

What Can Parents Do About Teacher Quality?



by Josephine Imbimbo
Senior Program Officer

NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A PUBLICATION OF NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS is the largest education reform organization dedicated to improving the quality of education in New York City's public schools. Working with the public and private sectors, New Visions develops programs and policies to energize teaching and learning and raise the level of student achievement. Visit New Visions on the Web at www.newvisions.org.

Written by Josephine Imbimbo
Designed by Daniel Jones
Cover photo by Philip Greenberg

© 2001 NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Richard I. Beattie, CHAIRMAN
Robert L. Hughes, PRESIDENT

INTRODUCTION

PARENTS HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN how important it is for their children to have good teachers. Now there is increasing evidence that teacher quality is the most important factor that affects student achievement. Students learn more when they have a quality teacher, and the progress a child makes with a good teacher carries over into the next school year. This guide is designed to help parents get a better understanding of the issues around teacher quality and to suggest ways that you can strengthen teacher quality in your child's school.

THE CHALLENGE: A QUALIFIED TEACHER FOR EVERY CLASSROOM

QUALIFIED TEACHERS are critical to student success, but there are not enough of them to go around. New York City, like many parts of the country, is struggling to hire enough teachers. During the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 9,800 of the city's 78,000 teachers were in their first year of teaching. By the year 2004, the NYC Board of Education believes they will need to hire an estimated 46,000 new teachers.

Filling vacancies is only part of the problem. New York City has set new, higher standards for student performance and promotion. To make sure that students meet these tough new standards, teachers must be better prepared to promote a high level of learning for all of their students.

THE NEW YORK CITY TEACHER STUDY

RECENTLY, NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS conducted a survey of 2,956 New York City teachers who entered the school system between 1994 and 1997. We asked these new teachers how prepared they felt when they first started teaching. Our goal was to come up with new ideas about how to prepare teachers before they started teaching, and how to support them once they were in the classroom.

The results of the survey helped us to identify some of the key issues of teacher quality discussed in this guide. They also showed us the importance of parents and teachers sharing information and working together to improve their schools. When we shared the results of our survey with parents, many were surprised to find out that even the most qualified teachers—some of whom had masters degrees in education—did not always feel prepared when they first started teaching.

PARENTS CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON TEACHER QUALITY

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN that a key feature of a successful school is parental involvement. Parents have an important role to play in improving their children's schools and the quality of their children's teachers.

Getting informed is the first step. Ask your child's principal, teachers, and other school decision makers (for example, members of the School Leadership Team or Parents Association) questions like those that we have listed in this guide.

Then, once you are informed, speak out. Make your concerns and priorities known. Parents have the greatest impact when they speak to principals, other

parents and their school leadership teams with an informed voice. Parents can also get more information and make their voices heard by working with one of the advocacy groups listed at the end of this guide.

Lastly, support your teachers; they are the most important ingredient in your child's education. Teaching is a tough job. Help make sure teachers have the resources they need to assist your child in the classroom. You and your child's teacher have the same goal: your child's success. Work with that teacher to reach that goal.

TEN QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHER QUALITY. . .

. . . TO ASK THE PRINCIPAL, REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE PARENTS ASSOCIATION, AND THE SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP TEAM IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL.

1. Is my child's teacher certified? What are that teacher's credentials and background?

Teacher quality is very difficult to measure. One standard is teacher certification. Like doctors and lawyers, teachers must meet minimum requirements to be certified to teach in a New York State public school.

To be certified by the State, New York City teachers must have:

- a bachelor's degree,
- a passing score on two tests: the Liberal Arts and Sciences Test (LAST) and the Assessment of Teaching Skills (ATS),
- one year of teaching experience or student teaching experience,
- a certain number of college-level courses in education, and
- a two-hour course in child abuse detection and reporting.

To become permanently appointed to a school, teachers must meet several

additional requirements within five years of starting to teach in New York City. These include a master's degree, two years of teaching experience in their area of certification, and a passing score on a Content Specialty Test.

Because of teacher shortages, New York City employs a large number of teachers who do not meet these basic state certification requirements. Currently, more than 15% of New York City teachers—and the majority of new teachers—are not certified. These percentages are even higher in many poor and minority communities.

The rate of uncertified teachers in New York City is the highest in the state (the average is just 3.3% in the rest of the state and 2.9% in the neighboring suburban communities). New York City's percentage of uncertified teachers is expected to increase as the demand for teachers continues to grow.

2. How many teachers in this school are certified in the subject area they are teaching?

Common sense tells us that teachers must know their subject very well in order to be effective. Research also shows that teachers with a strong background in the subject matter they teach are able to help their students reach higher standards. Unfortunately, many New York City teachers are asked to teach subjects in which they are not certified.

Currently, New York City has the greatest teacher shortages in mathematics, science, bilingual education, English as a second language, and special education. In these subjects, teachers are more likely not to have the appropriate educational background or teaching experience they need.

