

Making a Match: How Successful High-Poverty Schools Hire Teachers

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Abstract

Effective teacher hiring is fundamental to improving schools and yet few studies investigate this process. In this exploratory study of six successful, high-poverty schools (three charter, three district) in one Massachusetts city, we analyze the policy contexts that influenced hiring and examine the schools' hiring practices. Through interviews with 142 teachers and administrators, we learned that, despite significant differences, these schools' approaches were strikingly similar. Each used a two-way, information-rich hiring process that provided schools and candidates with opportunities to exchange information and assess one another before making an offer or signing a contract. Participants viewed their investment in hiring as an essential part of their school's success. Based on our findings, we provide recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

Keywords: teacher quality, hiring, implementation, principals, school improvement, high poverty schools

Introduction

In the early 2000s, economists determined that teachers are the most important school-level factor in students' learning (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). In response, policymakers and practitioners seized on a strategy of improving schools by improving teacher quality. Their reforms introduced a range of related initiatives intended to augment the human capital in schools and, in turn, increase students' learning.

Those initiatives focused intensively on urban schools serving low-income communities, where students most depend on their teachers (Downey, Hippel, & Broh, 2004). To attract the "best and brightest" into the field, some states reduced licensing requirements, perceived by many as barriers to entry, and created financial incentives to attract teachers in hard-to-staff subjects and schools. Meanwhile, many states and districts launched large-scale mentoring and induction supports for new teachers. Through its Race to the Top competition, federal policymakers incentivized states to adopt standards-based teacher evaluations that factored student test scores into teachers' ratings. These ratings then were expected to inform subsequent staffing decisions about teachers' assignment, re-employment, tenure, dismissal, and pay.

As these wide-ranging efforts to increase human capital unfolded, analysts also identified certain school district staffing policies that impeded progress. In a series of high-profile reports, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) argued that the centralized, bureaucratic staffing policies and practices of urban districts encumbered efforts to attract and hire first-rate teachers (Daly, Keeling, Grainger, & Grundies, 2008; Levin, Mulhern, & Schunck, 2005; Levin & Quinn, 2003). They called for accelerating hiring timetables so that urban districts could compete with their suburban counterparts for strong candidates (Levin & Quinn, 2003) and they urged curtailing senior teachers' contractual rights to claim positions of junior teachers (Levin et al., 2005).

TNTP also recommended that schools should be granted more influence in hiring through “mutual consent,” a process that empowers the principal and the teacher—not only district officials—to make hiring decisions (Daly et al., 2008).

Gradually, hiring that once was controlled solely by central administrators began to shift toward the schools (Engel, Cannata, & Curran, 2018). Liu’s 2002 survey of hiring in four states found that 77% of new teachers reported that some or all of the process through which they were hired was school-based (Liu, 2004). By 2012, Cannata and Engel found that 90% of principals nationally reported they had “extensive autonomy” to select teachers (p. 459). Meanwhile, some urban districts eliminated the right of senior teachers to “bump” junior teachers from their positions and thus ensured more stable staffing for schools. Such changes enhanced the odds that principals could hire the teachers they thought best fit their school’s needs.

Despite clear recommendations about the importance of granting schools more autonomy in hiring, few models exist for schools to consult as they exercise that right. Arguably, effective hiring is the first, essential step in all subsequent efforts to build human capital within schools, but with a few notable exceptions discussed below (Cannata et al., 2017; DeArmond, Gross, & Goldhaber, 2010; Engel & Curran, 2016; Jabbar, 2018), researchers have largely ignored how school-based hiring is enacted.

Instead, scholars have focused on the criteria principals use in choosing teachers (Cannata & Engel, 2012; Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, & Thompson, 2010; Rutledge, Harris, & Ingle, 2010); what teachers seek in schools (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Cannata, 2010; Engel, Jacob, & Curran, 2014; S. M. Johnson & Birkeland, 2003); the timing of hiring (Gross & DeArmond, 2010; Liu & S. M. Johnson, 2006; Papay & Kraft, 2016); and whether districts and schools utilize data to predict teacher efficacy (Cannata et al., 2017; Goldhaber, Cowan, &

Theobald, 2017; Goldring et al., 2015; Jacob, Rockoff, Taylor, Lindy, & Rosen, 2018; Rutledge, Harris, Thompson, & Ingle, 2008).

This scant attention to school-based hiring is apparent in RAND's 2018 evaluation of the ambitious Intensive Partnership for Effective Teaching, a \$575 million experiment by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Stecher et al., 2018). That intervention was designed to improve human capital in three public school districts and four charter management organizations (CMOs)—all viewed as “fertile soil” for implementing new reforms (p. 4). Using four levers of change, school officials were expected “to bring about dramatic gains in the achievement of low-income minority students by improving teacher workforces” (p. 2): (1) standardized test scores and Measures of Effective Teaching (Kane & Staiger, 2012) were to be used to assess teachers' effectiveness; (2) staffing decisions (recruitment and hiring, placement and transfer, tenure and dismissal) would then be based on those assessments; (3) teachers' professional development would be geared to their individual needs; and (4) new pay structures and career ladders would reward effective teachers. After 6 years of evaluating this intervention, however, RAND researchers found “no evidence of widespread positive impact on student outcomes” (p. xl).

There are various, related explanations for this stark finding. First, despite serious efforts to adopt the initiative, all its elements were not fully implemented (Stecher et al., 2018). Second, reformers focused on ways to improve the practice of individual teachers, but ignored shortcomings in the schools where those teachers worked (S. M. Johnson, 2019). Third, as the evaluators observe, the intervention “lack[ed] successful models on which sites could draw” in implementing the experiment's components (Stecher et al., 2018, p. 488). With regard to hiring—the focus of this study—the participating districts and CMOs took important steps by expanding their recruitment efforts, creating new local teacher preparation pipelines, accelerating

the hiring schedule, and increasing the principal’s authority to select teachers—all efforts both to enhance and decentralize hiring. However, principals continued to hire teachers much as they had before, often relying on a one-sided transaction in which they based job offers on a single interview. The Gates experiment may have successfully helped sites set the stage for school-based hiring, but it did not provide a new way to conduct that work. Given that all subsequent efforts to augment human capital in the schools rested on effective hiring, it is not surprising that the initiative fell short of its ambitious goals.

Here we focus on the opportunities and challenges of school-based hiring in six successful district and charter schools located in one Massachusetts city, each of which operated in a distinct policy context. Because these schools also differed markedly in academic programs, professional practices, and organizational cultures, we expected their hiring practices to vary widely as well. Instead, we found remarkable similarity in how they hired teachers.

Together, their priorities and practices further our understanding of how policy shapes what is possible in hiring as well as how effective school-based hiring works. In the sections that follow, we review key findings from the literature on hiring and introduce our conceptual framework. After presenting our research questions and methods, we report our findings. We conclude with the implications of this work for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars.

Literature Review

For decades, policies rooted in principles of efficiency and centralized management defined hiring and staffing systems (Levin et al., 2005). Steeped in the bureaucratic assumption that all schools are similar and all teachers are competent—what TNTP dub the “Widget Effect” (Weisberg et al., 2009)—hiring was seldom more than an employment transaction through which a district office hired an appropriately credentialed teacher. Hiring typically moved slowly

in large, urban districts for several reasons—the sheer scope of the task, engrained procedures, delays in municipal budget approvals, and the sequence of rule-based layoffs and transfers set forth in teachers’ contracts. These systems prevented both new and experienced teachers from finding positions that matched their knowledge, skills, and interests, and they made it difficult for schools to plan for instructional improvement (Engel et al., 2018; S. M. Johnson & PNGT, 2004). Consequently, teachers in urban schools frequently reported being dissatisfied with their jobs, and many left within a few years (Ingersoll, 2001; S. M. Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Simon & S. M. Johnson, 2015).

Although bureaucratic requirements were slow to change, schools, themselves, began to adopt distinctive missions and academic programs that called for teachers who could advance their goals. For example, in New York City, where this transformation proceeded at an unprecedented scale and pace, the district opened over 200 new, small, non-selective public high schools between 2002 and 2008—each with its own mission and theme (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). Concurrently, public charter schools burgeoned across the nation and their enrollment grew six-fold between 2000 and 2015. Such changes highlighted the needs of many schools for teachers with distinctive expertise and interests—needs that could not be met by centralized, standardized, and often sluggish, district staffing systems. These new demands fueled efforts to decentralize hiring in many districts by enacting mutual consent processes that allowed both the candidate and the school to participate in a hiring decision.

