Response: 'Teachers Don't Leave High-Poverty Urban Districts; They Are Exiled'

By Larry Ferlazzo on May 9, 2015 5:33 PM

(This post is Part One of a two-part series)

This week's question is:

Why do teachers avoid, or leave, high poverty urban public schools and what can be done to improve the situation?

This is actually a "repeat" question -- you can see a **three-part series** from last year on this same topic. But, since the issue of teacher attrition is such a huge issue, and one that's been **in the news recently**, I thought it was worth another look.

Today's responses are contributed by educators Pia LIndquist Wong, Rufus Thompson, Gail L. Thompson, Yvette Jackson, Veronica McDermott, Karen Baptiste, Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Cynthia L. Uline, and Lynne G. Perez.

You can also listen to a ten-minute conversation I had with Pia, Yvette and Karen on **my BAM! Radio Show**. In addition, you might want to check out previous shows that have covered the same topic -- one with **Angel Cintron and Paul Bruno** and the other with **Barnett Berry and Ilana Garon**.

Response From Pia Lindquist Wong

Pia Lindquist Wong, Ph.D., is the chair of the Department of Teaching Credentials at Sacramento State University. She has been involved in urban teacher preparation since 1990, in a range of urban contexts including the Bay Area, São Paulo, Brazil and Sacramento:

Teachers avoid or leave high poverty urban schools because:

- *These schools are often severely under-resourced, especially in the "resources" that matter like effective leadership, collaborative and productive teams of smart- and hard-working teachers in it for the long haul, appropriate materials (especially when so many materials are mass-produced and created for a more White and affluent context), adequate, flexible and responsive programming (from courses offered to enrichment programs to supplemental/remedial programs). They often exist in highly politicized urban districts where decision-making is fractious and policy-makers prioritize other goals above the intellectual, social and emotional needs of students. In this setting, most teachers will work hard just to survive; they will quickly leave for places where they have a higher likelihood of thriving.*
- *Teachers in urban schools daily encounter students who are under-prepared, students who appear to be uninterested in their own development and future, contentious relationships between school personnel and families/community members, etc. Having neither a nuanced understanding of the historical and political factors that produced "a" above, nor a deep appreciation of identity formation, multiculturalism and diversity, teachers can easily frame these serious issues as the result of individual deficits and defects, shaped by family dysfunctions rather than as expressions of the basic inequities, inequalities and power dynamics of a post-industrial, capitalist economy. With these assumptions in play, many teachers in high poverty urban schools struggle to develop relationships with their students and to respect, understand, empathize with and/or believe in them. When these connections are not present, teachers will seek them elsewhere.*

What to do (top three ideas):

- *Work on the pipeline of new teachers: create robust, articulated pathways between urban schools (middle and high schools especially) and undergraduate and teacher preparation programs. These sectors need to be in continual dialogue so that they are mutually supporting. We need more graduates of urban schools - from all cultural and language groups - returning to teach in them. For those unfamiliar with urban realities, we need to offer extensive, varied, and well-guided/well-structured experiences in urban schools so that they feel comfortable in these settings and so that they can develop a more sophisticated understanding of their complexities and how to operate successfully within them.*
- *Work on the realities in urban schools: Pressure school boards and district staff to:*

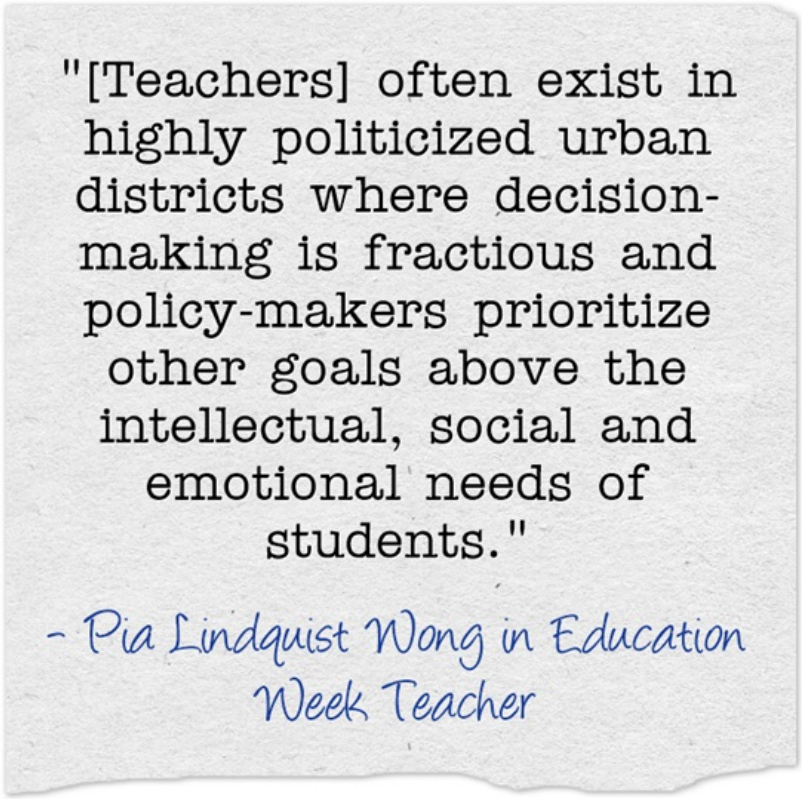
    1. Make personnel decisions that recognize schools as communities and ecological systems where each member and his/her assets must be tailored to the needs of each site and the other members of that community.

