

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE
Los Angeles Unified School District

INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education Date: March 26, 2008

FROM: Randy Ross
Director of Educational Policy

SUBJECT: **Star Teacher Engagement Program (STEP) – A Proposal**

Introduction and Overview

School reforms designed to address the needs of schools in high-poverty neighborhoods that fail to attend to the adequacy of teachers are destined to flat-line. As noted in Hammond et al.'s 2007 report on leadership development, "California principals...were significantly less likely than principals in any other state to believe that all of the students in their school have access to expert teachers and high-quality teaching."

Accordingly, in my presentation at the 2-28-08 Board study session on High Priority Schools, "Improving Student Outcomes: Key Parameters," I offered four ideas on how to improve educational quality and equity in teaching in high priority schools:

- Improve and broaden implementation of teacher incentive policies
- Provide hard-to-staff schools with extra teachers to cushion the effects of teacher mobility
- Regularly monitor teacher distributional dynamics (entries, exits, and transfers)
- Acknowledge and embrace teachers who consistently get great results for students (1,000 points of light)

Following my presentation, Board President Garcia asked me to develop a concept paper to describe how LAUSD might go about implementing the 1,000 Points of Light idea -- which I have opted to rename the Star Teacher Engagement Program or STEP. Under STEP, LAUSD would identify about 1,000 Star Teachers (i.e., teachers who, over time, have obtained the highest levels of academic growth for their students, with a focus on those who have enjoyed success in high-poverty schools).

Star Teachers would be systematically acknowledged, honored, embraced, and supported by LAUSD as a means for improving their motivation, engagement, retention, and recruitment.

In addition, STEP would identify and develop many of these teachers (e.g., as many as half or 500) into effective school administrators. That is, the standard criteria of school leadership (competency in analysis, judgment, written and oral communication, planning

and development, budgeting, etc) would be supplemented by the criterion that effective principals must also have been exemplary classroom teachers. The rationale is that effective instructional leadership implies skill in getting results for students in the classroom.

Teachers in LAUSD – Context

Just as stars are hard to see in a smog-dusted Los Angeles night, so are teaching stars in LAUSD. Generally, when we think of a star teacher, we think of teachers of the year; teachers who are recognized by the media (e.g., Jaime Escalante), National Board Certified teachers (of which LAUSD enjoys a sizeable contingent), and coaches of successful academic decathlon teams.

Yet, many, many more teachers in LAUSD are stars in that, as a result of their effort, their students show remarkable growth in academic achievement. As Superintendent Brewer noted in his Annual Speech on August 24, 2007, “There are great teachers in [LAUSD]...”

But Star Teachers who get results for kids are not always easy to glimpse. Sometimes these teachers are not well seen or well known because few of their colleagues know about how their students are performing. In part, this is because educational systems have only recently acquired the capacity and will to make practical use of student performance data at the classroom level. Another explanation may be that teachers who consistently achieve extraordinarily high levels of academic growth for their children (e.g., Jaime Escalante) are downplayed by their colleagues because they represent a threat to mediocrity.

In this light, STEP proposes to systematically increase the employment, retention, and presence of teachers who consistently deliver comparatively high levels of academic growth for their students.

Proposed Actions

To implement STEP, we propose three categories of action:

- (1) Identify teachers who get exemplary academic results for students;
- (2) Embrace Star Teachers; and
- (3) Groom selected Start Teachers to serve as school administrators.

Identify Teachers who get exemplary academic results for students

To be identified as an exemplary teacher for this initiative, first our data analysis would ascertain that the teacher has consistently experienced high growth in student achievement over time (at least three years)¹, relative to teachers who have taught

¹ Given the relatively high rate of teacher attrition, especially at high-poverty schools, we may want to be more flexible on this criterion. That is, to the extent that “potentially”

students with similar characteristics. If the teacher meets this primary criterion, then this assessment would be validated through consideration of factors such as the following:

- The teacher can articulate a coherent strategy(s) for accelerating academic growth for low-performing students;
- The teacher demonstrates excellence in delivering instruction in the classroom; and
- Principals at the schools at which the teacher has taught vouch for the teacher's effectiveness.

Star teacher identification would entail an exploratory analysis of LAUSD's longitudinal student-level data over time for all teachers in LAUSD. The objective of the analysis would be to identify teachers whose students' academic performance would be projected to grow at a faster than normal rate. Various methods would be employed to analyze student growth data for district classrooms across grade levels. The analysis would employ California Standards Test (CST) data for math and English Language Arts for grades 2 to 12 as well as data from standardized periodic assessments. Additional subjects (for example, social studies and science) would be covered for high school. One statistical method that would be usefully employed to this end is value-added analysis; this analysis could be carried out by the Research and Evaluation Branch using data in LAUSD's student information system.

The various statistical analyses would culminate in a preliminary list of teachers at all grade levels and school types who have attained consistently high levels of growth in student academic performance. Given that we want our selection process to culminate in about 1,000 Star Teachers, we would begin with more than 1,000 (e.g., 1,250) candidates.

