How to Adapt Schools to Meet the Needs of Students

Teachers United Policy Team Recommendations

October 2012
A statement from our policy team:

"Educators arrive at their schools everyday with the highest expectations for their students’ success. For decades this has been true. Over time, however, we have learned this is not enough: articulating a goal without providing effective means to reach that goal is a well-intentioned but empty promise. To accomplish what we are constitutionally and morally obligated to do, we must provide the means to guarantee every child does in fact attain an excellent education; does in fact reach those highest expectations. This has never happened. But we now know better. We have learned through our own experiences, through working with our peers, through observing the lives of our students, that certain things make a difference—make an incredible difference. And since we now know this, we must do better. The system we have built is failing many students. It is full of promise and expectation, but lacking in means. What we newly constitute must combine the best of our knowledge and experiences to ensure every child attains an excellent education."
At a network meeting in May, teachers affiliated with Teachers United discussed and voted on three policy issues to study in the upcoming year. One of these issues was alternative school models such as Innovation schools and charters. Any interested teacher was invited to join the “Alternative School Models” policy team and 17 teachers signed up. These teachers were particularly concerned about the fact that so many of our low-income and minority students were falling so far behind, dropping out of high school, or not graduating with the skills to attain higher levels of education and ultimately family-wage jobs.

Beginning in June, this group of teachers...

- dissected Initiative 1240,
- read eight research papers and 20 editorial pieces on charter schools,
- interviewed several authors of I-1240,
- interviewed national charter school experts from the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington-Bothell,
- traveled to New Orleans to visit five charter schools and host a panel of local education leaders.

About Teachers United

In 2010, a group of Seattle and Tacoma teachers came together around the idea that the educational system in Washington has to rise to the potential of our students. When nearly 30% of our students—and far higher percentages of low-income and minority students—aren’t graduating on time, we can do better. We believe informed and empowered teachers can play a transformational role in making our system one that provides a superior education for all students. Consequently, we are creating a movement of excellence: Teachers United.

“What we are doing isn’t working for all our kids and we need to do something new.” - Emily Elasky, TU Policy Team Member
Does the presence of charter schools negatively affect the students who remain in traditional public schools?

Our teachers expressed concern for those students “left behind” in their traditional public school when a charter school went into a neighborhood. In an effort to address this issue, we turned to several studies and experts to answer the question. What our research showed was that it does not seem that charter schools are hurting students remaining in traditional public schools. No study showed significant or negative effects to students from the inclusion of charter schools. One article we read discussed a study showing that non-district sponsored charter schools actually had a significant positive effect on student outcomes in the surrounding traditional public schools. Another study showed that traditional public schools exposed to competition from charter schools made significantly better improvements in test scores than public schools not exposed to charter competition.

In essence, some parents will exercise “school choice” on their own by finding out where the best schools are and moving there. It is interesting to note that a research study found that school districts faced with public-school competition from other districts had consistently higher test scores.

Do charter schools drain funds from public schools?

One common complaint in Washington about charter schools is that they take funds away from traditional public schools. As charter schools are public schools—funded with per-pupil dollars in the same way traditional public schools are—this was in many ways a difficult question to answer. If charters are public schools, how can they be taking money away from public schools? Regardless, our teachers did want to understand what happens to funding for the surrounding traditional public schools/districts when a charter is opened. They began with the question of whether a model for this scenario had already occurred in Washington State. One teacher brought up the point that districts have actually been dealing with this issue for years. He said that often parents with the money to do so buy a house in a neighboring district so as to have access to better schools. When this happens, the money for that student leaves the district since the per-pupil funding follows the child. This was a phenomenon Seattle Public Schools experienced to a large extent during the policy of mandatory bussing in the early 1980s. Many parents chose to move to other districts so as to escape a policy they were unhappy with.

Even independent of district policies, one sees this phenomenon of per-pupil funding moving between schools and/or districts. The 2000 U.S. Census found that 15-20 percent of all school-aged children moved in the previous year, and a 1994 U.S. General Accounting Office study found that one out of six students had attended three or more schools by the end of the 3rd grade.

National research of twelve states or districts that have school choice found that “all twelve are at least fiscally neutral when the impact on state budgets and local public school districts is combined.”

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4. Education Week Research Center: Student Mobility, Available online: http://www.edweek.org/rg/issues/student-mobility/?print=1
Given these data and in looking at Initiative 1240, our teachers concluded that with only eight schools opening statewide each year for five years, individual schools and districts would be able to adapt to small changes in enrollment numbers. Were the number of charter schools in a district to increase over time, districts would have the time to plan for consolidating classrooms or schools were their enrollments to shrink significantly, just as they have done in the past with dips in enrollment.

