

November 22, 2013

The Honorable Paul Clymer  
216 Ryan Office Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2145

**Re: HB 1722 "Protecting Excellent Teachers Act"**

Dear Chairman Clymer,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the House Education Committee in support of Rep. Tim Krieger's "Protecting Excellent Teachers Act" (HB1722).

My name is Greg Vincent, and I am a partner at TNTP, a national nonprofit founded by teachers. TNTP works with schools and school systems across the country to provide excellent teachers to the students who need them most. We have worked in Pennsylvania for 9 years. From 2005 to 2013, we operated the Philadelphia Teaching Fellows program, which hired and trained over 900 highly qualified teachers to work in public school classrooms in Philadelphia. Last year, we launched the Philadelphia Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools program, which prepares promising educators to become school leaders.

Decades of research and more than 15 years of experience have taught us that great teaching is the foundation of students' academic success. To ensure that every student in Pennsylvania graduates from high school ready for college or a career, the state needs to help schools hire, develop, and retain outstanding teachers.

HB 1722 would do this in two ways. First, it would allow schools to protect their best teachers when layoffs become necessary. State law currently requires districts to ignore teacher effectiveness when making layoff decisions and rely solely on seniority instead.

The result is that schools are often forced to lay off excellent teachers, even as they keep less effective teachers who happen to have accumulated more years of service. In fact, research has shown that quality-blind layoff rules (also called "last-in, first-out," or LIFO) result in better teachers leaving the classroom and less effective teachers staying more than 80 percent of the time. Other studies have shown that quality-blind layoff rules can cost students up to 3.5 months of learning, have a disproportionate impact on schools serving poor students, and create more total job losses than an approach that considered teacher effectiveness.

My organization has seen the devastating effects of quality-blind layoffs firsthand. Over the past several years, hundreds of teachers we trained through our Philadelphia

Teaching Fellows program have been laid off or threatened with pink slips. Many of these promising teachers lost their jobs just months after the School District of Philadelphia and TNTP invested heavily in training and recruiting them—all because of misguided quality-blind policies required by law.

HB 1722 would end harmful quality-blind layoff rules and require districts to base layoff decisions on teachers' performance within their licensure area, as measured by the state's teacher evaluation system. This common-sense change would allow schools to keep their best teachers even during tough economic times.

HB 1722 also includes a provision that would help schools make smarter choices about which teachers earn tenure. Granting tenure—and the *de facto* lifetime job protection that comes with it—is an incredibly important decision with far-reaching consequences. It is effectively a multi-million dollar decision, when factoring in salary, benefits, and pension costs over the course of 20 or 30 years. More importantly, a single teacher might shape hundreds or even thousands of students' lives over the course of a career.

Schools need time to carefully assess teachers' performance early in their careers, so that they can make an informed decision about awarding tenure. HB 1722 would provide this time by requiring teachers to complete five years of satisfactory service to be eligible for tenure, instead of the three years currently required by law. This change would preserve important job protections while helping to ensure that only consistently effective teachers earn tenure.

We believe that HB 1722 represents an important step toward the critical goal of providing great teaching for every Pennsylvania student, in every classroom, every day. We urge the committee to report the bill to the House Floor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Vincent", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Greg Vincent  
TNTP

## TEACHER EXPERIENCE: What Does the Research Say?

March 2012

### Experience makes a difference—especially at the beginning of a teacher’s career.

- On average, teachers with some experience are more effective than brand new teachers.<sup>1</sup>
- Teachers improve the most early in their careers. One study found that “close to half of the teacher achievement returns to experience arise during the first few years of teaching.”<sup>2</sup>
- The shift from no experience to some experience makes the biggest difference. One study found that “the bulk of the experience effects occur during the first year,”<sup>3</sup> while another noted that “the effect of moving from being completely inexperienced to having a full year of experience” matters most.<sup>4</sup>