3. How many teachers in this school are new? How does this school support new teachers?

New teachers are usually those who have been teaching for three years or less. In 1999-2000, there were approximately 25,000 of these new teachers in the school system.

New teachers are not necessarily bad for a school. Many new teachers bring a high level of enthusiasm to their classrooms, and some have had training in

new, state-of-the-art teaching methods. However, all new teachers are in the process of on-the-job training, and therefore need experience and support.

In our survey, we found that most New York City teachers did not feel well prepared when they first started to teach. Less than half the teachers felt they were well prepared to teach their particular subject area effectively. Less than a third felt they were well prepared to address students' special learning needs, or to meet the needs of students who are not native English speakers.

When we interviewed new teachers and principals, they agreed that the best way to help new teachers improve their skills was to have them work with more experienced teachers on a regular basis. One third of new teachers said that a lack of opportunities to work with more experienced teachers had a negative impact on their ability to teach.

Find out if your child's school provides special support for new teachers and push for greater support. For example, you might encourage your school to adopt a mentoring program for new teachers. The teachers' union (The United Federation of Teachers) can provide information about its Mentor Teacher Internship Program, which provides new, uncertified teachers with an experienced mentor teacher and after-school courses.

Your school might create a "buddy system," where new teachers are paired with an experienced teacher for a year or more. You might also encourage your principal to make sure he or she spends extra time working with new teachers and giving them feedback.

4. How does this school recruit teachers?

Quality teachers are in high demand. So, if you want the best teachers for your child, your school needs to be active in finding them. How does your school find teachers—and how do teachers find out about your school?

One way to build an effective new teaching staff is to develop partnerships with teacher training programs at colleges and universities. If your school has student teachers, find out which colleges and universities they attend. Do the student teachers return to your school once they have graduated, or do they go to other schools?

Partnerships like these may also help meet your school's specific needs. Some teacher training programs have expertise in specialized areas such as special education, and may be able to help your school fill a teacher shortage in a particular area.

5. What is the process for hiring teachers in this school? Can the school hire teachers directly?

Different schools have different methods for hiring new teachers. If you are not satisfied with the teachers in your child's school, you need to know how teachers are being hired, and who is making the decisions about hiring.

Not every school gets to review teacher candidates and select teachers. Often this decision is made by the school district or the Board of Education. Only schools that have a "school-based option," which is granted under the teachers' union contract, can hire their own teachers. If your school does have a school-based option (an SBO), you as a parent may be a part of the SBO committee and have some input in reviewing and selecting new teachers. If your school does not have an SBO, the principal or the faculty can propose one.

6. What is the teacher turnover rate in this school?

Staff stability is important. In our survey of new teachers, 85% said that they planned to continue teaching for as long as possible. But we know that within the first five years of teaching, approximately 50% of teachers leave the New York City public schools. If teachers intend to keep teaching, what makes them leave?

Salaries are one reason. The New York City school system often acts as the "minor leagues" for some neighboring school districts in Westchester and Long Island. The New York City schools hire large numbers of inexperienced teachers, and once these teachers gain experience and training, they are often hired by the nearby "major league" districts, where salaries are much higher.

Teaching conditions are another reason New York City loses teachers. The average class size is higher in New York City than in surrounding areas.

Teachers find it much harder to teach effectively when their classes are large or overcrowded. Teachers also find it difficult to teach when they do not have the resources they need, like books, curriculum materials, or computers. More than half of the teachers we surveyed said that a lack of resources and materials had a negative impact on their ability to teach.

Teachers, particularly new teachers, may also leave due to a lack of support from administrators and colleagues, which leaves them feeling isolated, overwhelmed and ineffective. Schools that have supportive principals, a system of support for new and continuing teachers, and a professional atmosphere are able to retain good teachers.

Is your child attending a "hard-to-staff" school? If you find that teachers are not staying at your child's school, ask the principal or other teachers why. Are they retiring? Are they leaving to take higher paying positions outside New York City? If you find that they are leaving to teach in other New York City schools, it may be they are not happy with their working conditions. Better working conditions will help attract and keep the best teachers.

7. What opportunities exist in this school for all teachers to improve their teaching skills?

Teachers are students too. All teachers need to continually learn about the latest developments in education. Successful schools are places where the adults and the children are both engaged in learning. When your child's teacher is absent from school to participate in professional development, keep in mind that the more a teacher knows about instruction, the better he or she can help your child to learn.

Most schools offer "professional development" opportunities to help their teachers continue to learn and improve their skills. There are many types of professional development programs, but most involve working with a more experienced teacher who acts as a mentor or a model for new teachers, or with an educator who has particular expertise.

The most effective professional development, according to experts, includes:

- classroom demonstrations by more experienced teachers,

- observations and coaching of less experienced teachers in their classrooms,
- teachers planning and developing lessons together, and
- on-going discussions of what the less experienced teacher is learning and doing.

