

Practical Considerations for Retaining High Quality Technical Instructors in the Texas Public Schools

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Introduction

The bursting of the infamous Tech Bubble in 2002, and the huge layoffs of highly qualified technical personnel in its aftermath, has sent an unprecedented stream of amazingly qualified technical instructors to our public schools. A whole industry of alternative certification has blossomed to support this migration of talent from the private sector to the public sector. As a result, the public schools, especially the high schools, are enjoying a quality of technical instructor that they previously could neither attract nor afford.

This temporary imbalance between supply and demand in favor of the public schools cannot continue. As the economy improves, all signs point to the technology sector as being among the first to recover. Private industry will try to lure those technology teaching wizards back with better pay, better benefits, and infinitely better cafeteria food.

If the public schools are going to retain their best talent, they must grasp the true motivators of technical instructor loyalty and still not break the budget. This paper describes critical non-pocketbook motivators and what steps school districts can take to leverage these motivators in their favor.

Previous Research

Earlier studies focused largely on whether Significant Across-The-Schedule Salary Increments (SATSSI) or performance pay schemes are more likely to improve the retention of high quality teachers. Considering that American public schools spend more than \$197 billion dollars a year on salaries excluding benefits (Podgursky & Springer, 2011), it is not surprising that the debate got a little heated.

SATSSI systems were generally found to be ineffective in attracting and retaining top talent. They reinforce the inherent unfairness of step-and-level salary schedules by widening the compensation gap between talented young teachers with Bachelor's degrees and to their entrenched, but sometimes less effective, senior colleagues. These schedules reward college coursework and years of experience, but no consistent relationship has been found linking an increase in student knowledge or skills to being in the presence of teachers with Master's degrees, with the possible exception of science and math (Duncan,

2010). Nor does student learning correlate to how long teachers have been teaching beyond a teacher's initial break-in period of three to five years. (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004, 2006).

There is also surprisingly little data to confirm or refute that performance pay motivates teacher loyalty (Duffrin, 2011). Many of the performance pay experiments were too short-lived to yield results worthy of confidence. The building of a performance pay plan is a profoundly political activity. Every sponsoring state, foundation, and district must engage in a consensus-building process to fashion a plan that it hopes will appeal to its unique collection of diverse local stakeholders. No sponsor has ever replicated any other district's plan with the objective of confirming earlier findings about what works and what doesn't. Several plans measure and reward performance in such unique ways that it would be hard to use their findings to predict what might happen in other districts (Lavy, 2007).

Clearly, we need to look beyond salary, regardless of how it is distributed, for the keys to motivating the best technical instructors to stay in the public schools.

Methodology

The present study compares the relative success of eight constructs, including SATTSI and performance pay, as contributors to technical instructor retention. Several of these constructs were first identified in the McKinsey report (Auguste, Kihn & Miller, 2010).

The research subjects were a group of twenty-five certified teachers in the Instructional Design & Technology program at West Texas A&M University. Seventeen of the subjects described themselves as Teachers Committed to Teaching (TCT) for their entire careers. Eight described themselves as thinking about options other than the public schools, or not committed to teaching (TNCT).

The research instrument consisted of pairs of sentences. Each pair had one sentence indicating a resonance with one of the eight constructs and another indicating a resonance with a different construct. Every combination of two constructs was represented in the 28 sets of pairs, so that each construct had an equal number of opportunities to be chosen in the complete instrument. The number of responses favoring each construct was calculated as a percentage of the total number of times the construct could have been chosen.

Findings and Practical Implications

The table represents how frequently each of the eight constructs was chosen by the subjects as most likely to instill loyalty to their current public school teaching careers.

Table 1: Factors creating loyalty to present career

Motivational factor	Totally committed to teaching (TCT) group		Not totally committed to teaching: (TNCT) group		Both groups	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1. SATSSI	46	9.66	29	12.96	75	10.71
2. Performance pay	46	9.66	19	8.48	65	9.29
3. Positional respect	47	9.87	20	8.93	67	9.57
4. Positive working environment	81	17.02	33	14.73	114	16.29
5. Technology environment	37	7.77	18	8.04	55	7.86
6. Personal meaning	76	15.97	36	16.07	112	16.00
7. Job security	69	14.50	37	16.52	106	15.14
8. Positive challenge	74	15.55	32	14.29	106	15.14
Total	476	100.00	224	100.00	700	100.00

The four of constructs discussed below ranked very significantly stronger than either of the two salary-related constructs, SATSSI or performance pay, in their ability to motivate high quality technical teachers to stay in the classroom:

Positive working environment (ranked first). This is the extent to which the workplace is pleasant and congenial. The most important element in positive working environment is belonging to a group of highly-valued colleagues (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Other elements include the perceived support of administration and physical comforts, such as whether the building is maintained at a reasonable temperature.

Public schools cannot compete with the corporate world in material amenities. My years at Microsoft corporate headquarters in Bellevue, Washington, recall impeccable landscaping with blooming flowers planted for every season, endless choices of gourmet food at the cafeterias (one in each building, so employees didn't have to go out in the frequent Pacific Northwest rain), and staff rooms on every floor with well-stocked free beverage coolers sitting next to overflowing take-what-you-need supply cabinets.

