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Action Learning Project - Summary
Minnesota Principals Academy - University of Minnesota
June 13, 2017

Retaining High Performing Teachers in an Urban Charter School

The purpose of the action learning project was to begin to develop a system and culture to support and retain high performing teachers at Twin Cities Academy, a secondary urban charter school in St. Paul, MN. Charter schools inherently are less competitive with salaries in comparison to larger urban traditional schools. Twin Cities Academy is a fast growing school, which doubled its enrollment in five years, and significantly increased students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (from 25% to 50%) and students of color (40% to 70%) in the same time frame. As referenced in the literature used for this project, teacher retention rates at schools with over 35% or more students of color and 50% or more students qualifying for free and reduced lunch are generally much lower than schools that do not meet this criteria.

Over the past five years the teacher retention rate has dropped consistently year after year, with the overall teacher retention rate in the spring of 2016 at its lowest point of only 54%. The administration determined that a full review of teacher pay and teacher culture was needed to determine how to properly support and retain high performing teachers. It should be noted that as an at-will (non-union) employer, Twin Cities Academy does not retain under performing teachers.

Upon a review of the literature on teacher retention, the three most common causes cited by teachers who left schools are: 1) pay, 2) working conditions primarily related to school safety and student discipline, and 3) relationship with the lead school administrator related to professional and personal support and resources. Based on these researched factors, the project began with a full review of the current teacher salary schedule, and in 2016 the school board adopted a salary schedule that rewarded high performing and highly educated teachers. An additional amount (between \$5,000 to \$7,000) was added to the base salary for teachers performing in the exemplary range for two consecutive years as determined by the administrative formal observation rubric, and for teachers with a Master's in a content area added to their license. The project continued with an implementation of a new disciplinary system, in an effort to ensure higher levels of school safety and student behavior. Lastly, the administration made significant efforts to ensure that teachers had both professional support and resources, as well as opportunities to have regular access to and support by the principal both personally and professionally through regular informal meetings and "check ins" throughout the year.

Results:

In regards to pay, there was very little change in attitudes in regards to the new salary structure. The teacher survey question related to teacher's feelings about their current salary indicated a 72% favorable rate in 2016 prior to the new performance-based salary schedule implementation, versus 69% favorable rating about their current salary in the spring of 2017, after the new schedule was implemented .

The implementation of the new discipline system equally had very little impact to the favorability results in the teacher survey. Both in 2016 and 2017 72% of teachers responded favorably to the question that the school had an "effective student discipline system." However, there were several unusual factors during the 2016-2017 school year related to student behavior, combined with the fact that it was the first implementation year of the new system, both which may have skewed the overall favorability rating as a true comparison from the prior year.

The most significant factor impacting teacher culture and consequently retention, appears to be related to professional support and trust of administration. In 2016 82% of teachers indicated they had adequate resources and support to do their jobs, whereas in 2017 94% reported favorably. Additionally 82% of teachers in 2017 felt they were valued by administration for their "positive contributions" in the school, up from 75% in 2016. Additional measures of favorable relationships between teachers and administration were indicated through anecdotal interviews conducted by lead teachers with their peers and by administration with teachers, which indicated that 94% of teachers in 2017 felt that administration was highly supportive, transparent and trustworthy, up from 72% in 2016.

Overall teacher retention for 2017 is 94% up from 54% in 2016 and an average of 76% in the last five years.

Implications for Practice

Based on this limited study, it appears that relationships with administration are a key factor to high performing teacher retention. However, student discipline and safety were continually cited as the most concerning factor for teachers overall in the spring of 2017, and although 82% believed that the school was moving in the right direction based on a separate survey related to the new discipline system, 96% of teachers also indicated strongly that things needed to improve in this area during their one to one interviews.

It is imperative that Twin Cities Academy administration continue to improve student culture and safety in conjunction with maintaining positive administrative to teacher relationships. In regards to pay, it appears this is a lesser factor at this time, provided the salary system remains competitive to other charter schools.

