

2020

Teacher and Administrator Experiences with Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Support in a California Charter-led Turnaround School

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Jia; Straubhaar, Rolf; and Ong, Christine. (2020). Teacher and Administrator Experiences with Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Support in a California Charter-led Turnaround School. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 13.*

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol12/iss1/13>

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i.e.: inquiry in education is published by the Center for Practitioner Research at the National College of Education, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.

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Cover Page Footnote

This work was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [52306].

Teacher and Administrator Experiences with Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Support in a California Charter-Led Turnaround School

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In recent years, turnaround schools have become a relatively new phenomenon in education reform, intended as a means of improving student academic outcomes in struggling institutions by significantly changing school administration and structure. Such reforms typically involve a change of faculty at some level, the implementation of drastically different pedagogical or curricular models, and/or the complete replacement of existing management structures by an outside organization, typically under the administration of a charter school management organization (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). In the fall of 2007, a Southern California high school (hereafter referred to as Urban High) with a history of extremely low academic performance became a turnaround school. A charter management organization (hereafter referred to as New Schools) was approved by Urban High's school district to transition this school into a set of small new charter academies, smaller theme-driven schools-within-a-school on Urban High's former campus.

Since 2007, we as authors along with a larger group of associated researchers have studied the impact of this transition on Urban High student academic outcomes, comparing Urban High student performance after the transition to the academic performance of students at a set of comparable neighborhood high schools. We found

that Urban High's students during New Schools's tenure demonstrated statistically significant improvements in achievement, persistence, and completion of college preparatory courses (Herman et al., 2012; Herman et al., 2013).

Given this empirical evidence of the success of turnaround efforts at Urban High, the present article aims to explore teacher and administrator perceptions of the reasons for that success, investigating qualitatively what has been demonstrated quantitatively. Specifically, this article will explore how these measured positive effects of Urban High participation (Herman et al., 2012) may relate to New Schools's *professional capacity*, defined here as "a school's ability to recruit and retain capable staff, the efficacy of performance feedback and professional development, and the social resources within a staff to work together to solve local problems" (Bryk, 2010, p.24), with a particular focus on *teacher quality*. Using interview data from current Urban High employees, this article explores teachers' experiences working in a charter-led turnaround school like Urban High with regards to recruitment and retention, teacher support and evaluation, and the general trends reflected in teacher comments in these areas. By doing so, we highlight some of the unique challenges and opportunities afforded by this yet-unexplored turnaround setting. Given the variety of charter school models (with differences such as non-profit versus for-profit, charter management organizations versus independent single-school charters, and so forth), and the unique challenges of turnaround schools, we were particularly interested in the experiences of teachers and administrators during the turnaround process of Urban High, as led by the charter management organization New Schools.

Through analysis of interview data, we find and will herein argue that Urban High's faculty feel that New Schools's success can be attributed to several factors: first, New Schools's extensive and rigorous hiring process, which participants felt results in a dedicated (though young and relatively new) teacher corps with retention rates that are roughly comparable to similar public school settings. Second, participants felt that the quality of professional development and extent of personal administrative support for teachers available to them through New Schools contributed positively to student success, though (as will be explored further) the quality and rigor of such support was seen to vary significantly across Urban High academies and administrators.

Review of the Literature

These findings reflect the four elements of school management which Bryk (2010; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, & Luppescu, 2010) referred to as *professional capacity*, namely teacher recruitment/selection, retention, and both formal (i.e. professional development) and informal (i.e. teacher mentorship and so forth) support. Scholars have explored all four of these areas at length, within both traditional public school settings and more specifically within charter schools. It is on the basis of this literature, explored below, that we move forward with the present study.