The Importance of Match

Research in both industry and education affirms the wisdom of a hiring process designed to achieve a good match between a new employee and the organization where she works (Chatman, 1989; Jacob, Rockoff, Taylor, Lindy, & Rosen, 2018; Kristof, 1996; Liu & S. M.

Johnson, 2006). Organizational studies find a positive correlation between person-organization or person-job “fit” and employees’ overall satisfaction, effectiveness, and plans to stay (Chatman, 1989; Kristof, 1996). Similarly, teachers who were hired through a process that provided a realistic preview of the job reported that they are more satisfied with their school than those who were not (Liu & S. M. Johnson, 2006; Loeb et al., 2012).

When a school’s hiring process conveys its distinctive “organizational identity” through hiring (Albert & Whetten, 1985)—its purpose, norms, and practices—both parties can explore whether a good “fit” might exist between them. A prospective teacher can assess whether the organization embodies her values and if the open position aligns with her skills and experiences. Simultaneously, an organization can select candidates who are committed to its mission, have the knowledge and skills to advance its initiatives, and are prepared to adopt the norms and practices of its staff. Credentials, such as degrees, licenses, and test scores might inform selection, but they complement other criteria, rather than serving as exclusive predictors of on-the-job performance. Harris et al. (2010) interviewed 30 Florida principals about their approaches to hiring and found that they sought to “mix and match” (p. 228) the teachers they hired with their current teachers, who differed in skill, experience, and demographics. They explained that their approach to hiring enabled them to form collaborative teams that were diverse and productive.

Several studies explore how schools that are granted hiring autonomy use it. DeArmond and colleagues (2010) studied 10 schools in a large, urban district that required them to use a common set of hiring procedures. Although they found wide support for the policy, they also found great disparities in how schools implemented the process. Some schools actively engaged, with the principal articulating a clear description of the kind of teacher they sought and others in the school endorsing that description. In schools where hiring was a passive process, a shifting

group of participants held vague priorities and implemented inconsistent approaches. Engel and Curran (2016) found similar variation in their study of Chicago Public School principals. They interviewed 31 principals who had hiring autonomy in order to determine whether and how they used 10 strategic hiring practices drawn from the literature, such as having applicants teach demonstration lessons or contacting references. Few did. Jabbar (2018) found similar disparities in the practices of 94 principals, district leaders, and CMO leaders in New Orleans. Authors of all three studies concluded that policies granting hiring autonomy to principals fall short of their aims because they assume that schools have both capacity and technical expertise to implement them well, when they often do not.

To provide a more comprehensive view of school-based hiring, Cannata and colleagues (2017) interviewed over 100 central office staff and 76 principals in six urban school districts and CMOs. They then supplemented the interviews with surveys of 795 principals in six of the eight systems. They focused on whether and how schools in systems that were early adopters of teacher effectiveness measures and enhanced data systems incorporated those into their hiring processes. Although the authors describe how some schools used teacher evaluation data in hiring, yet they do not explain the larger hiring process or whether it was effective. There is still much to learn about school-based hiring.

A Framework for Understanding and Assessing Hiring

Our conceptual framework for this study, based on Liu's (2004) research about new teachers' experiences with hiring, highlights the differences between centralized, bureaucratic hiring and school-based, information-rich hiring (see Figure 1.1).

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

The framework depicts hiring on two dimensions. The first focuses on where hiring decisions occur—centrally, at the district office, or locally, at the school. The second focuses on the amount and quality of information that is available and exchanged during the hiring process. Most hiring for teachers has been centralized and “information-poor,” providing neither the candidate nor the school with much information. Typically, central office administrators reviewed candidates’ paper credentials, conducted interviews, offered jobs to successful applicants, and then decided where they should be placed. Those who hired teachers did not watch them teach in advance, and often those candidates had no chance to visit the school where they would be assigned before they accepted a position in the district. Neither the teacher nor the school had much agency in the process.

In contrast, Liu and Johnson (2006) explain, school-based hiring is potentially “information-rich” because it can promote exchanges about whether a candidate’s skills, interests and needs align with a school’s mission, programs, and expectations. Hiring that is school-based makes it possible for principals and their staff to recruit and select teachers who are qualified for specific, rather than generic, positions. Also, conducting hiring at the school site creates opportunities for broad participation by administrators, teachers, and students, thus increasing what a candidate can learn about a specific school and position. By participating in school-based activities—tours, meetings with teachers and students, classroom observations, demonstration lessons—the candidate and those in the school can assess whether a good match is likely before a contract is offered or accepted.

Importantly, school-based hiring is not necessarily interactive. In fact, what is technically a school-based decision actually may result from a principal’s cursory review of credentials or a brief interview. Such an offer might relieve a candidate’s anxiety about finding a job or a

school's need to fill a position, but it is unlikely to help the candidate prepare for his new responsibilities or allow the school to use hiring as a bridge to a new teacher's induction.

Methods

This article is based on qualitative data drawn from a larger study examining the human capital practices of six successful high-poverty, urban schools, all located in one Massachusetts city. Here we focus on teachers' and administrators' approaches to and experiences with teacher recruitment and hiring. We address the following research questions:

1. What state, local, or CMO policies influenced the school-based approaches to hiring teachers and what opportunities and constraints did those policies create?
2. How did these high-poverty schools where students succeeded approach hiring? How did they conceive of, enact, and assess the process?

The Sample of Schools

We sought a sample of schools that successfully served high-minority, high-poverty student populations, all within one city. We considered schools where over 70% of students qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch. Massachusetts officials rated all schools on a scale from 1 (high) to 5 (low), largely based on a measure of student growth on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), but also incorporating the schools' progress in narrowing proficiency gaps among student subgroups. We considered only Level 1 elementary and middle schools. Because we wanted to investigate different approaches to attracting, developing, and retaining teachers and the influence of various state and local policies on the hiring process, we selected schools of various types—traditional, turnaround, restart, and charter—all serving low-income students in Walker City¹. Although Walker City and the Walker

¹ All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms.

City School District (WCSD) share geographic boundaries, only some schools report to WCSD while others—including the charter schools—report to their board of trustees and to the state’s department of education. In selecting schools, we also reviewed reports and websites and consulted our professional networks to understand the eligible schools’ missions, policies, practices, and reputations. We then drew up a sample of six well-regarded Level 1 schools and contacted their principals who all agreed to participate (See Table 1). Our small, purposive sample allowed us to conduct an informative study, but our findings are not generalizable.

Data Collection

Interviews. Between March and June 2014, we conducted 142 semi-structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes with teachers, administrators and other staff. At each school, we constructed our sample by recruiting a group of teachers who varied demographically and in their preparation, teaching experience, and teaching assignment. We also interviewed relevant staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, discipline deans, family coordinators). In each school, we interviewed between 31-56% of the teachers, depending on the school’s size, complexity, and practices (Appendix A). We assured participants confidentiality and anonymity and used semi-structured protocols (Appendix B) to guide our interviews and elicit generally comparable data within and across sites (Maxwell, 1996). Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

We asked administrators to clarify policies that governed their hiring and to explain how they interacted with WCSD and/or their CMO in recruiting and hiring teachers. We asked administrators where they recruited, what positions they struggled to fill, and how they made hiring decisions. We asked teachers to describe the process they had experienced as candidates and to explain whether and how they later participated in recruiting and selecting new colleagues. All researchers conducted some interviews at every school.

Document collection. Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered and analyzed relevant documents such as collective bargaining agreements, teacher and student handbooks, and protocols for assessing demonstration lessons.

Data Analysis

After every interview, we summarized the participant's responses, using a common template, which allowed us to compare responses within and across schools and identify emerging themes. We subsequently developed a list of thematic codes—etic codes drawn from the literature and emic codes that emerged from our initial analysis—to be used in labeling segments of interview data for further analysis. We clarified our use of these codes by reviewing a sub-set of transcripts and calibrating our coding decisions. After coding all transcripts using *Dedoose*, we created data-analytic matrices to compare participants' responses within and across schools (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we addressed risks to validity by returning often to the data to review coding decisions, check our emerging conclusions, and consider rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We also conducted member checks by sharing early findings with participants.

