

Introduction

As current K-12 teachers working in a wide range of Boston Public Schools (innovation, exam, pilot and charter), our experiences give us a first-hand perspective on what factors contribute to a school’s success and the sustainability of that success. This brief shares our insights with the School Quality Working Group that is responsible for making recommendations about Boston Public Schools’ measures of school quality.

“Research demonstrates that the retention of effective teachers is a critical component of school and student success.”

While there are many factors that make schools attractive to students and families, the only indicators that should be used to rate school quality are those that have a direct impact on student achievement.

One key to student achievement – and a crucial part of maintaining the success of a school over time – is the employment and retention of highly effective teachers and school leaders. For this reason, we want to highlight the importance of a professional environment for teachers.

Professional environment – explained in detail below – would include teacher retention and the factors that research has shown to attract and retain effective educators, such as shared leadership and opportunities for professional growth and collaboration. Research demonstrates that the retention of effective teachers is a critical component of school and student success.ⁱ

Several other factors, such as student outcomes, culture and climate, and student opportunities, - most of which have been discussed by the School Quality Working Group’s School Quality metrics subcommittee - are also essential to identifying high-quality schools.

A Professional Environment for Teachers

The most powerful school-based predictor of student success is an effective teacher.ⁱⁱ Yet numerous studies show that half of teachers are leaving the profession just as they are reaching the point in their career where they are becoming more effective.ⁱⁱⁱ According to *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools*, a report published by TNTP, “When a top teacher leaves [an average school], only 1 in 6 potential replacements will be of similar quality...When a top teacher leaves [a low-performing school] only 1 in 11 potential replacements will be of similar quality.”^{iv}

When effective teachers leave a school, student achievement can suffer, and the schools that suffer most are the ones that are already lagging behind. A key study concluded, “Teacher turnover has a significant and negative effect on student achievement...Moreover, teacher turnover is particularly harmful to students in schools with large populations of low-performing and black students.”^v

Numerous studies, along with our own teaching experiences, have shown that highly effective teachers are more likely to stay at schools that offer a collaborative environment, opportunities for professional growth and – a factor that can make or break all aspects of a school’s functionality – strong leadership.

High attrition is often an indicator of a negative school environment and ineffective school leadership. It is a red flag that – if caught early enough – would allow attention and intervention to a school before student achievement drops so low that drastic measures are necessary to turn the school around.

A professional environment indicator is essential because high quality schools are staffed by highly effective teachers and school leaders, retain highly effective teachers and leaders from year to year, and provide teachers with opportunities to collaborate and develop their practice.

**TEACHER
TURNOVER**
has a **SIGNIFICANT &
NEGATIVE** effect on
student achievement – especially for
students in schools with large populations of
**low-performing &
black students.**

— Ronfeldt, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J.
(June 2011). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. NBER Working Paper No. 17176. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17176>.

Suggested Measures

Domain	Outcome	Indicator	Metric
Teaching & Learning	High retention of effective teachers	Percentage of teachers rated exemplary and proficient who return each year	Staffing data collected by district
Management & Organization	Effective school leadership	School leader rated as ‘proficient’ or ‘exemplary’	Educator Effectiveness rubric & staff rating of school leader on staff survey
Management & Organization	Opportunities for collaboration and shared leadership	Evidence of collaboration opportunities built into the school day, evidence of meaningful teacher leadership roles	

Student Outcomes

We recommend the inclusion of student achievement and growth in the measure of school quality. Although test scores may not be a comprehensive measure of all types of learning and desired outcomes of a high-quality education, assessments do provide a standardized, specific measure of core academic skills. High quality schools are closing the achievement gap and have a positive impact on student achievement across all subgroups.

We believe that student success is the number one priority of teachers and schools, and that students who are succeeding can demonstrate that learning on assessments. Often statements about academic achievement and test scores raise concerns about teaching to the test or uninspired drilling. In many of our classrooms and schools, we have seen that in reality, an education that prepares students for academic success through robust, authentic learning activities will be reflected in positive gains on standardized tests. In order to ensure rich learning opportunities, and assure that schools are not teaching to the test, we are also recommending a quality indicator that addresses curriculum and instruction.

As effective educators, we set high expectations for all our students – including English language learners and special education students – and work diligently to move our students towards high levels of achievement. In order to recognize the effort and progress of students who may start the year far below grade level, we believe that growth measures must also be included in the measure of academic achievement.

