

MATCH: An Experiment In How To Put Urban Middle & High School Teachers In A Position To Succeed

Some elements of education policy are designed around the idea of controlling teachers, particularly weaker ones: teacher tests to block certain people from joining the profession; clear standards to block weak teachers from teaching fluff; etc.

Our school asks the flip side of that question: how do you *redesign a school around good teachers?*

Of course, all of the “solutions” in this paper are really partial solutions. The goal is to put urban teachers in a **better** position to succeed, not utopia. All of these partial solutions are in place at MATCH Charter Public School.

Policymakers often ask us “What can you learn from MATCH, if anything?” Our basic message is that all schools need to be designed around answering the question – *what puts urban middle and high school teachers in a better position* to succeed?

1. Problem: Chaotic classrooms.

Solution: Get all the teachers rowing in same direction. Teachers collaborate with principal to define rules and consequences. Then all teachers held accountable to enforce rules, so kids don’t “blame” one teacher for being “too strict.”

Principal can’t be in his office; must personally greet and dismiss every kid every day, be in the hallways, be in the lunchroom, etc. That inspires teachers and helps them know that they’re not working alone.

Also, the principal must support the teacher when he/she decides to “send a student to the office.” Sometimes principals or their deputies send the kid right back to the classroom without any consequence. This obviously undermines the teacher. The right approach is for the principal to handle the short-term situation, but then require a detailed discussion amongst all parties (teacher, parent, kid, principal), and achieve a specific resolution satisfactory to all parties (well, sometimes not the student...)

2. Problem: Grading papers takes a lot of time, makes for stressful weekends.

Solution: Hire low-cost college or graduate student assistants to whom teachers can delegate some of their grading. Let each decide how much/what to delegate.

This is a great use of certain volunteers, too. It's not glamorous but helps teachers, freeing them to work more closely with kids.

3. Problem: Many teachers resent their professional development.

Solution: Never hire "outside PD" that isn't approved/desired by teachers. Have teachers rate each PD session to cut out all low-rated ones. Maximize teachers observing one another, since they know the "local context" of the school best.

4. Problem: Some talented young people only want to teach for 5 years, then have a family or change professions. Yet when they leave they are often called "failures" or "burnouts."

Solution: Many young people nowadays want to have multiple careers. Specifically and vocally welcome that. Make them know they're valued (of course career teachers are perhaps even more valued).

Meanwhile, support the lifers (or 10 to 20 year teachers) by letting them express individual desires. One might want to be a department chair. One might want to run a summer program. One might want Fridays off in order to help care for a new child. To maximum extent possible (without creating problems for other teachers), allow these more veteran teachers the chance to customize their job experience. This "customization" tends to be most possible in small schools with enormous amounts of (hard-earned) principal-teacher trust.

5. Problem: Hard to get supplies, broken copiers.

Solution: Get multiple copiers; get a secretary who has within-24 hour response times to teacher requests for supplies. Hold the secretary accountable for this; she or he should perceive her job as helping to put teachers in a position to succeed. Have the teachers evaluate the "office" several times per year – secretaries, availability of supplies, the principal, the counselors, etc.

6. Problem: Kids arrive with low skills. All the pressure on teacher to fix things, while teaching the “new material.” Sometimes it’s just not plausible.

Solution: High-dosage, relentlessly managed tutoring program is key to helping teachers – they often can’t do it alone. We’re not talking about the usual “extra help” programs with sparse attendance and inconsistent execution. We’re talking about 1-on-1 (not 5-on-1) tutorials *that* are clearly scheduled, required, measured, and aggressively managed.

Our school is unusual in this. But there are 200,000 college students in the Greater Boston area. Surely thousands could be deployed in this way. What about senior citizens in other areas?

Also, many schools have “paraprofessionals.” They often have really undefined job descriptions. What if they were clearly redefined as tutors, trained as tutors, and carefully deployed and assessed in this area?

