

NEPC Review: “So Hard, but So Rewarding:” How School System Leaders are Scaling up Strategic School Staffing Models (Center on Reinventing Public Education, March 2024)



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July 2024

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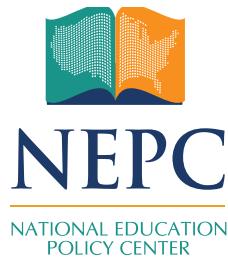
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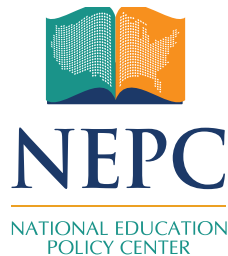
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Summary

Following the pandemic, pervasive challenges have plagued the teaching profession, including teacher shortages, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and attrition. A new report from CRPE proposes strategic school staffing models as a solution. The report analyzes findings from interviews of 42 school leaders across six systems it identifies as implementing strategic school staffing models, including how such models could be scaled, what challenges and supports leaders encountered, how the work can be supported, and the role of the school leader in strategic systems change. The report concludes that, despite piloting and promising results, strategic school staffing initiatives remain “fragile” and are a recipe for leader burnout and potential failure to scale. However, the report has multiple conceptual, design, and methodological flaws, including a lack of research evidence to support the report’s assertions, conclusions, and recommendations. As a result, the report offers little actionable guidance for policymakers, school leaders, practitioners, or other stakeholders.



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I. Introduction

High attrition rates and dwindling interest in the teaching profession are intensifying a long-standing teacher shortage in the U.S., exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching vacancies are at an all-time high, related to increasingly stressful work environments, shifting public support, tensions over professional jurisdiction, and poor compensation.¹ Teacher burnout and attrition from the profession have emerged as significant consequences, stemming from lack of support, inadequate resources, new demands, lack of respite, and shifting roles and responsibilities.²

In this context, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), a research organization at Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, released “*So Hard, but So Rewarding: How School System Leaders Are Scaling up Strategic School Staffing Models*,” a research report by Lisa Chu, Lydia Rainey, and Steven Weiner. This report explores strategic school staffing models, described as “radically rethinking who they hire to educate students, how they design the job, and how they support educators to stay in the profession.”³ Such initiatives are intended to support new pathways into the teaching profession, new structures for teacher development, and new teaching roles. The researchers conducted interviews with 42 leaders, including principals, superintendents, school system leaders and administrators, technical assistance providers, and school staffing advocates from six school systems. Interviewees answered several questions examining their thoughts about the role of school leaders in scaling models, the key challenges involved in bringing the models to scale, and the nature of necessary supports. The report concludes that, despite extensive piloting and promising results, strategic school staffing initiatives “remain fragile” and are a recipe for leader burnout and potential failure to scale.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

This report describes an exploratory study involving interviews of 42 school leaders and technical assistance providers in six systems. Interview findings yielded seven key strategies used by school systems in service of strategic staffing models. The report finds three broad categories of work required of school leaders engaged in scaling strategic staffing models and concludes with seven recommendations to help state policymakers, technical assistance providers, and researchers understand what is required to scale such models.

Strategies

The report identifies the following key strategies as being implemented across interviewees' six systems:

- *redesigned schedules and workload* (flex time, scheduling, and responsibilities)
- *redefined teacher requirements* (broader range of individuals who can staff or support classes)
- *collaborative teaching structures* (team teaching and increased class size)
- *intentional recruitment programs* (recruitment of diverse, bilingual, or other educators)
- *new teacher leadership roles* (leadership opportunities that do not require leaving classroom teaching)
- *differentiated and personalized teacher development* ("system-wide" differentiated professional development)
- *compensation* (increased compensation for accepting additional responsibilities or "high performance")

Leaders' Work

- The report finds that leaders working to scale up strategic staffing systems face barriers unrelated to their daily responsibilities falling into three broad categories:
- *Changing Policies* includes leaders' attempts to change "big P" (policies set by state or local school boards) and "little p" (district policies, processes, guidelines, and expectations) policies. The report notes that "big P" policies, such as state teacher licensure, class size, state-mandated pay-scales, and collective bargaining agreements both supported *and* significantly impeded the scaling of strategic staffing models. The report also explains that "little p" policies, including data systems, master schedules, hiring and training processes, school level teaching supports, and collective bargaining agreements, usurped leaders' time but were typically malleable.
- *Building Relationships* cited relationships as key to scaling strategic staffing models. The challenges school leaders face in this category, as described in the report, include building trust with teachers, identifying obstacles, recognizing teachers' and leaders'

complementary expertise, and developing buy-in.

