

# MAKING TEACHER TENURE MEANINGFUL



In 2010, New York City principals made the most rigorous teacher tenure decisions on record, defying a history in which teachers typically received tenure by default. What caused the change? Clear priorities, accountability for principals and good management of existing district data.

**Every year in New York City, some 7,000 teachers are considered for tenure.** It's a far-reaching decision, and a critical opportunity to shape the city's teacher workforce.

Each teacher may shape thousands of students' lives over the course of his career. Tenure, therefore, should be a carefully-considered honor bestowed only on teachers with track records of success in the classroom.

Yet until recently, these decisions were made with little scrutiny. Principals could grant the equivalent of lifetime job security by simply ticking off a box, with no rationale or supporting evidence.

In 2007, 97 percent of eligible New York City teachers earned tenure, including hundreds who had "Unsatisfactory" evaluation ratings, consistently lower-than-expected student academic results, or who did not even have full-time teaching positions. Many teachers earned tenure simply because school principals neglected to make their official decision on time; tenure was the default.

That same year, New York City declared the days of default tenure over, and began asking principals to consider teacher performance in their tenure decisions.

By 2008, tenure denials increased from 1 to 2 percent. It was a promising start, the first step towards making tenure decisions truly rigorous.

In 2010, New York City built on that momentum by giving principals the tools and information to make informed tenure decisions for their highest- and lowest-performing teachers.

With help from TNTP, the district generated clear reports from existing student achievement and personnel data, flagging tenure-eligible teachers who had either exceptional or worrisome track records.

Teachers with consistently outstanding student learning gains (measured by high value-added scores) earned a "tenure likely" flag. Those with an "Unsatisfactory" evaluation rating, a prior extension of their probationary period, or consistently low student achievement results were marked "tenure in doubt."

The reports also noted which teachers were in the Absent Teacher Reserve (ATR), the city's designation for teachers who have been unable to secure full-time teaching positions after being displaced from other schools – often despite the availability of many job openings.

*"There is no business in America that would be prevented from taking results into account when making personnel decisions, and that's exactly what happens in our school system across the country."*

*—NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, 2010*

“The current system of awarding tenure devalues great teachers by treating teachers as if they are widgets on an assembly line. If we’re going to professionalize teaching, we have to reward teachers, evaluate teachers and develop teachers like the 21st-century professionals that they are.”

– NYC Deputy Education Chancellor John White, 2010

Thanks to these monthly reports, principals could see at a glance which tenure decisions merited greater scrutiny. For the first time, they were asked to back up their decisions with evidence of each teacher’s performance, and their regional supervisors personally reviewed any calls that went against the tenure guidance or involved the ATR pool.

To encourage consistent decisions, the district provided trainings on how to assess data on teacher performance, write a clear rationale, and avoid common pitfalls. And it held principals’ managers directly accountable for both rejecting unfounded tenure recommendations and supporting good ones.

With clear information and explicit accountability, principals made the most rigorous tenure decisions on record: 11 percent of teachers were denied tenure or had their probationary period extended, nearly quadruple the rate in 2007.

Importantly, more than 200 teachers with performance flags were not awarded tenure in 2010 – double the previous year – and almost all teachers with standout student achievement earned tenure.

New York City still has further to go, but these decisions mark the start of a critical transformation in tenure, from a default to an honor.

Adding rigor didn’t require New York City to pass legislation or re-negotiate their teachers union contract; as the United Federation of Teachers itself noted, “the process for granting tenure has always been within the [Department of Education] and the Chancellor’s control.”

Instead, it required clarity, a concerted focus on teacher performance and better management of existing data – possible in any district around the country.

THE PILOT LIGHTS PROJECT profiles promising human capital initiatives that are lighting the way towards larger reforms. Each profile highlights concrete steps taken by schools, districts and states to elevate the teaching profession and advance student learning.