### However, most teachers reach their peak after about five years in the classroom.

- Teachers gradually reach a plateau after 3-5 years on the job.<sup>5</sup> As one study put it, “there is little evidence that improvement continues after the first three years.”<sup>6</sup> Another found that, on average, teachers with 20 years of experience are not much more effective than those with 5 years of experience.<sup>7</sup>
- Some studies suggest that effectiveness actually declines toward the end of a teacher’s career. For example, the most experienced high school math teachers may be less effective than their less experienced colleagues<sup>8</sup> and even their inexperienced colleagues.<sup>9</sup>

### Teacher performance varies at all levels of experience.

- Individual teachers tend to improve with experience, but **not all teachers begin their careers with the same skills or rise to the same level.**<sup>10</sup> The fact that a fifth-year teacher is more effective than she was in her first year doesn’t mean she’s more effective than all first-year teachers.
- In fact, research shows that **some less-experienced teachers are more effective than teachers with more experience.**<sup>11</sup> One study found that when layoffs are based on seniority alone, about 80% of the novice teachers who get pink slips are more effective than their lowest-performing colleagues who remain.<sup>12</sup>
- There is limited evidence, but not consensus, that **returns to experience vary based on how a teacher is assigned over the years**—by subject, and by how long they teach the same grade.<sup>13</sup>

## THE BOTTOM LINE

### Experience helps, but it doesn’t tell the full story—and it doesn’t guarantee excellence.

As one study of more than a half-million students concluded, “experience is not significantly related to achievement following the initial years in the profession.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (2006). “What Does Certification Tell Us About Teacher Effectiveness?” NBER Working Paper 12155.

<sup>2</sup> Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007). “How and Why Do Teacher Credentials Matter for Student Achievement?” CALDER Working Paper 2.

<sup>3</sup> Harris and Sass (2007). “Teacher Training, Teacher Quality, and Student Achievement.” CALDER Working Paper 3.

<sup>4</sup> Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, and Wyckoff (2008). “The Narrowing Gap in Teacher Qualifications and its Implications for Student Achievement.” NBER Working Paper 14021.

<sup>5</sup> Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2006). “Teacher-student matching and the assessment of teacher effectiveness.” National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>6</sup> Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005). “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement.” *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458.

<sup>7</sup> Ladd, Helen F. (2008). “Value-Added Modeling of Teacher Credentials: Policy Implications.”

<sup>8</sup> Ladd (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Harris and Sass (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor (2009). “Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School.” CALDER Working Paper 17. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.

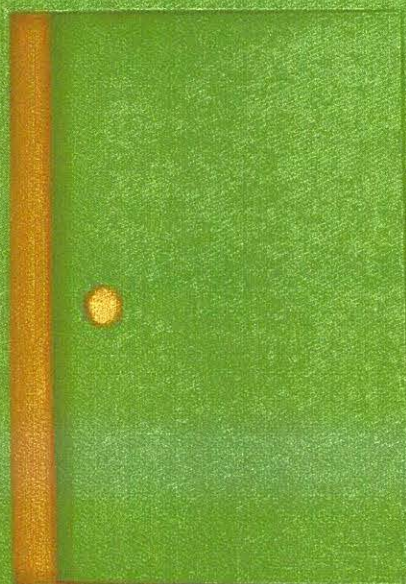
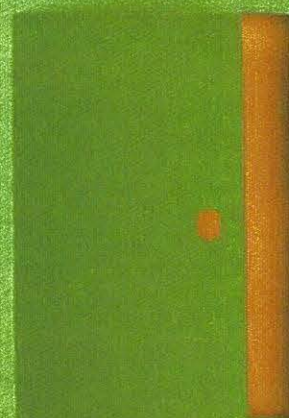
<sup>11</sup> Sass, Hannaway, Xu, and Figlio (2010). “Value Added of Teachers in High-Poverty and Lower-Poverty Schools.” CALDER Working Paper 52.

<sup>12</sup> Goldhaber and Theobald (2010). “Assessing the Determinants and Implications of Teacher Layoffs.” Center for Education Data & Research, University of Washington-Bothell.