    2. Give teams of educators the appropriate resources to support successful collaboration, effective innovation and investments of professional time, energy and expertise geared towards on-going student success (coming to school, staying in school, being engaged in school activities, taking challenging courses, earning respectable grades).

    3. Select programs wisely, implement them carefully, measure them using appropriate metrics and timelines, and study them to see

it they are working. Stay the course if something is successful, study it so the reasons for its success can be replicated.

- *Advocate for broad based partnerships that bring educational resources together with the other resources/conditions needed for healthy youth development - physical and mental health care, stable housing, safe/non-violent communities, and workforce/internship experiences.*



Response From Rufus Thompson & Gail L. Thompson

Rufus Thompson, education consultant and owner of **Techguyinabox.com**, and **Gail L. Thompson, Ph.D.**, Wells Fargo Endowed Professor of Education, Fayetteville State University. The Thompsons' book for beginning teachers, ***Yes, You Can! Advice for Teachers Who Want a Great Start and a Great Finish With Their Students of Color***, was recently published by Corwin:

There are two main reasons why teachers avoid or leave urban and high-poverty public schools. First, although they have high hopes and are optimistic when they enter the teaching profession, many teachers quickly become overwhelmed by the realities they face. Second, many teacher training programs fail to adequately prepare teachers in key areas that would, undoubtedly, improve their teaching experiences. Results from the recently published "Teacher Confidence Study" (TC Study), offer clues about these specific areas.

In the TC Study, which we described in "Yes, You Can! Advice for Teachers Who Want a Great Start and a Great Finish With Their Students of Color," 293 K-12 teachers rated their levels of confidence about numerous teaching-related topics. The five areas where teachers were most likely to lack confidence pertained to (1) students' race, (2) students' academic skills, (3) parents' race, (4) parents' language skills, and (5) classroom management.

In terms of race, teachers were less likely to state that they were "very confident" about their ability to effectively teach African American students, especially African American males, than any other racial or ethnic group of students. Similarly, they were less likely to feel "very confident" about working with African American parents than any other racial or ethnic group of parents, but when race was excluded, English Language Learner (ELL) parents constituted the group with whom teachers were least confident about working. Furthermore, only 40% of the teachers stated that they were "very confident" about working with students who have poor math skills, only 36% rated themselves as "very confident" about working effectively with struggling readers, and only 43% rated themselves as being "very confident" about their classroom management skills.