- *Shifting Mindsets* involves leaders' need to shift “beliefs and assumptions about the teaching profession, how schools or districts should run, and the nature of education itself.”⁴

Recommendations

The report concludes with a set of recommendations urging state policymakers, technical assistance providers, and researchers to understand what is involved in scaling strategic school staffing initiatives and to “be willing to share the work.”⁵ The report recommends ways that the following groups can support scaling strategic staffing models:

- *School and system leaders*: by sharing responsibility for key activities, as more than one or two school leaders are needed to scale strategic staffing models.
- *Superintendents*: by offering frequent and decisive support for scaling staffing initiatives.
- *Technical assistance providers*: by providing model-specific support and general support on how to scale innovative initiatives.
- *Advocates (i.e., nonprofit, membership organizations, and professional learning organizations)*: by providing free and paid resources, coaching, and support.
- *State level leaders*: by expanding state-level autonomy policies and clarifying existing policies to determine when whether a local practice would require a waiver.
- *School boards*: by working with state-level policymakers and union leaders to change policy that hinders innovation.
- *Foundations*: by filling in funding gaps with grants that contain specific timelines, goals, and reporting to incentivize scaling models.
- *Researchers*: by studying the relationship between strategic staffing models and student outcomes.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The underlying rationale of this report is that strategic staffing models are promising but remain “fragile” due to the influence of policy that hinders the scaling up of different models, antiquated ideologies about the teaching profession, and lack of support from states, policymakers, foundations, and researchers. Several assumptions are embedded in this rationale. One is that lack of support stifles innovation and leads to leader burnout, model unsustainability, and pervasive staffing challenges. Another implicit assumption is that context—leader role, school type, geography, culture, urban, suburban, rural, etc.—does not matter. Finally, the report assumes that a wide array of both original and commercial initiatives can be characterized under the umbrella of *strategic staffing models* and applied successfully by districts to solve pervasive teacher challenges, most notably teacher shortages.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report's central claim is that strategic staffing models are a reliable way to address teacher workforce challenges—largely, persistent teacher shortages—but provides little to no research evidence to support this claim. Instead, the report hyperlinks to resources including a news article, a “landscape scan” on strategic school staffing, a related CRPE report, the results of a loosely connected research study, a district program evaluation report, and a trademarked consulting product page. It cites one theoretical framework on systems change.

These references provide both weak support and contradictory evidence for the report's main claim. For example, the report indicates that “early results from districts adopting [strategic school staffing] strategies are promising,” that “teachers report higher satisfaction levels,” and that schools are seeing “improvements in student learning.” These claims are hyperlinked to the various resources outlined above. Yet, the report makes no straightforward connections to the references, and provides no explanation for how they support the report's claims.

For example, one hyperlink leads to the results of a related research study focused on the Next Education Workforce (NEW) model.⁶ This model focuses on team teaching to large groups of students with the goal of deepening student learning and supporting educators, though does not indicate that NEW is a strategic staffing model. While this resource does indicate that participating teachers reported “higher” levels of satisfaction, it makes clear that “teachers' responses do not indicate that their increased satisfaction has translated into an increased commitment to the teaching profession”⁷—directly contradicting the report's central claim that strategic staffing models address pervasive workforce shortages.

The report also links to a slide deck outlining the results of a district program evaluation on “Opportunity Culture,” which, again, is presumably a strategic school staffing model, though this is not explicitly stated. While the deck indicates that the Opportunity Culture teaching models “appear to correlate to positive, immediate academic gains,”⁸ there is no explanation of how this particular model fits into the report's claims that such models address teacher shortages (i.e., the central concern of the report) nor does it explain the Opportunity Culture model itself, which appears to be a trademarked consulting product with an annual cost of over \$20,000.⁹

Notably absent is reference to the significant bodies of research on recruiting and retaining teachers,¹⁰ teacher shortages,¹¹ and teacher self-efficacy.¹² Thus, the report is not grounded in any significant body of research literature, despite an abundance of research in several related areas and a healthy number of studies and reports on strategic school staffing itself.¹³ As a result, strategic school staffing is never clearly defined, making it difficult to ascertain why some participants, initiatives, and themes were included or excluded.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report lacks theoretical grounding clarity, contains significant ambiguity, and is plagued by significant methodological flaws, which are described below with examples.