<sup>13</sup> Ost, Ben (2009). “How do Teachers Improve? The Relative Importance of Specific and General Human Capital.” Cornell University.

<sup>14</sup> Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005). “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement.” *Econometrica*.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# THE IRREPLACEABLES

Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools

## URBAN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE ARE FACING A TEACHER RETENTION CRISIS—BUT NOT THE ONE THAT EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT

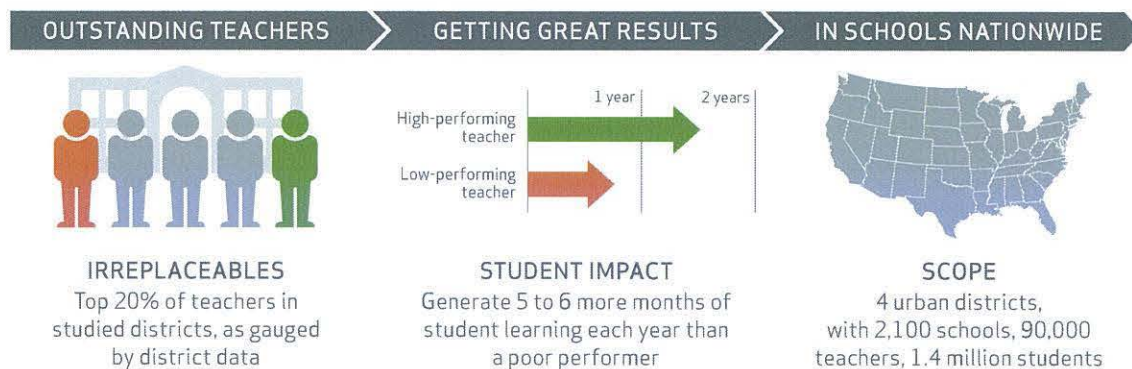
Discussions of teacher turnover usually focus on *how many* teachers leave schools each year, without regard for their performance in the classroom. This oversimplification masks the real teacher retention crisis: not only a failure to retain enough teachers, but a failure to retain the *right* teachers.

This paper examines the real retention crisis through the experiences of a group we call the “Irreplaceables”: teachers who are so successful that they are nearly impossible to replace. Teachers of this caliber provide more engaging learning experiences for students and help them achieve five to six more months of learning each year than students of low-performing teachers—academic results that can be life-changing.

Of the 90,000 teachers we studied across four large, geographically diverse urban school districts, we estimate that about 20 percent are Irreplaceables. When one of them leaves a low-achieving school, it can take 11 hires to find just one teacher of comparable quality.

These are the teachers our urban schools desperately need to keep. Yet we found that they are ignored and undervalued at almost every turn. Their experience illuminates the true obstacles to turning around chronically low-performing schools and raising the status of the teaching profession.

FIGURE 1 | WHO ARE THE IRREPLACEABLES?



**The “Irreplaceables” are teachers so successful that they are nearly impossible to replace.**

Estimates of Irreplaceables percentage based on teachers with value-added or growth data; District A high performers: 21%; District B high performers: 20%; District C high performers: 20%; District D high performers: 18%; Student impact estimates calculated following the methodology of Hahnel and Jackson (2012). Source: District data from SY 2009-10 and SY 2010-11.



