

Executive Summary  
October 2011

# Teacher Quality Roadmap

Improving Policies and Practices in Springfield, Massachusetts



About this study

# This study was undertaken on behalf of the 25,000 children who attend Springfield Public Schools.

## About NCTQ

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is a non-partisan research and policy organization committed to restructuring the teaching profession, led by our vision that every child deserves effective teachers.

## Partner and Funders

This study is done in partnership with the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), committed to a high quality public education system that will prepare all students to engage successfully in a global economy and society. MBAE was supported by Springfield Business Leaders for Education whose goal is to improve educational attainment to ensure a skilled workforce and economic opportunity for all in the Springfield community. Additional funding for this study was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

## The NCTQ team for this project

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# Executive Summary

This study looks at the policies and practices shaping teacher quality in Springfield Public Schools. It is part of a series of analyses by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) looking at select school districts across the nation. We undertake each of these studies to better engage the whole community, who is in the best position to drive much needed improvements in the district's schools. By providing the community with essential data and information about the school district, most of which has never been shared with the public, we are able to deliver a set of concrete, actionable reforms on which to build a platform for improvement. We consider our work to be the easy part of this process. The hard work comes next, ensuring that the push for change stays organized, determined and constructive.

At the invitation of the community, we would be happy to return to the district in one year, learning and reporting on the progress we observe.

Like students in many other urban districts, far too many of Springfield students underperform. The four-year cohort graduation rate is 53 percent, compared to the state-wide average of 82 percent. The gap between Springfield students' proficiency on the state test with other students in the state is just as large.

Springfield has been hard-hit by the economic recession. The district had to craft its fiscal year 2012 budget with an \$18.9 million cut from the previous year. Accordingly, we make every effort to put forward recommendations that can be adopted given the bleak financial picture in the district.

Still, there are bright spots. The collective bargaining process works more smoothly in Springfield than in other districts NCTQ has studied. The dialogue between district and union officials is more open, collaborative and respectful than we often observe.

This report focuses on district policies and practices in five key areas all of which affect the quality of the teaching force: 1) teacher assignment, 2) teacher evaluation, 3) tenure, 4) compensation, and 5) the work schedule.

## Snapshot of Springfield school district

- Approximately 25,000 students
  - 81 percent receive free or reduced lunch
  - 24 percent have a first language other than English
- 2,144 teachers
- 108 principals and assistant principals
- 52 schools
- \$410.5 million budget

## 1. Teacher Assignment

While Springfield makes some effort to give principals considerable authority in deciding who teaches in their school buildings, the authority is too limited. Meeting the obligations of its teacher contract, the district still “force places” those teachers who, for one reason or another, have lost their current position, requiring principals to accept teachers they may not think are a good fit in their schools. Recently, the number of force placements has increased because the district had to turn over a large proportion of staff at its most academically struggling schools.

The district fills most of its teacher vacancies in August, after receiving most of the applications by April. The delay hurts Springfield’s ability to hire the best available teacher candidates, largely because the district spends too much time finding new assignments for teachers who wish to transfer out of their current schools and because it puts no deadline on when teachers must notify the district of plans to resign or retire. Consequently, by the time principals have the opportunity to interview new candidates, many of them are dissatisfied with the available applicants—with the notable exception of interns from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst’s Teach 180 program.

Additionally, a Massachusetts law requiring that teachers be laid off in order of reverse-seniority instead of by their skill further impedes the district’s attempts to build a strong corps of teachers.

### Primary recommendations for Springfield Public Schools

1. Require teachers who lose their assignment to interview and pursue a new assignment, eliminating any “forced placements.”
2. Give displaced teachers two hiring cycles to secure a new assignment, at which point the district is no longer contractually obligated to find a placement.
3. Improve the overall caliber of teacher prospects by addressing inefficiencies in the current timeline for assigning teachers to schools.
4. Improve assistance provided to principals by better screening applicants. Train principals in effective hiring and interview practices.
5. Collect better data on what recruitment strategies work and where lie the best sources of new teachers.

### Primary recommendations for Massachusetts

1. Make it legally permissible for districts to dismiss displaced teachers who are unable to secure a new assignment after two hiring cycles.
2. Allow performance to be used as a factor in determining which teachers will be laid off.