7. Problem: Parent communication can be overwhelmingly time-consuming.

Solution: First, don’t rely on report cards. Parents can’t converse with a report card. Schools need to help teachers and parents talk frequently by telephone.

This needs to be done in a way which doesn’t overwhelm the teacher. Divide the work. Each teacher reaches 10 parents per week by phone. Sometimes they praise kids. Sometimes they report problems. Write notes about the call into our database, make it easy for other teachers to stay up to date.

When parents receive phone calls from teachers, they’re much more likely to support the teacher when something “goes wrong” (behavior, grades). We almost never have parents pressure teachers to change grades.

8. Problem: Teachers often feel unappreciated.

Solution: Do the little things. Personalized gifts. Birthday cakes. Personal thank you notes from the principal. Collecting teacher "shout-outs" each week where they can praise one another...then publish it. Try to help students express their legitimate-but-not-often-vocalized appreciation of teachers, by organizing, for example, student-written thank you cards to teachers at Thanksgiving and end-of-year.

This is not a substitute for compensation and benefits.

9. Problem: Special Ed IEPs can be tough to implement.

Solution: First, get an amazing SPED teacher who does NOT talk in jargon, but instead is detailed and practical on how to best help each student. Second, make sure that it's easy for teachers to communicate with support staff.

10. Problem: Teachers unclear about who decides what.

Solution: Work to make this more transparent. For example, in terms of teaching style, our school requires a certain format for the first 3 minutes ("Do-Now") and the last 3 minutes ("Ticket To Leave") of each class. But teachers have enormous latitude on teaching style for the "middle 50 minutes."

11. Problem: Teachers sometimes feel that their only “voice” is the “group voice” – it’s never their *individual* views.

Solution: Do an in-depth 1-on-1 interview of every single teacher at least once a year. After all, they’re giving thousands of hours of service.

Should end up with a 4 to 8 page transcript of teacher's likes, dislikes, concerns, ideas about the school as a whole. Respond to the individual teacher, and respond to the group of teachers.

Use the combined interviews to have an annual teacher retreat which culls the key concerns, gets the staff together to address them as a team.

12. Problem: Sometimes teachers feel pressure (from parents or administrators) to change year-end grades.

Solution: Principals must back up the teachers, even if it means unhappy parents, kids, or “bad statistics.” Most teachers have clear reasons why a student failed – usually involving huge amounts of undone work. Principals simply cannot cave into pressure from parents (or other officials) to “socially promote” students that the teacher has deemed to be failing, unless there is just overwhelming evidence that the teacher made horrendous or unfair judgment.

Also avoid nice-sounding “summer classes” that allow students to “make up” several failed classes. This undermines teachers. It compromises their

integrity, because students will stop trying in the class halfway through a school year and simply say “well I’ll just make up that in summer school.” If students don’t hit the teacher-set bar, they should be held back, **and** go to summer school.

13. Problem: Some effective teachers are frustrated by weak colleagues.

Solution: Involve teachers in hiring process. Before any teacher is hired, have he or she do sample lessons in front of both students and teachers of that subject. Enlist teacher feedback as a key part of choosing new teachers.

14. Problem: Teachers sometimes aren’t clear on what is happening during the school day...assemblies, pep rallies, trips, kids pulled out for counseling, etc.

Solution: A daily email sent around at 6am or so, with a detailed account of what’s happening, so that teachers are rarely surprised.

15. Problem: Sometimes teachers feel out of the loop.

For example, kids might complain or seem to spread rumors about a big behavior incident (for example, “Did you hear that So-and-so got expelled just for defending himself in the locker room?”). The teacher wants to respond but has no facts.

Solution: After any serious behavior violation, the principal or assistant principal who dealt with the issue should email the teachers with the resolution. Each teacher can then decide whether to skim it or read it with interest. The principal should be open to teachers who want to ask a question, for example to critique a punishment as too lax or too strict.