

# Improved Principal Hiring

The New Teacher Project's Findings and  
Recommendations for Urban Schools

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# Overview: How can urban schools overcome common obstacles to hiring quality principals?

Building on the success of its 2003 study, *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms*, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), with support from The Broad Foundation, investigated the methods that urban school districts use to recruit, select and hire principals. This working paper presents the basic findings of that investigation along with recommendations for how urban districts and schools can build model recruitment, screening, selection and hiring processes to obtain quality principals. Specifically, this working paper seeks to answer the following:

- What obstacles do urban schools and districts face in hiring principals?
- How is principal quality affected as a result?
- What viable solutions exist to overcoming obstacles in order to hire quality principals?

To better understand urban school districts' principal recruitment, selection, and hiring practices, TNTP conducted an extensive literature review of the relevant research. In the area of principal selection processes, we additionally conducted interviews and made observations of seven school districts, two university-based leadership programs, and four district-affiliated or national school leadership programs. In the area of principal recruitment and hiring, we investigated the phenomena described in literature by conducting resume reviews, surveys, and interviews with district staff in three urban districts, one each in the Eastern, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern regions of the United States.

Three primary findings confirmed beliefs about principal hiring long suspected by those in the field of education and unearthed obstacles not before extensively addressed:

1. **There is a shortage of high-quality principal candidates available to urban schools.** Urban districts suffer from low applicant-to-hire ratios, relatively low-quality candidates in general and a heavy reliance on internal candidates. However, a striking lack of dedication of resources, personnel and attention to new principal recruitment significantly exacerbates this shortage.
2. **Urban districts appear not to be selecting the best candidates from this limited pool.** Faulty selection processes further exacerbate the shortage of principal candidates. Although districts generally use appropriate selection criteria, the processes by which they evaluate candidates against these criteria are seriously flawed. These flaws prevent districts from making consistently appropriate selection decisions and increase the risk that less qualified candidates will be hired.
3. **Late vacancy notifications and administrative inefficiencies result in the loss of applicants and in a less effective selection process.** Inevitably, hiring delays caused by late vacancy notification and administrative inefficiency compound the problems described above. These delays result in the withdrawal of many new

## ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

- Urban districts studied received about *60 percent fewer principal applications* on average than did their suburban and rural counterparts.
- Although recruiters in the private sector estimate that filling a mid-level executive position costs between 20 and 30 percent of the salary for that position, the Southern and Mid-Atlantic districts each spent far less than that – approximately \$3,000 *in total* on their principal recruitment efforts.
- In the Mid-Atlantic district in 2005, one third of all principal vacancies occurred *after* July 1, giving schools less than two months to recruit before the start of the new school year.
- The vast majority of assistant and regional superintendents surveyed reported that they had far fewer assistant principals – fewer than half in most districts surveyed – ready to become excellent principals than they had principal openings.

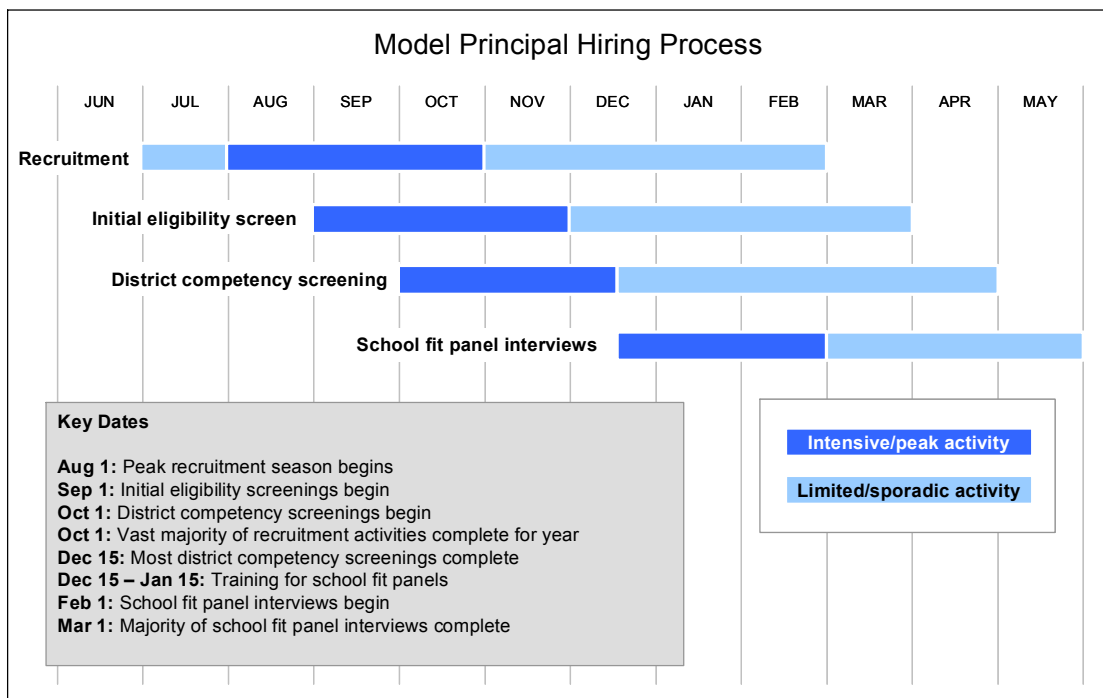
principal candidates from outside the system, further limit districts' ability to make selective hiring decisions, and compress the amount of time in which selection must occur. As a result, critical elements of the selection process are carried out inconsistently or eliminated altogether.

