

Successful Practice #2 Doing More with Less: Personnel

Districts and schools are now facing two major conflicting challenges: declining financial resources and the demands of new, more rigorous and application-based standards, assessments, and teacher evaluation requirements. They are being asked to Do More with Less.

This is the second in a series of papers on the “Successful Practices” of Doing More with Less found in the nation’s most rapidly improving schools that will be showcased at the Model Schools Conference on June 30-July 3. The first [paper](#) described the ways these schools have used technology to do More with Less in the improvement of student achievement.

Many education leaders have already recognized the critical and urgent need to address their growing budgetary issues. They have taken steps specifically related to the significant challenges of managing current staffing costs—and for good reasons:

- Personnel costs typically represent 80 percent of a school district’s budget.
- Instructional staff are also *THE* primary factor in influencing student performance.
- From 1980-2010, K-12 enrollment in the U.S. increased by 17.9 percent.
- During the same time period, employment in our school systems increased 47.9 percent. ¹
- Student performance improved during that period, but neither substantially nor universal.
- Budget challenges have led some schools to reduce staff, but levels of staffing are still generally substantially higher than prior to 2010.

For all of these factors, personnel-related decisions are the central factor in addressing the challenge of Doing More with Less. However, certain realities need to be recognized.

The first reality is that to make existing schools and districts more effective and efficient, personnel-related issues **must** be addressed. The challenge, however, is that personnel issues are complex and challenging, protected by tradition and special interests. In the nation’s most rapidly improving schools, those traditions and special interests have been factored into the decision-making process, but they have not dictated personnel decisions. These schools have moved to a culture where employing and rewarding superior teachers trumps hiring and maintaining mediocre teachers, and they have adopted policies to reflect this change. Having more effective teachers has enabled these schools to increase class size while also improving student performance.

The second and perhaps larger reality, however, is that revising personnel policies “around the edges” will only temporarily improve and “prop up” what is an inefficient and outdated education system. For the big picture and for the longer term, we need to rethink what learning and teaching need to become. The traditional model of teaching and learning requires loading up students with information, using the same periods of time for everyone and never emphasizing students’ abilities to demonstrate or apply what they have learned. New models of learning use time and space differently. Transformative schools have students learning information and content online—in learning centers, media centers and at home. They then use three or four periods a week for discussion, analysis, and problem solving activities,



facilitated, challenged, coached, and enabled by teachers. This kind of “flipped classroom” concept is how students need to be learning and how teachers need to be teaching. The required five-day week classroom model is both one-size-fits-all and the most costly way for large numbers of students to learn. The “blended model” is less costly because students learn in settings other than the classroom.

Additionally, some schools have changed the model of the four-year high school. A performance-based model can lead to a determination that many students have met the new standards at the beginning of or part way through senior year—or even before. Those students should be involved in internships, community service, or early college. The old model uses time and staff in a rigid, one-size-fits-all model that may be convenient and sustaining for staff, but is not consistent with how today’s students learn—or want to learn. As historian Walter Russell Mead once expressed so astutely, we need to move from a model of “time served” to a model of “stuff learned.” That model changes staffing patterns, likely leads to higher achievement, and prepares students for careers and for living as responsible, self-sufficient citizens.

A number of the nation’s most rapidly improving schools have made both incremental and transformative changes including many practices that address personnel matters and the structure of instructional programs to reduce costs and improve student performance. Among them are:

- A modest increase in class size will save a district a considerable amount of money by reducing teaching staff, yet this increase has no measurable impact on student performance. Recent studies by both John Hattie and by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have found that adding three to five additional students to the average class size had no measurable impact on student performance, but dramatically reduced costs. (South Middle School, Massachusetts)
- End, or phase out over time, the “last in/first fired” basis for termination. Have performance determine who is retained and who is not. (Huntington North High School, Indiana)
- Move to a pay-for-performance rather than time-in-the-position as the basis of salary. (CT Sewell Elementary School, Nevada)
- Reward success, terminate failure. Underperforming staff should not be retained at the expense of students and taxpayers. (George Read Middle School, Delaware)
- As part of a pay-for-performance policy, teachers who voluntarily take larger class sizes and maintain or improve student performance receive an additional stipend that is determined by a percentage of the cost savings to the district due to the larger class size. (Kramer Middle School, Washington, D.C.)
- Eliminate pull-out programs in favor of in-class support, increasing time and effectiveness of the support kids need. (South Heights Elementary School, Kentucky)
- Implement a professional development program that helps teachers focus on the most critical standards and provides them with high-quality instructional tools. This will dramatically impact student performance. (Brockton High School, Massachusetts)
- Remove/modify class size mandates. Some classes should be smaller (i.e., writing-intensive classes) and some should be larger (lecture-type, physical education, etc.) (Merrillville High School, Indiana)
- Pay teachers a stipend to teach during their prep period. The stipend can be less than average salary per period. (Merrillville High School, Indiana)
- Relax rigid certification and contract language requirements that prevent flexibility to reassign staff. Then provide incentives to teachers who perform well in their out-of-certification/contract area.



Also, pair teachers with different certifications to achieve flexibility. (CT Sewell Elementary School, Nevada)

Next Steps

In summary, “fixes” related to staffing costs will help to stabilize and rescue shrinking district and school budgets for the short term, but they will essentially only prop up a broken and outdated education system. Transformative changes will alter all of the traditional metrics about staffing and learning. Both approaches can and will reduce costs while still valuing teachers and improving learning. Personnel-related decisions that have enabled some schools to become more effective and efficient—as well as decisions that are transforming approaches to learning and teaching in other schools—are embedded in the practices of many exemplary schools that will be presenting at the Model Schools Conference on June 30–July 3 in Washington, D.C. Their experiences can assist other schools and districts in the difficult decision-making that lies ahead for education leaders and their stakeholders. We hope you can send a team to the conference. For information and to download a brochure, please go to www.modelschoolsconference.com.

If my colleagues and I can assist you in addressing the need to move to a more efficient and effective system, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Bill Daggett