“If we set high expectations that everyone would follow then I would love to remain at my job.”  
—Irreplaceable Teacher

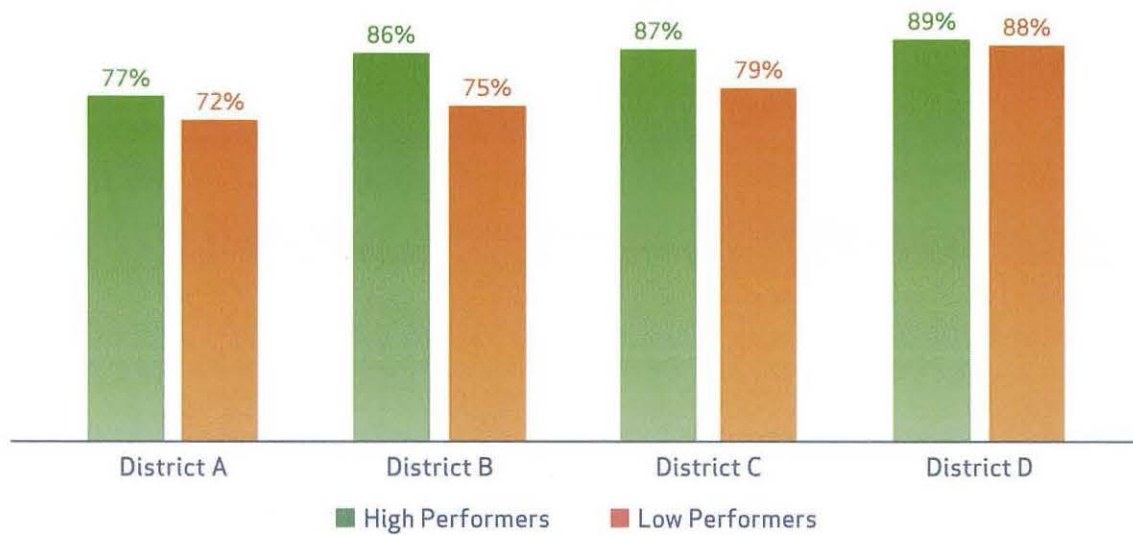
## THE REAL CRISIS: NEGLIGENT RETENTION

Knowing the power of great teachers, one would expect schools to be sharply focused on keeping far more of their best teachers than their lower performers. Instead, they retain all teachers at strikingly similar rates; and about half of all Irreplaceables leave within their first five years (*Figure 2*).

This means too many Irreplaceables are leaving too early — **we estimate that the nation's 50 largest school districts lose approximately 10,000 every year** — while too many struggling teachers remain for too long. We found that 1 in 10 classrooms in the districts we studied is led by an experienced but low-performing teacher. In fact, in these districts, **40 percent of teachers with more than seven years of experience are less effective at advancing academic progress than the average first-year teacher.**

The result: Rather than steadily improving the quality of instruction, schools are running in place.

FIGURE 2 | SCHOOL RETENTION RATES BY TEACHER PERFORMANCE, 2009-10



Most schools retain Irreplaceables and low performers at strikingly similar rates.

School retention defined as teachers remaining at their school from one year to the next.  
Source: District data from SY 2009-10 through SY 2010-11.

"An effective teacher is worth his/her weight in gold. Too few people really know this."  
— School Leader



## THE CAUSES

These destructive retention patterns occur mainly because leaders at all levels let them happen. We identified three main causes of negligent retention:

### 1 Principals make too little effort to retain Irreplaceables or remove low-performing teachers

Less than 30 percent of Irreplaceables plan to leave for personal reasons beyond their school's control, and principals' actions have a significant impact on the decisions of the other 70 percent. We identified eight simple, low-cost strategies that helped boost teacher retention at the schools we studied—things like giving positive feedback or public recognition for a job well done. Irreplaceables receiving two or more of these strategies planned to remain at their schools *up to six years longer* than those who didn't, yet many Irreplaceables experienced few or none of these strategies. Two-thirds told us that nobody even encouraged them to return for another year (*Figure 3*).

Meanwhile, principals rarely attempt to dismiss or counsel out chronically low-performing teachers, though we found teachers are nearly three times as likely to plan to leave if encouraged to do so. In fact, principals often work to retain low-performing teachers, even though a brand-new teacher will pay off in improved performance about 75 percent of the time. Most principals focus on development instead—more than 70 percent insist it is a top priority—even though the average experienced low performer we studied remained less effective than an average beginning teacher even three years later (*Figure 4*).