**Are charter schools and Innovation schools selective? Who do they serve?**

We began this discussion with a look at Washington's own Innovation schools. Our teachers independently researched the application process and demographic data for three different schools. It was agreed that the applications were quite rigorous, some schools required long interviews, and that academic performance couldn’t help but factor into the admission decision.

The demographic data showed that Innovation schools enrolled significantly lower percentages of low-income and minority students than their surrounding traditional public school counterparts. While our teachers agreed that some Innovation schools were providing an excellent education to their students, they concluded that these schools were not reaching large numbers of at-risk students.

Another issue the policy team looked at was whether charters exclude special education students. Although a Government Accountability Office report came out showing that charters enroll slightly lower percentages of special education students, we looked at a number of explanations for why this might be. In analyzing the GAO report, one education expert noted “there’s Initiative 1240 states that charter schools “may not limit admission on any basis other than age group, grade level, or capacity and must enroll all students who apply within these bases. A charter school is open to any student regardless of his or her location of residence.”

Another article makes the point that the GAO report doesn’t account for the fact that many successful charter schools work hard to “de-label” kids previously identified as special needs by overcoming their “disability” with strong schooling. These schools also focus on early interventions in the younger grades to prevent needing a special education IEP in the first place. In response to a proposal to impose special education quotas on charter schools, Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO of the Harlem Success Academy, said this would only “institutionalize perverse incentives to over-identify students with disabilities.”

Having established that charter schools cannot legally exclude students, the team began researching the topic of what student populations are best served by charter schools. To begin with, the research was very clear that in large urban areas like New York, low-income, minority, and ELL students enroll in charters at much higher rates than their traditional district school counterparts. When one compares those charter students to their peers who were “lotteried out” (tried to enroll but couldn’t get a seat due to demand), the data show significantly higher levels of achievement on average for the charter school students. These data, among other factors such as school safety, could certainly explain the long waiting lists at public charter schools in large, urban areas.

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7 Petrelli, Michael. “GAO and George Miller Don’t Understand How Special Education Works.” Thomas B. Fordham Institute (June 2012)
8 Emerson, Adam. “A Different Case for Justice in Special Ed.” Thomas B. Fordham Institute (June 2012)
9 1-1240, section 204(a) p. 8
While there is evidence of successful charter schools it seems like a lot are no better than traditional public schools. How can we prevent bad charter schools?

The policy team first looked at the statistics about charter school quality nationwide. Although a Stanford study concluded that only 17% of charters outperform traditional public schools nationwide, the team decided to delve into this statistic. Their research led teachers to conclude that the overall quality of charter schools opened in Washington was more likely to resemble the 17% of charters outperforming traditional public schools.

How are charters different from traditional public schools? Can’t we do what they do in traditional public schools?

Based on their interviews with five leaders of highly successful charter schools, one research report identified seven components essential to charter success: autonomy to develop a great team, autonomy to manage teachers as professionals (including the option of giving them merit-based raises), autonomy to change curriculum and classroom structure, autonomy over scheduling, financial autonomy, accountability to more localized school boards, and autonomy to define a school culture.

Interestingly, our teachers came to the same conclusions, based on their research, observations of charter schools, and frustrations with their own traditional district schools in which they work. Having identified what they felt to be the essential elements a school must have to successfully meet the needs of all students, the policy team asked the central question: “Are we able to do this in all schools right now?” The answer for most key elements was “no.” This conclusion was confirmed when we polled the Teachers United network. The policy team felt that union contracts, legal constraints, district mandates, and lack of site-based financial freedom were barriers to making the kind of substantial changes schools must make to meet students’ needs. They concluded that 1-1240 would allow schools these essential freedoms, and those freedoms—if implemented well—could benefit students. 1-1240 states that:

“Charter schools are not subject to and are exempt from all other state statutes and rules applicable to school districts and school district boards of directors, for the purpose of allowing flexibility to innovate in areas such as scheduling, personnel, funding, and educational programs in order to improve student outcomes and academic achievement.”