What public schools cannot supply in the material landscape that can offer in the human landscape. Unlike the Fortune 500 corporations, moment-to-moment cut-throat competition is blessedly absent from public school life. This is partially because teachers have relatively few promotions to aspire to. Most of the available promotions would involve entering the administrative ranks and most teachers realize they are not built for that rollercoaster. Also, the types of people who populate public schools tend to be of a somewhat kinder, gentler stripe than their corporate equivalents, whatever personalities quirks that might display.

To retain high quality technical instructors, public schools need to make a conscious effort to support a sense of community of purpose. This would include maximizing self-regulation by the professional staff. Districts must assure that the inevitable teacher committees have actual input and not just symbolic but meaningless “after-put” to decisions already made by administration. Schools also need to constantly send the message of the nobility of their mission as something beyond the less inspiring, though still worthy, profit goal of the business world. They must also grow the social aspect of the teaching community, at the building and district levels, through events and occasions that bond all district employees in ways where individuals are not defined by their position on the organization chart.

Personal meaning (ranked second). This is the extent to which a career is perceived by the employee as being of true service, if only in some small way, to the locality, state, nation, and the Progress of Man. In the Texas Panhandle, such a career would often be considered a ‘calling’ as much as a way to make a living. Altruistic jobs, such as working with the homeless, are likely to be high in personal meaning. Personal meaning cannot be assigned to a position by anyone other than the holder of the position. One school secretary might consider her role to be rich with personal meaning and another might consider the same job to be totally devoid of it.

Here again the public schools have a critical advantage over the corporate world. Can any thoughtful person question that being part of the process of growing capable, confident, public-spirited young adults has a higher potential for self-satisfaction than doing purely technical work in industry?

But teachers are constantly barraged by negative messaging about their profession. They are told daily that the nation is going down the drain and a primary reason is their incompetence in turning out a professional workforce that is competitive on the world stage. There is no doubt there are tragic weaknesses in the American educational system, but to blame this solely on the teaching profession is untrue and unfair. School districts need to enhance each individual teacher’s sense of personal meaning by creating a firewall of sanity between their teachers and this destructive message. They must always remind teachers of the paramount importance of their role in every possible way.

Personal meaning is a holistic concept that speaks to a person’s life, and not just how they make a living. Public school systems must provide the emotional space in which each individual can create that meaning for themselves, both inside and outside the classroom. Even the hardest-working teacher can and must manage her workload to create time and space for recreation, family, community work, and reflection. Eighty-hour-a-week corporate employees, who are never “unplugged” or truly off-duty, often cannot. Public schools, even in tough budgetary times, need to structure work

expectations in ways that jealously guard each teacher's right to have a life outside of the classroom.

Job security and positive challenge (tied for third rank). Job security is the perceived likelihood that a position will be immune to budgetary layoffs for the foreseeable future. Positive challenge is the degree to which a position demands the best that the employee has to offer. It includes high organizational standards, engaged helpful supervision, rigorous but fair employee evaluation, and abundant opportunities for meaningful professional development.

Job security has always been considered a major advantage of public sector employment. Clearly, that is no longer the case. In one sense, that is a good thing. Continued employment in something as important as teaching our children should be contingent on maintaining a very high standard of performance. We clearly need to do a better job of determining how that standard can be fairly designed and measured.

Unlike much of the business world, public schools have a highly developed sense of due process in relation to economy-driven layoffs. Teachers usually (though not always) know about the likelihood of a reduction in staff months, sometimes many months, in advance. In corporate technology departments, it is in the interest of employers to keep news of an impending layoff from their employees until the last possible moment, which could be the effective date itself. This reduces the possibility of an about-to-be-released technical employee sabotaging the computer system. It also maximizes the productivity of such employees while they are still on the payroll. It is not unusual for a corporate technical worker to walk into his workplace on an ordinary workday, be told to report to the Human Resources office, be informed there that is his last day due to a reduction in force, get a final paycheck, have his ID badge confiscated, and then be escorted out of the building by a security officer without being allowed to return to his desk. In many companies, this is the routine layoff procedure even for those who have given the company a decade or more of acknowledged quality service.

The public schools need to emphasize their natural compassionate advantage in the area of job security by giving the maximum possible notice of potential downsizing and by doing everything possible to shift resources and protect positions. This will have a major impact on how those who are leaving feel about the company, and an even greater impact on the future plans of those who are invited to stay.

Technical life in corporations can also be weak on positive challenge. For every technical employee who gets to have their creative juices flowing by taking an active part in designing an exciting new project, there are hundreds sitting in anonymous carrels doing necessary but uninspiring repetitive work.

Public schools don't have to be like that and often aren't. A skillful administration can find an infinite number of ways to use the creative talents of their technical teachers by creating, supporting, and rewarding inspiring projects for the benefit of the building or the district. Technical teachers must be given the opportunity to constantly sharpen their skills on exciting emerging technologies or they may start looking for the chance to do so in the business world.

Summary

Public education is currently profiting from the poor job market for technical professionals in the corporate sector. When that sector improves, many technical teachers who took refuge in the public schools will be tempted to return to the private sector for the financial rewards that public schools cannot provide. This would be a great loss to K-12 education.

This research suggests that four factors other than salary may strongly drive the degree of loyalty to the teaching profession, even trumping the salary package. They include positive working environment, personal meaning, job security, and positive challenge. Determining how to improve the local levels of these abstract, but very real, motivators of teacher loyalty may be the greatest challenge schools will face in the years ahead.

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