

INNOVATIONS IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: Highlights from Illinois' charter school sector



The common perception of human resources (HR) management strategy in charter schools is one of “burn and churn”—hiring young, low-paid teachers, often prepared through alternative routes like Teach for America, and working them long hours until they burn out and are quickly replaced by more of the same. As one reporter notes, “The image of the harried 20-something teacher burning out after 60-hour weeks in her charter school has become a stock type in education debates.”¹ Research on teaching in charter schools generally shows that pay is quite low relative to surrounding districts, security is virtually nonexistent, and turnover rates are typically quite high. Though many of these factors can be at least partially explained by the characteristics of charter school teachers (less experienced) and the schools in which they work (more urban), they are still not conducive to the high functioning HR systems needed to optimize a school’s potential. However, research also indicates that charter school teachers are more likely than non-charter teachers to report cooperation amongst their colleagues, supportive teaching environments, higher levels of autonomy, greater influence on school policies and practices, and more support from administrators and colleagues.² So, what is really going on in charter schools?

In a recent study for the Illinois Education Research Council, we interviewed administrators from 27 charter schools in Illinois to learn more about their human resource management strategies and how these affect school outcomes. We found that many of the schools in our study do use the “incentivist” HR practices described in the popular press. However, we also found that the newest generation of Illinois charter schools was considerably less likely to use these “burn and churn” practices, and that HR management in charter schools is more complex and varied than popular perception would suggest, likely because of the flexibility that charter schools are granted. This brief focuses on elements of three alternative human resource management strategies that we found in Illinois charter schools:

- 1) teacher support and empowerment;
- 2) information-rich decision-making; and
- 3) mission-driven practice.

While some schools in the study may have emphasized one HR management approach over the others, almost every school used elements from each of these strategies.





Empower Teachers through Influence in HR Decision-Making

Studies have found that teachers are the least likely professional group to believe that their opinions matter in their work³, and numerous scholars decried the loss of teacher autonomy through reforms such as scripted curricula.⁴ However, some observers have noted that charter schools are at the vanguard of new teacher leadership models that provide teachers more voice in school governance.⁵ Over three quarters of the schools we interviewed stated that teachers were involved in hiring their colleagues, and teachers were involved in the final hiring decision at almost half of the schools. One third of the schools we studied allowed teachers to play a significant role in determining professional development opportunities, evaluating their peers, and evaluating their own teaching. Teachers at one Illinois charter school designed a voluntary performance-based pay plan, and several schools in our study offered their highest performing teachers an increased voice in school decision-making, additional autonomy, or career advancement opportunities.

In fact, the most frequently cited teacher retention strategy – mentioned by more than half of the schools in this study – was to offer teachers increased influence over school decision-making.



