, President of NCTQ. “Our more focused look here at teachers gives us further insight into some of the reasons for Boston’s success, but also lays out a clear strategy for continuing to make great progress.”

NCTQ spent four months analyzing the regulations governing the work rules of Boston’s teachers, comparing the city to other districts both in the state of Massachusetts and nationwide. It also spoke with local stakeholders, including teachers and principals and examined key personnel data to help illuminate how policies play out in practice.

“Reaching our state’s goals for raising student achievement cannot be done without changes in how we operate our school management and human resource systems,” according to Linda M. Noonan, Executive Director of MBAE. “The recommendations for action in Boston are relevant guidelines for districts across the Commonwealth.”

The 52-page report focuses on the areas governing teaching that can be most directly transformed by better policies, including hiring, assignment, compensation and evaluations.

Among the primary findings:

- Principal authority is undermined by hiring rules that put the interests of teachers before the interests of schools.
- Boston attracts teachers with strong academic backgrounds, but does not do enough to aggressively recruit the best teachers early enough in the year. Nearly a quarter of new teachers hired for the current school year were hired in the two weeks prior to the start of school.
- The design of Boston's mentoring program for its new teachers appears outstanding.
- Teacher evaluations are in need of serious improvement; Only half of all teachers have been evaluated between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, and a quarter of the city's schools failed to turn in a single evaluation over the two previous school years.
- Teachers do not appear to be held accountable for their job performance with only 41 teachers out of 4, 873 found unsatisfactory last school year, less than one percent of all teachers.
- Like districts across the nation, the process to dismiss a teacher is cumbersome and too prone to procedural errors. An underperforming teacher can languish in the system for years, permitted to appeal a dismissal multiple times before a decision is final.
- Again reflecting practices in districts across the nation, and state policy, Boston teachers earn tenure too easily.
- Boston teachers get high marks for having a much higher attendance rates than teachers in other districts, with teachers using less than half of their allotted sick and personal leave.
- While teacher salaries are competitive with the surrounding districts, the city devotes too much of its resources to strategies that do not build a stronger teacher corps. For example, Boston spends nine percent (\$33 million) of its teacher payroll to reward teachers for post-graduate coursework—even though research has conclusively found that most coursework has no impact on teacher effectiveness.

NCTQ's recommendations to improve teacher quality in Boston include:

- Give principals full authority to interview and hire the teachers who are to work in their school buildings.
- Recruit top candidates earlier, especially those qualified to serve in hard-to-staff positions.
- Hold principals responsible for completing teacher evaluations and allow senior leaders in schools to evaluate their peers.
- Make teacher evaluations a more meaningful process by 1) better differentiating teachers' performance levels and 2) making sure that only teachers who are effective instructors are able to qualify for a satisfactory rating.
- Shorten the remediation schedule for underperforming teachers so that ineffective teachers are not assigned to a new class of students.

- Restructure the salary schedule so that the district can use resources strategically, gradually eliminating ineffective compensation schemes such as rewarding teachers for earning advanced degrees.

The National Council on Teacher Quality is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and advocacy group dedicated to increasing the number of effective teachers. NCTQ's work focuses on the institutions that have the greatest impact on teacher quality, including states, school districts, teachers' unions and schools of education. To learn more, visit: www.nctq.org

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education is a statewide advocacy organization that brings together business and education leaders to promote education policies and practices based on measurable standards of achievement, accountability for performance and equitable educational opportunities for all students. To learn more, visit: www.mbae.org