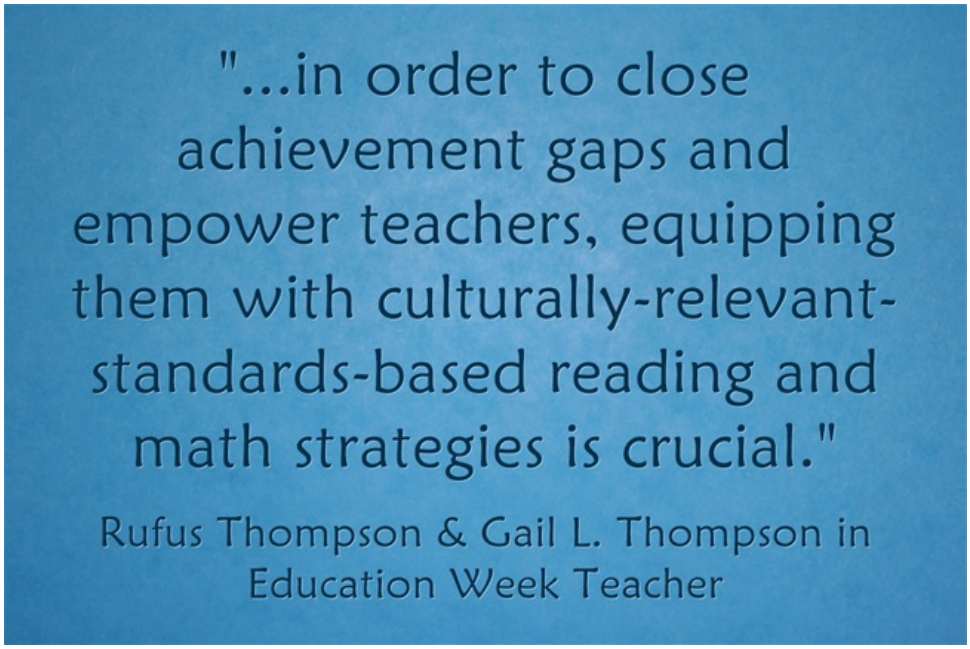
These results suggest that teacher preparation programs and professional development providers can boost teachers' confidence, and consequently, their teaching efficacy, by targeting these areas. In the current high-stakes testing and standards-focused era, "race" and the educational needs of historically under-served students, such as African Americans, Latinos, and low-income students are often minimized or

ignored through a "one-size fits all" curriculum model. Nevertheless, for decades, researchers have emphasized that a culturally relevant curriculum is necessary and can benefit all students, including Whites. Therefore, today, in order to close achievement gaps and empower teachers, equipping them with culturally-relevant-standards-based reading and math strategies is crucial.

Teachers also need specific training in strengthening their relations with parents, especially African American and ELL parents. In terms of communicating with ELL parents, teachers can learn to use translators, online translation programs, and learn basic words and phrases in the parents' language. However, improving their relations with African American parents and also African American students will require (1) a fundamental mindset change for teachers that results in an examination and eradication of negative stereotypes, (2) the realization that most African American parents and their children value a good education, and (3) a commitment to treat these parents and students as respectfully and with the same high expectations that they have for White middle-class students.

Finally, teachers need classroom management strategies that will enable them to develop strong, positive relationships with students; learn the differences between major versus minor misbehavior; respond appropriately to student disrespect, disruptions, apathy, and failure to follow class rules; explore other discipline options besides sending students to the office; and most important, to create a classroom management plan that allows teachers to spend the majority of class time on instruction.

When individuals who train prospective teachers and professional development providers devote more time to equipping teachers with strong classroom management skills and additional information, skills, and strategies that will help them work more effectively with the students of color who are most likely to underachieve and be labeled as "discipline problems," with students who struggle with reading and/or math, and with African American and ELL parents, undoubtedly, fewer teachers will avoid or leave urban and low-income public schools.



Response From Yvette Jackson & Veronica McDermott

Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott are co-authors of ***Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban Schools Through Fearless Leadership*** (ASCD, 2012). Currently, Jackson is CEO and McDermott is regional director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education:

Teachers don't leave high poverty urban districts; they are exiled, like many of their students. To be exiled means to be sent from your place of belonging. Teachers and students belong in school, reaping the reciprocal joy of discovery, the emotional high of building competence and confidence, the pleasure of pushing each other to the frontiers of their intelligence.