Teacher Recruitment

Most new teachers, in charters and more generally, are White women (Broughman & Rollefson, 2000; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999). As White women are among those teachers who most often leave schools set in urban settings, schools like Urban High at the time of this study experienced difficulty recruiting qualified teachers (Arnold, Choy, & Bobbitt, 1993; Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; Stinebrickner, 1999). As a result, many districts and charter management organizations like New Schools have sought recent college graduates (in particular Teach For America participants) to teach in their schools each year,¹ though the effectiveness of such teachers is relatively contested.²

Teacher Retention

Interestingly, teachers with two years or less of classroom experience (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004), math and science teachers (Arnold, Choy, & Bobbitt, 1993), and White teachers in urban schools and schools with high percentages of minority students (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002) have tended to leave the profession more than their peers, with teachers of color being more likely than White teachers to enter and stay in minority-dominant urban schools (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). However, studies of charter schools have found that particular policies help to ameliorate problems with teacher retention. School-based mentoring programs have had a strong positive effect (Liu, Johnson, & Peske, 2004), as has frequent and informal administrative support (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006) and increased teacher autonomy (Weiss, 1999). Charter schools have been noted as experiencing large amounts of teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001), as charters are able to hire and fire staff more easily than traditional public schools. While this is often noted as a positive attribute (as it allows charters to easily dismiss ineffective faculty), Stuit and Smith's (2010) national study of teacher turnover in charter schools questioned this assumption, arguing that this trend creates a revolving door of new, inexperienced teachers that often results in weakened organizational conditions for supporting effective instruction, such as pedagogical cohesion and trust among staff.

Formal and Informal Teacher Support (Professional Development and Mentorship)

Interestingly, despite the large number of organizations offering various forms of professional development for teachers, little empirical work has been made available to school leaders regarding which forms of professional development have the strongest positive effect on teacher performance (Hansen, 2007). Generally speaking, however, several studies found that professional development efforts seem to be most effective when they closely fit school and district expectations for teacher performance (Datnow,

¹ Founded in 1990, Teach For America (TFA) aims to place high-performing graduating college seniors from prominent universities as teachers in low-income urban and rural schools for a two-year commitment (though teachers may stay longer if they choose). For further information, please see <http://www.teachforamerica.org/>.

² For a brief introduction to this literature, see Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor (2011), whose findings regarding TFA teachers' impact are relatively positive, and Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig (2005), who find TFA teachers to be less effective.

Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007) and when teachers feel that they play an active and contributing part within those efforts (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Studies have found that more frequent and possibly more informal supports such as mentoring or coaching provide an important venue for teacher professional growth. A national study (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) found that having a mentor from the same subject field made teachers less likely to move after first year. In one charter-school focused study in Missouri (Hill-Carter, 2010), mentoring was a significant factor in retaining new teachers. The extent to which such programs are functioning within charter schools and larger charter networks, or charter management organizations, however, is not fully clear.

Methodology

We conducted phone interviews with thirteen teachers and four administrators who were at Urban High prior, during, and subsequent to the transformation of Urban High by New Schools. While we recognize that in-person interviews would have been preferable for rapport-building and so that we as interviewers could learn more about respondents' answers from their facial expressions and posture (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), this option was not logistically feasible for our team at the time. The interviews were intended to solicit teachers' and administrators' views on key aspects that affect teacher quality in the areas of teacher recruitment/selection, retention, support, and evaluation at Urban High.

Participant Demographics

Thirteen teachers and four administrators (i.e., principals or assistant principals) who were present at Urban High academies during the 2010–2011 school year participated in this study. We interviewed at least one representative from each of the five current Urban High academies (with a maximum of five teachers from a particular academy). Given the small size of the sample and our assurances of confidentiality, we will provide only a broad overview of participant demographics.

Teachers and administrators reported from two to nearly twenty years of teaching experience. Participants taught a range of subjects from core content areas to electives. Four of the participants reported having some knowledge of Urban High School prior to the New Schools transformation; four participants had worked at more than one Urban High academy.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

To recruit interview participants, we were given a list of e-mails for all teachers and administrators working at Urban High academies during the 2010–2011 by New Schools staff. Since these e-mails were primarily work addresses (i.e. New Schools accounts), our recruitment efforts were limited to current New Schools employees, including those who had moved to another New Schools school. In other words, our

interview sample may not be totally representative of Urban High as an organization in 2010–2011, as we had no way of reaching former employees that had left Urban High and New Schools since that year. Yet, as a group, interviewees provided detailed and highly reflective answers to our questions and offered us a glimpse of the 2010–2011 Urban High experience from a range of perspectives.