Findings

The schools in our sample, like those across the country, each operated in a distinctive policy context, where state and local policies intersected to define the autonomies that a particular school could exercise in hiring. While some had extensive freedom to hire whom they wanted, others were constrained by requirements of the state, district, or CMO. Principals viewed hiring as a powerful lever for improvement and marshalled the authority and resources they had to create a systematic and thorough information-rich process. Each school articulated the “central, distinctive, and enduring” characteristics of its “organizational identity”—including

its mission, organizational culture, pedagogical practices and professional norms (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265). Each school then designed its hiring process to determine whether and how applicants fit their school's needs and expectations. Each process was two-way, providing both schools and candidates with opportunities to exchange information and assess one another before making or accepting an offer. Those involved in hiring were convinced that the significant investment of time and resources required by their process helped to ensure a strong match between their school and its teachers. Ultimately, they believed, this paid off for students.

Six Schools in One City

In 2014, our sample of schools included three district and three charter schools. However, we quickly learned that this count masked the schools' complicated and consequential histories. As the detailed descriptions below explain, two of the three district schools had recently emerged from turnaround status imposed by state officials. One of the three charter schools had previously been a failing district school, which state officials reassigned to a CMO for restart. These changes in status, resources, and school-based authority reflect the substantial and varied impact of policy on hiring.

Walker City School District's Evolving Hiring Policies

As in most districts, hiring in WCSD was highly centralized before 2000. Then, through three major changes in district policy, WCSD gradually improved and decentralized its hiring process. First, the district granted principals the authority to hire candidates once their applications had been screened by district staff. Second, WCSD created an accelerated timetable enabling schools to consider during a single round of hiring in April both new applicants and current teachers applying to transfer. This allowed them to compete with suburban and charter

schools for the same candidates. Third, through collective bargaining, the district eliminated the right of senior teachers to “bump” junior teachers from their positions.

In 2010, WCSD introduced an internal website where it posted both the schools’ vacancies and the applications of candidates who passed the district’s basic screening. However, candidates and principals still encountered challenges. For example, although principals hired teachers, the district retained the right to unilaterally place tenured teachers who lacked a position. Principals who understood the process frequently avoided such forced placements by concealing a vacancy until they identified their preferred candidate and could move quickly to fill it. Savvy candidates who understood this practice also did not count on the website, but contacted principals directly to ask about possible openings. Meanwhile, applications from candidates unfamiliar with the district sat unnoticed in cyberspace.

Despite worthwhile reforms, many school leaders and applicants found the process opaque and frustrating. Although bumping had been eliminated, unexpected enrollment shifts, program changes, and late resignations limited even the most enterprising and organized principal’s efforts to conduct productive hiring. In 2014, when we began this study, WCSD overhauled hiring again by allowing candidates to apply to individual schools and empowering school-based hiring committees to select candidates who best matched their needs. Schools could consider current district employees and external candidates simultaneously in March. Seniority was not a factor in school assignments and, although principals were required to interview all tenured teachers who applied to their school, they did not have to select one. Within a year of these changes, 63.3% of all new teachers were hired before July—up from 8.7% in the previous year. Finally, the district eliminated the forced placement of tenured teachers who failed to find a job within the district, instead assigning them to a pool of excess teachers who assumed

special responsibilities. Mutual-consent hiring became possible for all teaching positions district-wide.

To support these new policies, the district created what one administrator called an “amazing website,” through which candidates applied for specific positions and schools managed applications through their customized portal. Principals also had access to all applications and could contact promising candidates, whether or not they had applied to their school. The WCSD’s teachers’ contract required schools to create a site-based personnel committee including the principal, teachers, and parents, while the district required principals to follow a multi-step process, including interviews and a demonstration lesson.

The Schools and Their Policy Contexts

It is important to understand these WCSD policies because they regulated hiring in three of the six schools we studied, while state and CMO policies influenced hiring in the other three.

The district schools. *Dickinson Elementary*, a century-old, well-regarded neighborhood school, served a mostly immigrant student population. Dickinson experienced very low teacher turnover; in 2014, over half of its teachers had taught there more than 20 years. Principal Davila, the sole administrator, was required to follow WCSD policies, including all provisions of the teachers’ contract, and state licensing requirements. Unlike the other principals in the study, Davila had never been granted special autonomy in hiring teachers.

Hurston School (PK-8) and *Fitzgerald School (PK-5)*, both WCSD schools, had each been placed in turnaround by the state in 2010 because of persistent failure. At that time, their newly appointed principals could replace all teachers, but they could retain no more than half. Hurston’s Principal Hinds replaced about 80% and Fitzgerald’s Principal Forte replaced about 65%, while continuing to enroll students from their local community. By 2013, both schools had

shown substantial growth on the MCAS and they exited turnaround status at Level 1.

After turnaround, both Hurston and Fitzgerald remained WCSD schools. Because Hurston reverted to being a WCSD pilot school, Hinds retained broad autonomy in hiring, could dismiss non-tenured teachers at any time and could transfer tenured teachers into the WCSD excess pool at the end of each year. Fitzgerald became a state Innovation School within WCSD, which gave Forte some additional managerial autonomy, but she still was required to comply with the district's new hiring rules. After they exited turnaround, both Hurston and Fitzgerald experienced little teacher turnover.

The charter schools. *Kincaid Charter School* (6-8) was the flagship school of Kincaid Charter Network, a CMO selected by the state to restart a failing WCSD middle school in 2011. At that time, current teachers in the closed school could reapply for positions in the new charter school, but few did and none was rehired. Although most students who had attended the failing school re-enrolled in the Kincaid charter school that replaced it, the CMO hired an entirely new team of administrators, teachers, and staff. Within two years, Kincaid made significant gains in student test scores and achieved a Level 1 rating from the state. Annual turnover rates among teachers at the school were relatively high at approximately 25%.

As a restart school, Kincaid functioned as an in-district charter school; the local union represented Kincaid's teachers, whose pay was set by WCSD's negotiated scale and, under state law, teachers could attain tenure in the district. However, the school was exempt from other laws and provisions of the contract. Kincaid's Principal Kain, who was primarily responsible to the Kincaid CMO, could hire new teachers, dismiss non-tenured teachers, and involuntarily transfer tenured teachers into the WCSD excess pool. Although he was not required to comply with the district's hiring policies, he had access to the new website and thus to all WCSD's applicants.

Naylor Charter School (K-8) and Rodriguez Charter School (PK-8) opened in Walker City 10 and 20 years earlier as freestanding charter schools. Each was responsible to its own board of trustees and to state officials who issued its charter. In 2014, Naylor was one of three schools in the expanding Naylor Charter Network, while Rodriguez remained a stand-alone school. Both schools were exempt from all local WCSD policies; principals enjoyed complete autonomy in hiring and all teachers were at-will employees. Since 2012, when Massachusetts first rated schools, both Naylor and Rodriguez Charter Schools had received a Level 1 rating.

Theory in Practice: Developing a Two-Way, Information-Rich Process

This study allowed us to explore how a sample of successful schools that served demographically similar students in a single large city recruited and hired teachers. All principals took full advantage of the hiring authority they had to conduct a systematic and informative hiring process. Together, these schools' experiences illustrate how school-based, information-rich hiring can and does work.

Each school had a clear response to the question, "Who are we [as an organization]?" In alignment with what theorists define as key to strategic change efforts, principals could readily list the attributes of their school that were "central, enduring and distinctive" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265). Administrators and teachers could articulate their school's mission and specify how they would work to achieve it through their combined organizational culture, professional norms, and pedagogical practices. Every principal believed that his school's investment in the process of selecting strong teachers who "fit" their organization was crucial to their continued success. They thought that their school was not the right professional home for all candidates—whatever their credentials. At Rodriguez Charter, Director Rowland captured this sentiment in

describing her applicant pool: “[S]ome are a good fit for Rodriguez. Others are great teachers, but we are not perfect for them and they are not perfect for us.”

Mission, culture, norms and pedagogy. Each school’s mission focused on effectively educating children of color from low-income communities. Principal Forte said that Fitzgerald had a “social justice” mission and that teachers had to be committed to “altering the course of these kids’ lives.” Forte’s primary decision rule in hiring centered on whether a candidate shared the school’s “belief system.” She considered, “Did they think that children who are African American or Latino, and poor, could learn?” She was explicit with applicants: “We’re on a mission, and if you don’t see yourself as fitting in here, we welcome you to go somewhere else.” Others shared similar sentiments. At Naylor and Kincaid, teachers talked at length about their school’s commitment to “closing the achievement gap.” Principal Hinds attributed Hurston’s success in exiting turnaround to the fact that teachers “had that fundamental belief” in the promise of all students, even if those students “didn’t have a track record of success.” He wanted to be sure that he wouldn’t need to convince new hires that “this *could* be done.” Rather, he would “support them in the *how*.”

