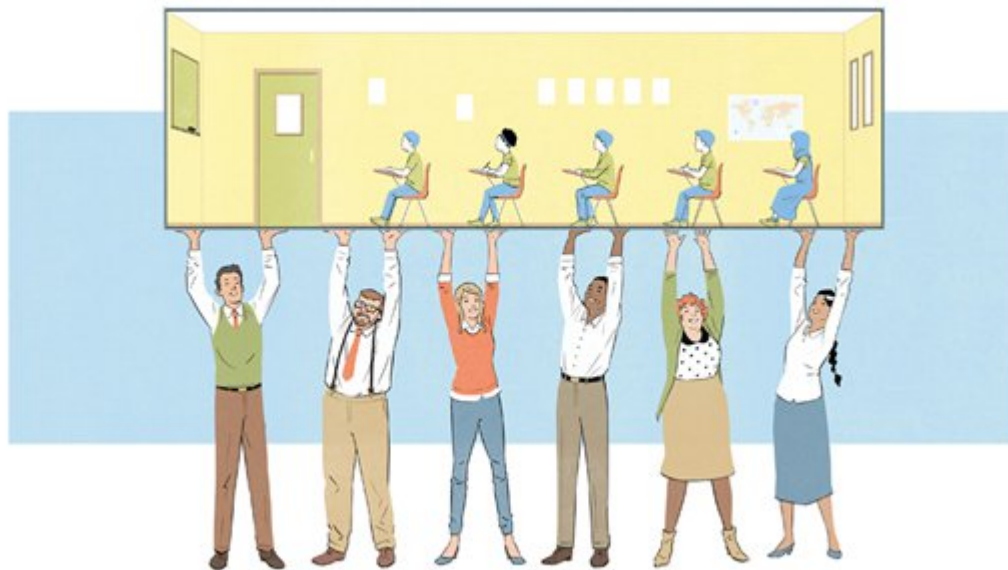


# What Makes Teachers Thrive?



—Jori Bolton for Education Week

## Focus on schools, not individual teachers

By Susan Moore Johnson

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Last summer RAND and American Institutes for Research evaluators stunned educators by reporting on the failure of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's six-year, \$575 million **experiment to improve student achievement**, particularly for low-income minority students.

This initiative included three large, urban school districts and four charter management organizations. They had all agreed to recruit, reward, and retain effective teachers, while rejecting, dissuading, and dismissing ineffective ones. Over time, they expected to build a "better" teaching force by replacing weak teachers with strong ones and thus improve outcomes for students. Researchers reported that, despite conscientious efforts to implement the program's components, there were no appreciable increases in either student test scores or graduation rates—the goals of this initiative.



In many ways, this report was the denouement of a gradual but steady decline in confidence about the use of financial bonuses, evaluations, value-added assessments, and accelerated dismissals to improve schools. After two decades of endeavors by many of the nation's districts and schools to use these levers for improvement, urban school performance has not substantially improved and scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have flatlined.

Could it be that the economists got it wrong, that teachers are not as important as scholars thought? Of course not.

The problem was not that the Gates strategy focused on teachers, but that it ignored the schools where those teachers worked. In 1998, when my colleagues and I first began studying new teachers, we found that their **school was the most important factor** in determining whether they experienced a "sense of success" in their work and planned to stay in teaching.

Since then, we have found that working in an effectively organized school is what matters—and not only to new teachers. All teachers benefit when schools offer collegial interactions, opportunities for growth, appropriate assignments, adequate resources, and schoolwide structures to support student learning.

Moreover, in the schools that teachers assess favorably as work environments, **students show greater growth** than in demographically similar schools that receive low ratings from teachers. Policymakers seemed to forget that students move through schools and that they depend on their school to provide a coherent learning experience from class to class and grade to grade.

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When a school isolates teachers and persists in distinguishing degrees of success and failure among them, rather than developing everyone's performance, students are subject to the luck of the draw. Those who get the "best" teachers flourish, while others often become bored and disengaged. In contrast, a well-organized school augments the skills, knowledge, and contributions of everyone for the benefit of all.

How does this dynamic play out in schools where both teachers and students succeed?

We recently **studied six successful schools**—three district and three charter—serving high-poverty, high-minority communities within one large city. Notably, all six were well regarded publicly and had achieved the state's highest accountability rating, based on student growth and success in closing achievement gaps.

Although these schools differed substantially, each had developed systems for key aspects of their work: hiring teachers, organizing collaborative teams, choosing curriculum, planning instruction, conducting supervision and evaluation, ensuring order and discipline, and assessing students' progress and needs for support.

Unlike many other schools that we have studied in the past, decisions in these six were not left to individual teachers. Instead, administrators and teachers jointly developed and refined approaches that everyone understood and used. These were not top-down mandates with superficial buy-in by teachers. They were social systems that the school's educators had chosen, implemented, and adapted to meet their needs. It took the people to make them work, and they worked well because of the people.

For example, many principals continue to hire teachers based on a single interview, but these schools all engaged current teachers in selecting new colleagues. Hiring was an intensive, multistep process that included ambitious recruitment, careful screening, a school visit to meet with administrators and current teachers, and a teaching demonstration with feedback.

The school's educators wanted to know if a candidate embraced their mission, accepted the school's practices, were committed to improving their instruction, demonstrated teaching skills, were receptive to constructive criticism, and believed that their students could succeed. Because candidates were hired based on their strength and promise, they began work confident of their peers' support and acceptance.

Teachers also collaborated closely with colleagues. In five of the exemplary schools we studied, teachers used common planning time to meet, choose curriculum, create and refine unit and lesson plans, and compare group assessments in order to gauge the effectiveness of their instruction. Teams also reviewed the progress of individual students and their cohort, responding with tailored interventions, supports, and initiatives. Scheduled team time was inviolable, not to be interrupted or appropriated by others. Teams had a clear purpose and explicit goals, which the teachers participated in setting. During meetings, they could speak candidly and take risks as they learned and worked together.

Like other researchers, we found that teachers are inclined to rate their schools positively when they **participate as partners and leaders of change**. When principals are inclusive and **teachers have responsibility** for choosing their school's practices, they also invest personally in developing and refining them. However, when principals treat teachers instrumentally, making them objects rather than agents of change, teachers are likely to object overtly or resist covertly by closing their classroom door and proceeding as usual.

One teacher at a successful turnaround school we studied had worked with others to create a system for teacher teams. Later, at a professional-development session, a consultant asked the teams, "What's holding this thing together?" He recalled his team's response: "You know what? We hold this place together. We're the total package. We put in a lot of work and a lot of time and a lot of effort and energy. We want the kids to do well ... and that's why this place is successful."

As school leaders begin the new year, they would do well to consider whether they are making the best of their school's most powerful resource for improvement—their teachers.

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