

Human Resource Management Strategies in Illinois Charter Schools

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS 2016-1

Rationale:

In the last five years, the number of Illinois students enrolled in charter schools has doubled. Because of this rapid expansion, it is critical to understand how these schools operate, particularly with regard to human resource (HR) management. Advocates and critics alike would benefit from a descriptive study that provides a comprehensive overview of the human resource policies in charter schools in the state of Illinois, and educators can benefit from examples of innovative HR management strategies and their effects on school outcomes.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to examine the human resource practices and policies in Illinois charter schools to obtain a more detailed and accurate understanding of how these schools hire, develop, and retain their teachers, and how those policies affect student achievement, teacher retention, and school learning conditions.

Methods:

Over the course of the 2013–2014 school year, interviews and surveys were conducted with school administrators from 27 Illinois charter schools. Twenty-two of these schools were based in Chicago and the study's sample covered 60 percent of the state's charter school students.

Analysis:

The study grouped HR practices into four broad categories:

- Incentivist reforms, including teacher evaluations based on student growth, performance-based pay, recruiting from alternative certification pathways, and setting salaries based on market rates.
 - Teacher support and empowerment, such as involving teachers in the recruitment and selection of new hires, influence over school decision making, and peer and self-evaluations.
 - Information-rich decision-making, intensive data collection on applicants during the hiring and evaluation processes, earlier recruitment calendars, and data analysis days.
 - Mission-driven practices, for example emphasizing buy-in in recruiting, customizing teacher evaluations, and long teacher orientations focused on school culture.
- In addition to creating this typology of HR practices, the study conducted linear regressions to determine the relationship between these management practices school learning conditions, teacher retention, and student achievement growth.

Findings:

- **School Climate:** None of the HR practices had a statistically significant link with the three “essential” school climate measures (ambitious instruction, effective leaders, or collaborative teachers), but they did have relationships with narrower measures of school learning conditions. Teacher empowerment practices were positively related to the 5Essentials teacher influence measure, but negatively associated with the 5Es measure of academic press, and information-rich decision-making was inversely related with school commitment.
- **Teacher Retention:** None of the human resource practices tracked in this study had a statistically significant relationship with three-year teacher retention rates, after accounting for location and school poverty.
- **Student Achievement Growth:** In some instances, incentivist practices were associated with increased student math scores. However, other models which used different test data to measure achievement showed little relationship with students' reading or math scores. In sum, there is some evidence that incentivist practices may be associated with increased math achievement, but this depends on how achievement growth is measured.
- **Newer charter schools:** Charter schools that had been in operation for less than five years were four times less likely to use incentivist practices than their more mature counterparts. This represents a significant departure from the practices that have in the past defined perception of the sector.

Additional Findings:

Recruitment: Charter schools utilized both traditional teacher preparation pathways and alternative certification pathways.

- Seventy percent specifically reported recruiting from local colleges, while 63 percent of charters recruited new teachers from alternative certification pathways such as Teach for America.
- One of the most fruitful recruitment pathways was referrals from current staff members, which schools said helped to ensure fit with their mission.

Hiring: Charter schools generally emphasized characteristics such as the quality of a candidate's experience and his or her buy-in to the schools' mission over years of teaching experience.

- Forty-eight percent sought experience with populations the school serves, typically the urban poor.
- Eighty-one percent used demonstration lessons in the hiring process.

Professional Development: Most charter schools provided substantial opportunities for new teacher orientation and individualized professional development.

- Thirty-eight percent of charters had a new teacher orientation which lasts for 11 or more days.
- Fifty-seven percent of charter schools used student growth measures as part of their formal teacher evaluations.

Teacher Retention: Some charter schools empowered teachers by offering increased influence over school decision-making.

- Fifty-two percent offered increased influence over school decision-making to help reduce teacher turnover.
- Forty-four percent offered innovative career advancement opportunities.

HR Differences by School Characteristics: The study also examined the differences in HR practices across various school characteristics, including unionization status, organizational structure (networked vs. standalone), location, and age. For example, the study found that Chicago charter

schools were significantly more likely than non-Chicago charters to:

- Hire teachers earlier in the year.
- Utilize multiple observers and more observations in teacher evaluation.
- Offer hybrid teacher-leader roles.

These geographic differences are consistent with past research showing school HR policies are sensitive to the local context and the HR policies of nearby schools. Chicago charter schools must compete with other charters as well as the Chicago Public Schools, which are well-resourced and have an advanced organizational infrastructure.

Recommendations:

- Gather feedback from teachers. This study focused only on the opinions and perceptions of charter school principals and hiring administrators. Many charter school practices, such as increased influence over school decision-making and rewarding success, are intended to address perceived weaknesses in the teaching profession and to make charter schools more attractive places for teachers to work. However, teachers may have a different view of the policies and practices described by administrators in the study. To get the full picture, their input is crucial.
- Conduct further research to determine the efficacy of particular human resources practices as they relate to school outcomes. This study provides a comprehensive overview of the HR management policies in Illinois charter schools and presents a useful typology for conceptualizing HR practice. More exploration is needed about whether certain combinations of practices across various HR tasks are more productive than other combinations, or any single approach in isolation.
- Improve data collection. Illinois needs better data systems—including regular assessments that are designed to measure growth and a longitudinal data system linking students with schools and classrooms for purposes of research and school improvement—in order to be able to compare the effectiveness of HR (and other) practices on a statewide scale. The state's development of a longitudinal data system with common identifiers and implementation of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam will assist similar efforts in coming years.

This study was funded by the Joyce Foundation.