



BUILDING TEACHER QUALITY

in the Kansas City, Missouri School District



National Council on Teacher Quality



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study looks at the policies and practices shaping teacher quality in the Kansas City, Missouri School District (KCMSD). It is part of a series of analyses by the National Council on Teacher Quality in school districts across the nation.

Framing this analysis are five policy goals for improving teacher quality:

1. **Staffing.** Teacher assignment is based on the mutual consent of principals and teachers, with district policies facilitating the access of schools to top teacher talent.
2. **Work culture.** Policies encourage a professional and collaborative culture, including a work schedule that allows for sufficient planning time.
3. **Evaluations.** Teachers' performance evaluations play a critical role in advancing teacher effectiveness.
4. **Tenure.** Tenure is a meaningful milestone in a teacher's career and advances the district's goal of building a corps of effective teachers.
5. **Compensation.** Compensation is strategically targeted to attract and reward high quality teachers, especially those in hard-to-staff positions.

For this analysis we explored the policies (found in both the collective bargaining agreement and state law) that shape teacher quality. We collected personnel data from the district and met with teachers, principals, union leaders and district administrators to get a better understanding of how these policies play out in practice. We also compared the policies in KCMSD with those of surrounding districts and the 100-plus districts found in the NCTQ's TR³ database, www.nctq.org/tr3. Lastly, we laid out a blueprint of suggested improvements and highlighted possible solutions that have been successful elsewhere.

Many of the recommendations in this document require changes in state law or in contract language. Since collective bargaining is not mandatory in the state of Missouri, the teachers' contract should not be seen as an obstacle to reform. Most of our recommendations simply require that the district make significant improvements to how it conducts its daily business. Though all school districts struggle with efficiency, the degree to which Kansas City struggles is cause for concern. The district's poor record-keeping and lack of data systems were alarming. KCMSD was often unable to provide us with the most basic information on its workforce and much of the data it did provide was unusable.

**THE MAJORITY
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These data problems prevented us from exploring key issues that we were able to review in other districts. **Improving the district's technology and data systems should be a key goal of KCMSD.** Failure to make these changes will hinder the district's efforts to make other improvements.

For a complete list of the workforce data KCMSD should collect and review on view NCTQ's Teacher Quality Checklist at: http://www.nctq.org/tr3/docs/nctq_teacher_quality_checklist.pdf

Summary of findings and recommendations

I. STAFFING

Principals' authority to staff their schools is limited, undermined by centralized, seniority-based assignment practices. In KCMSD, teachers are assigned to schools by the central office, often without an opportunity for school officials to interview candidates or to voice preferences. When the district closed 26 schools at the end of the 2009-2010 school year, KCMSD missed a key opportunity to allow principals to build new school teams, instead reassigning displaced teachers in order of seniority and without attention to their effectiveness. Many teachers were laid off because they lacked seniority in the district, without any regard to their classroom performance.

Teacher retention is higher in KCMSD than in other urban districts NCTQ has studied. Despite a number of transitions in recent years, such as a new superintendent and school closures, three out of four teachers who were teaching in the 2007-2008 school year were still working in the district in the 2009-2010 school year.

Primary Recommendations

- Permit principals and their school hiring teams to determine which teachers work in their schools.
- Use performance as a factor in determining teacher assignments, whether when staffing schools for vacant positions or when deciding which teachers go when positions must be cut.
- Change state law to permit districts to dismiss a displaced teacher who remains without an assignment after one year.

2. WORK CULTURE

KCMSD provides the longest instructional day among surrounding districts, but has one of the shortest school years in the nation. The short school year is attributable to an unusual state law setting the minimum number of schools days to 174 days, comparing unfavorably to a 180-day national average.

In spite of a sensible sick and personal leave package of 12.5 days a year, attendance patterns of KCMSD teachers merit attention. Teachers use almost all of their allotted sick leave, missing an average of 9.6 days of the 10.5 allowable days in the 2009–2010 school year. Sick leave is taken disproportionately on Mondays and Fridays. Absences increase as teachers gain more seniority. Tenured teachers have one third more absences than their nontenured peers, and elementary teachers have one third more absences than high school teachers.

Primary Recommendations

- Adjust teacher work schedule to an eight-hour day to facilitate collaborative planning with other teachers, individualized assistance for students and outreach to parents.
- Lengthen the student school year to a minimum of 180 days to be consistent with the national average.
- Improve tracking of attendance and provide principals with regular attendance reports.
- Make teacher attendance a component of teacher evaluations.

3. EVALUATIONS

KCMSD teachers can receive a satisfactory evaluation rating without evidence that they are increasing student learning. The district does a poor job of identifying ineffective teachers even relative to the underreporting by most U.S. school districts: Only six teachers were identified as “not meeting standards” last school year.

Primary Recommendations

- Make student performance the preponderant criterion on which teachers are evaluated.
- Develop a team of independent evaluators to validate principal evaluations and provide content-specific feedback on teacher instruction.
- Collect and examine student feedback on teacher instruction.
- Change state law to allow teachers only one opportunity to appeal a dismissal decision.

4. TENURE

KCMSD does little to make tenure meaningful. The district does not have a process whereby teachers and the principals in whose schools they serve must present evidence of teacher effectiveness.

KCMSD does not keep records on the number of teachers who qualify for tenure each year, nor the number of teachers on a provisional contract who were dismissed.

Primary Recommendations

- Develop a tenure tool kit to assist principals in making informed and deliberate tenure decisions.
- Hold a tenure review that factors in value-added data on teacher effectiveness to decide whether to award tenure.
- Reward teachers who earn tenure with a significant increase in pay, the largest structural pay increase in their careers.
- Aim to dismiss the bottom-performing 25 percent of nontenured teachers each year.

5. COMPENSATION

KCMSD's pay structure for teachers is misaligned with district needs and teacher quality goals. Although KCMSD deserves credit for exploring performance pay through various grant programs, it has done little to address underlying structural problems in teacher compensation.

KCMSD spends 17 percent of its teacher payroll, \$8 million a year, to compensate teachers for obtaining advanced degrees. While many assume advanced degrees (generally master's degrees) make teachers more effective, research concludes decidedly otherwise, particularly for degrees not related to the subject matter taught.

KCMSD teachers have the lowest starting salary of the surrounding school districts. While salaries ultimately recoup some of their competitiveness as teachers gain experience, lifetime earnings never recover from the initial setback of low starting pay in KCMSD.

KCMSD reserves the largest raises for teachers with the most experience. Raises for teachers in their 19th year are nearly three times larger than for teachers in their first two years of teaching.

Until KCMSD relieves significant wage compression, whereby the top performing teachers earn the same as less effective peers, its compensation structure will remain inherently unfair to talented teachers.

Primary Recommendations

- Redirect pay tied to degree-based compensation to a pay structure predominantly premised on a teacher's effectiveness, a demand for a teacher's skill and a teacher's willingness to teach in challenging environments.
- Raise the starting salary of KCMSD's teachers so that KCMSD compensation is competitive with surrounding districts.
- Redistribute raises associated with experience to earlier in a teacher's career, awarding the largest raise at the tenure mark.
- Attend to the details of the district's performance pay program, funded by a federal grant from the Teacher Incentive Fund, to ensure that the bonuses go primarily toward teacher effectiveness, teachers with high-demand skills and placement of effective teachers in high-needs schools.

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