Culture and Climate

School culture is an important indicator of a high-quality school because we have seen that our students learn more when they feel safe, supported and believe they can succeed. A positive school culture generally includes the following:

- a welcoming environment for students and families;
- a focus on learning;
- a celebration of student successes;
- a high level of student engagement;
- a clear school mission;
- a high level of safety; and
- a positive and proactive approach to behavior management.

As teachers, we work diligently to establish a strong positive culture in our classrooms. We see our students push themselves when we build an environment of learning and achievement. A positive culture throughout the school truly benefits teachers, students, and their families. When students feel a strong sense of community and belonging at school, they are more likely to succeed. Developing a positive school culture requires thoughtful planning and consistent attention.

A positive school culture includes many varied opportunities for family participation. Students are recognized for their effort and successes, and students identify their school as supportive and positive. Students and family are also able to identify the mission of their school and describe structures that support and emphasize learning in their school. Students demonstrate a high level of engagement in all classes. Another element of a positive culture includes addressing and supporting student needs (e.g. access to social-emotional support). A high quality school demonstrates evidence of a strong positive culture.

Student Opportunities

Some of the key factors associated with student opportunities pertain to curriculum and instruction. A high quality school generally includes the following elements:

- access to resources,
- varied and rigorous course offerings,
- necessary student supports,
- appropriate curriculum materials, and
- evidence of differentiation of teaching for learners at different levels of proficiency.

High quality schools have access to and implement high quality curricula and learning opportunities for all students. We have experienced a range of available materials and supports at our different schools. High quality schools provide all students with varied learning opportunities. We have experienced schools that have restricted their course offerings to subjects covered by standardized tests. High quality schools place a real value on a rich offering of learning opportunities, including social studies, science, arts, and language. We would expect high quality high schools to offer opportunities that truly prepare students for college, such as AP courses and other college prep opportunities.

Conclusion

Measuring school quality in Boston will have numerous implications – from helping families find high quality schools that fit their needs to potentially driving school improvement as more data on schools is made public. School quality measures will also be critically important to effective teachers, who want to work at schools that prioritize student learning and a positive working environment.

Effective educators are at the center of high quality schools, and by including a professional environment domain in the measure of school quality, Boston will reinforce the fact that teachers are key to a school’s success. Measuring if a school has the kind of professional environment that attracts and retains high-quality educators will give crucial insight to the likelihood of a school’s continued success

Teachers have a unique and invaluable perspective on what really goes on in a school. Incorporating teacher voice and teachers’ recommendations is crucial for this work. As Boston teachers and Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows, we recognize the importance of this work to our careers and the young people of Boston, and we are eager to share our perspective and participate in this process. We look forward to continuing to work with the School Quality Working Group on this important project.

ⁱ Hanushek, Eric A., Kain, John F., Rivkin, Steven G. (August 1998) Teachers, School, and Academic Achievement. NBER Working Paper No. 6691. Retrieved from http://www.cgp.upenn.edu/pdf/Hanushek_NBER.PDF and TNTP. (2012). The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools. Brooklyn: TNTP.

ⁱⁱ Hanushek, Eric A., Kain, John F., Rivkin, Steven G. (August 1998) Teachers, School, and Academic Achievement. NBER Working Paper No. 6691.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ingersoll, R.M. (2007). CPRE Policy Briefs: Misdiagnosing the teacher quality problem. Philadelphia: Consortium on Policy Research in Education.

^{iv} TNTP. (2012). The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools. Brooklyn: TNTP.

^v Ronfeldt, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (June 2011). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. NBER Working Paper No. 17176. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17176>.

Teach Plus Greater Boston Teaching Policy Fellows, 2013-2014

Portia Botchway
Colleen Considine
Caroline Corcoran
Jayme Drzewinski
Mallory Hicks
Matthew Kazlauskas
Carline Kelly
Erin Lane
Karen Levin
Nick Lippman
Mardi Loeterman
Sean McAdam
Julian A. McNeil
Marlena Montenez
Brittany Morse
Michael Phaneuf
Amanda Schreckengaust*
Anita Sintes
Catherine Tighe
Rhiannon Varmette*
Marcus Walker
Christopher Wright

Lindsay Sobel, Executive Director, Teach Plus Greater Boston

* Denotes lead authors