# Building a Model Principal Hiring Process

While navigating these obstacles may seem impossible, research shows that viable solutions do exist. Urban school districts can begin by taking a few simple steps, such as designing a thoughtful recruitment strategy and providing basic training on selection to Human Resources and school-based staffs, with relative ease. Ultimately, however, districts need to establish and implement effective, sustainable principal hiring processes. The following basic components, described in more detail on the pages that follow, constitute what we believe are essential steps of an effective principal hiring process:

1. **Recruitment**, during which the school district engages in intensive efforts to attract a large and diverse pool of prospective principal candidates, both from internal sources (e.g., assistant principals within the district) and external sources (e.g., principals of schools in neighboring districts and graduates of school leadership programs).
2. **Initial eligibility screen**, through which the district makes a preliminary assessment as to each candidate's basic eligibility for the principalship (e.g., verification of academic requirements) without making any further determination as to the individual's actual competency as a school leader.
3. **District competency screening**, whereby the candidate is evaluated by trained selectors against an objective set of criteria for school leadership and either recommended for hiring by a school or dismissed from the hiring process.
4. **School fit panel interviews**, during which a diverse group of school representatives (e.g., teachers, parents, community members) make a recommendation as to the candidate's potential fit with their school. Following the school fit panel interviews, the district superintendent or an appropriate designee formally approves the hire.

Although these key elements need not occur in the exact order laid out above, the diagram below shows an appropriate timeline based on this sequence. In recognition of the fact that (1) teacher quality is the most important school-based factor influencing student achievement and (2) that our previous research showed urban schools must hire the bulk of their teachers by May 1 to capture the highest-quality candidates, principal hiring decisions must be prioritized by March 1. Though aggressive, this timeline allows new principals adequate time to interview and hire teachers selectively with a focus on quality and fit.



# Recruitment

A school district's ability to be selective in its hiring decisions rests on the quantity and quality of its applicants. Therefore, districts must improve existing recruitment efforts to expand the pool.

## ➤ **Plan ahead and allocate appropriate resources**

- Define a few key quality measures of the type of candidate the district wants to recruit and focus recruitment plans accordingly
- Accurately project vacancies for principal positions and use this information to guide recruitment planning
- Dedicate a budget towards recruitment and dedicate staff to implement it
- Clearly identify different pools of "prospects" and create tailored marketing strategies and activities for each (e.g., current teachers, assistant principals, principals from neighboring districts, etc.)
- Diversify marketing and advertising strategies to ensure an adequate number of external candidates (e.g., highly visible internet and classified ads with effective messages and images, as well as targeted mailings to school administrators in other districts, personalized contact with prospective candidates, district representation at principal association conferences and meetings, etc.)
- Evaluate results throughout the recruitment season to determine which strategies work and which do not

## ➤ **Rethink past assumptions**

- Change total reliance on internal candidates – aggressively recruit external candidates
- Develop proactive mechanisms to identify and select potential school leaders from existing staff, seeking out and cultivating teachers who show leadership potential
- Develop criteria to determine when an assistant principal is considered ready to be an excellent principal – abandon the assumption that an assistant principal is ready merely because they have served long enough and/or met minimum requirements
- Establish competitive leadership pathways that include coordinated recruitment, selection and training or mentoring components

# Selection

Districts have already expended considerable effort to develop clear selection criteria and selection models. It is during the implementation of such models that districts can make major gains in hiring. Many solutions suggested in this section derive from best practices that TNTP has identified are working today in urban districts. When combined with research-based school leadership criteria, the resulting four-step selection process will help districts identify the most capable school leaders.

## ➡ 1: Screen for minimum eligibility

- Train a team of highly competent, specifically assigned HR staff to accurately screen applicants for *minimum* employment requirements using basic information
- Ensure that there is a central database of all applicants to the district, coordinated among schools, to be used to track candidates even if they apply to individual schools
- Utilize technology to optimize efficiency in managing and tracking applicants
- Build in accountability structures through customer surveys, timeline benchmarks, and other hiring indicators to ensure the screening team is effectively communicating with candidates and schools and efficiently processing applicant materials. Given the critical importance of this HR team, members failing to reach established goals should be removed from the team.