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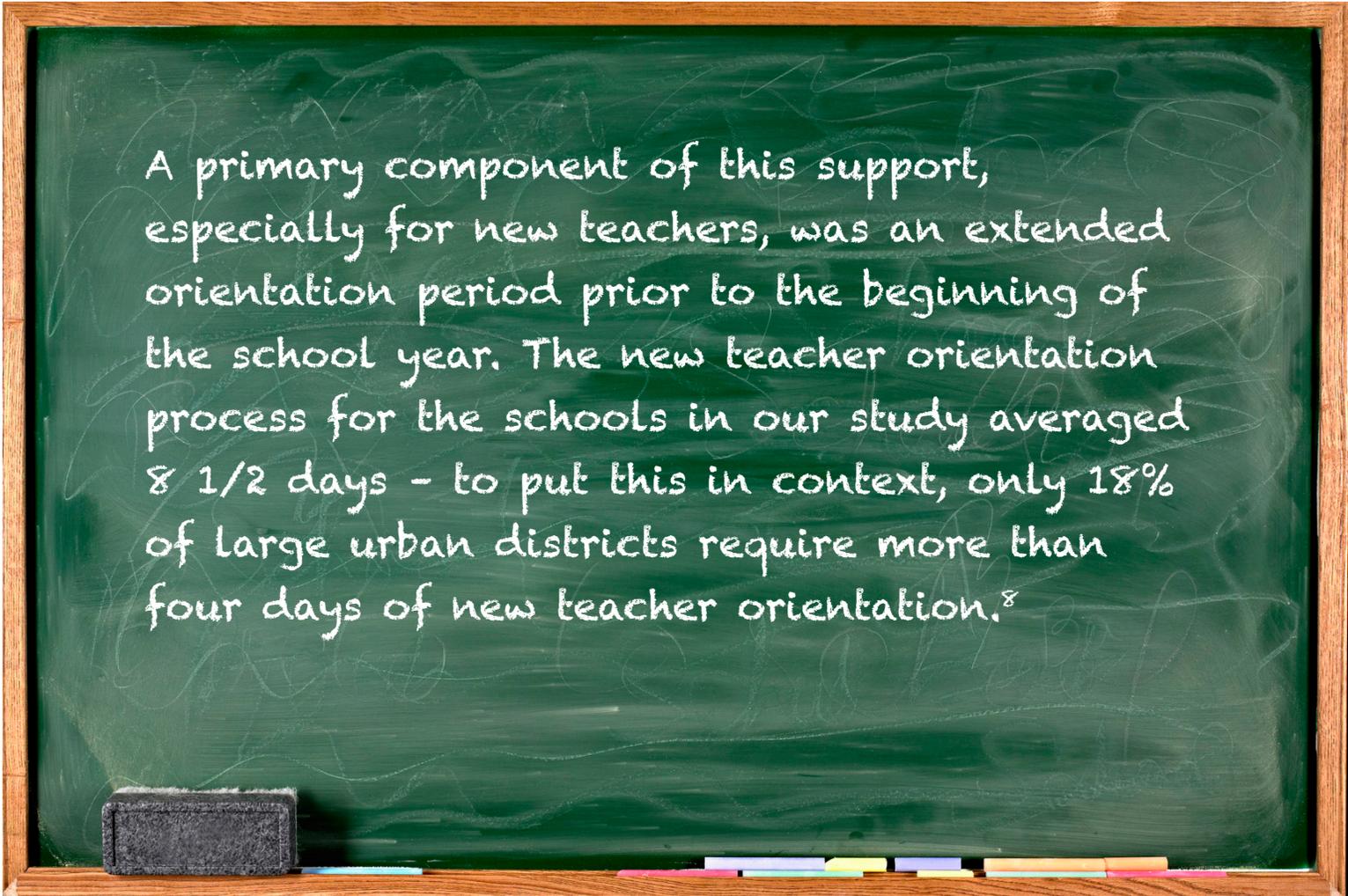
Recruit and Hire for Fit (and Retention)

The most frequently sought teacher characteristic for the schools in our study was a buy-in to the school's mission. Administrators in Illinois charter schools noted one of the most successful strategies for ensuring teacher fit and quality from the outset was recruiting teachers through referrals from current staff. More than half of the schools in our study used this strategy and, according to a representative from Rowe Elementary School in Chicago, "Some of our strongest candidates have come by word of mouth—we have found that great teachers tend to be friends with other great teachers. Informal networks have spread the word about our school, and some of our best have sought us out rather than us searching for them." About one-fifth of the teachers from the LEARN Charter School Network were referrals from current staff, and the Noble Network of Charter Schools cited data indicating that about 40% of referred candidates get hired, compared to less than 10% of those from other sources. Several Illinois charters, including Catalyst Schools network, the Noble Network, and the Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) managed by Civitas also provide bonuses of up to \$1,000 for successful referrals.