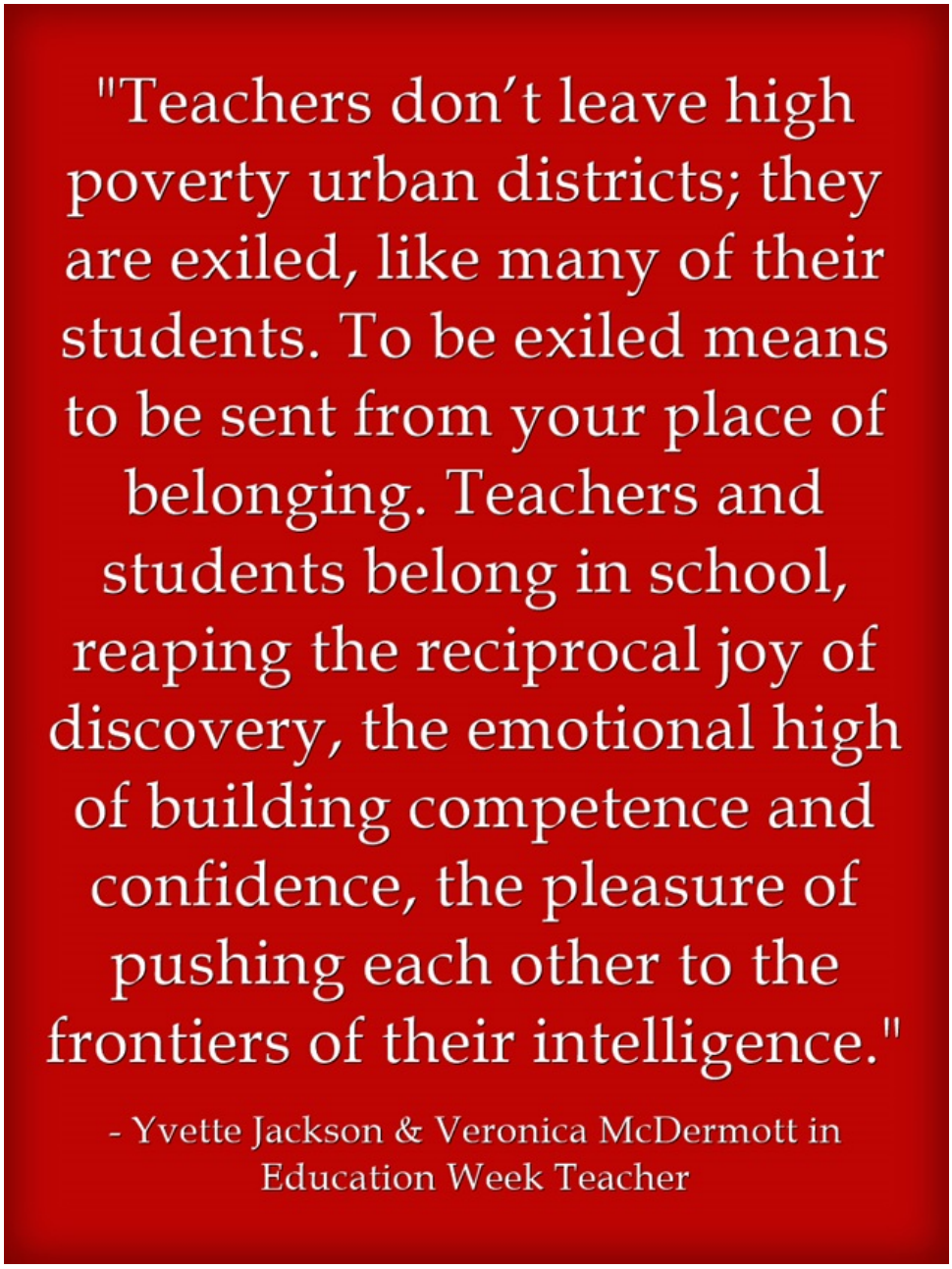
Teachers aspire to make a difference. Urban teachers are often systematically denied the stimulation, excitement and reward that comes from learning and teaching in a sanction free, monitor free, and stress free environment. The result: they leave in disappointed, disillusioned droves. Some cast these educational exiles as burned out, a term suggestive of personal failing. Instead, we believe they are burned by a system that has failed them - and their students. Every time an idealistic, enthusiastic, caring teacher flees the system for self-preservation, the system has committed another crime of squandered potential.

The crime of squandered potential can be eradicated. Fearless leadership helps.

Fearless leaders choose to be fearless. They work with others to mutually rekindle the passion that brought them to education in the first place, and to loudly and boldly rewrite with their students and families the delimiting and deficit-laden narrative that has been written about them. Like architects, they redesign the narrative and rebuild the spirit, highlighting the unseen innate intellectual potential and strengths of their students, teachers and communities.

