



RESEARCH REPORT

It Takes a (Whole) School

Supports teachers need to serve students in high-poverty, urban schools.

According to a new report, most teachers in urban, high-poverty schools are remarkably motivated to meet the challenges at hand, but they need and want schoolwide, principal-led supports in order to succeed in the face of the uncertainties that economic privation brings. Schools that hope to retain these teachers and bolster their success must provide those supports.

A research team led by Harvard Graduate School of Education's Susan Moore Johnson at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers spoke to 95 teachers and administrators in six high-poverty, high-minority schools in a large, urban district. Researchers analyzed the data to study the effect

MYTWOCENTS

How do you get teachers to buy in to new initiatives?



Mark French (@PrincipalFrench): With lots of communication, training & support. Work alongside them & see what they need.



Kas Nelson (@kasonelson): I start by showing how the initiative will help/be good for kids. I also like to model for staff, and get those early-adopters on board & let them model.



Kristin Bishop: Let the teachers find the new initiatives. Give them time to explore, read, and talk. Then they bring the ideas to me, and I set up systems to support them.

of uncertainty—the instability that often disrupts their students’ lives and impedes their performance—on teachers’ work and career decisions. They wanted to look at what kinds of supports might make a difference for teachers, and to see how actively (or not) schools engaged with the challenges arising outside their walls.

Teachers said they contend daily with the obstacles their students face—obstacles caused by previous negative experiences in school, unequal opportunities, and limited services and poor support outside of school. They described their roles in students’ lives as extending beyond those of traditional instructors, and most said they stepped into those roles willingly.

Schools as Open Systems—Or Closed

But these teachers consistently described their need for robust support from their schools and principals. And researchers found a great degree of variety in how school leaders responded to the complexities of their environment, characterized as reflecting different organizational philosophies about how schools can and should engage with the communities around them.

In an “open-system” approach, leaders are inclined to acknowledge more explicitly that schools operate within

a context of broader challenges and needs. Principals in an open system recognize the academic and social needs that students bring with them, and they work actively to develop schoolwide practices to respond, offering a web of support for teachers’ work. In a more closed system, administrators don’t deny the role that the outside environment plays, but they tend to respond to it as an intrusion that should be minimized or held at bay, rather than incorporated and addressed. The report finds that leaders who recognize that schools are open systems that require coordinated organizational responses to uncertainty are better able to provide the support teachers want.

The researchers identify four effective organizational supports that help teachers manage the uncertainty of their environments. To retain and support teachers, schools should: coordinate instructional practices and curriculum across classes; develop and consistently follow schoolwide policies to promote orderly and disciplined learning environments; offer school-based, socio-emotional and psychological support; and create and prioritize schoolwide initiatives for engaging parents. Read the full report at bit.ly/1oHEXmZ

From Usable Knowledge at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Learn more: www.gse.harvard.edu/uk

SPOTLIGHT ON BEST PRACTICES

Student Recognition

Our Renaissance Academic Pep Rally shines a spotlight on and brings excitement to student academic success in a way that traditionally has been reserved for athletics. Last spring, our gym was full of students, parents, community members and our district’s superintendent as our students received T-shirts, limousine lunch-rides, and other prizes based on their academic performance. We received tremendous feedback from our parents and community during and after the event.

—*Patrick Mackin, principal of Alta Vista Elementary Slidell Junior High School in Slidell, Louisiana*

Every year, I personally design a school shirt with a unique theme for our school. Parents and local organizations donate funds to ensure that every child and teacher gets a shirt. The staff and students wear their shirts with pride, and at the end of every month the students return their shirts to my office. My staff and I calculate students’ achievements and then iron awards onto the backs of each individual shirt. Students can earn as many as 10 awards each month, based upon course grades, citizenship, attendance, honor roll, and reading goals.

—*Donna Boles, principal of Perkins-Tryon Intermediate School, in Perkins, Oklahoma*

“ **Brian Bond: Get your key teachers on board first! Once you convince them that it’s what’s best for students, continue to have open communication, and make sure all staff realize you’re in this with them.** ”

“ **Christopher Wooleyhand: Principals don’t have to worry about buying in for new initiatives if their teachers are included in the decision-making process from the start.** ”