Teacher Selection: Deliberate, Data-Driven, Demonstrations

The schools in our study were remarkably deliberate and thorough in their teacher hiring process. As one of our participants said, “Hiring is probably the only time a school can establish its beliefs and be clear about what they want in a teacher.” The on-site job interview often lasted a full day, involving multiple one-on-one, small group, and large group interviews. For example, the on-campus interview at Galapagos Charter School includes a fit interview, a demonstration lesson, feedback related to the demonstration lesson, a tour of the school with an instructor, and a writing task. The vast majority of the schools in our study used demonstration lessons as part of the hiring process. Some (such as Christopher House Elementary School) visited the candidate’s current school to observe lessons and gauge the rapport the teacher has built with his or her students, others (such as Intrinsic Charter School) viewed video recordings from the candidate’s current classroom, and still others (such as Passages Charter School) had the candidate substitute or teach summer school on their campus. Some schools focus on instructional elements of the demonstration lesson – for example, the University of Chicago Charter Schools use their own instructional rubric and student feedback to evaluate the demonstration lesson – whereas others focus on how prospective teachers respond to feedback and how receptive they are to coaching.



A primary component of this support, especially for new teachers, was an extended orientation period prior to the beginning of the school year. The new teacher orientation process for the schools in our study averaged 8 1/2 days - to put this in context, only 18% of large urban districts require more than four days of new teacher orientation.⁸

Extended Orientation to Support and Develop Teachers

More than a quarter of the schools in our study named teacher support as one of their most successful HR management initiatives. A primary component of this support, especially for new teachers, was an extended orientation period prior to the beginning of the school year. The new teacher orientation process for the schools in our study averaged 8 1/2 days – to put this in context, and only 18% of large urban districts require more than four days of new teacher orientation.⁸ The back-to-school orientation process, called “Institute” across several charter schools, typically addressed logistical issues, such the location of school bathrooms and training on computer systems, but also more strategic issues. For example, almost half of the schools in our study emphasized school culture during orientation, such as the learning “the Intrinsic Way” at Intrinsic charter school or the essential principles of Lasallian education at Catalyst Schools. The orientation process also often sets aside time for curricular planning, either individually or in teams, or to introduce new school-wide initiatives. For instance, the Victory Education Partners schools of CICS have three weeks of summer institute beginning in August, where they have covered techniques from Doug Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), reviewed components of the curriculum, developed interim assessments for unit planning, and reviewed lesson planning.



Evaluation: More Observations, More Observers, More Formative

On average, the schools in our study used four classroom observations for each teacher evaluation, and more than two of every five schools used multiple observers to rate each teacher's practice. For example, teachers at the Charter Schools USA-managed CICS schools have a 5-minute administrative walk-through at least once a week and a 20-minute observation every week, along with longer formal observations at least twice a year, all of which contribute to their summative rating. This is important because recent research indicates that multiple observations and multiple observers can substantially increase the reliability of teacher evaluation ratings.⁹ Further, the majority of schools in our study stated that they used evaluations primarily for formative purposes, such as identifying areas for professional development, and studies suggest that teacher evaluation results can help improve teacher performance and retain more of schools' best teachers.¹⁰ Schools such as KIPP and the Noble Network noted that evaluation scores were used for instructional improvement and served as "an extension of coaching," in line with other research on teacher evaluation in charter schools,¹¹ which finds:

"Rather than engage with each other only around a formal evaluation schedule, leaders and colleagues in these schools used embedded development and evaluation to constantly work together to improve their practice."



Customized, Non-Financial Rewards to Attract and Retain the Best Teachers

Many schools in our study—especially those in Chicago—noted that they were unable to compete with their local districts on salaries alone. Because starting salaries in charter schools are typically negotiated between each teacher and the school administration rather than via set salary schedules, more than half of the schools in our study used some form of market-rate to set teacher pay levels. For example, salaries at UNO Charter School Network often depend on both the qualifications of the candidate and the subject area he or she teaches. Perhaps more interestingly, some principals were able to make special accommodations to retain their best teachers. At schools such as Intrinsic, this might mean taking responsibilities off of teachers' plates where possible, whereas other schools might assign extra duties and responsibilities to help increase salary. Passages Charter School reports that they have had success offering additional sick or vacation days as incentives, and they also allow highly effective teachers to sign multiyear contracts, rather than the typical year-to-year, at-will appointments. The Noble Network says they will do “whatever it takes” to ensure that successful teachers remain at their schools, and when their leadership noticed that talented teachers were leaving to start families, they opened a daycare center to support and retain these staff.