Professional norms and pedagogical practices at the schools were grounded in their mission. Although the schools differed significantly in their beliefs about what Dickinson’s Principal Davila called “the way to make a difference,” all described fundamental attributes that distinguished their school from others. For example, Kincaid described itself as a “no excuses school.” Teachers were expected to subscribe to this strict “mentality”—defined in the school’s handbook as a belief that “regardless of circumstances... there is no reason why... a teacher cannot achieve meaningful results with his or her students.” Principal Kain explained that this philosophy was fundamental to maintaining the school’s focus on learning. For example, he said

that if a student failed to turn in homework, “we do not want to hear excuses about why... we want to see [it] completed.” In contrast, at Rodriguez, Principal Rowland said, “We’re not a ‘no excuses’ charter school. That’s not what we believe in... you need to believe that you’re here to serve all the kids who walk through the door and you need to believe that they can and will succeed.” Principals at Dickinson and Fitzgerald expressed similar sentiments. Principal Forte said she was explicit with candidates about the “intensity” of teaching children who “don’t have their basic needs met.”

Educators at all schools believed that they offered what one administrator said were “very demanding” academic programs that required teachers to invest significant time and effort. Fitzgerald and Rodriguez teachers designed complex, project-based learning experiences for students. Hurston and Dickinson prioritized the arts and integrated them into classes because, in Principal Davila’s words, that was what students’ “suburban peers” experienced. At Naylor and Kincaid, teachers were expected to provide teacher-centered, data-driven instruction. As one said, candidates who were “not experienced at using data, or maybe have some opinions against it” would not fit well at Naylor, where quantitative data “informs everything.”

A prominent professional norm at all schools was that teachers should work hard to improve. As one Hurston administrator explained, teachers there had to “constantly reassess, reinvent and really be creative.” He said further that successful candidates had to demonstrate that they had “the mindset to make things work for the kids that they have that period, that year. That might not necessarily be what worked for the kids they had third period, or first period, or last year.” Administrators in all schools regularly observed instruction and provided feedback to teachers, who were then expected to improve (see Reinhorn, S. M. Johnson, & Simon, 2017).

Teachers at these six schools also were expected to collaborate with peers regularly about how they were educating their students, how effective their practices were, and what they might do better (S. M. Johnson, Reinhorn, & Simon, 2018). This level of interdependence among teachers remains far above the norm in many schools. Determining whether candidates would collaborate well was crucial because, as Principal Forte explained, “a lot of our success is because we really work as teams—it’s like you’re married to your team.”

Although administrators wanted to convince candidates that their school was a desirable workplace, they also had to be, as one said, “upfront about the challenges,” Rodriguez Principal Rega spoke candidly with applicants about what she called Rodriguez’s “work ethic” where teachers were “never satisfied—we want every child to succeed. . . There are teachers who stay until 6:00, 7:00, 8:00 at night. There are teachers who come early. There are teachers who have [their own] kids and go home and [continue to] work.” Similarly, Naylor’s Principal North explained to applicants that they would be expected to “work really long hours. . . creating curriculum from scratch. . . staying after school tutoring. . . calling parents on their way home.” Principal Kain said that, in considering candidates for Kincaid, he weighed them on the “will-skill” dimension: “We try to limit as many low-will hires as we can, because that is the thing that we’ve found we cannot change or don’t have the patience to change.”

Recruitment and Hiring in Action

Each school sought candidates who would be a good match for their unique organizational identity and related mission, norms, and practices. They wanted teachers to be enthusiastic about their school’s mission, know their obligations as members of the faculty, understand the support they could expect as they improved their practice, and quickly engage with colleagues to provide a coherent, effective program for students. Principal Ryan summed it

up: “Good hiring matters. If you hire well and you’re explicit beforehand, you don’t need to fire people... If you’re really clear about what kind of teacher [a Rodriguez teacher is]... [some applicants] just know they’re not that teacher and they’re like... ‘This isn’t the right environment for me.’” A Naylor administrator expanded on this notion, explaining that if the school discovered that current teachers disagreed with the school’s mission and culture, “it’s probably just our fault in hiring.”

All the schools conducted a hiring process with the same basic steps: recruiting and screening a strong, diverse pool of candidates; interviewing candidates while school was in session so they could observe students and talk with administrators and teachers; and organizing demonstration lessons and follow-up debriefs with the principal. Every component required considerable planning and attentive implementation.

Recruiting a candidate pool. Administrators agreed that successful hiring depends on actively recruiting promising candidates, a process that we found was more robust at the charter schools than at the district schools. Naylor, Rodriguez, and Kincaid all relied on their CMO’s “talent staff,” who recruited and screened promising candidates for positions in their schools. Rodriguez and Naylor each employed one talent staff member, while Kincaid was supported by a team of ten serving five network schools. Talent staff consulted with principals about their needs and then arranged for them to meet promising, pre-screened candidates.

Talent teams traveled throughout the state and, for Kincaid and Naylor, across the country, recruiting promising teachers. They formed ongoing relationships with local and national organizations including Teach for America (TFA), TNTP, urban teacher residency programs, historically black colleges, and many schools of education. They resourcefully

recruited program alumni and teachers from other CMO networks and awarded bonuses to current teachers who recommended successful candidates.

Each charter school also maintained a “farm team” by employing full-time teachers-in-training (TTs), who served the school for a year, hoping to be hired eventually as a classroom teacher. In the most developed program, Naylor hired 9 TTs annually in a rigorous selection process. Each was assigned a mentor teacher and participated with her mentor’s grade-level team. TTs engaged in a structured cycle of being observed and receiving feedback from their supervisor as they worked to master the basics of teaching. After their training year, almost all TTs were promoted to classroom teacher within the Naylor Network. Principal North, like many Naylor teachers, began her own career as a TT and several current teachers were promoted from TT to classroom teacher when a midyear vacancy occurred.

District schools had fewer recruitment processes, but principals were proactive nonetheless. Unlike some large urban districts (see S. M. Johnson et al., 2015), WCSD lacked the ambitious recruitment effort that these principals thought their schools needed. One administrator complained, “they have a whole department and they’re not helpful.” However, principals appreciated the district’s new online dashboard, which a Hurston administrator said substantially increased the applicants for his school’s openings. Principal Forte also valued being able to “look at all of the candidates who applied to the system. . . I need a sixth grade math teacher. Only 13 people applied to *my* sixth-grade job, but 168 applied to the district.” With the new website, she could “just open up every one of those résumés and personally recruit promising candidates,” including any current WCSD teachers seeking to transfer.

However, the district principals in our study went well beyond reviewing WCSD’s applicant list. They attended job fairs, posted positions on online job boards such as Idealist and

Craigslist, and maintained connections with alternative preparation programs, WCSD's teacher residency program, curriculum organizations, and universities. They encouraged their current teachers to actively recruit promising candidates because, as a Hurston administrator explained, "teachers know a ton of teachers. They'll refer people they know are good."

Although none of the district schools had a formal TT program, each district school principal maintained an informal pool of candidates. Some enterprising candidates found ways to display their talents by becoming a long-term substitute at the school, hoping to be hired permanently when a position opened. At all three district schools, we interviewed teachers who said that their principals had invested in their improvement when they were school-based substitutes. These schools also sponsored resident teachers through Walker City's teacher residency program and student teachers from local universities. Administrators appreciated these programs' success in attracting "somewhat non-traditional candidates," but some suggested that their quality was "uneven." As Principal Forte explained, those aspiring teachers had "the right mindset," but were "too idealistic for people who have never taught in hard schools... That's not going to work."

Vetting the candidate pool through screening. Before inviting candidates to visit, all schools screened application materials—résumés, cover letters, and in some cases teaching portfolios with videos—to decide whether they warranted further consideration. The primary goal of the screening process was to determine, as a Naylor administrator said, "mission fit and basic educational philosophy." Administrators explained that the most convincing signal of mission alignment was prior experience in a similar school. Principal Davila looked for teachers with experience at specific WCSD schools and preferred candidates who were, themselves, WCSD alumni. Kincaid and Naylor sought experienced candidates from what a Naylor

administrator called “other high-performing charter schools...that we highly respect” or TFA alumni. These schools further assessed mission-fit by screening candidates by phone. Naylor’s Talent Director said she would ask, “Why Naylor?,” explaining “If they don’t have a good answer, that’s a big, red flag. If they don’t mention the achievement gap, if they don’t ever discuss urban kids and that all students need good teaching—not just rich white kids—they’re rejected.” She also said that Naylor used phone screens to reject candidates whose attitude towards students were “deficit-based, not respect-based,” as well as those with “savior complexes... who think that there’s something wrong with [our kids].”

