



National Council on Teacher Quality



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Contact: Lisa Cohen, NCTQ
Cell: 310-395-2544
Email: lisa@lisacohen.org

Tricia Lederer, MBAE
Tel: 617-737-3122
Cell: 781-424-9417
Email: TLederer@mbae.org

REPORT ON SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS DEMONSTRATES NEED FOR IMPROVED DISTRICT PRACTICES IN ORDER TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN QUALITY TEACHERS

Study Examined Teacher Recruitment, Staffing, Compensation, Tenure and Evaluation Policies

SPRINGFIELD, October 11, 2011 – A report released today by the National Council on Teacher Quality on teacher policies in the Springfield Public Schools found that key teacher policies must be reformed in order for the district to be able to attract and retain highly effective teachers and drive an effective educational system where Springfield students can learn and thrive.

The in-depth study, ***Teacher Quality Roadmap: Improving Policies and Practices in Springfield***, was sponsored by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) and Springfield Business Leaders for Education. Designed as a tool to highlight what is and is not working in our local schools, the report compares Springfield's policies with both surrounding districts and similar districts around the nation. The report also identifies local and state legislative reforms that would facilitate district efforts to recruit and retain highly effective teachers. This report follows other NCTQ district spotlights in Baltimore, Boston, Hartford, Kansas City, Los Angeles and Seattle.

Having an effective teacher in every classroom is critical for improving student learning. Research has shown that teacher quality is the single most important school-controlled variable that influences student achievement. A 2002 study found that having a highly effective teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of low socio-economic background.

“The business community understands the value of talent and the importance of having a great teacher leading every classroom,” said Linda Noonan, Executive Director of MBAE. “We were pleased to find that Springfield compared to other urban districts in the country quite favorably in several areas, and by implementing the recommendations made in this study has the potential to drive great gains in student performance.”

This examination of the state of teacher policies in the Springfield Public Schools explores the district's contract with its teachers, as well as district practices and state laws that shape the work rules for teachers. Additionally, NCTQ analyzed Springfield human resource data;

conducted a district-wide survey of over 600 teachers and principals; and held focus groups with teachers, principals and community members.

Kate Walsh, President of NCTQ, says that “Job one for Springfield, like most districts in the United States, is to turn its full attention to improving teacher evaluation, not just to hold teachers accountable but to provide the feedback every teacher needs and deserves, no matter how good they are. So much turns on the availability of a sound evaluation system. Nothing the district attempts will work well without that system in place.”

The analysis is framed around five standards for improving teacher quality — staffing, evaluations, tenure, compensation and work schedule— which are supported by research and best practices from the field.

Among the report’s findings

- Principal’s authority to build their own team and decide who teaches in their school buildings is limited. The district “force places” teachers into vacancies, instead of assignment by “mutual consent” of the principal and teacher that the placement is a good fit.
- Springfield’s leave package, at effectively 19.5 days, exceeds what is offered in comparable districts. In the 2009-2010 school year teachers were absent an average of 15 days, approximately one day every 2-1/2 weeks. Teacher absenteeism has been linked to learning losses for children.
- Springfield is revising its evaluation policies, largely due to new state regulations. Recent data shows that all but 0.6 percent of teachers evaluated received satisfactory or better ratings. Most problematic is that evaluations failed to factor in the most important measure of teachers’ effectiveness: their impact on student learning.
- As in most districts, the decision to award tenure is largely automatic with principals basing their decisions on the results of the current, weak evaluation tool where all teachers virtually are labeled satisfactory or exemplary.
- Salaries and lifetime earnings are lower in Springfield than in surrounding districts, making it difficult to attract highly effective teachers.
- Studies show that asking teachers to earn advanced credits, such as a master’s degree, has no impact on teacher quality, yet the district currently spends over \$7 million of its resources on awarding high salaries to teachers who have taken advanced coursework. However, in recent years the district has made a positive step away from compensating teachers for advanced course credit by eliminating some intermediate pay grades.
- The pool of teachers seeking work in the district is largest in April, yet the district does not typically extend any offers to new teachers well until August when the pool has dwindled and the most qualified have found other placements.
- Commendably, Springfield’s contract provides its teachers with time to plan and work collaboratively each week.

This analysis is meant to serve a practical purpose, offering clearly articulated steps to pursue, including steps that the district might take alone, jointly with the teachers union, or to urge changes in Massachusetts state law.

Primary Recommendations

Work for the district

- Require teachers who lose their assignment to interview and pursue a new assignment, eliminating the practice of “force placements” where the district forces principals to accept teachers that may not be a good fit.
- Improve the overall caliber of teacher prospects by addressing inefficiencies in the current timeline for assigning teachers to schools, screening applicants more rigorously and paying more attention to their academic strengths.
- Make student performance the preponderant criterion on which teachers are evaluated.
- Develop a team of independent evaluators who are sent into schools to conduct random observations on teachers, for the dual purpose of validating principals’ evaluations and providing teachers with important content-specific feedback.

Work for the district and union

- Give displaced teachers two hiring cycles to secure a new assignment, at which point the district should no longer be contractually obligated to find teachers a placement.
- Base tenure decisions primarily on performance, including student data, and reward teachers with the most significant pay increase of their teaching career when they achieve it.
- Offer significantly higher salaries, not bonuses, to the best teachers who consistently produce the greatest learning gains, the top 5 to 15 percent of performers depending on what the district can afford.
- As the profession now demands, require teachers to work an 8-hour day onsite.
- Finish eliminating any salary increases associated with earning course credits by eliminating raises for advanced degrees.
- Schedule professional development when school is not in session; distribute training days throughout the year.
- Trim the leave package to be more in line with districts nationally, providing one day of leave per month worked.

Work for the state

- Allow performance to be a factor in determining which teachers will be laid off.
- To increase the reliability of the data that needs to be considered in tenure decisions, extend teachers’ probationary period to four years from three. Alternatively give principals the right to delay tenure a year.

The full report is available at: www.nctq.org/p/publications/nctq_springfield.pdf

About the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education

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

About Springfield Business Leaders for Education

Springfield Business Leaders for Education (SBLE) are employers concerned about educating Springfield's children for college and career success. The group provides the business community engagement that is a key component of sustainable education reforms and a public education system accountable for its performance. SBLE members understand the critical role that education plays in economic vitality and are involved as active leaders in education issues and challenges in Springfield. The group, which was founded in 2009, focuses on advocacy and accountability with an emphasis on those issue areas where the business community has expertise and brings value -- accountability measures, human resources, management, and communication among others.

About the National Council on Teacher Quality

The National Council on Teacher Quality advocates for reforms in a broad range of teacher policies at the federal, state, and local levels in order to increase the number of effective teachers. In particular we recognize the absence of much of the evidence necessary to make a compelling case for change and seek to fill that void with a research agenda that has direct and practical implications for policy. We are committed to lending transparency and increasing public awareness about the four sets of institutions that have the greatest impact on teacher quality: states, teacher preparation programs, school districts and teachers unions. For more information, visit: www.nctq.org

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