With inability to compete on salary, charter schools offer significant non-financial incentives that address aspects teachers value such as:

- Increased voice in decision-making and school policies;
- Enhanced leadership opportunities. Many schools offer leadership fellowship opportunities to train the next generation of charter school administrators; and
- Individualized professional development.



Career Advancement as a Strategy for Retention and Succession

Almost half of the schools in our study provided clear career advancement or leadership development pathways beyond the opportunities that are typically available to teachers, often tapping high performing teachers to advance to instructional coach, master teacher, or other hybrid teacher-leader positions. This was especially the case in growing networks, such as KIPP, which tended to offer more opportunities for upward mobility and the salary increases these entail. Intrinsic Schools has piloted a program to train future principals, and Catalyst Charter Schools identify potential leaders and provide financial support for coursework from Northwestern University's non-profit management program that they believe is especially useful for future charter school administrators. The University of Chicago Charter Schools offer a year-long leadership fellowship focused on leading change initiatives aligned with school goals, and note that many fellows have gone on to leadership positions within their network or in the Chicago Public Schools. Similarly, KIPP offers the Miles Family Fellowship and the Fisher Fellowship, which identify potential leaders and prepare them to open new KIPP campuses. KIPP also uses several hybrid teacher leader roles that involve peer observation, facilitating weekly meetings, and working with the school's leadership team.

¹Sawchuk, 2015.

²Canatta & Penalosa, 2012; Ni, 2012; Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011; Wei, Patel, & Young, 2014

³Gallup, 2014

⁴see, e.g., Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Milner, 2013

⁵Kahlenberg and Potter, 2015; Petrilli and Northern, 2014

⁶DeArmond, Gross, Bowen, Demerit, & Lake, 2012, p.27; Gross & DeArmond, 2013

⁷Grogan & Youngs, 2011; Gross & DeArmond, 2011; Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, & Thomsson, 2010; Jackson, 2013

⁸National Council on Teacher Quality, 2015

⁹Ho & Kane, 2013; Kane & Staiger, 2012; White, Cowhy, Stevens, & Sporte, 2012

¹⁰Dee & Wyckoff, 2015

¹¹Donaldson and Peske, 2010; Gross and DeArmond, 2013, p. 12



Conclusions: The Future of the Teaching Profession?

The HR strategies described in this brief, and many others described in our full report, are consistent with the employment features that teachers find attractive and also address perceived weaknesses in the current educational system in general, and the teaching profession in particular. These include increased teacher voice in school policy and decision-making, enhanced leadership and career advancement pathways, individualized professional development, opportunities for collaboration, acknowledging and rewarding success, and working with like-minded colleagues around a common mission. While it is difficult to draw any causal conclusions about the impact of these HR practices on school outcomes, we do find some evidence that incentivist practices may be associated with math achievement gains under some conditions.

Because charter schools are granted extra flexibility and subject to more competitive market conditions, they are expected to implement more innovative and efficient HR management strategies than non-charter, district schools. The descriptions and examples of charter school HR practices presented here illustrate that, in many areas, some charter schools are implementing promising and state-of-the-art approaches to HR management. But this is not universally the case, nor is it unique to the charter school sector. In fact, we venture to guess that most of the practices described in our report have also been attempted in non-charter school settings. As evidenced by the U.S. Department of Education's Teach to Lead initiative, the TeachStrong campaign, and Illinois' new Teacher Leader endorsement, there is renewed interest in and new opportunities for teacher leadership both nationally and statewide. It is our hope that this brief provides a better understanding of human resource management in charter schools to provide a glimpse into the future of teaching and insights on how innovations from Illinois charter sector could be instrumental in transforming the profession.

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