Schools also assessed candidates with very specific characteristics in mind. For example, in hiring a literacy interventionist, Principal Davila scanned résumés for someone who had been “trained in Wilson Reading and taught first grade.” At Fitzgerald, the principal used college major to signal preferred content knowledge. At Rodriguez, staff looked for “interesting experiences,” such as living abroad, that might enrich teachers’ instruction. All principals sought experienced urban educators and teachers of color.

At the charters—Kincaid, Naylor, and Rodriguez—talent staff not only screened applicants, but also managed all steps of recruitment and hiring. This ensured an organized process and conveyed, as one teacher said, that the schools “very much have their stuff together.” One recent hire said that the hiring process alone was a much-needed “breath of fresh air” after his experience in an “underperforming” district school. Kincaid’s CMO talent team of 10 conducted roughly 100 calls each week posing scripted questions and assessing candidates on a 5-point scale; those who scored 3-5 points advanced to a school-based interview. Candidates could earn points for fulfilling “strategic diversity requirements around gender, race, or second language.”

At the three district schools—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, and Hurston—administrators carefully reviewed résumés and then arranged to interview the most promising candidates. Given principals' other responsibilities and the need to coordinate hiring with the district office, this was inevitably a time-consuming and sometimes fragmented effort in which they lost favored candidates to other, more agile schools. Teachers also expressed frustration with their experiences navigating the district systems, and several charter school teachers were explicit that the bureaucratic hurdles to landing a WCSD position drove them away from district schools altogether. For example, a Naylor teacher who was licensed to teach in California described the Massachusetts licensing website as a “terrible, awful, labyrinthine Kafkaesque nightmare... it felt much easier just to go to the charter world... they never asked me about [my license].”

Many current teachers we interviewed spoke positively about their experience as candidates in the screening process. One Kincaid teacher said that it provided the chance to learn “what the organization is about,” how it functioned, and then to ask questions. It also gave applicants a sense of what the school was seeking and time to think about “how you could fit into that” before interviewing in person.

Despite applicants' enthusiasm, high-poverty schools are demanding environments and even successful schools face a shortage of strong candidates, especially in math, science, and special education. One principal explained that, when they cannot find the candidate they wanted, “we wait and wait and wait and hope we can find someone.”

School-based interviews. Candidates who successfully passed the screening process typically interviewed at the school while it was in session, which as one administrators said allowed schools to communicate, “what we're all about.” As part of this experience, candidates frequently toured the building, interacted with students, and observed classes. Several teachers

recounted being impressed by what one called the “feeling when you walk in the school.” A Dickinson teacher recalled a climate that was “noisy, dynamic, alive, happy!”—a welcome contrast to the “quiet, orderly, and stuffy” school where she had recently interviewed. A Naylor teacher who had previously worked in a “very disorganized” setting recalled being “blown away by...the work that I saw teachers doing [at Naylor] and just the overall calm of the school. . .” Realizing that “there’s a lot of learning going on and not a whole lot of other nonsense,” she thought, “I want to be a part of that.”

At all schools, it was standard for candidates to meet with both administrators and teachers, sometimes over several visits. A Dickinson teacher explained that when she interviewed for her current position, Principal Davila impressed her by inviting teachers who would become her colleagues to participate in the interview. Candidates appreciated having a good preview of their future work and many credited this experience with enabling them to make a well-informed decision when a position was offered.

Schools were strategic in what they asked candidates during interviews, and through their questions they conveyed their organizational identity, explained their norms and practices, and piqued teachers’ interest in the school. For example, at Kincaid, interviewers probed candidates about their commitment to the school’s mission and organizational culture. As Principal Kain explained, the most critical predictor of fit was whether candidates were “philosophically inclined to want to hold the kinds of expectations we believe help students focus and prepare them for learning experiences.” He said that he often pressed a candidate’s readiness for Kincaid’s “no-excuses” culture by posing a scenario: “You see a student on Friday afternoon walking down the hall. They’re getting ready to leave and their shirt is untucked. What do you do?” Kain listened carefully to the candidate’s response: “If, philosophically, you might say... ‘I

don't think students should ever have to have their shirt tucked in,' then you're not going to really like that they have to raise their hands [in class]... or that we require them to sit up without their hands on their face.”

In order to assess fit, the schools customized generic interview questions to specific positions or candidates. At Rodriguez and Hurston, interviewers probed a candidate's instructional expertise. A Hurston administrator explained, “if they're a literacy coach, I might ask [how they teach] tone and mood... if it's math, 'how do you get kids to not just do fractions but to understand fractions? What does that look like? How do you make it come alive...?'” She said that desirable candidates were “truly able to describe how they think about designing lessons.” Rather than saying “I use this textbook,” they might say “if I want to grow the reading, writing, and speaking of my English language learners, these are the key components of my classroom I need to have. I'm going to pull from this material and that material.” Teachers with prior experience reported having been drawn to their school because they were asked to talk in depth about curriculum and instruction. Often these conversations also illuminated how the school would help them become better teachers. Some current teachers also said that they appreciated knowing that their colleagues had been carefully vetted through the hiring process for expertise in teaching their subject.

Across our sample, teachers appreciated having been asked thoughtful questions when they were interviewed. A Kincaid teacher reported, “I knew in the interview that I would love working here” because of the “fabulous questions” and because administrators discussed a vision that “might [actually] come true.” Several current teachers said that Kincaid's strict discipline code was a major attraction for them. One explained that the interview made it clear that she

would be able to “slip right into the culture” of the school and teach—rather than having to establish her own expectations for student behavior.

At Dickinson and Fitzgerald, administrators reported being challenged by a new district requirement to ask all candidates the same interview questions. Principal Davila said that this made the process “cumbersome” and candidates’ responses were less “authentic.” She recalled one who said he already knew what she would ask because “they’re the same questions wherever you go.” Davila therefore supplemented her interview with other questions that allowed her to “go with [her] gut” about what she believed would be important for teachers at Dickinson—a commitment to partnering with families and an interest in the “family feel” of the school’s professional environment.

Teaching demonstration and debrief. Whereas most schools continue to offer teachers a position based on one or more interviews, these schools required candidates to demonstrate their teaching first. As one Fitzgerald administrator explained, “you can have the most fabulous answers in an interview, but if you can’t stand up in front of the class... it’s not going to be a good fit.” Although arranging demonstration lessons was time consuming, all believed that they were crucial. Principal Hinds observed, “With demos you can tell really quickly.” He recalled visiting one candidate’s classroom, “As soon as we walked in the room, I knew. I was like... every kid should have this... teacher. Just remarkable.”

Dickinson recently had begun holding demonstration lessons in response to the district’s new requirement and current staff had begun to see their value. One teacher compared his responses to two applicants’ lessons. He called the first “rudimentary” and said, “I wanted to pull my hair out” waiting for the candidate to capture students’ attention. In contrast, the second

applicant “did classroom management... in about a minute... by the end [of the class], she had taught them about pantomime.” He continued:

She had had the kids paint—with their bodies—this picture of being at a baseball game...

She put one kid in a pose and it was obvious that the kid was about to hit a baseball and then she said ‘now, who could add something to this picture?’ One kid ran up... she had another kid selling hot dogs. Another person was cheering in the stands. Another person was an umpire. Another kid was fielding – it was incredible.

He was amazed: “Both women gave pretty good interviews,” but he and his colleagues on the hiring committee “couldn’t believe how revealing” the lesson was.

Demonstration lessons were arranged either by visiting the candidate’s school and observing him in his own classroom, or by asking the candidate to teach a class of students at the hiring school. A Fitzgerald administrator preferred going to a candidate’s school where she could assess “What kind of work is on the wall? How have they prepared for me to come and see them? On a daily basis, what is it like to be a kid in their class? Do they have management issues?” She also considered whether “they’re asking higher order questions... if they’re engaging with their kids... Are they more stand-in-front-of-the-classroom-and-lecture, expect kids to take notes, and do practice problems? Or do they have manipulatives?” Other principals favored having lessons taught at the hiring school, which allowed current teachers to observe the candidate’s instruction and provided more opportunities to interact informally with teachers and students. When arranging demonstration lessons introduced difficult logistical problems or candidates lived far away, principals often asked them to film themselves teaching.

