The New Teacher Project

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The Education Trust in Washington, D.C., recently gave a presentation that highlighted just how great the need for new teachers is in this country. They started with an estimate of the number of math teachers we are going to need to hire over the next decade and concluded that if we hired all of the students who are currently in teacher education programs and are pursuing certification in math—if we put them all in classrooms—we would not even make a dent in the number of teachers needed. Even if we hired as teachers all of the students majoring in math at colleges and universities nationwide, they calculated, we still would not have enough math teachers. Clearly, we need to figure out ways to bring qualified teachers with alternative educational and professional backgrounds into the classroom. That, in a nutshell, is what The New Teacher Project was created to do.

The New Teacher Project began in 1997 as a spinoff of the successful Teach For America (TFA) program, which brings high-achieving college graduates directly from their institutions of higher education into the classrooms of underresourced public schools across the nation. Inspired by the results of TFA’s recruitment strategies and the positive feedback from participating school systems, we established The New Teacher Project to help school districts employ the same teacher recruitment and training techniques. In the four years of our operation, The New Teacher Project has evolved into a nonprofit consulting organization composed of over 60 individuals with diverse backgrounds, including teaching, nonprofit work, education policy, and management consulting. Most of the work that we do revolves around establishing alternative programs for state departments of education and public school districts across the country to increase the number of outstanding individuals who become public school teachers and create environments

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for all educators that maximize their impact on student achievement. Our clients have included the New York City Board of Education, the Massachusetts Department of Education, the District of Columbia Public Schools, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, the City University of New York, and the San Jose Unified School District. To meet their diverse needs, we have helped attract and prepare over 2,600 high-quality new teachers, launched 19 programs in 10 states, and developed 10 training institutes.

**Current Recruitment Obstacles**

To construct a better system, you have to understand how the existing system works. The New Teacher Project has identified four main obstacles to recruiting and retaining high-quality certified teachers in school districts under the current system.

1. **Lengthy timeline.** In large urban districts, the number of teaching vacancies for the upcoming school year may not be known until early summer, meaning the application and hiring process may extend so far into late summer that applicants make other plans for the fall before receiving an offer.

2. **Lack of school-level contact.** Recruitment and hiring are often conducted by centralized district staff, but prospective teachers are more likely to accept an offer if they have contact—and are able to make a connection—with the students and faculty at a specific school.

3. **Unclear process.** Delays, lack of clarity, and frustration with the district application process is a significant reason why many individuals committed to education do not end up in urban districts.

4. **Unfocused recruitment.** Most urban districts do not have the resources to make recruitment a strategic, focused endeavor or to adjust their current recruitment process to accommodate their dramatically increased need for teachers.

**Typical District Challenges**

Let’s take a look at how these obstacles prevent districts from getting the qualified teachers they need. In a typical scenario, districts are concerned about needing to hire teachers for the next school year, but they are unable to calculate the number of vacancies in specific fields until late in the school year, preventing them from making focused, early recruitment efforts for specific positions. Figuring the number of vacancies is so difficult for a number of reasons. First, most districts do not have historical trend data that can
accurately predict vacancies. Second, many teacher contracts do not require resignation announcements until the beginning of June, and there are often disincentives, such as discontinuation of benefits or exclusion from summer teaching activities, that keep educators from making their intention to leave known any earlier. Third, union policies often require a teacher-transfer process that gives tenured teachers priority. Thus, teacher counts at district schools cannot be completed until the transferring teachers have indicated their school choice, and this process, which usually affects only a small percentage of a district’s teachers, can delay the entire recruitment process.

Even without knowing exactly what their vacancies will be, however, large urban districts end up spending most of their time and energy during the school year recruiting certified teachers. Unfortunately, negative experiences with the recruitment process can often turn qualified candidates away from positions in the districts that need them most. Lack of school-level contact when dealing with a large district’s central human resources personnel can be a major deterrent. Visiting a specific school and making a personal connection can often make the difference in convincing an individual to accept an offer from the district, but the politics of district administration may exclude principals from the recruitment process or cause principals to work on recruitment without district involvement. If a central district administration, and not the school staff who are the major stakeholders in teacher hiring efforts, is the only accountable party, candidates may receive late responses or no responses to their application and end up accepting offers elsewhere.