- *Sample selection.* The report does not describe the sampling method utilized to identify the target population. This is important because the participants chosen have vastly different responsibilities as defined by their roles in their school systems. For example, a principal is likely to have different responsibilities than a technical assistance provider. The report does not indicate how many of each identified role were included in the sample, nor does it define the number of participants in each of the six school systems.
- *Sample size.* The number of participants ($n = 42$) is not problematic on its own, but the sample is broad and differences in roles may be amplified in the context of the findings. The interview data are used to make broad recommendations about scaling staffing models that are not commensurate with this sample size or the data presented.
- *Data.* The report does not indicate how the data were collected or how/whether they were transcribed, stored, coded, or analyzed. Additionally, the study relies on self-report/retrospective data, which can introduce bias, error, and limitations for the validity of the findings and conclusions.
- *Coding.* It is not clear whether seven strategic staffing strategies were asked about in interviews or emerged in the coding of the interviews. Neither is it clear why these particular strategies are included in the report and why others, such as using “technology that optimizes’ educators’ roles/time,”¹⁴ are excluded. Likewise, the report fails to address how the three broad themes (changing policies, building relationships, and shifting mindsets) were identified and whether these themes emerged in coding.
- *Analysis.* The report identifies themes based on the leader interviews, but the information is not analyzed contextually; i.e., by leader role, by district, by numbers, or by school type. This is particularly problematic given the role of contextualization in understanding the conditions, relationships, or factors surrounding the data, which allows for more comprehensive analysis and meaningful conclusions. In addition, treating different categories—such as traditional school districts and charter management organizations, which have highly defined operational differences—as the same can lead to incorrect conclusions. Finally, it is unclear how the data are analyzed, and thus they are not presented in categories but rather as singular quotes or with non-specific references; e.g., “several leaders” (p. 3) or “some leaders” (p. 8) or “in a few cases” (p. 4).
- *Findings.* The report asserts that leaders scaling up staffing models faced challenges that “were different from the everyday challenges of their jobs”¹⁵ but fails to acknowledge that the three identified themes (policy, relationships, and mindset/culture) are actually hallmarks of school administrators’ roles in overseeing operations.¹⁶
- *Recommendations.* The report’s conclusions and recommendations lead to a circular argument in which the participant roles (principals, school leaders, superintendents, technical assistance providers) are later identified as the groups that should support school leaders and share the work of scaling strategic staffing models.

The methods may be clearer than the report indicates, but without additional information, it is impossible to know. As a result, the report’s methodological weaknesses significantly erode its usefulness.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

This report considers a compelling topic—staffing and teacher shortages have become a central focus of research on teaching post-pandemic—and explores strategic staffing models as a potential solution. The report promises to provide insight into how school leaders are scaling such models and provides some interesting points that position policies as barriers, emphasizing the need to build relationships, and acknowledge shifting ideologies about teaching and the teaching profession. Notably, teacher voices are completely missing from the research, which is puzzling since teacher shortages and attrition are cited as the central problem.

The overall conclusion of the report—that strategic school staffing models are promising—is unsubstantiated by the evidence presented. The report offers seven recommendations to help state policymakers, technical assistance providers, and researchers understand what is required to scale strategic staffing models, but the recommendations do not emanate from the data. Perhaps this is because the sample of 42 leaders included a broad range of leaders with vastly different responsibilities (principals, superintendents, “school system leaders,” administrators, and school staffing advocates) from traditional districts and charter management organizations in both union and non-union states. The report and findings completely ignore context—implying that we can broadly compare traditional, charter systems, urban, suburban, rural, etc., and consider them inherently alike, despite the mountains of research evidence to the contrary.¹⁷

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report’s lack of focus, lack of grounding in research literature, and significant methodological flaws including study design, small sample size, unclear sample selection, reliance on retrospective data/self-report, circular reasoning, and incomplete/disjointed data analysis render its conclusions questionable. While the report itself notes some of these limitations, it ultimately concludes with sweeping recommendations disproportionate to the study’s relatively small sample of leaders and research evidence, making it unlikely that the conclusions have validity for the profession writ large. Given these factors, the report offers little actionable guidance for policymakers, school leaders, practitioners, or other stakeholders.

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