Like a soul friend, who knows you better than yourself, they explain with clarity and precision the debilitating and soul shattering effects of poverty, constant stress, and an unrelenting litany of negativity. They speak out about policies that strip hope, optimism and opportunity from the learning experiences of students who are made to feel school dependent. Like muses, they deliberately, unabashedly and persistently support each other to set as their intention the foundational principles and motivating beliefs of the Pedagogy of Confidence®, the fearless expectation and support for all students to achieve high intellectual performance (HIP). Fearless leaders are ministers, or go betweens. They provide what is necessary for teachers to employ transformative High Operational Practices. These HOPs enable teachers to mediate from strengths, to affirm belief in the capacity of their students for high intellectual performance, and to develop skills for students to demonstrate high performance and achieve personal agency.

With affirming, inspiring, mediating leadership, schools co-create an oasis where students and teachers aim for HIP, employ consistent High Operational Practices, and live and learn in an environment of hope. HIP HOP HOPE- the antidote to being exiled.



Response From Karen Baptiste

Karen Baptiste is the Supervisor of Teacher Development for Broward County Public Schools in Florida. She is a class of 2013 **ASCD Emerging Leader**:

Once upon a time, we prepared scholars from K-12; we now prepare them from cradle to career. While some districts have embraced this evolution and provided adequate training and resources, others continue to argue their plight, resulting in high teacher turn-over and burn out rates.

There are five major reasons why teachers avoid, or leave high poverty urban public schools:

***1. Lack of social-emotional services:** There has been a significant increase in the suspension rates for African American and Hispanic males. Where are the restorative practices to break the vicious school to prison pipeline? Unfortunately, high poverty schools lack high-quality wraparound services in the form of medical care, mental health and nutrition - schools that offer these and other community services that address the whole child fare better.*

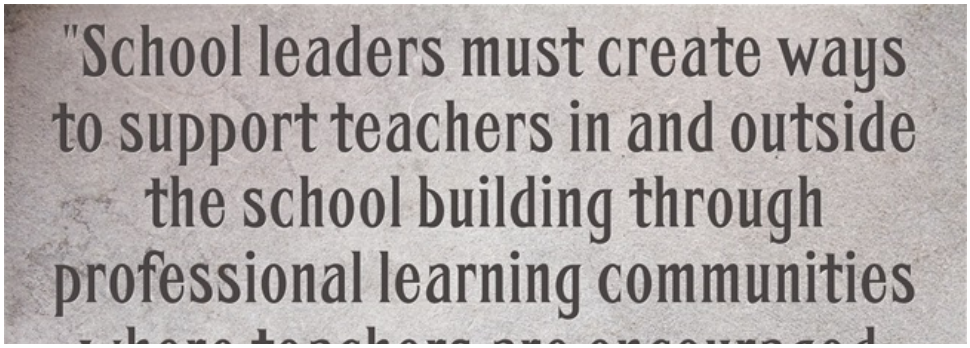
Some of the controversial policies that have been created, such as No Child Left Behind, still have residual effects of students being left behind more than ever. Over the last century, our country has failed to address federal policies that have manifested into deep seeded issues of institutionalized racism that has ultimately affected the advancement of Black and Latino males. For example, UCLA conducted a nationwide study that reported 24 percent of black males at the secondary school level were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year, at least once, compared to seven percent of white students. Another study in 2013 conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that scholars who were suspended in ninth grade lowered their chances of graduating by 20 percent.

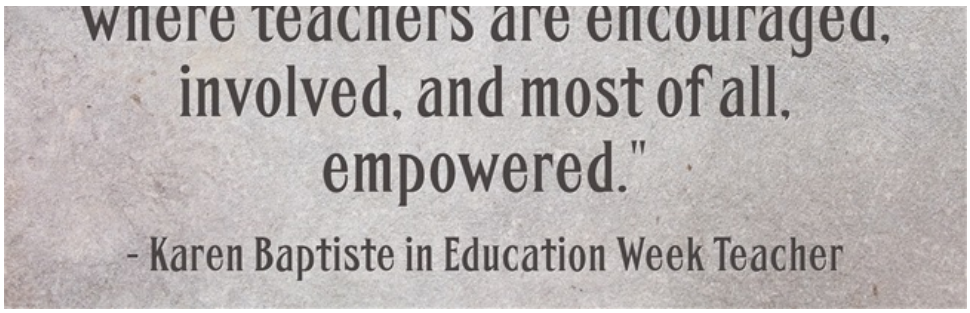
***2. Sparse resources:** With decades-old policy and practices in place, educators struggle with effectively implementing research-based, 21st century learning. Teachers in high poverty schools leave the profession because financial resources are dwindling as mandates and blame increase. Leaders have to be innovative, flexible, and implement a sustainable vision. We know that schools have to do more with less, and this can be done through partnerships with businesses, successful schools, and educational institutions; grant applications; and most importantly, creating a community of trust, respect and support.*