**Results of a Flawed Recruitment System**

Such delays and the lack of personal contact from district administrations can lead to candidates’ frustration with the entire process, especially in the largest school systems. In these districts, candidates may find that there are multiple routes for an application to travel through the process and many handoffs among district, human resources, and school-level staff. Districts may not be able to keep track of applications or their status effectively, and if no single individual or group takes responsibility for the process, unreasonable delays can result. The level of uncertainty involved and the lack of communication and personal follow-through highlight for many applicants the drawbacks of working in large districts as opposed to smaller, suburban systems.

A typical large district, then, is heavily involved for a long period of time in recruiting new teachers. Yet because such districts often lack the resources to change their administration, they are locked into a minimally responsive and often ineffective recruitment and hiring system that cannot meet their needs in this time of serious teacher shortages. What happens is that when July and August roll around, they undoubtedly realize that they have not
hired enough certified teachers to fill all of their vacancies for the upcoming school year. So they then do what we call the “street sweep.” They go out into the community, and if you have a pulse and you pass the criminal check, they’ll stick you in a classroom. No training, no support—nothing. This is understandable—after all, these districts are desperate for teachers—but is obviously not the best thing we can do for our children.

A Different Approach

At The New Teacher Project, we encourage school districts and states—if they know that they are going to hire uncertified teachers—to utilize a distinct and very specific process. We work with them to develop their internal capability to aggressively recruit, select, train, and support high-quality individuals. The focus is on improving existing strategies and systems for recruiting and supporting candidates with education backgrounds. We also work with them to set up and maintain programs that enable them to go out into the community and attract a specific kind of person into the classroom. We look for young and mid-career professionals, career changers, and people who have very strong content knowledge. We look mostly for those who have content knowledge in math, science, special education, and technology, which are the target areas for almost every district. We also look for people who specifically want to teach in the most underresourced schools in a district, because we already have enough teachers fighting over spots at magnet high schools, and we need people who are really dedicated to teaching in the schools that need them the most.

Recruiting Passionate Professionals

We conduct our search for teacher candidates with a very specific set of guidelines (Figure 1). In terms of recruitment, we concentrate on designated sectors of the population. We are not looking for people trying to “find themselves,” who think they might like having three months off in the summer and think maybe they’ll try teaching. Instead, we go out into the community and begin our search where we know the high achievers are—sectors such as law, medicine, banking, accounting, and science. We go after people who aren’t necessarily looking for a career change and who may be extremely successful at what they’re currently doing but can be compelled to use their skills to give back to their community.
We start with a mass awareness campaign in the city, and we also integrate grassroots campaigns. Again, we follow a prescribed protocol. To begin the campaign, we send the message that children in the city, many of them the poorest children, are not receiving the education they deserve, either because of where they were born or the family they were born into. We expose this social injustice and call on the city’s most outstanding citizens to make a commitment to do something about it. With one of our clients, for example, we ran an ad featuring a grainy picture of a little girl. Above her it read, “Four out of five fourth graders in the city’s most challenged schools can’t read and write according to state standards. Are you willing to do something about it?” Officials at the school district were skeptical about running the ad. They felt the negative message would not inspire people to join the program. So we said to them, “First, this is true. We didn’t make this statistic up. Also, if you want to try to compel the city’s best people to come into the district, you can’t say that everything’s great in our district, so come and take a large pay cut and be a cog in the wheel. It’s not going to work. You have to send a very compelling and inspiring message that people can make a difference where they’re needed most.” We put the ad in the paper. We were looking for 250 teachers that year. We received over 2,300 applications for those positions.
Selecting First-Rate Teachers

At The New Teacher Project, we realize that teacher quality is a key factor in determining the quality of education students receive. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, while 32 percent of all fourth graders read proficiently at their grade level, only 13 percent of low-income fourth graders read proficiently at their grade level, and by age nine, children in low-income areas are already three to four grade levels behind children in high-income areas in reading proficiency. The New Teacher Project usually gets between eight and ten applications per vacancy in the alternate route programs we set up, which is an astounding figure for the kinds of districts that we’re working with (Figure 2). And we get some phenomenal people applying, so selection is something we take very seriously. Because teacher quality is so important to student learning, we must make sure that the chosen candidates are the kind of people who will be successful teaching in an urban classroom. Accordingly, we have developed a two-step selection process.

Figure 2
Applicants versus Vacancies in Alternate Route Programs
from The New Teacher Project

Source: The New Teacher Project, 2001
(Data as of 8/10/01)
The first step in our process is a paper screen where we look at applicants’ GPAs, where they graduated from college and in what subject area, as well as recommendations, writing samples, etc. About 30 percent of the applicants are weeded out through that process. We invite the remaining candidates in for a day-long session, which consists of a one-on-one interview, a sample teaching lesson, and a discussion group. You would be amazed at what we learn through this process.