Several administrators said that debriefing a demonstration lesson was more important than the lesson itself. In assessing their capacity to improve, administrators looked for what the

applicant said went well—or, more importantly—what did not. A Naylor administrator listened for whether the candidate had a “strong locus of control.” She explained, “When things go wrong, [do they] recognize their role in it? When things go right, [do they] recognize their role in it?” Similarly, Principal Forte listened for whether a candidate who had difficulty “catching students’ attention” took personal responsibility and said, “I wish I had put nametags on the kids” or instead subtly blamed students with comments such as “kids moved around a lot.” Forte said she was stunned by how often candidates “tr[ie]d to fight” her feedback. She believed that “if [candidates] can’t take any hard feedback,” teaching at Fitzgerald was “not going to go so well.” A Rodriguez administrator concurred: “We want teachers to understand that [improving in response to feedback is] part of being here.”

Current teachers who recalled their experiences teaching a lesson as part of their application process said it conveyed the school’s focus on pedagogy. Several suggested they would be skeptical of a school that did not routinely observe candidates teaching. As Principal Ryan observed, the teachers Rodriguez hires “do not want to work at a school where someone’s going to hire you just on how well you interview!”

Some teachers said that participating in a post-lesson debrief convinced them to accept an offer. One Naylor teacher reported that he “loved the hiring process” because it provided “a great preview of what it would be like to work [there].” He had submitted a video of his class and then received feedback from Principal North: “Instead of looking for canned answers, we really got into the nitty-gritty of the lesson... [She provided] helpful ideas about how to improve [it].” He recalled being “shocked” but impressed by comments about “how informal I was in the classroom” when “I thought it was the strictest and most efficient class!” Once he had joined the faculty, he realized that his demo debrief was “exactly the same tone and intent as my weekly

debriefs... after [my principal] observes me.” Although principals believed that demonstration lessons were strong predictors of who would succeed at their school, they realized that they were not foolproof. Principal Ryan said, “even when you’ve seen the person teach, you’re still rolling the dice. You never know.”

Learning from references. Even when a school was eager to make an offer and sign a promising candidate, checking references was—as one talent director put it—“a hard and fast rule.” In talking with references, principals followed up on what they learned from interviews and demonstration lessons. Principal North explained that she and others at Naylor developed “a whole line of questioning... after we’ve met the person,” which was intended to yield “information on what we think they might struggle with.” For example, North said, “we watch a [demo] video, and let’s say the [behavior] management is just awful, but we have a great debrief where the teacher takes a ton of awesome feedback. Then you wonder why it’s still really bad after two years.” So, she would ask the reference ““How often is this teacher getting observed? How often are they getting feedback?”” North recalled a teacher with “terrible” behavior management who was “great on the phone. I found out from his principal he’s never been observed. Well, if you have no one helping you, you’re not going to get better.” Information gleaned during a reference check not only helped principals make a final hiring decision, but also plan for a smooth induction process once the teacher joined the school.

Courting the candidate. Although the schools received many applicants for each opening, the pool remained shallow, and strong candidates often received several offers. Recruitment, therefore, did not end once a candidate applied. Instead, those in the schools worked throughout the process to ensure that candidates would choose to accept an offer if extended. Charter schools used some of their substantial hiring budgets to send applicants school

“swag,” but as a Hurston administrator explained, district schools did not have “a ton of glossy, branding type of things.” Instead, they did “the selling with our results and with showing them what kind of team they’ll be a part of.” Current teachers said that this combination of strategies worked. As one explained, Kincaid made her “feel wanted”—a welcome experience in her otherwise frustrating quest to find an urban teaching job.

In an effort to court candidates, some schools “fast-tracked” those who were especially attractive. Naylor’s recruitment director asked such candidates to send a demo video before interviewing, and occasionally checked references before the school visit so the principal could make an offer on the spot. Kincaid employed a similar process and hosted special days for alumni of pipeline programs like TFA and urban teacher residencies, when the school could efficiently conduct interviews, demonstration lessons, and debriefs and make timely offers to coveted candidates. Many principals described what one called “aggressively recruiting” Black and Latino teachers throughout the hiring process by “mak[ing] sure they were at the front of the interview pack.” However, even in subjects that are generally easier to fill, principals reported that the competition for strong teachers was fierce. One principal observed that alumni of prestigious pipeline programs such as TFA and the local teacher residency program got “snapped up in 24 hours by schools across the country.” Sometimes those responsible for hiring acknowledged that they needed to make decisions more quickly than they would like. As one talent director said, “I’ve gotten people offers in less than a week.” However, she also cautioned that it was important not to try too hard: “You don’t want to be that dorky kid who keeps asking others to the prom. We want them to want us as much as we want them.”

Ongoing Challenges

Although participants praised their school's robust approach to school-based hiring, significant barriers to implementing that process remained and their practices occasionally fell short of their plans. Sometimes this was because the school lacked sufficient autonomy to choose its teachers or became hamstrung by bureaucratic requirements or lack of capacity within the school. Not surprisingly, charter schools benefited from their CMO's well-funded support and specialized talent staff and, as a result, their applicants were more likely than district school applicants to experience the hiring process as it was intended. In contrast, WCSD principals suggested that district support often was more frustrating than helpful. Teachers in WCSD schools sometimes reported having been hired by happenstance, long after they had submitted their application and without meeting their future colleagues or teaching a demonstration lesson. In addition, principals at all schools dealt with late and mid-year hiring needs caused by unpredictable turnover. Therefore, although hiring was well-organized and productive across the six schools, the process was not without ongoing challenges.

Summary and Implications

Across this study, principals attributed a large share of their students' academic success to their hiring process. They believed that effective hiring served as the foundation for subsequent efforts to increase their school's human capital and develop its instructional capacity. Teachers experienced hiring as the first step of their induction into the school, rather than a separate transaction that preceded it. Each school capitalized on the autonomy that its policy context provided and developed an informative, site-based process that gave the school's current educators and candidates ample opportunity to exchange information and assess one another before making an offer or signing a contract.

Despite notable differences among these schools, we found striking similarities in their multi-step hiring practices. They began with a clear understanding of their organizational identity, including their mission, professional norms, and preferred pedagogical practices, which then guided both their understanding of the kind of teachers they needed and their judgments about whether a candidate would be a good match for their school. They all made a special effort to recruit both teachers of color and those with experience in schools serving low-income communities. Their process included careful screening, school visits, interviews with the principal and teachers, a demonstration lesson followed by a debrief with the principal, reference checks, and concerted efforts by all involved to ensure that the applicants they chose would accept their job offer.

These steps promoted a rich exchange of information. By visiting a school when it was in session, an applicant could see how staff and students interacted, what instructional approaches teachers used, and whether their prospective colleagues collaborated. By conducting interviews, the school's current teachers could gauge whether a candidate would be responsive to new pedagogical approaches, respect students and their families, and help to improve the school. Through a demonstration lesson and debrief, a candidate could display her instructional skills and the principal could assess how this recruit responded to feedback. This intensive, complex process required significant time from many individuals. However, those we interviewed widely agreed that their investment paid off because it led to well-informed hiring decisions.

Effective hiring also had organizational benefits for the school that went well beyond adding strong individuals to the staff. By participating in selecting their future colleagues, current teachers gained confidence in them as team members and developed a stake in their success. Principals believed that if they were conscientious in hiring, they could then focus on

developing their teachers' instruction, rather than coping with the consequences of hasty, ill-informed hiring decisions. For their part, new teachers who gained an accurate preview of what their work would take could begin their jobs with confidence.

Collectively, these six schools make a strong case for increasing schools' authority over how and whom they hire. However historically urban school districts have not encouraged or even permitted schools to select their own teachers. Because district officials are responsible for ensuring quality, equity, and efficiency across all schools, they tend to control and standardize hiring. Yet, research documents how centralized hiring systems often lead to sluggish, bureaucratic requirements and practices that delay timely decisions, discourage broad participation, and deny schools the discretion they need in choosing their staff.

Nonetheless, we found that district-level reforms can moderate problems and augment opportunities for school-based hiring. Between 2000 and 2014, WCSD accelerated its hiring schedule, ended bumping and forced placements, granted principals the right to select their teachers, and created an informative and interactive online portal, all of which principals endorsed. Thus, we found considerable evidence that school districts can substantially improve opportunities for stronger school-based hiring by amending their policies and upgrading their services. Yet, more can be done to ensure that schools can and do hire the teachers they need.