***3. Parental accountability:** The old adage, "It takes a village to raise a child" goes a long way, especially in struggling schools. Research shows that schools with high failure rates also have low parental involvement. Educators must find ways to account for parents' varying schedules - many of whom may hold multiple jobs - and meet with them to discuss their child's progress and how the parent can get involved in the learning and planning process. Some examples may be sending newsletters home in the parents' native language or having parent-led multicultural events.*

***4. Adequate professional learning:** In some schools and districts, professional learning has become a time for teachers to gather to hear announcements, grade papers, or discuss disruptive scholars. Professional learning should be sacred time set aside where educators come together to share best practices and receive training that is designed around adult-learning principles and differentiated to their needs where they receive ongoing follow-up.*

***5. Support for teachers:** The U.S. Department of Education reported that 40-60% of teachers don't feel appreciated. Although school leaders are under pressure to produce results, it's their obligation to encourage, build capacity and include teachers in the decision-making process. Teachers want to feel supported, heard, and provided with resources and training necessary to do the job. In failing schools, the blame is usually placed on teachers for not teaching enough, or not planning lessons that are rigorous enough. School leaders must create ways to support teachers in and outside the school building through professional learning communities where teachers are encouraged, involved, and most of all, empowered.*





Response From Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Cynthia L. Uline, and Lynne G. Perez

Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Cynthia L. Uline, and Lynne G. Perez direct the **National Center for Urban School Transformation** at San Diego State University. Their findings regarding teaching practices in high-performing urban schools are described in ***Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools: A Guide for Classroom and School Leaders*** :

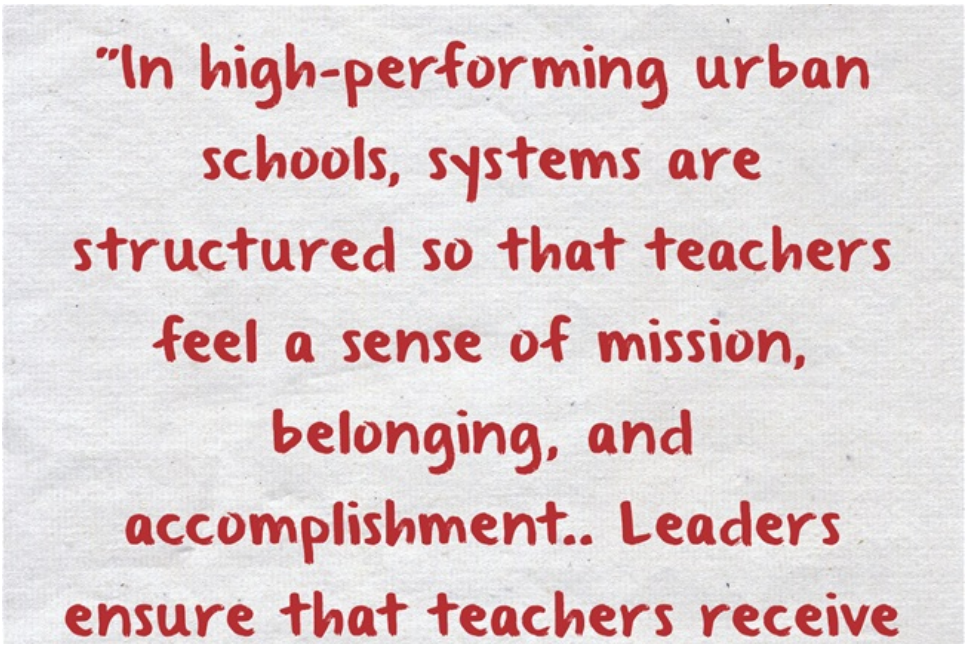
The National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has identified some (albeit few) high-achieving schools that serve low-income communities where teachers rarely leave. Often these impressive schools are in the same districts, with the same salary schedules, school board policies, crime rates, and other community challenges as schools with rapidly revolving personnel doors. So perhaps, the question, "Why do teachers leave high-poverty schools?" can best be answered by considering, "Why do teachers in some high-poverty schools choose to stay?"