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111 Initiative 1240, Section 2145(2), p. 21
113 Ibid
114 Ibid
115 Ibid
116 Initiative 1240, Section 2105(6), p. 13-14, Section 2152(7), p. 15-17
117 Initiative 1240, Section 2152(3), p. 6-24
118 Initiative 1240, Section 2152(5), p. 66
119 Initiative 1240, Section 2205(2), p. 29
121 Initiative 1240, Section 2105(3)
NEW ORLEANS

In August, thirteen teachers, including members of the Policy Team, traveled to New Orleans to visit five charter schools and speak with their school and network leaders. They also had the opportunity to host a panel discussion of local education leaders. While each school they visited was different, common themes emerged:

- Effective leadership matters. Excellent leaders must be recruited and supported to carry out the vision of the school.
- Schools must have a clear vision that the entire staff is committed to working towards.
- Everyone in the school must have high expectations for all kids.
- Everyone at the school must do whatever it takes to get kids to where they need to be. No excuses.
- Teachers, principals, custodians, community partners, etc. must work together as a team.
- Leadership’s role is to select great staff and constantly support them in the honing of their craft and their career development.

"Before I joined this policy team, I was actually anti-charter..." - Emily Elasky, TU Policy Team Member

Development of the Recommendations

After returning from New Orleans, the policy team and other accompanying teachers reconvened to discuss what they had seen and how these themes connected with the research they had done, and with their own experiences in the schools in which they teach. From this conversation, they created a long list of elements schools need to successfully educate all students. The list was edited and pared down to what the team felt were the most essential elements. This list became the nine recommendations that follow.
WE BELIEVE EVERY SCHOOL NEEDS AUTONOMY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY.

VISION

As teachers, we know that different schools need different things for their students. A one-size-fits-all approach to education and delivery of services does not serve our communities. Schools should have the ability to go to a community, speak with its members, and design a school with a vision that will address their specific needs to best educate their children. Schools must then be held accountable for adhering to that vision and ensuring that the progress towards that is measurable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO YOU THINK THIS IS GOOD FOR STUDENTS?</th>
<th>IS THIS POSSIBLE IN EVERY SCHOOL?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The autonomy to create a vision constructed around specific needs of students.</td>
<td>The accountability for moving students measurably toward the vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89% Yes</td>
<td>97% Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3% No</td>
<td>16% Unsure</td>
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<tr>
<td>8% Unsure</td>
<td>26% Yes</td>
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</table>

“Right now teachers get into their classrooms and are so disconnected from each other that they are not building on what they’re doing. This system can’t work... there is no vision or purpose. We should be for schools that articulate specific, clear visions and can be held accountable for those visions.” — Martin Piccoli, TU Policy Team Member
WE BELIEVE EVERY SCHOOL NEEDS AUTONOMY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY.

STAFFING

Having built a school around a specific vision for a community, school leaders need the autonomy to recruit and hire teachers who agree with and commit to that vision. We know that different students have different needs—the same is true of schools with regards to staffing. School leaders find that some teachers “fit” and others do not. Leaders need the autonomy to find those “best fits” and the ability to let go of those who are not able to move their students measurably toward the vision.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>IS THIS POSSIBLE IN EVERY SCHOOL?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The autonomy to hire staff to fit the vision.</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Pie chart" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Pie chart" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>The ability to retain staff that fit the vision and let go of staff that do not.</td>
<td><strong>95% YES</strong></td>
<td><strong>71% NO</strong></td>
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“Charter schools have the autonomy to hire who they deem to be in line with their mission and capable of doing the job. And then teachers are given so much support. That kind of support is crucial... for teachers to be able to support children and do what’s best for them.” — Rachel Belcastro, TU Policy Team Member
WE BELIEVE EVERY SCHOOL NEEDS AUTONOMY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY.

FUNDING

Given that every school serves different communities with varying needs, schools need the flexibility to decide how best to use their per-pupil funds to meet those specific needs. Spending may be different at every school. Some schools may put their resources towards more early interventions; others may choose to hire more teacher coaches. Mandates from a central administration about how to use funding do not allow schools to be nimble and creative in meeting the individual needs of their students and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The autonomy to use per-pupil funding to best meet the specific needs of students.</th>
<th>95% Yes</th>
<th>3% No</th>
<th>3% Unsure</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The accountability for ensuring that the use of those funds best contributes to specific needs of students.</td>
<td>95% YES</td>
<td>55% NO</td>
<td></td>
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DO YOU THINK THIS IS GOOD FOR STUDENTS?

IS THIS POSSIBLE IN EVERY SCHOOL?