## ➡ 2: Assess for competency

- Form a team of senior instructional leaders, including assistant superintendents, high-caliber principals, retired principals, and representatives of the offices of curriculum and instruction and professional development
- Utilize rigorous assessment tools, in-depth interview questions and innovative performance assessments to assess candidates' leadership competencies (see Best Practices which follow)
- Align selection criteria with interview questions and with scoring rubrics
- Rubrics must be clear, objective and regularly calibrated



## BEST PRACTICES: Competency Assessments

### Interview Questions that Tap into Candidates' True Competencies

- *Questions should be focused to address specific competencies. For example, the following questions measure skills in Instructional Management and Instructional Expertise.*
  - What does good teaching look like? Mediocre teaching? Poor teaching? How would you work with each?
  - What do you think is the best way to prepare students for reaching proficiency on our state standardized test, especially those who are not currently meeting this challenge? Cite any relevant research you have read.
- *Creative questions that require the candidate to think in the moment by responding to a scenario or describing specific strategies for success can probe for competencies much more effectively than questions that one can predictably encounter in any job interview.*
  - Every day when you come into your office in the morning, you have 30 emails waiting in your inbox. How would you prioritize them without losing too much of your day dealing with email?
  - What techniques do you use in developing a rapport with colleagues? With staff? With parents? With students?
- *Questions should allow a candidate from any pipeline to demonstrate his/her competencies.*
  - Outline an inclusion program for special education and second language learners.
  - Your school has inadequate resources and you determine that your students need more. What do you do?

### Performance Assessments that Require Candidates to Respond to Realistic School Scenarios

- *School walk-throughs*
  - In Western District 2, candidates visit a school and individually observe four different class sessions for 10 minutes each. Candidates then have 15 minutes to think about what they saw and consider three questions: "What did you see?" "What directions do you see for improvements?" and "How would you get the school moving in these directions?" They present their answers in a 15-minute interview with the district's selectors, who have also observed the classrooms and had the opportunity to analyze them.
- *Evaluation of videotaped classroom sessions*
  - In Western District 1, candidates are asked to watch a 20-minute videotaped classroom session, after which they are asked to evaluate the quality of instruction. The candidates then role-play giving feedback to the "teacher", role-played by one of the selectors.
- *Role-playing*
  - In addition to the role-play between principal and teacher described above, candidates in Western District 1 take part in a second role-play between principal and parent and a third role play between principal and regional superintendent. The three role-plays, administered in succession, test a candidate's ability to communicate with a variety of stakeholders and to deal with conflict and stress.
- *Response to a case study*
  - In Western District 1, candidates are given 40 minutes to read a case study of a school facing many challenges, and review student achievement and attendance data, disaggregated by gender and race. Candidates analyze the state of the school and discuss their analyses with other candidates while being observed by selectors.
- *Writing exercises*
  - The Northeast Program asks candidates to write a sample letter to parents encouraging them to send their children to a new after-school tutoring program. This on-the-spot writing assignment assesses a candidate's written communication skills, as well as their relational and community-building competence.

➡ **3: Assess “school fit”**

- Assemble school-based hiring committees with representatives from various groups of stakeholders, including teachers, support staff, parents, students (if the position is in a high school) and community members
- Clearly define a set of qualities that would make someone a good fit for the school (perhaps consulting the central HR hiring team to prevent unnecessary redundancy in assessing candidate competencies)
- Ask focused and realistic scenario questions
- Use clear, objective and regularly calibrated scoring rubrics
- Document evidence to support the committee’s recommendation

➡ **4: Final approval**

- District superintendent or an appropriate designee evaluates candidates recommended for hire (in person, ideally) to ensure they are of the highest caliber and share in the overall goals of the district
- Utilize interview questions that assess candidates’ leadership qualities and their commitment to district goals
- Align selection criteria, tools and rubrics so competing candidates can be objectively and uniformly evaluated against one another during the final approval process

# Hiring

Without responsive customer service, clear and accurate communications, and a reasonably efficient and well-structured hiring process, even the most painstakingly coordinated marketing and recruitment effort will fail as applicant after applicant withdraws in frustration. We make the following recommendations to ensure professional and timely hiring.