### 2 Poor school cultures and working conditions drive away great teachers

At schools that retain high percentages of Irreplaceables, principals created cultures of respect and trust, but were also less likely to tolerate ineffective teaching. Turnover rates among Irreplaceables were 50 percent higher in schools with weak instructional cultures than in those with strong cultures. In three out of the four districts we studied, retention rates were higher at schools where teachers reported a low tolerance for poor performance—yet fewer than half of the teachers we surveyed believed that their own school has a low tolerance for ineffective teaching.

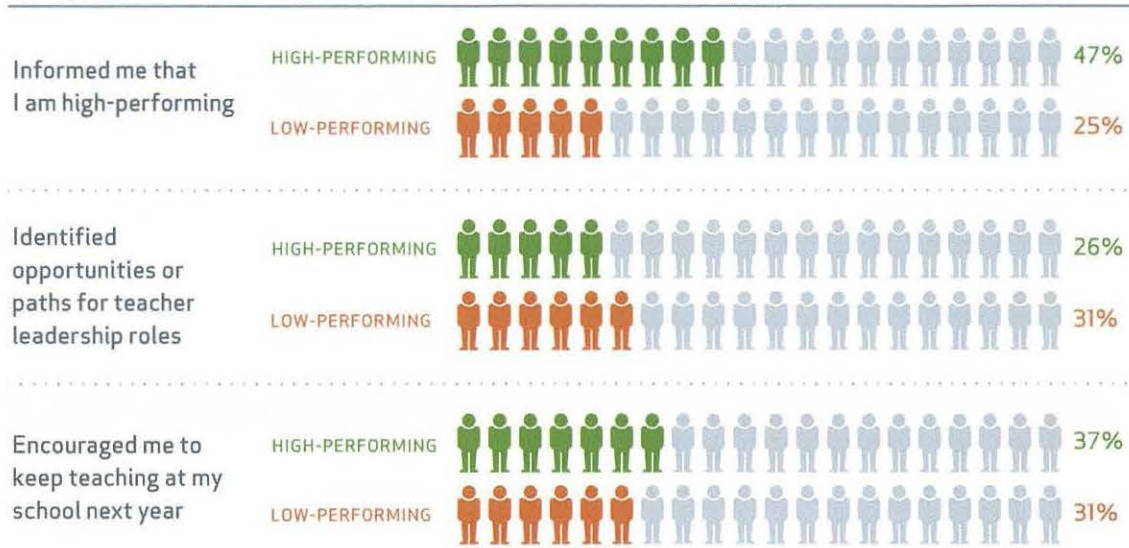
We believe the lesson is clear: Good teachers don't leave demanding schools that hold them to high expectations; they leave schools that aren't serious about good teaching.

### 3 Policies give principals and district leaders few incentives to change their ways

In most school districts, smart teacher retention is simply not a priority. In three of the four districts we studied, only 20 percent of principals agreed that their district had effective strategies to retain its best teachers. Furthermore, principals in most districts encounter a number of policy barriers that discourage or prevent them from making smarter retention decisions. Most notably, they are hamstrung by lockstep teacher compensation systems that are hard-wired to undervalue great teaching. Because these systems award most raises for seniority and advanced degrees, about 55 percent of Irreplaceables earn lower base salaries than the average ineffective teacher. Not surprisingly, **compensation was one of the reasons most frequently cited by Irreplaceables for leaving their schools.**