68% No
16% Unsure
16% Yes

“Our system doesn’t work to make the best out of us. It allows us to be less productive and uncoordinated... it’s a system we need to change.” - Martin Piccoli, TU Policy Team Member
# Professional Development

While we are beginning to see some movement toward more individualized professional development, particularly for struggling teachers, we think all teachers ought to have access to this. Often, districts determine that all teachers must spend their time on a particular professional development focus, whether or not it’s of use to that particular school or teacher. They decide that every teacher needs a set—and often small—number of observations a year. Schools need the freedom to choose how they as a school will use their coaching, professional development time, and resources to best support teacher growth and student learning in that community. They then must track whether their efforts are leading to increased student achievement. Providing site-based leadership development and career pathways that tie directly into the school’s vision are also essential to school success. Some schools may choose to grow teacher leaders to take on more administrative duties, others may choose to provide career pathways that include teacher coaching duties. Schools must be able to decide.

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<tr>
<td>Autonomy to provide site-based, individualized professional development and coaching.</td>
<td><img src="chart_data.png" alt="97% Yes" /> 0% No 3% Unsure</td>
<td>50% No 29% Yes 21% Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability for ensuring that this professional development and coaching leads to increased student achievement.</td>
<td><img src="chart_data.png" alt="95% Yes" /> 50% No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy to provide site-based leadership development and pathways for career growth and promotion.</td>
<td><img src="chart_data.png" alt="97% Yes" /> 0% No 3% Unsure</td>
<td>55% No 21% Yes 24% Unsure</td>
</tr>
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"In the charters we saw, the level of support within the school leadership structure and beyond was tremendous... it comes from every place. They offer so much support...daily, weekly feedback. If you’re a teacher at these schools, you don’t have an opportunity to fail." - Rachel Belcastro, TU Policy Team Member
At a network meeting on September 10th, the policy team presented these nine recommendations for how schools can better adapt to the needs of students. Teachers in attendance voted on whether the recommendations would benefit students, are currently possible to implement in all schools, and whether or not Teachers United should support Initiative 1240. Additionally, those unable to attend the September 10th meeting cast their votes on these recommendations through online polling.

**Should Teachers United Support Initiative 1240?**

- **YES**: 77%
- **NO**: 14%
- **UNSURE**: 9%

"With accountability, our kids need choice. They need choice and they need people who believe in them and are going to do whatever it takes on their behalf." - Caine Lowery, TU Policy Team Member
CONCLUSION
Undoubtedly, teachers want better for their students and their schools. They want to focus on what’s best for students. The recommendations our policy team have made—and that network teachers decidedly support—are a clear way to bring the focus back to students. School leaders and teachers are engaged in and know their communities. They can be trusted to make decisions that will ultimately serve students’ and families’ best interest. Autonomy with accountability will allow schools to focus on teaching and learning rather than being encumbered by hierarchy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Kirby Green, Seattle
Todd Hausman, Bellingham
Michelle Lewis, Puget Sound ESD
Gina Poling, Highline
Gina Wickstead, Seattle

“Currently, we focus on systems and hierarchy... not on kids.”
— Todd Hausman, TU Policy Team Member

“It’s time we deliver on this promise. The promise is that every single kid gets access to a quality education.”
— Caine Lowery, TU Policy Team Member
How to Adapt Schools to Meet the Needs of Students is a product of our “Alternative School Models” Policy Team, which conducted research in the summer of 2012 and presented their recommendations to Teachers United teachers in September, 2012.

A very special thanks to all of the brilliant teachers who contributed to this work (see inside back cover). The depth and quality of their thinking combined the best of the intersection between policy and the classroom. To Erin Gustafson, our policy director, who brought it all together, and Caley Mitchell who created the design and layout. To Dr. Betheny Gross and Tricia Maas (Center on Reinventing Public Education), Chris Korsho (League of Education Voters) and Lisa Macfarlane (Democrats For Education Reform) for giving us a deeper look at I-1240 from a local and national perspective. A hearty thank you to the teachers and leaders who welcomed us to New Orleans: Benjamin Marcovitz and Soraya Verjee (Collegiate Academies), Jay Altman and Ava Lee (FirstLine Schools), Andrew Shahan (ARISE Academy), Adam Meinig (KIPP:Believe), Dr. Marvin Thompson and Steve Barr (Future is Now at John McDonogh), John Ayers (The Cowen Institute), Dr. Jonas Chartock (Leading Educators), Kwame Floyd (Langston Hughes Academy), Neerav Kingsland (New Schools for New Orleans), and Kate Mehok (Crescent City Schools). You inspired us with your commitment and love for kids.

Published November, 2012 by Teachers United.