For example, a person applied to one of our programs who had his master’s and his Ph.D. in astrophysics from MIT. The district looked at this guy and said, “Well, he could probably teach high school physics. Hire him!” However, we needed to meet him. During the sample teaching lesson part of the interview, the gentleman literally read off of note cards the entire time. He never once looked up, asked a question, or tried to engage anybody in the class. Now, we don’t expect applicants with no teaching experience to know the seven-step lesson plan before they come into the classroom, but we are looking for people who feel comfortable talking to and interacting with a classroom full of students. So we asked him, during the one-on-one interview, how he felt the presentation went. He said, “Oh, great. Got through all my cards. Had enough time at the end.” We’re not saying that this guy couldn’t eventually be a great high school physics teacher. He’s just not the kind of person who can be successful in a fast-track program. We need people who are very self-aware and are able to communicate effectively with groups. The sample teaching lesson really helps to identify these people.

The last component of the interview process is the discussion group. We supply the applicants with articles on current issues in urban education before they come to the interview, and then we just discuss the topic. For example, one topic is the achievement gap between poor students and students from wealthier communities. One article we provide specifically chronicles a day in the life of a little boy named Ruben. Ruben has all kinds of problems during the day. He has no breakfast, no one to help him with his homework, nowhere quiet to study, etc. So to start, we ask the applicant, “Is it fair to hold all students to the same high standards?” You would be amazed at the number of people who, before they even step foot in the classroom, are already making excuses. “Absolutely not, we can’t hold kids to the same high standards. Poor Ruben didn’t eat breakfast this morning. He didn’t have somebody to help him with his homework. We can’t expect him to do as well as the kids in Beverly Hills are doing.” That response to us is a huge red flag. We’re looking for the kind of person who believes that we need to have the same high standards for all students. If we want our kids to go out into the world and succeed, they’re going to have to be at the same
academic level. We’re going to face a lot of obstacles, I know that, but our job is to make sure that children overcome those obstacles and can succeed at the same levels. That’s what we’re trying to get at.

**A Success Story for Schools and Students**

Overall, we’ve had tremendous success across the country in places as dissimilar as New York City, Kansas City, and Baton Rouge. More often than not, when I speak with a community about what we do, people cannot believe that these changes are possible in their districts. Then we run the program and they see great numbers of impressive individuals who want to come into the classroom from diverse backgrounds. Applicants to our Teaching Fellows programs have included a senior economist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, an assistant district attorney, a partner at a Silicon Valley venture capital firm, and a sportswriter for *Sports Illustrated* and *The New York Times*. It’s really inspiring.

We believe that we are truly bringing in a different type of high-quality teacher through our programs. We have found in our work that there are a number of barriers that exist in school districts that actually discourage the most outstanding certified teachers from coming into the classroom. I’ve heard the statistic that about 50 percent of certified teachers end up not teaching in public school classrooms, and there is a lot of evidence that this is the higher-achieving 50 percent. So we can really make progress in attracting high-quality individuals if we recognize that there are barriers—from timing to customer service, to systems and processes—that prevent the best people from coming into classrooms. In many of our programs, 40 percent of people who are coming into teaching have advanced degrees. Nationwide, 40 percent of our new teachers are people of color. Perhaps most compelling is how these new teachers perform on nationally recognized standardized tests. Our recruits are passing the incoming teacher tests in some of our sites at almost twice the rate of other new teachers who are seeking employment in those states. At The New Teacher Project, we believe that alternative routes are an incredibly effective way to bring high-quality teachers into low-performing urban schools. And we hope to make believers out of the rest of the country, too.
References


Appendix

Figure 3
Average Undergraduate GPA of Participants in Programs from The New Teacher Project

Source: The New Teacher Project, 2001
(Data as of 8/10/01)
Figure 4
Percentage of Participants in Programs from The New Teacher Project with Graduate Degrees

Source: The New Teacher Project, 2001
(Data as of 8/10/01)
Figure 5
Percentage of Participants in Programs from The New Teacher Project Qualified to Teach Math or Science

Source: The New Teacher Project, 2001
(Data as of 8/10/01)
Figure 6
People of Color as Percentage of Total Participants in Programs
from The New Teacher Project*

*People of color include African American, Asian American, Latino/Latina, and Native American people.

Source: The New Teacher Project, 2001
(Data as of 8/10/01)