Recruiting for Hard-to-Staff Schools

YOU KNOW ROCK star teachers when you see them. They are capable of commanding attention day in and day out, and they motivate students to achieve well beyond standard expectations. They even help other teachers succeed.

So how can school districts attract them, especially to hard-to-staff schools and subjects?

Four districts that implemented the Opportunity Culture model — Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Cabarrus County, N.C., Syracuse, N.Y., and Nashville, Tenn. — have found a way to keep great teachers in the classroom and reach more students, offering leadership opportunities, on-the-job training and higher pay. Schools reallocate their own budgets using new staffing models that fund pay supplements permanently, rather than with temporary grants, increasing the attractiveness of the roles.

These districts now receive a significant number of high-quality applicants each year, allowing for selectivity in positions that once went unfilled.

Popular Options

How did districts with the best recruitment outcomes do it? The Opportunity Culture provides ways for teachers to advance professionally without leaving teaching. The three most popular roles are these:

MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP. This keeps excellent teachers with leadership competencies in the classroom by leading a teaching team. They co-teach, plan and collaborate with the team on establishing annual goals, offering ongoing feedback and support, and taking accountability for the group’s success.

TIME-TECHNOLOGY SWAPS. Great teachers can extend their reach by using digital instruction for limited, age-appropriate periods of time. While some students work online, the teacher's time...
is freed to work with other students, collaborate with peers and plan lessons. Most schools rotate students between in-person and digital instruction on an alternating-day schedule or by splitting the class period. Some teachers also pull out small groups of students for differentiated instruction on a flexible schedule.

SUBJECT SPECIALIZATION. Elementary school teachers specialize in a core subject or subject pair, such as math/science or language arts/social studies, according to their strengths. Students get the best teaching available in each subject as specializing teachers become true experts, with time to plan deeper, more creative lessons and provide more differentiated instruction.

Appealing Features
Several other aspects of the Opportunity Culture contribute to its appeal to highly capable educators willing to tackle their districts’ most difficult assignments.

INCREASED TEACHER PAY. A select group of teachers and administrators customizes the model to best fit each school, using the resulting financial savings to increase pay for excellent teachers, typically by 10 percent to 50 percent. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, multi-classroom leaders earn pay supplements of up to $23,000, which increases their salary to 50 percent above the state’s average for teachers.

EARLY RECRUITMENT. Grab the attention of top teachers early, before they commit to other districts. Project Leadership & Investment for Transformation, a learning community that serves nine high-need schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system, began recruiting as early as March. They received 27 to 30 applications for each Opportunity Culture opening in 2013 and 2014.

Many candidates were so enthusiastic about the career advancement potential that they agreed to take non-Opportunity Culture jobs to get a foot in the district’s door. Creating this vital pipeline will help the district as it scales up its Opportunity Culture initiative to reach nearly half its schools by 2017.

MESSAGE REFINEMENT. Charlotte-Mecklenburg had an easier time recruiting terrific candidates in 2014, the second year the new roles were available, because they honed the message of how Opportunity Culture benefits students and teachers. Anticipating teachers’ questions, recruiters made videos that allowed candidates to visualize the roles in action and hear directly from Opportunity Culture teachers. The videos and a new brochure clearly defined the impact on a teacher’s career.

SPREADING THE WORD. Opportunity Culture schools encourage their teachers to spread the word about job openings, sharing their experiences and explaining the model to other educators in their networks. Great teachers are attracted to schools where like-minded excellent teachers already work, and are enticed by hearing directly from those who would be their colleagues, in person or in the videos.

Openings should be publicized widely through social media, webinars, local news media and partner organizations. By connecting with teacher preparation programs, the Nashville Opportunity Culture schools created yearlong, paid student-teacher positions. These student-teachers not only provide valuable classroom support to current teachers, but also serve as future Opportunity Culture teacher candidates, strengthening the pipeline.

Videos and other recruiting materials can be found at http://OpportunityCulture.org.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT is senior editor at Public Impact in Chapel Hill, N.C. E-mail: sharon.barrett@publicimpact.com. Twitter: @OppCulture. EMILY AYSCUE HASSEL, Public Impact’s co-director, contributed to this article.

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