## ➔ Identify vacancies early

- District promotions, terminations and transfers that create principal vacancies must occur early enough to allow school fit panels in those schools to begin meeting by January 15
- Eliminate existing disincentives for early notification (such as loss of health benefits)
- Consider creating incentives specifically to encourage early notification (this will require experimentation, keeping in mind that compelling incentives are not always monetary)
- Carefully monitor data to identify principals who are eligible for retirement
- Remain in close communication with all principals to determine their future plans

## ➔ Build a pool to fill unexpected vacancies as needed

- Begin recruiting as early as the summer of the preceding year to build a competitive pool of applicants who can be funneled to vacancies as they arise
- Consider creating a small reserve pool of alternate candidates who can serve in an advisory or assistance capacity until they are needed to fill unanticipated vacancies that occur late or even during the school year

## ➔ Minimize delays through improved accountability structures

- Hold everyone involved in the hiring process accountable for success in meeting critical milestones and deadlines (as illustrated in the model hiring timeline chart)

## ➔ Facilitate the transition by providing new principals with orientation or induction

- At a minimum, offer new principals basic orientation to the district and to key school-related processes (e.g., budgeting, vacancy identification, teacher hiring and certification requirements, etc.)
- To familiarize the new principal with school issues or concerns that may not be formally documented (e.g., which teacher has informally announced an intention to leave the school), facilitate opportunities for “knowledge transfer” between a school’s former and new principals through a period of overlap or formal communications

### *Efficient Customer Service*

At every step in the applicant process, principal candidates should receive excellent customer service. Specifically, candidates should expect:

- Clear communication about their current status in the applicant process and what to expect next
- Prompt and courteous responses to voice and email messages
- Accurate and consistent answers to their questions

To hold HR personnel who are responsible for customer service accountable, districts should survey all candidates, regardless of their final status, about their satisfaction with the service they received from each group (e.g., central HR staff, central academic leadership, and school fit committees).



## BEST PRACTICES: Hiring Timeline

### **Making the Principal Hiring Timeline Conducive to Earlier Teacher Hiring**

As discussed in our 2003 report, *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms*, districts must hire early to capture the highest-quality teachers. Currently, many districts do not announce principal transfers or make principal hiring decisions until June or July. This has a ripple effect on teacher hiring as incumbent principals stop the hiring process after learning they will be leaving, while incoming principals have either not been identified or not yet authorized to hire for their new school.

If the vast majority of teachers are to be hired by May 1, principals should be hired no later than March 1. Some districts are trying to address this issue more aggressively than others. The Southern District, which has the earliest goal for principal hiring, set the following timeline goals this year: hire principals by April 1, complete teacher transfers by May 1, and staff teaching vacancies by June 30 – still later than our recommendations, but a definite move in the right direction.

### **Rolling Hiring Timeline**

The Northeast District uses a rolling timeline that minimizes late hiring of principals. Brand new positions (e.g., for new schools) are posted from September to November. Mid-year and late hiring positions that are temporarily filled by acting principals are posted in January, while openings due to resignations and retirements are posted as they become known. In this way, for at least a significant subset of principal vacancies, the district is able to hire early enough for full implementation of the selection process.

## Conclusion

Urban school districts are struggling to hire the best possible principals for their schools. Not only do they face a pronounced shortage of qualified candidates, but they compound the problem by using selection processes that lack coordination and consistent implementation. Moreover, delays in the hiring timeline cause applicants to withdraw and further increase the chance that selection processes will not be carried out fully.

Enhancing recruitment, building a truly rigorous selection process and aggressively advancing the principal hiring timeline requires the right people, adequate resources and institutional determination. Many school systems already face difficult day-to-day challenges and so may be skeptical that change is possible. However, some of the most important changes can be achieved relatively easily (for example, assigning one or more high-quality central staff members to focus exclusively on identifying and filling principal vacancies).

Current research makes clear that the school principals play a critical role in improving student performance. Therefore the quality of education that can be delivered to students rests on a school district's ability to bring quality principals on board. It is our hope that urban school districts will use our findings and recommendations in combination with established leadership competency models as a starting point to improve their school leader recruitment, selection, and hiring processes and to fill critical gaps with quality principals in the years ahead.

## About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the number of outstanding individuals who become public school teachers and to creating environments for all educators that maximize their impact on student achievement. Since 1997, TNTP has recruited, prepared and/or certified nearly 23,000 new, high-quality teachers, worked with over 200 school districts, and launched more than 40 programs in 23 states. To date, The New Teacher Project has also published two major studies of teacher hiring and school staffing, *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms* (2003) and *Unintended Consequences: The Case for Reforming the Staffing Rules in Urban Teachers Union Contracts* (2005). The New Teacher Project gratefully acknowledges the support of The Broad Foundation for this research. For more information, please visit [www.tntp.org](http://www.tntp.org).

## About The Broad Foundation

The Broad Foundation is a Los Angeles-based venture philanthropic organization established in 1999 by Eli and Edythe Broad. Eli Broad, who founded two Fortune 500 companies over a five-decade business career (KB Home and SunAmerica), created The Broad Foundation to dramatically improve student achievement in urban public schools through better governance, management, labor relations and competition. The Broad Foundation is proud to support the efforts of The New Teacher Project. For more information, please visit [www.broadfoundation.org](http://www.broadfoundation.org).