Two additional reminder e-mails with information about the study were sent within three weeks of our first recruitment e-mail, encouraging teachers to participate. We also sent personalized e-mails to all principals and assistant principals to encourage their participation in the study.

Data Collection

We developed separate yet complementary interview protocols for teachers and administrators. In these interview protocols (which can be seen in Appendices A and B), one can see that we first asked general questions regarding teacher and administrator perceptions of what Urban High did well, and what could use improvement. After these questions, we then asked for their specific impressions of how they perceived Urban High performed on several metrics noted in the literature (Bryk, 2010; Bryk et al., 2010) as key to school success, such as teacher recruitment/selection, retention, support and evaluation activities at Urban High. The aim of these semi-structured interviews was for participants to reflect on their Urban High experience, particularly during the 2010–2011 school year, and to share what they felt was “working” or “not working” in the areas mentioned.

Teacher interviews, on average, lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes; administrator interviews were designed to be shorter—15 minutes—considering administrators’ hectic schedules. However, several participants were eager to spend more time than originally allotted to share their experiences. For logistical reasons (i.e., finding a private space to conduct interviews and maintain confidentiality), we conducted all except one of the interviews via telephone.³

Data Analysis

We developed a series of codes based on the core interview constructs detailed above after reading through several of the transcripts. In addition, we noted overarching themes that appeared across constructs such as resource issues, the desire for teacher input, and the role of relationships in their work. All of the transcripts were double coded to provide a coder reliability check. The research team resolved any coding questions through consensus (see Carlson and McCaslin, 2003). Coded interviews were then analyzed for particular trends. We utilized Excel and Atlas.ti software to assist in the coding and analysis of interviews.

³ Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Throughout the article, individual interview citations can be identified by the participant code which follows them. For example, a citation that refers to INT25 is referring to an interview conducted with participant 25.

Findings

Our original intent in interviewing Urban High faculty was to shed light on potential reasons for the gains in student achievement, school persistence, and completion of college preparatory classes found in previous analyses (Herman et al., 2012). We will organize this section around the three primary themes that arose in these interviews: that is, teachers' and administrators' perceptions that Urban High was successful in recruiting dedicated and talented young faculty, that New Schools's formal and informal teacher supports were overall strong and effective, and that to a degree the quality and relevance of some forms of support (especially professional development) varied across Urban High academies and administrators.

Strong Teacher Recruitment/Selection

Overall, teachers tended to have fairly positive impressions of New Schools's efforts to recruit "highly effective" teachers. Administrators also generally praised New Schools's "excellent job at recruitment" (INT66). Several participants described the multi-step recruitment/selection process as intense and comprehensive.

I think it is the most intense recruitment that I've seen at any other district which is really competitive especially right now with the lack of job availability. I think that New Schools is doing a real good job of recruiting some really highly skilled and qualified teachers. (INT26)

Other participants gave further detail regarding the details of the job application process:

You have to give mock lessons and you have to actually write a lesson plan and you have to go through an interview. It's like this very extensive process. (INT66)

While many teachers focused on what they perceived to be high levels of skill and qualifications among New Schools's hires, others focused on the predominantly "young, enthusiastic" teaching pool drawn upon by New Schools (INT65), particularly among those teachers recruited through the Teach for America program. This perception of passion among Urban High teachers is reflected in the following sentiment:

I have not yet met a teacher at Urban High who doesn't--who has taught there just because it is a paycheck. And so they do so because they want to be the change that they want to help see in student's lives. So I think that is the primary reason, the intrinsic altruism of the people. (INT23)

Effective Teacher Support

We asked participants a series of questions about formal and informal types of support, mainly professional development activities, mentorship/ collaboration and evaluative feedback. While each of these topics is explored independently in the paragraphs below, they are closely related and essential in supporting teachers' growth as intentional and reflective practitioners.

In terms of professional development (PD), teachers discussed participating in activities such as new hire orientation, weekly staff development sessions, and content-area staff development. A majority of teachers, for example, explicitly mentioned attending weekly Wednesday morning sessions within their academies. Most teachers spoke highly of the quality of these PD sessions:

..New Schools has made lots of effort to make it more beneficial and make it practical for teachers to incorporate into the classroom. I think that they've done a wonderful job with that in better preparing the teachers in what to expect. (INT26)

Others spoke about the important role that principals played in leading professional development activities and getting teachers involved. Teachers also praised professional development activities led by teachers as being particularly effective.