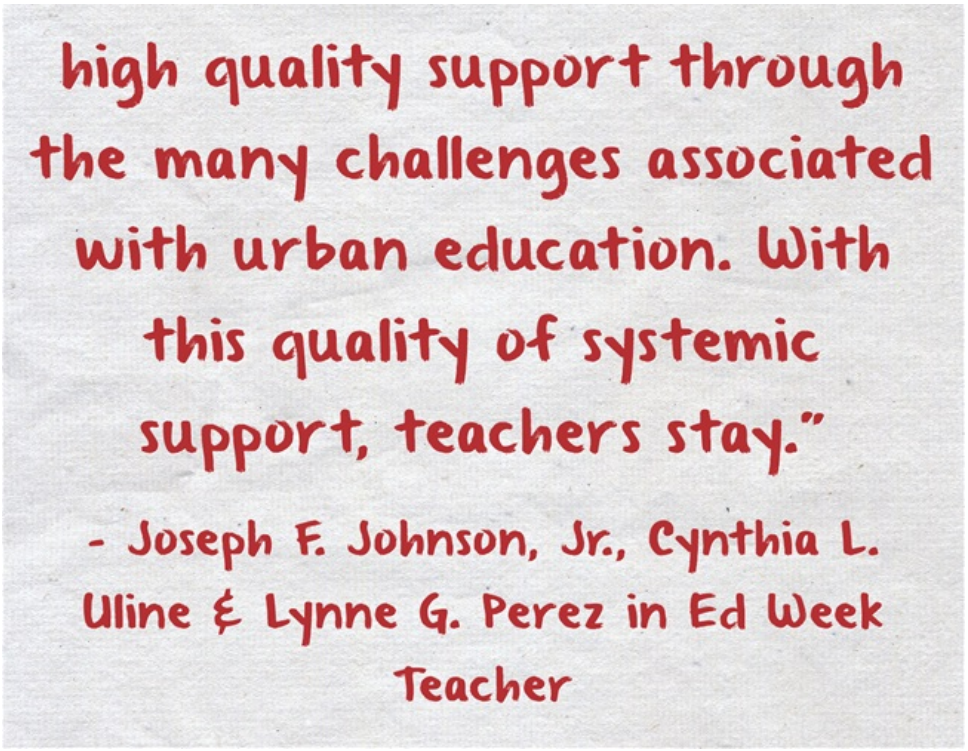
NCUST has found that teachers in high-performing urban schools share a sense of accomplishment. Regularly school leaders acknowledge and celebrate the large and small learning gains they help students achieve. In contrast, often in more typical schools, large and small gains go unnoticed. The only news is bad news, and teachers perceive little evidence that their substantial efforts make a difference.

Also, in high-performing urban schools, we've found a wonderful team spirit among educators. Teachers are less likely to feel like they are independent contractors who must struggle to survive on their own. Instead, they benefit from rich collaborations that help them plan, solve pedagogical problems, and learn from each other. Teacher turnover is low, in part, because teachers perceive that they are members of a powerful team that is likely to make a positive difference for students.

Relatedly, in high-performing urban schools, teachers feel like they have strong support from their administrators and colleagues. Even though leaders in these schools have high expectations for teachers, leaders also expect themselves to create a learning culture in which teachers believe they have a strong likelihood of success.

Paul Batalden, a Dartmouth professor, has said, "Every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets." In high-performing urban schools, systems are structured so that teachers feel a sense of mission, belonging, and accomplishment.. Leaders ensure that teachers receive high quality support through the many challenges associated with urban education. With this quality of systemic support, teachers stay. How can we help make sure that all urban schools are similarly designed to achieve high teacher retention rates?





Thanks to Pia, Rufus, Gail, Yvette, Veronica, Karen, Joseph, Cynthia, and Lynne for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post. I'll be including comments from readers in my next post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at **lferlazzo@epe.org**.When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at **@Larryferlazzo**.

Anyone whose question is selected for weekly column can choose one free book from a number of education publishers.

Just a reminder -- you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via **email** or **RSS Reader**.. And,if you missed any of the highlights from the first three years of blog, you can see a categorized list below. You won't see posts from school year in those compilations, but you can review those new ones by clicking on the monthly archives link on this blog's sidebar:

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Instructional Strategies

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Education Week has published a collection of posts from blog -- along with new material -- in an ebook form. It's titled ***Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching***.

Watch for the next "question-of-the-week" in a few days...

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