EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 19, 2009
Published in Print: October 21, 2009

Incentives Alone Not Enough to Prod Teacher Effectiveness

Once a frustrated teacher, Anne Patrick moved to a new school, where she found supportive administrators and became a 'wild idealist.' —Andy McMillan for Education Week

By Stephen Sawchuk

Policy experts are renewing questions about the role of school culture and leadership in the drive to improve teaching effectiveness in the most-challenging school environments.

As states and districts increasingly explore tactics like performance-based pay, incentive programs, and bonuses to attract the best teachers to troubled schools, experts contend that such programs are unlikely to succeed over the long haul unless officials simultaneously work to improve school conditions and leadership capacity in those schools.

"Within a few years, an idealistic teacher moving to one of these schools could become disheartened" if underlying problems with school culture aren't addressed, said Tom Carroll, the president of the

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National Council on Teaching and America's Future, or NCTAF, a Washington-based group that advocates changes in the structure of the teaching profession. "You're simply asking an individual to do more than is humanly possible."

New polling data **published for the first time** in this issue of *Education Week* give credence to that view. The survey suggests two out of five of the nation's K-12 teachers are "disheartened" with the profession. Of those who reported being frustrated with teaching, unsupported by administrators, overburdened by their students, or stifled in their careers, more than half were teaching in schools that served poor children.

"We don't know what causes a teacher to be disheartened—whether it's an attitude or the working conditions," said Jon Rochkind, the director of research for Public Agenda, one of the partners on the survey. "A dialogue needs to be held that not only addresses the goals of reform, but what teachers' needs are now."

The New York City-based research and public-engagement organization, conducted the research in conjunction with Learning Point Associates, a research and consulting group based in Naperville, Ill.

Experts reviewing the survey data pointed to the responses as a sign that leadership and school culture should be weighed as part of the intensifying national conversation about teacher effectiveness.

Lacking Leadership

Analysts for the survey project grouped the nationally representative poll of 890 teachers into three main categories, based on their response patterns and demographic characteristics: "Disheartened," "Contented," and "Idealists." (**"State of Mind,"** this issue.)

Fifty-four percent of disheartened teachers were found in schools where more than half the students qualified for federal school meal programs, compared with only 18 percent who taught in upper-income schools.

Perhaps the poll's most striking findings concern the conditions under which the disheartened teach. Disheartened teachers, who made up 40 percent of the survey respondents, were more likely than those in other groups to say that students with behavior problems were disruptive, that too much testing was a major disadvantage, and that smaller classes would improve their effectiveness.

Crucially, say teachers and scholars, disheartened teachers were also much less likely than idealist or contented teachers to say that they felt supported by their principals, or that their principals made decisions that improved the quality of their schools. Just 32 percent of disheartened teachers, for instance, rated their principals as "excellent" or "good" at providing useful instructional feedback, compared with 78 percent of idealists and 79 percent of the contented.

By any definition, Anne Patrick, a teacher of primarily low-income children in Catawba County, N.C., was once a disheartened teacher.

The 1st grade educator had seen a revolving door of school leaders, attended endless meetings, and received virtually no feedback on her teaching. Then, this past summer, she was subjected to the

emotionally draining process of being forcibly transferred to a different school in the 17,000-student district. Her first meeting with her new principal didn't start promisingly, she recounts.

"He said, 'I'm going to be honest with you. The building is terrible, your classroom is going to be old—it's an interior one with no windows,' " she recalled.

But then came something she hadn't ever heard before. She said he went on to say: "But it's not about the building, Anne, it's about the people. And I have wonderful people here."

True to his word, her new principal and his assistant have visited her classroom several times for formal and informal observations. They have reduced the burden of district-mandated programs. Teaching feedback is provided on time.

"They're really smart guys; they're willing to go the extra mile for their teachers to make their teachers better, which is really what an administrator's job is," Ms. Patrick said. "I went from discouraged to an optimistic, crazily enthusiastic, wild idealist."

Obstacles Remain

The study seems to suggest that more than two-thirds of disheartened teachers want to stay in the profession and could be teachers who, like Ms. Patrick, could feel revitalized with the right supports.

And 66 percent of those teachers, despite tough circumstances, felt that teachers could lead all students to learn, even those from poor families.

"I would have guessed that the disheartened ones would have different views about that, so the fact that the majority felt that what they did was hugely important to student achievement is very, very good news," said Kati Haycock, the president of the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that works for better teaching in poor schools.

"You can have a terrific teacher with great results for kids, but horrified by the teaching around her," Ms. Haycock said. "It's a reminder that people with really high standards for themselves could be disheartened for very legitimate reasons."

Still, the poll results don't provide insights into individual respondents, making it difficult to determine whether some disheartened teachers are chronically ineffective and unlikely to improve even with support.

Nor do the results indicate whether poor school working conditions or other factors, such as low expectations, influence—or change—teachers' attitudes toward their students. Debates over that issue are at the heart of national arguments about school and teacher accountability.

Emerging evidence suggests, though, that peers could play an important part in improving teacher effectiveness. (**"Effective Teachers Found to Improve Peers' Performance,"** Sept. 16, 2009.)

And while changing policies such as unequal funding formulas and testing mandates generally requires state legislative action, working conditions like professional collaboration can be addressed at the district and school levels, say teacher experts.

"A lot of those conditions, the teachers and the principals have under their control to fix if they work together collaboratively to create a strong, coherent culture," Mr. Carroll of NCTAF said. "It's not that a low-income school is inherently a tough place to work."

One policy idea that has gained much support among professional-development associations and scholars who study teacher training is that professional development led by peers appears to be more effective than workshops. And the Public Agenda findings appear to suggest that disheartened teachers want to take on additional roles in their schools. They were more likely than teachers in the other categories to say that a drawback of the profession is insufficient room to grow.

Districts have reintroduced the concept of "career ladders" to give teachers more professional opportunities, but in some cases they suffer from the same problem that has made reforms to teacher-evaluation systems difficult: a lack of consensus on how to make finely tuned, fair distinctions about teacher performance and to identify which teachers should assume "master" or "lead" roles. In other cases, they are career ladders in name only, in which master teachers are drafted into administrative duties or not given enough release time to engage in research, community action, or professional development of other teachers, said Barnett Berry, the president of the Cary, N.C.-based Center for Teaching Quality.

"Too often, educators have master-teacher status, but all they are dressed up and have no good place to go," he said. "There are few strong mechanisms for strong teachers to spread expertise."

*Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at **www.joycefdn.org/programs/education**.*

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