They've gotten more teachers involved and you know there's some of the ones—they're more of the ones now who are doing the professional developments, which as an educator is for me, you know a strong teacher presenting information and you want to listen and you want to learn from them. (INT74)

In terms of mentorship and collaboration, while there did not appear to be a formal cluster-wide mentoring program in place according to teachers, nearly half spoke of serving as a mentor—formally or informally—to others. Many teachers described their assistant vice principals or content coaches as mentors or the closest to what may be considered a mentor. Several teachers spoke of the invaluable, informal support they received from colleagues both in planning their instruction and getting through the day. For example,

(Speaking about their department)...We've had some very strong, competent, motivated and with-it teachers. I've had some phenomenal--phenomenal--phenomenal interactions, feedback, and discussions with them. And so I have really, really, really enjoyed working with some of my colleagues (INT74).

Variation of Teacher Support Across Academies

While participants tended to view their academies' recruitment, retention, and professional development efforts positively, one interesting trend that arose across all participants was a recognition of variability and change relative to each of these

activities over time. Depending on context such change was viewed both positively and negatively.

With regards to professional development, some participants noted that New Schools has improved and expanded their offerings as Urban High has become more established after the turnaround:

..New Schools has made lots of effort to make [PD] more beneficial and make it practical for teachers to incorporate into the classroom. I think that they've done a wonderful job with that in better preparing the teachers in what to expect. So I do see a big growth in that and even just as New Schools has expanded over the years I've noticed that it has improved quite a bit. (INT26)

However, the perceived quality of professional development activities appeared to vary somewhat by academy and academic year. As one teacher explained:

Over my 4 years at Urban High it [Wednesday morning PD] ranges from teachers sharing their instructional strategies, which I think has been the most useful thing, to viewing things about classroom management, working with special instruments, literature strategies, it's been a lot of different things, but it hasn't always been effective. (INT65)

Some teachers spoke of a change in focus within PD sessions over time. In particular, some participants spoke of a recent new evaluation system (hereafter called The Teacher Improvement Model, or TTIM) as a growing focus in professional development activities.

Recently, more so this year, there is a lot of propaganda. There just seems like they're really trying to pitch to us the TTIM, The Teacher Improvement Model. (INT71)

However, their experiences appeared to differ, both in terms of interpersonal relationships between teachers and their administrators and actual time reportedly spent interacting in person, via e-mail, etc

For some individuals, the utility of feedback provided as part of their evaluation varied substantially from year to year, administrator to administrator.

You know it really is dependent upon who has been evaluating me and who has been giving me feedback. My first two years my principal was phenomenal... I've had other you know feedback and critiques, which you know that have not always necessarily been as you know pertinent to my teaching and I--I've been somewhat skeptical of it. (INT74)

Teachers' actual evaluation experience, the frequency of evaluations and their timeliness also seemed to vary by participant. One teacher explains:

...In my experience, evaluation seems to be an afterthought on the part of administration. My second year, the 2009–2010 school year, even though I know you're not asking about that school year, my vice principal never set a foot in my classroom second semester. At [my academy] it has been a systemic issue of the vice principal not, basically, putting evaluations off until the last minute. (INT65)

This level of variation in professional development, support, and evaluation is perhaps understandable given the relatively limited time frame in which New Schools has been operating as administrator of Urban High. Several interviewees noted that as Urban High was still adapting to New Schools's management, it might be understandable to see some "growing pains" (INT72). While understandable, this variation and instability associated with the first years of Urban High's tenure after the New Schools turnaround seems quite relevant to the current policy discussion regarding school management, as new charter schools and campuses are very common and might exhibit similar characteristics during their initial years.

Discussion

These findings corroborate much of what is in the extant qualitative literature on teacher recruitment, retention and support in urban charter school and other similar urban school settings.