## 2. Evaluation

Springfield is presently developing a new evaluation system, complying with new Massachusetts regulations aimed at strengthening teacher evaluation. Springfield's evaluation policies have been long overdue for reform. Not all teachers were required to be evaluated annually and of those that did receive evaluations, less than 1 percent (0.6 percent) received below passing marks. The evaluations also failed to factor in the most important measure of teachers' effectiveness: their impact on student learning.

New state regulations will help ensure that teachers receive more frequent feedback—though formal annual evaluations are still not required—and that student outcomes are incorporated in assessments of teachers. In some areas, the district could go further than what the state has proposed. Some of our recommendations tackle important objectives left unspecified by the new regulations.

### Primary recommendations for Springfield Public Schools

1. Using multiple measures, make student performance the preponderant criterion on which teachers are evaluated.

### Primary recommendations for Massachusetts

1. Make student achievement the preponderant criteria of the Massachusetts evaluation system instead of allowing districts to weigh all criteria equally.
2. Require that every teacher receive a summative evaluation every year, as opposed to every other year.
3. Make it a legally permissible reason to dismiss a teacher who has been repeatedly rated as ineffective.

## 3. Tenure

In accordance with Massachusetts law, Springfield teachers are granted tenure after three years of teaching. 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 which last year rated 99.4 percent of Springfield's teachers as satisfactory or above.

### Primary recommendations for Springfield Public Schools

1. Make performance, including student data, the primary factor on which to base the tenure decision.
2. Reward teachers who earn tenure with the most significant pay increase of their teaching career.
3. Use multiple strategies to support new, non-tenured teachers beyond traditional mentoring programs which are often of highly uneven quality. Strategies to consider are frequent observations and feedback from content experts, release time to observe master teachers, and digitally recording teachers for review and discussion with a master teacher.

### Primary recommendations for Massachusetts

1. To increase the reliability of the data that needs to be considered, extend teachers' probationary period from three years to four. Alternatively, give principals the right to delay the tenure decision a year.

## 4. Compensation

Springfield's struggle to offer a competitive salary proves problematic when it comes to recruiting and retaining high quality teachers. Salaries and lifetime earnings are lower in Springfield than in surrounding districts, starting at \$37,370 for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and \$39,643 for a teacher with a master's.

To Springfield's credit, the district has made a positive step away from basing compensation on teachers earning course credits, eliminating some intermediate pay grades such as "Master's degree plus 15 credits." Regardless, Springfield presently spends over \$7 million on awarding higher salaries to teachers who have taken advanced coursework. While this is less, proportionally, than many other districts, it is money that could be easily diverted towards rewarding high-performing teachers and making the base salary more competitive.

### Primary recommendations for Springfield Public Schools

1. 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.
2. Eliminate any salary increases associated with earning credits.
3. Restructure the salary schedule so that teachers can reach their peak salary much earlier in their career, as other professions do, thereby increasing Springfield teachers' lifetime earnings.

## 5. Work Schedule

Commendably, Springfield's contract provides its teachers with time to plan and work collaboratively. Collaborative efforts between the district and union have also helped cultivate leadership among teachers through a modest career ladder. Springfield teachers have a relatively short work day at 7 hours and 15 minutes, 13 minutes shorter than the national average—though their school year is four days longer than most other districts, 190 versus an average of 186. Springfield's teachers have fewer non-student work days than in many districts, and are often absent to attend professional development.

Springfield's leave package is overly generous, effectively 19.5 days a year. The absentee rate in the 2009-2010 school year was quite high, with teachers absent an average of 15 days. That rate translates into approximately one day every 2.5 weeks.

### Primary recommendations for Springfield Public Schools

1. As the profession now demands, require teachers to work an 8-hour day on-site.
2. Factor teacher attendance into the new teacher evaluation.
3. Teachers working in schools with low attendance should notify a school level administrator, not the automated substitute system, of an absence.
4. Professional development should be scheduled when school is not in session and is distributed throughout the year.



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 lobby in the Massachusetts state legislature. We do not dwell much on the problems stemming from the culture of the district even though culture defining expectations and roles of teachers may in fact be more important than any written policy, contract provision or law.

However, as we have found elsewhere, professional practices often become embedded in written policy. The first signal that a district or state intends to do things differently is to change policies. Policies matter. But good policies require a sustained commitment to a new culture of practice, not just from the superintendent and union leadership, but also from school leaders and educators in the classroom.

**This full report is available online at  
[www.nctq.org/p/publications/nctq\\_springfield.pdf](http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/nctq_springfield.pdf)**



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*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.*

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