Next, each of these candidates (and their principals) would be notified that he/she has been nominated as an LAUSD Star Teacher. The notification would indicate that the next step in the process is for the District to survey/interview the teacher. The survey/interview would be conducted using email as well as interview teams made up of central office staff, local district staff, university staff, parents, union representatives, and representatives from education-focused community-based organizations. Ideally, interviews would be accompanied by observation of each teacher's classroom. Finally, we would seek input from the current principal of each candidate to validate the selections.

Once all data are collected, first the candidates would be ranked by their "value-added" score (the higher the score, the higher the rank). Teacher and principal (survey, interview, and/or observation) data would be used to develop a validation score for each

high-performing teachers have high early attrition rates, we would want to identify them (at least provisionally) as soon as possible in order to expedite retention interventions. Survey, interview, and observation data from teachers and principals could help to corroborate our preliminary assessment.

candidate. We would propose a three point validation scale: (1) strongly validated, (2) validated, and (3) not validated. Candidates who are “not validated” by the supplementary data would be removed from the candidate list. All other candidates would be designated as Star Teachers. The assessment categories of “strongly validated” and “validated” would be used to help make subsequent judgments regarding, for example, the ability of teachers to transfer their knowledge to others as coaches or school administrators.

Embrace Star Teachers

The embracing of Star Teachers begins with the acknowledgement of their existence. Examples of actions that could be taken by the District to acknowledge these teachers include:

- Send a personal congratulatory letter to each Star Teacher in LAUSD indicating that he/she has been identified as an exemplary teacher based largely on their success in the classroom (Human Resources).
- Encourage each Star teacher to support his/her school’s efforts to improve student achievement.² (Professional Learning, Development and Leadership)
- Invite each Star Teacher to participate in special meetings designed to nurture, engage, strengthen, and retain exemplary teachers. (Professional Learning, Development and Leadership; Local Districts)

Groom Selected Star Teachers to serve as site administrators (principals)

Frank et al. note that “If [National Board-certified] teachers are not exceptionally effective in producing student achievement, then their helping behavior might actually be negligible, even counterproductive, to the extent they are supplying faulty guidance based on their own relatively ineffective practice.” STEP carries this idea beyond master teaching to the development of school administrators. Our premise is that effective school leadership implies extraordinary effectiveness in the classroom.

The leadership development component of the STEP proposal would include actions such as the following:

- Convene school leadership orientation meetings for Star Teachers (Human Resources Division and Professional Learning, Development and Leadership).
- Assist Star Teachers in paying the costs of participating in college/university school administrator certification programs (e.g., tuition) – (Human Resources Division)
- Create a cohort in LAUSD’s Leadership Development Program³

² Suggesting the need for this intervention, Frank et al. note that “Uses of NBPTS-certified teachers in schools and districts ultimately will depend on developments in the policy and administrative spheres because, on their own, NBPTS-certified teachers are unlikely to realize their potential as social resources for instructional improvement. Teaching’s traditional ethos of independence, together with the “zone of discretion” allocated to teachers, militates against the systematic emergence of teacher leadership in schools.” (p. 25)

³ This action will be described more fully in a Board Informative we are developing in response to a draft Leadership Development Plan described in a December 20, 2007 Board informative.

Concluding Remarks

If the Board opts to adopt STEP, the program could be transferred to the Superintendent for its first round of implementation via a Board resolution based on the features described above. Moreover, the resolution would include an implementation timeline as well as an examination of budget implications.

Given the District's (indeed the state's) dire fiscal condition, what are the prospects for implementing STEP? I believe that STEP can be integrated into current District initiatives operating in several LAUSD divisions and branches, especially (1) Human Resources, (2) Professional Learning, Development and Leadership; (3) Priority Staffing Program; and (4) Research and Evaluation. Notably, implementing the key potent feature of STEP (linking teacher recognition, teacher retention, and school leadership development to growth in student achievement) would mainly require adjustments in how these units work together.

Ostensibly, the task of surveying, interviewing, and observing teachers may require additional resources. Even here, much of this work could be done using extant resources. For example, could not local district field staff (e.g., directors) intensify the focus of their monitoring effort on aspects of schooling that relate most closely to improving student outcomes (e.g., identifying and retaining teachers who consistently achieve exemplary growth in student academic achievement)?

In an era where student achievement has rightly been accorded the highest place in state and federal accountability formulations, it would behoove the District to embrace and nurture those teachers who have consistently gotten exemplary outcomes for students. The proposed Star Teacher Engagement Program (STEP) would help the District methodically pursue this goal.

Selected References:

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D. Brewer, J. Morris, R. Ephraim, M. Wale, G. Smith-DeVille, D. Holmquist, R. Buschmann, J. Slayton, G. Daley, J. Crain, M. Medina, M. Davis