First, a number of similar studies also found that those who teachers in urban charters and similar settings were frustrated at the variability in the quality of their professional development and the lack of administrative support they received as new teachers. Gonzalez, Brown and Slate (2008), in their qualitative study of early career teachers in Texas who left the classroom, found a lack of administrative support to be the primary driving factor being their departure. Similarly, in another qualitative study of leaving teachers, Buchanan (2012) found that most cited a lack of administrative support and the absence of effective long-term training in pedagogy for early career teachers. Finally, Miller (2010) encountered similar stories in her work, from teachers who more specifically attributed their departure to negative experiences with administrator knowledge of how to support teachers and a lack of administrator professionalism. While not all Urban High teachers expressed sharing the negative experiences cited in these studies, many did, and even those that didn't felt that these same factors were what drove away many of the teachers who had left Urban High.

With regards to teacher retention, the findings of the present inquiry also reflect those encountered in the existing literature. In her national mixed-methods study of novice teachers in urban districts in 2009–2010, Sarah Eckert (2013) found that traditional qualifications do not predict teacher retention, and that both traditionally and alternatively certified early career teachers leave for many of the same reasons listed by this study's participants—that is, burnout, stress, or a change in career trajectory. Lloyd and Sullivan (2012) similarly found burnout to be a driving reason for leaving in their

qualitative exploration of the long-term retention of participants in one particular teacher preparation program, even among those who had been rated as highest performing.

Implications for Further Research

This article intends to provide a clear ground-level view of what practices of teacher recruitment, retention, support, and evaluation look like to the staff of one particular charter turnaround school. While such findings are not easily generalized beyond this relatively unique context, they provide crucial insight into why charter turnaround schools might succeed or struggle in their efforts in these four areas of focus.

With regards to teacher recruitment and selection, teachers and administrators at Urban High generally feel that New Schools did a very good job in hiring what interviewees call “highly skilled and qualified” (INT26) teachers, though how such terms were defined by the participants using them was beyond the scope of the present study. Further study of what staff in charter turnaround settings perceive “good” teachers to be would contribute insight from this relatively new school setting to the already extensive literature on perceptions of teacher quality (for an introduction, see Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Dudley-Marling et al., 2006). While overall participants’ responses to this line of questioning was quite positive, some respondents shared concerns that the type of teachers being hired were not sufficiently committed to long-term teaching and were not sufficiently prepared for a small schools charter setting through their previous experience in public schools.

In terms of teacher retention, participants expressed very mixed feelings, with most of them sharing cases of coworkers that had quit because of stress, “burnout,” or a desire to pursue different career options. In response, if charter organizations working in turnaround settings wish to hold on to their staff for longer periods, they may wish to consider recruiting staff more oriented towards the long term and troubleshooting potential means of mitigating the level of stress felt by their faculty.

Regarding professional development and support, perceptions of PD effectiveness varied widely across academies, implying varying levels of implementation at the academy level. While some teachers found their administrators to be effective in supporting their instruction, others found their school leaders to be uninterested or too busy. Teacher evaluation was found to vary significantly depending on one’s principal as well. Given the proven effect of successful mentoring and teacher support efforts in mitigating teacher turnover (Liu et al., 2004; Guarino et al., 2006), these findings further illustrate the importance of effective school leadership in small settings. Future research into supervisory models or accountability mechanisms that motivate small school administrators to be more rigorous in their PD and evaluation implementation could provide further insight into how to ameliorate issues of quality control in small school settings.

Lastly, the level of variation in administration and program implementation cited by participants across academies raises important questions regarding the potential impact of such variation on student outcomes in newly-established turnaround schools. While previous research (Herman et al., 2012) has shown positive outcomes that imply a lack of impact within Urban High particularly, the role of change and variability in new turnaround and charter settings is a topic that deserves further inquiry.

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Rolf Straubhaar is an assistant professor in the graduate programs in educational leadership and school improvement at Texas State University. Prior to academia, he worked and taught in elementary schools in New York City and on the Navajo Nation in Shiprock, New Mexico. He also worked as an adult educator in Brazil and Mozambique. His research focuses on the real world implications of education policy for educators and students, with a particular focus on English language policy, teacher education policy, and high-stakes accountability policy frameworks.