Implications for Districts and Schools

This study yields recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, especially those who shape hiring practices in high-poverty schools.

Reconceive the relationship between HR and the schools. Analysts often view the relationship between the district office and its schools in stark either-or terms: A district is said to either rigorously centralize or radically decentralize its approach to managing schools. However,

scholars increasingly find that in managing a range of functions—budgeting, curriculum and instruction, and staffing—the interests of both the district and the schools are best served when their relationship is interdependent, dynamic, and coherent (Honig & Hatch, 2004; P. E. Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; S. M. Johnson et al., 2015; Supovitz, 2006). What we learned about hiring supports this perspective.

What, then, is the most promising, interdependent relationship between the schools and the district HR office for hiring teachers? Our findings suggest that the district should conceive its role as one of support for the schools. Specifically, HR officials should ask: “What can we do to recruit and screen a strong, diverse pool of candidates who will meet the varied needs of our schools?” and “What assistance can we offer schools as they develop the capacity to identify promising candidates, explore their interests and qualifications, and select those who best meet their needs?”

Charter school principals in our study counted on their CMO as an indispensable partner in recruiting and vetting a pool of candidates who matched their school-based needs. CMO talent staff managed the school-based hiring process, although principals chose their teachers. Although the relationship between CMO talent staff and a small group of similar charter schools differs markedly from that between a large district’s HR office and its diverse array of schools, it does illuminate the potential of a district HR office to maintain close communication with schools about their staffing needs, conduct timely recruitment and screening, and support schools and candidates throughout the process from initial visits and interviews through demonstrations, debriefs, reference checks, and selection. This is not simply a renaming or rebranding of the current HR office, but rather a substantial reorientation of its purpose and restructuring of its role and responsibilities. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations.

Recruit widely and actively with purpose. The principals in our study found themselves competing feverishly to hire teachers from the same shallow pool of well-qualified candidates in their local labor market. WCSD's recruiting efforts largely focused on graduates of nearby schools of education. However, the principals also sought candidates who already had experience teaching low-income, urban students and, given these schools' populations of minority students, they were especially intent on hiring teachers of color. Principals and teachers said the district could do much more to develop relationships locally and nationally with various preparation programs and their alumni groups, advertise positions on popular online job boards, and publicize the advantages of becoming a WCSD teacher.

Although WCSD's new hiring portal supported candidates searching for vacancies and principals searching for candidates, it did not educate prospective teachers more generally about the district's schools, missions, and programs. An expanded, public-facing, interactive website could assist interested individuals in finding schools that matched their experience and interests. In a customer-oriented HR office, staff would be available in person, by phone, and online, to answer questions about how best to navigate the hiring process, given individuals' interest in a particular subject, student population, or school. HR staff could host job fairs and school visits (both live and virtual) designed to stoke prospective candidates' interest in particular schools.

Further, HR offices could assist principals in developing a well-vetted "farm team" of experienced candidates to quickly fill unexpected openings. As in the charter schools we studied, the district could sponsor a cadre of salaried associate teachers seeking to gain experience and certification in a school that might eventually hire them. The district might actively support schools in preparing these professionals-in-training for their future roles through centralized programming and classroom-embedded supports.

Screen candidates with schools in mind. Currently, most district HR offices actively screen candidates for eligibility, but few explore their interests and guide them to particular schools as the CMO talent staff did. A reformed HR office could curate candidate pools for specific schools and thus support candidates and principals in identifying a potential match.

Build school-based capacity for hiring. Currently, most urban schools lack experience in conducting the kind of intensive, multi-step hiring process that we found in these successful schools. Therefore, a district would do well to invest in providing training and materials to help them develop this capacity. The HR office could create a team of specialists in school-based hiring, who would provide workshops and hands-on assistance to individual schools. They might closely collaborate with a network of schools that have similar programs and needs, conducting workshops and helping the schools' hiring teams create their timeline, craft job descriptions, and plan school visits, interviews, and demonstration lessons. They could help principals—especially new ones—understand the key role they play in hiring and suggest how they can make the process inclusive while using their scarce time well. Such targeted assistance would require more specialized staff and resources than a traditional HR office and although schools would take a far more active role in hiring, the district's responsibilities would expand as well. Based on our research, we are optimistic about the support that districts can offer and the standards that they can set for information-rich, school-based hiring—even in large, urban districts.

Implications for the Schools. Assuming that the district redefines its role in hiring so that new teachers are hired by the school—not for the school—what does this mean for school-based practices? First, principals must be both good managers and instructional leaders, who give priority to hiring over many other managerial responsibilities and effectively represent the school's goals, professional norms, and academic priorities. However, principals should not

expect to do this work single-handedly, for school-based hiring works best when it is inclusive and responsibilities are distributed widely. Teachers can help to guide the hiring process as members of the school's hiring committee or participate by rating demonstration lessons or interviewing candidates. Principals who take teachers' views seriously will find that members of their staff willingly participate when they see that they have a stake in the outcomes.

Implications for Research

Given the dearth of research about hiring practices, our study opens many lines of further inquiry. We identified and described practices in our sample of six schools that worked well and have promise as models for others. However, it is important also to examine hiring practices in districts that maintain centralized control of hiring, but are responsive to unique school-based needs. Therefore, scholars could contribute to this line of research by conducting similar studies in school districts that succeed in educating low-income students, yet have different histories, policies, and norms. Well-designed surveys that are informed by these comparative case studies could then be administered widely in order to illuminate broader patterns of practice.

Little is yet known about teachers' experience with the hiring process. Researchers might follow candidates—both new teachers applying for their first job and experienced teachers transferring between schools or school systems—as they go through the process of securing a new job. What influences their strategies and choices? How satisfied are they with the jobs they take? What do candidates of color look for in a school and what elements of the hiring process encourage or discourage them?

Researchers might also follow candidates over time to determine whether information-rich, school-based hiring predicts particular outcomes. For example, are teachers who taught demonstration lessons more likely to succeed with their students or be responsive to supervision

than those who did not? Are teachers who met with their future colleagues more likely to report an interest in working collaboratively than those who were hired solely by the principal? Does having a good preview of the work encourage retention, especially in challenging settings? Are principals who hire novice teachers through information-rich processes better prepared to support their development? Meaningful changes in a district's policies and practices for teacher hiring are likely to redistribute authority and responsibility between the central office and the schools and, therefore, will require sustained effort and ongoing review and adjustment. Such work might productively be done in formal research-practice partnerships between local district personnel and university-based researchers.

Conclusion

Over the past 20 years, researchers have investigated various policies and practices that influence the quality of teachers and teaching by introducing or improving evaluation, collaboration, dismissal, and financial incentives. However, hiring—especially school-based hiring—has not had the attention it deserves. This oversight is notable, given that hiring sets the groundwork for all subsequent human capital practices.

In concluding their evaluation of the Gates Foundation's intervention—"Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching"—RAND researchers observed that, although the participating districts and CMOs implemented the appropriate "levers" of the experiment, they did not have access to successful models from other districts that they could "observe, adopt, or adapt," and thus they failed to "innovate" in ways that would produce better outcomes for students (Stecher et al., 2018, p. 559). We examined hiring in a range of successful schools and identified models of practice that can contribute to productive innovation. Public education will certainly fall far short of its promise as this society's great equalizer unless districts and schools

effectively recruit and select teachers whose interests, skills, and commitment match the needs of the schools that hire them.

