

CHAPTER 3

From Staffing to Strategy in Human Resources

ROBIN GREENE, principal of Sound Elementary School, pulled out her planner from last year and said, “Look, I can show you.” She was describing how much time she and her leadership team used to spend preparing for her school’s annual spring budget and staffing meeting. She said:

It was *hours*. And that’s just what’s on my calendar. All of that for one meeting—downtown with twenty minutes to share our wish list for staffing with central HR [Human Resources] and budget. We made our presentation. We looked at budget and vacancy projections. Which we had already sent in [to HR] so they already had it! And there is only so much you can do to build a staff opening by opening, retirement by retirement. But that’s how we did it. And then, when an opening came up or enrollments shifted—Groundhog Day. We just had to go over it all over again.

But the district’s HR transformation process made that meeting obsolete, and last year, the district canceled it. The HR director explained:

My staff was drowning in processes that took multiple steps and, like the spring meeting? Totally unnecessary. Redundant. We stepped back and made an inventory of all our work processes and identified

what we can just stop doing or significantly trim down the steps. That literally wiped out about a third of our processes. Then we started to look more deeply at the processes that remained and how to redesign them in a way that made everything easier for principals and teachers and our own staff.

In tandem with that streamlining and redesign, a team of HR staff members, personnel from the Data and Accountability office, and a local university researcher worked together to develop a “teacher profile”—a set of standards that every new hire would have to meet to ensure that every teacher, from day one, was likely to be successful. That effort started with the standards of high-quality teaching and learning that the district’s Teaching and Learning (T&L) unit had adopted to anchor professional development. The team then asked, “What experience must a candidate have and what competencies do they need to demonstrate at the point of hiring to increase the likelihood of their success along those standards?” To help them answer that and related questions, the team examined research and their district’s own workforce data, which provided a set of initial predictors of teacher performance and retention. In the words of the HR director, “Now, you are a principal and you don’t have to ask for teachers who have a basic level of cultural competency coming in or at least initial experience with ambitious mathematics instruction because that’s our baseline. The goal is we won’t show you a candidate who isn’t already on that ground floor.”

HR was also able to dedicate staff members to work directly with principals to use staffing as a main driver of equitable teaching and learning. Now HR partners collaborated with each principal to develop a strategic staffing model—an aspirational map of the experience and expertise they believed they needed on each teacher team to support teacher team learning, with an explicit focus on the success and retention of teachers of color. The superintendent summed up these changes: “Our HR unit used to staff vacancies. Now, they build teacher teams.” She elaborated:

Like a lot of districts, we have relied on PD [professional development] and PLCs [professional learning communities] for teacher support. But we weren’t getting the results. In any other industry, leaders know that

performance starts with staffing strong teams. So then we started to say, "Any good PD starts with staffing, with making sure teachers are on the right teams so they can learn well together." But our strategy was still, "Okay, bam, those third-grade teachers are now a PLC and they have ninety minutes of weekly planning time. No further guidance or help." And as a district, we had too few teachers of color and what did we do? Principals competed for them, they got spread across schools, and ended up being the only teacher of color on their team and maybe their school. Which is basically exactly what *not* to do if you want to support and keep those teachers.

The strategic staff planning process at Sound Elementary School started with Principal Greene and her HR partner working through a protocol over several meetings that asked questions such as: Given the district's strategic plan and our schoolwide vision, beyond what's in the teacher profile, what is the expertise we need on each of our teacher teams to ensure they can learn well together? They also reviewed guidance that the HR partners and T&L staff had been developing about that expertise, such as the importance of dual-language schools having native speakers on each team and teachers who had participated in an intensive training program to lead teacher learning in inquiry-based science. In the process, they considered research such as that on the isolation teachers of color feel when they are the only one on their teacher team, which in turn can have a negative effect on their retention.

Then they compared Greene's current teacher teams with the forward-looking staffing model to identify gaps. They also looked at data on teacher performance and retention. That analysis revealed that the current fourth- and fifth-grade teams had enough expertise to grow their teaching along the new science standards, but in the earlier grades, 82 percent of staff members were humanities, not science, majors; those teachers had participated in science PD sessions, but classroom observations revealed that the teachers too often made scientific errors. Data also showed that Principal Greene had a weak track record hiring and retaining teachers identifying as Latino/a. While she worked on her own practice in that area with her supervisor, she needed to ensure that those teachers were on the right teams to support their retention.

Principal Greene and her HR partner then identified a series of next steps to close the gaps between the teacher teams she had and those she needed to support her teachers in leading their own learning in teams. First, Greene shared her analysis with her current teachers to see if any were interested in shifting grades or schools. Her HR partner had a roster of teachers at other schools who had been science majors and had an interest in changing schools.

And the bench was even deeper than that thanks to a partnership between the district and a local teacher education program. Through that partnership, the recruitment team and program faculty members had already been working to increase the number of graduates specializing in science education. Enhancements to the teacher hiring process also now provided principals like Greene with detailed information about each candidate's readiness to perform in different content areas from performance tasks and other sources. The superintendent added:

You are going to ask me, "What about unions?" Union leadership helped us design these processes, and teachers are integrally involved at every step. We grew a partnership from day one. And the whole idea is to stop doing PD and staffing to teachers and start lifting our teachers up as professionals and giving them the support and tools they need, which is our common ground. We hit bumps, of course, but we keep coming back to that shared belief and that helps us move forward together.

From: Honig, M.I. & Rainey, L.R. (2023). *From tinkering to transformation: How school district central offices drive equitable teaching and learning*. Harvard Education Press.