Christine Ong is a research scientist at UCLA (CRESST). She currently leads several evaluation studies connected to teacher preparation programs in California and various STEM initiatives at the high school and college level. Her research interests include what factors support or hinder the institutionalization of innovative projects and partnerships over time.

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Appendix A – Teacher Interview Protocol

First, I'd like to know a bit more about you and your work.

1. What grade(s) do you teach?
2. What subject(s)?
3. How long have you been at Urban High?
4. Were you at Urban High before the reorganization under New Schools?
 - If so, when were you hired back?
5. How many years have you been teaching?

To start us off, I'd like to ask some general questions about your impressions of Urban High and its programs.

6. In your opinion, what is working well at Urban High?
7. What are areas that need improvement at Urban High?
8. What role do New Schools's core principles play in your work?
9. Thinking about these principles specifically, what areas, in your opinion, is Urban High doing well in, and what areas need improvement?
[Can remind participant of principles if necessary, but do not ask for each principle specifically]
 - Creating a small, safe, personalized atmosphere?
 - Maintaining high expectations for all students?
 - Maintaining local control with extensive PD and accountability?
 - Increasing parent participation?
 - Maximizing funding in the classroom?
 - Keeping schools open later?

Now I'd like to ask you a few more specific questions about your Urban High experience as a teacher:

10. Why did you choose to teach at Urban High?
Potential Prompts:
 - *Did you know anything about New Schools before you started teaching at Urban High?*
 - *How much do you know about the different Urban High academies?*
11. How successful do you feel Urban High is at recruiting and retaining effective teachers?
12. How could the recruitment and retention process be improved?
13. In your opinion, what are the primary reasons teachers stay at Urban High?
14. What are the primary reasons that teachers leave?

Now I'd like to ask you about professional development opportunities at Urban High.

15. Can you tell me more about the professional development (PD) you received after being hired at Urban High? Please specify.
16. What kinds of PD opportunities are available to continuing Urban High teachers?

Now I'd like to know a bit more about how colleagues support your teaching.

17. Let's start with administrators (such as your principal, AP)
 - What kind of support do administrators (your principal) offer you?
 - How much time do you spend/interact with them?
 - Do you feel that this support is sufficient, or is there room for improvement? If so, what could be improved and how?
18. Mentors, coaches
 - What kind of support do mentors/coaches offer you?
 - How much time do you spend/interact with them?
 - Do you feel that this support is sufficient, or is there room for improvement? If so, what could be improved and how?
19. Colleagues
 - What kind of support do colleagues offer you?
 - How much time do you spend/interact with them?
 - Do you feel that this support is sufficient, or is there room for improvement? If so, what could be improved and how?

Now I'd like to ask a bit about your teacher evaluation process.

20. What comprises your teacher evaluation process?
21. What weight do your evaluation scores/findings have on promotion and contract renewal decisions?

Before we end:

22. Is there anything else that we haven't discussed related to your experiences at Urban High that you would like to share?

Appendix B –Principal Interview Protocol

First, I'd like to know a bit more about you and your work.

1. How long have you been at Urban High?
2. Were you at Urban High before the reorganization under New Schools?
 - When were you hired back?
3. In your opinion, what is working well at Urban High? What are areas that need improvement at Urban High?
4. What do you feel have been some of the Urban High's key achievements in:
 - Recruiting/selecting teachers?
 - Retaining teachers?
 - Supporting teachers?
 - Evaluating teachers?
5. What are some of the biggest challenges in:
 - Recruiting/selecting teachers?
 - Retaining teachers?
 - Supporting teachers?
 - Evaluating teachers?
6. What role do New Schools's core principles play in your work?
7. Thinking about these principles specifically, what areas, in your opinion, is Urban High doing well in, what areas need improvement? *[Note: Can remind participant of principles if necessary, but do not ask for each principle specifically]*
 - Creating a small, safe, personalized atmosphere?
 - Maintaining high expectations for all students?
 - Maintaining local control with extensive PD and accountability?
 - Increasing parent participation?
 - Maximizing funding in the classroom?
 - Keeping schools open later?
8. Is there anything else that we haven't discussed related to your time at Urban High that you would like to share?