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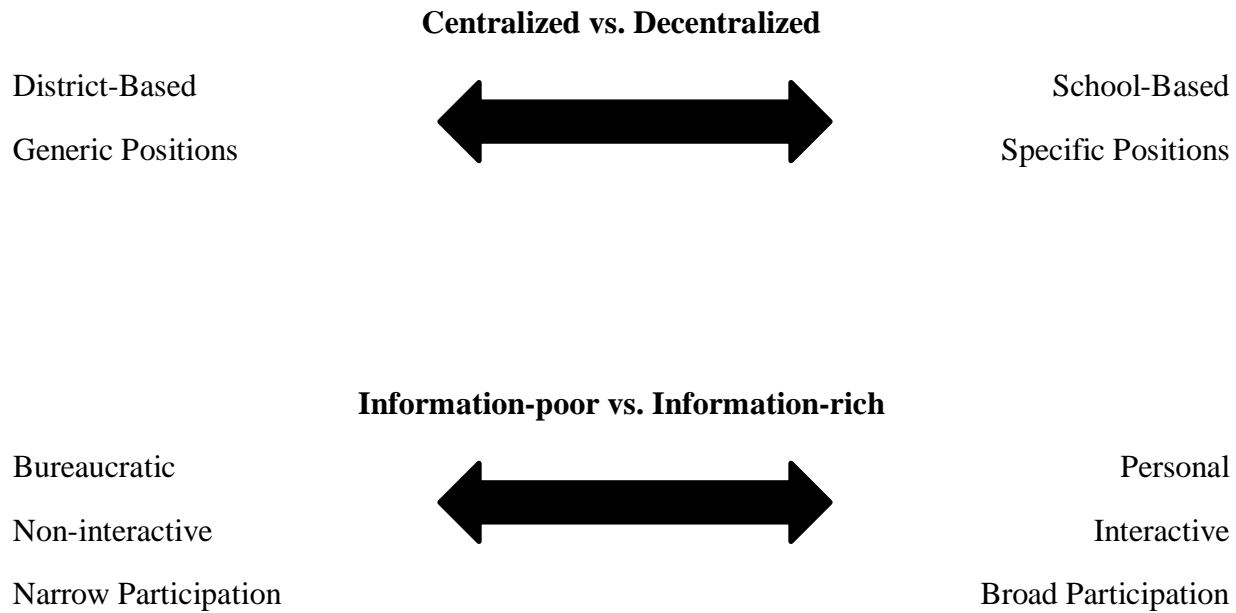
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Figure 1: *Types of Hiring Systems*



Source: Liu, 2004

Table 1. *Selected Characteristics of Six Sample Schools**

School Name	School Type	Grades	Estimated Enrollment	% Low-income students	% African American or Black Students	% Hispanic or Latinx Students	% Other Non-white students	% White Students
Dickinson Elementary	Traditional District	PK-5	370	76	4	85	2	9
Fitzgerald Elementary	District - Former Turnaround	PK-5	390	85	70	25	3	2
Hurston K-8	District - Former Turnaround	PK-8	800	75	41	54	4	1
Kincaid Charter Middle	In-District Charter	6-8	475	88	50	30	10	10
Naylor Charter K-8	Charter	K-8	500	82	70	24	5	1
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	Charter	PK-8	420	72	55	20	7	18

*Percentages are approximated for confidentiality purposes

Appendix A: Additional Sample Descriptive Statistics*Table 2. Number of Interviewees at Each School*

School Name	Administrators*	Non-Teaching Staff**	Teachers in Training	Teachers	% of Total Teachers in the School Interviewed
Dickinson Elementary	1	2	n/a	15	56
Fitzgerald Elementary	2	2	n/a	14	47
Hurston K-8	4	5	n/a	21	31
Kincaid Charter Middle	5	4	2	16	38
Naylor Charter K-8	2	3	2	17	46
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	3	3	3	16	36

* Administrators include directors of CMOs and school-based administrators who directly supervise teachers.

** Non-teaching Staff includes instructional coaches, parent coordinators, data leaders, recruitment officers, deans of discipline and other administrators who do not teach students and do not supervise teachers

*Table 3. Race / Ethnicity of FTEs at Each School**

School	Total Number Full-Time Equivalent (FTEs)	African American	Hispanic/Latinx	Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	Asian	White
Dickinson Elementary	34	3 FTEs (8%)	6 FTEs (17%)	0 FTEs	1 FTEs (2%)	24 FTEs (73%)
Fitzgerald Elementary	44	20 FTEs (45%)	.5 FTEs (2%)	0 FTEs	2 FTE (4%)	21.5 FTEs (50%)
Hurston K-8	97	25 FTEs (26%)	15 FTEs (15%)	0 FTEs	3 FTEs (3%)	54 FTEs (56%)
Kincaid Charter Middle	51	10 FTEs (20%)	0 FTEs	3 FTEs (6%)	3 FTEs (6%)	35 FTEs (69%)
Naylor Charter K-8	61	3 FTEs (5%)	3 FTEs (5%)	0 FTEs	2 FTEs (3%)	53 FTEs (88%)
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	57	8 FTEs (13%)	5 FTEs (8%)	2 FTEs (4%)	2 FTEs (4%)	40 FTEs (71%)

These data were drawn from the Massachusetts DESE School and District Profiles and include information from staff during the 2013-14 school year. Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100.

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Teacher Interview Protocol

Intro: Study explanation emphasizing that we really want to learn about your experience at this school.

1. Background:
 - a. How did you come to be in your current position at this school?
 - b. Starting with college, can you tell us what you've done?
 - i. Probe for: training and employment
2. Current Teaching Assignment:
 - a. What do you teach here?
 - b. How did you wind up in this position?
3. Overall view of school:
 - a. If another teacher would ask you, "What's it like to teach at _____?" How might you respond?
 - b. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?
4. Hiring:
 - a. How were you hired at this school? Step-by-step.
 - b. Do teachers play a role in hiring other teachers? If so, how?
 - c. Has the hiring process changed at this school? If so, how and why?
5. Induction:
 - a. Did you have some kind of induction as a new teacher at this school? What worked and what didn't?
 - b. How are new teachers inducted now? How have things changed since you got here?
6. Support:
 - a. What kinds of supports are available here for teachers to improve their instruction?
 - b. What works well for you? What doesn't? (Probe: PD, Coaching, Collaboration, Evaluation)
7. Evaluation:
 - a. How is your teaching evaluated? Describe the process.
 - b. Was it helpful? How?
8. Administration:
 - a. Who do you go to for support? For what?
9. Social & Psychological Supports:
 - a. What sorts of social and psychological supports does your school offer for students?
 - b. What support do you get for interacting with parents and families?
10. Career goals:
 - a. How long do you expect to stay at this school? In what roles?
 - i. If yes: What keeps you at this school?
 - ii. If no: Why do you think you might leave?
11. Union:
 - a. What role does the union or the contract play in this school?
12. More: Do you have any additional comments?

Principal Interview Protocol

Overview of Study: 6 Schools, All high-poverty, high-minority. All Level 1.

1. Background:
 - a. How long have you been at this school? Prior experience in education? Anything else we should know about how you got here?
2. School Overview:
 - a. Could you first provide an overview of its structure and programs?
 - b. (Where applicable) What does it mean for your school to be a pilot/turnaround/charter school?
 - c. (Where applicable) How did you go about selecting teachers when ---- was placed in turnaround?
 - d. How would you describe it to a teacher or parent who might be interested in it—both its strengths and weaknesses?
3. Teachers: We'd like to get a sense of who your teachers are.
 - a. Where do they come from?
 - b. What formal or informal preparation do they have?
 - c. What attracts them to the school?
 - d. Approximately, what proportion has fewer than 10 years of experience? 5 years of experience? 0-5 years of experience? (Has that changed or remained steady?)
4. Recruitment and Hiring:
 - a. Could you describe the process you use to recruit and hire teachers? (Applicants per position? Teaching demonstration? Who decides?)
 - b. What challenges do you face in recruiting teachers?
 - c. Are there specific demographics or subject areas that you have trouble finding/attracting? If so, how have you addressed those challenges?
5. Assignment:
 - a. How do you assign teachers to a particular grade or subject?
 - b. Could you describe the teachers' responsibilities, both during school hours and outside of school hours? Scheduled and unscheduled time?
6. Compensation:
 - a. Please tell us about the pay scale for teachers. Are there additional stipends? If so, can you describe these opportunities?
7. Collaboration:
 - a. Are the teachers organized by teams, grade-levels, subjects? If so, what does that mean for how they do their work? What is the work of those teams?
8. Supports:
 - a. What supports can a new teacher count on in getting started? And for more experienced teachers?
9. Role:
 - a. Are there specialized roles for some teachers? (Teach Plus, team leaders, etc.) If so, please describe them.
10. Curriculum:
 - a. Does the school provide a curriculum for the teachers? If so, please tell us about it.
11. Professional Learning:
 - a. Do you have formal professional development? Instructional coaches? If so, please tell us about them.
12. Supervision and Evaluation:
 - a. How do you supervise teachers? How do you evaluate teachers? Are these separate processes? Do students' test scores play a role in evaluating teachers?
13. Dismissal:
 - a. How frequently do you dismiss or decide not to rehire a teacher? Reasons?
14. Retention:
 - a. How long do teachers stay? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? Is there a type of teacher who stays or leaves? Is turnover a challenge?
15. Policy Context:
 - a. Does state or local policy play a role in how you approach building your teaching capacity?
16. Union:
 - a. What role if any does a teachers' union play at your school?
17. Have we missed anything?