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How “Talent-Friendly” is your School?

Over time, some schools attract and retain more than their fair share of talented teachers while other schools lose talent. Talented teachers have options and they are relatively mobile. They are not necessarily like athletic free agents, willing to go anywhere to play for the highest bidder. They will, however, drive past several schools closer to their home to find a place that suits their needs. What are they looking for? What school characteristics turn out to be most inviting for highly talented teachers?

According to surveys of highly skilled teachers who transfer schools, the top two “look-fors” are:

- The presence of other talented teachers. Talent, it seems, wants to work with other talent.
- Quality leadership. Talented teachers want to work with/for skilled administrators.

Let’s look more closely at four leadership attributes that turn out to be very powerful attractors for teaching talent. Over time, it seems, talent accrues to schools where it is valued, appreciated, recognized, and developed.

Talent goes where it is valued. What teacher characteristics are valued most at your school? Is it a teacher’s good attitude, work ethic, local community connections, years of experience, or extracurricular activities? All these attributes are valuable, of course. A talent-friendly school values teachers’ talents and skills above everything else.

Talent goes where it is appreciated. One definition of appreciate is “to be fully conscious of, to be aware of, to detect- as in a person who appreciates modern art or fine wine (dictionary.com). Talented teachers seek out settings where administrators know what great teaching looks like and understand the finer points and nuances of effective pedagogy.

Talent goes where it is recognized. In talent-friendly schools administrators regularly point out effective episodes of instruction. They provide immediate and specific feedback to teachers on their instructional moves and strategies. “This morning I noticed you had students stand around high tables to complete the map activity. Having them on their feet really upped the energy level of the activity and helped them see the map from different angles. That really worked... nice move.”

Developing
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teacher



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And the administrators are always visiting your classroom and providing feedback. The rumor is they know what they're looking for too. I think I'll find a school that's a little more comfortable."

The key, as in the example above, is to provide abundant, immediate, and specific recognition of teachers' talents— not in a general way as in "nice job," but specifically as in "when you..., that caused..."

Talent goes where it can be developed. Ultimately, the greatest attractor of talent is the opportunity for growth and development. Some administrators focus much of their classroom observation time on evaluation instruments or supervision "walk-throughs." Administrators in talent-friendly schools focus their energies mostly on the development of teachers and teaching. They agree with that old Iowa proverb—"You don't make the lambs fatter by weighing them more often. You make them fatter by feeding them." Administrators who develop a reputation for developing talent will, over time, attract more than their fair share of it.

In talent-friendly schools, where administrators value, appreciate, recognize, and develop teachers' talents, these positive outcomes occur:

- The school builds a reputation as a "destination" for talented teachers. More talented teachers apply and are selected to join the staff.
- Talented teachers already on the staff tend to stay. Every time a talented teacher moves from one faculty to another there is a gain and a loss of talent. Talent-friendly schools gain more and lose less.
- Talented teachers who could retire tend to stay. These teachers are expensive because of their relatively high salaries but they are a bargain with respect to student achievement. Just one or two more years from these teachers makes a big difference in the "net talent" of a faculty.
- "Not so talented" teachers tend to stay away from talent-friendly schools. The same characteristics that attract talent (value, appreciation, recognition, development) repel non-talent. Once a school gains a talent friendly reputation, the word gets out. *"Think twice about applying there. The teachers all come early, stay late, and talk about instruction all the time. And the administrators are always visiting your classroom and providing feedback. The rumor is they know what they're looking for too. Sounds like a lot of pressure to me. I think I'll find a school that's a little more comfortable."*

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