FIGURE 3 | TEACHERS REPORTING RECOGNITION AT SCHOOL

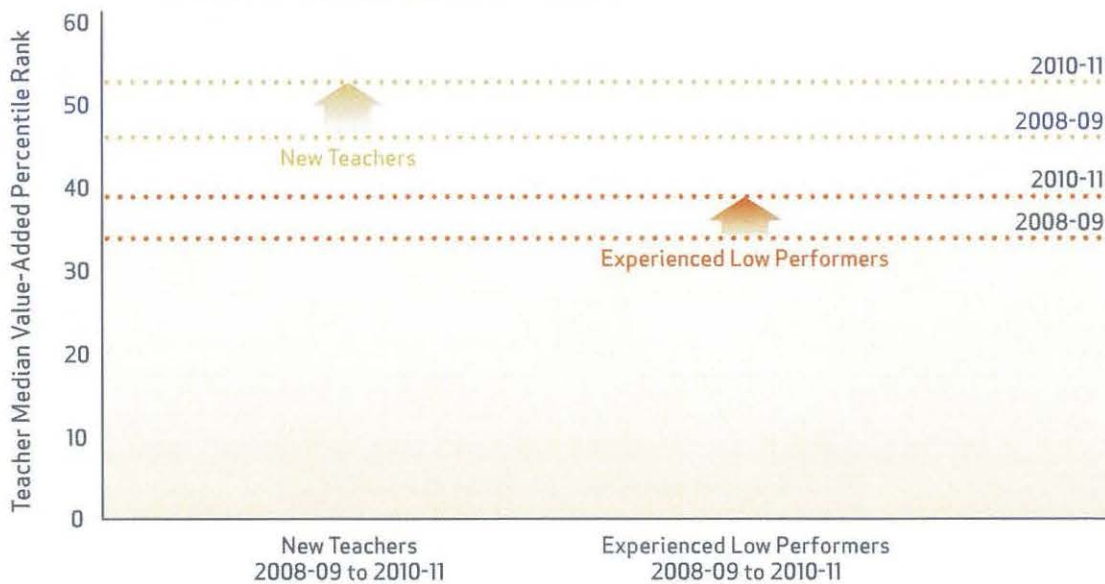
“Last year, someone from my school leadership team...”



Principals use retention strategies at similar rates for high and low performers.

Source: District B data and survey data. Trends confirmed across districts.

FIGURE 4 | PERFORMANCE COMPARISON OF NEW TEACHERS AND EXPERIENCED LOW PERFORMERS OVER THREE YEARS



Low performers rarely improve significantly. Even three years later, most perform worse than the average first-year teacher.

Median percentile ranks by population scores; Populations defined in SY 2007-08. Source: District C data from SY 2007-08 through SY 2010-11. Trends confirmed across districts.



## THE CONSEQUENCES

Negligent retention has dire consequences for students, teachers, and schools. Specifically:

### 1 School turnaround is nearly impossible

Current retention patterns lock our lowest achieving schools into a cycle of failure, keeping them from ever having enough good or great teachers to improve. Our analysis shows that **struggling schools can reach an average teacher composition after three to four years of smart retention practices**, but may never do so under a pattern of negligent retention (*Figure 5*).

Put simply, most struggling schools won't ever have as many high-performing teachers as other schools—and are unlikely to improve significantly—without making smart retention a top priority.

### 2 The teaching profession is degraded

The neglect of Irreplaceables is just one glaring symptom of a wider problem: a profession that has become one of low performance standards and the lack of respect that accompanies them. Negligent retention sends the dangerous message that great teachers are expendable and that anyone can make a career out of teaching, regardless of how well they perform.

Tolerating poor performance keeps ineffective teachers in the classroom indefinitely, **demoralizes outstanding teachers, and allows the entire teaching profession to be defined by mediocrity** rather than excellence.

FIGURE 5 | SIMULATED TEACHER RETENTION PATTERNS IN 10 LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS, EACH WITH 20 TEACHERS

NEGLIGENT RETENTION		200 Teachers Start Year 1	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	200 Teachers End Year 4 <i>Includes New Hires</i>
14% Low Performers Leave	Low Performers	38	5 leave	5 leave	5 leave	5 leave	34
14% High Performers Leave	High Performers	24	3 leave	4 leave	4 leave	4 leave	25
SMART RETENTION		200 Teachers Start Year 1	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	200 Teachers End Year 4 <i>Includes New Hires</i>
33% Low Performers Leave	Low Performers	38	13 leave	10 leave	7 leave	7 leave	17
4% High Performers Leave	High Performers	24	1 leaves	1 leaves	1 leaves	1 leaves	36

**By changing which teachers leave, low-performing schools can reach an average teacher composition in a few years.**

Number of total teachers is 200. Starting composition is 24 high performers, 138 mid performers, and 38 low performers. Ending composition for negligent retention is 25 high performers, 141 mid performers, and 34 low performers. Ending composition for smart retention is 36 high performers, 147 mid performers, and 17 low performers. Analysis only includes schools with a minimum of 7 teachers with value-added or growth data in each year. Composition data based on an average of 3 years; attrition and pipeline data based on an average of 2 years. Models using the teacher composition at low- and mid-proficiency schools, defined by school-level math proficiency quintile. Model does not assume any fluctuation in teacher populations at schools and assumes population of teachers with performance data reflects the effectiveness of all teachers at these schools. Overall attrition and incoming pipeline rate held steady each year. Source: District D data from SY 2007-08 through SY 2009-10.

## THE SOLUTION: SMART RETENTION

Solving the real teacher retention crisis requires a new approach that revolves around smart retention: keeping more Irreplaceables and fewer low-performing teachers.

This approach could improve the quality of teaching at almost any school right away, and it has the potential to boost student learning substantially. We believe it represents the best way—possibly the only way—for low-performing schools to break their cycles of failure, and for the teaching profession to achieve the elite status it deserves.

Lamenting the low prestige of the teaching profession without addressing the low standards that perpetuate it will not solve the real retention crisis, nor will focusing on greater accountability for teachers without regard for the challenging circumstances in which they work. Education leaders at all levels need to embrace the more difficult, more complex work of demanding better working conditions for teachers along with higher performance standards. We make two main recommendations for solving the real retention crisis.

### 1 Make retention of Irreplaceables a top priority

A combination of focused strategies, focused leadership and focused policies will help keep the best teachers in the classroom longer. Education leaders should:

**Set a goal of retaining more than 90 percent of Irreplaceables annually**, and report progress towards that goal publicly

**Overhaul principal hiring, support and evaluation** to focus on instructional leadership abilities that result in smart teacher retention, like the ability and commitment to give teachers frequent, high-quality and rigorous feedback

**Monitor school working conditions** and address concerns at the policy and individual school level that drive away Irreplaceables

**Pay Irreplaceables what they're worth** and create career pathways that extend their reach

**Protect Irreplaceables during layoffs**

### 2 Strengthen the teaching profession through higher expectations

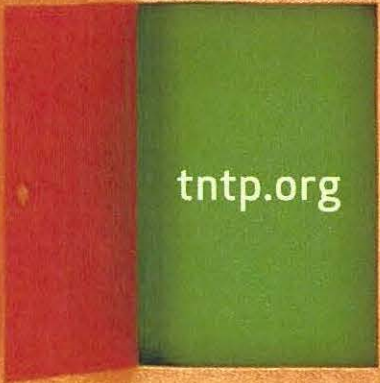
Education leaders must also address the other side of the retention crisis: the indifference to performance that has allowed so many unsuccessful teachers to remain in the classroom for years or even decades. This will require difficult decisions and long-deferred actions, but further delay will only exacerbate the problem.

**Set a new baseline standard for effectiveness:** Teachers who cannot teach as well as the average first-year teacher should be considered ineffective and dismissed or counseled out (unless they *are* first-year teachers)

**Encourage low performers to leave voluntarily** by creating alternatives to formal dismissal

**Remove the policy barriers to higher expectations**, such as forced-placement staffing rules and onerous dismissal processes

Neither the teaching profession nor our schools can move forward without these changes. Leaders at every level helped create the real retention crisis; they now have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to help solve it. The alternative is to continue standing by as thousands of Irreplaceables every year leave the schools and students who need them most.



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