Some schools or districts may have professional staff developers, while other schools may have contracts with colleges and universities who provide professional development. Some schools also have teacher centers, which are organized by the teachers' union and provide a wide range of professional development programs and support for teachers.

As a parent, you can help make your school a learning community—for students, teachers, and for other parents. The more you know about what teachers are teaching the students, and what methods the teachers are learning to use, the more you and the teachers can work together for your child's success.

Parents are also teachers. In addition to supporting their children at home, some parents spend time in classrooms conducting special art or science projects, or organizing a book group, or tutoring individual students. Parents who want to volunteer in the classroom can receive training and support from a New York City-based organization called Learning Leaders (see resources, p. 11).

If you want to help in your child's classroom, you might find it helpful to participate in some of the training that is offered to teachers, or to organize a training session for interested parents. Find out what the teachers in your school are teaching, what they are learning, and how it makes a difference in the work your child is doing. Work with the school administrators and staff to organize workshops for parents that focus on what students are being taught in the classroom, and the methods being used to teach them.

8. How much of the school's budget is spent on opportunities for teachers to upgrade their skills?

Every school has a school-based budget. That budget includes specific information about how much money is spent on professional development.

While money is tight everywhere, push for greater school spending to improve teachers.

Information about your school's budget and spending is public information. The Board of Education publishes a School Based Budget Report and a School Based Expenditure Report, where you can find out how your school and the district allocate and spend their money. These reports are available from the Board of Education's Office of Finance and Management (718-935-4648), and also on the Board of Education website, www.nycenet.edu.

9. How does my child's school compare to other schools?

Learn about your child's school. The more you know about the school, the more you can do to help make it better. Each year, the Board of Education produces an Annual School Report Card (www.nycenet.edu/daa/reportcards) with information on every New York City School. Your school should have a copy of its report card for all parents. The report card will list the numbers of teachers in the school and how many years they have been there. It will also list your school's student achievement scores.

10. Who are the other adults in my child's classroom assisting the teacher? What are their backgrounds?

Your child's teacher may be assisted by another adult. Some classrooms have paraprofessionals, who work with children in the classroom to support the teacher. A paraprofessional helps to reinforce the lessons being taught by the teacher by working with individual students or small groups of children. Special education paraprofessionals also support children in certain functional activities (for example, wheelchair assistance). The minimum requirement for a paraprofessional is a high school diploma or GED. Then, within the first year of teaching, paraprofessionals need to earn six college credits. Some paraprofessionals may decide to become classroom teachers. The teachers union (UFT) provides a Career Training Program for paraprofessionals who want to pursue this goal.

There may be a student teacher working in your child's classroom. A student

teacher is a college student who is learning how to teach by watching your child's teacher, and by getting some hands-on experience in the classroom. A student teacher is supervised by a professor from the college or university he or she attends. Your child's teacher is also responsible for observing and evaluating the student teacher. If your child has a new teacher, it is unlikely there will be a student teacher in the classroom, since student teachers are placed with more experienced teachers from whom they can learn.

When your child's teacher is out due to illness or for other reasons, your child's classroom will be assigned a substitute teacher. At the minimum, substitute teachers need to apply for a license and show proof of completing a four-year college degree. "Occasional" substitutes fill-in for teachers on a day-to-day basis. Regular substitutes are hired to replace a full-time teacher or to fill a teaching position in a school.

The substitutes have to apply for "provisional certification." The State determines if they have enough education-related college courses, and classroom teaching experience (either as a student teacher or a substitute teacher). If not, these substitutes have to agree to take at least 6 college credits a year, and within 5 years they need to apply for permanent certification.

PARENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHEN THEY GET INVOLVED

GOOD TEACHERS will be less likely to leave if they know they are valued and appreciated by parents and administrators. Support your teachers by attending parent-teacher conferences, asking them for advice regarding school work, and volunteering in the school. Organize and participate in "staff appreciation" activities at your school.

Partner with your child's teacher. Review your child's homework and schoolwork. Are the assignments well thought out and appropriate for the grade level? Does the work become more challenging as the year progresses? How does the teacher provide feedback to your child on his/her work? Look at how the classroom is organized. Does it seem inviting and comfortable? If you have a concern, communicate it directly to your child's teacher. Be specific as possible and request a plan for action.

Let your voice be heard. Your observations, questions, and suggestions are important for the on-going process of school improvement. Join your school's Parent Association or School-Leadership Team. If you can't join, stay informed and communicate ideas to your parent representatives. If your school has the contract option of hiring teachers directly, volunteer to be on the school-based option committee.

Get politically involved. It takes money to reduce class size, fix broken down schools or build new ones, purchase computers, books, or science materials. Politics drive decisions around educational funding. Know where your elected officials stand on the education issues you care about. Make your voice heard by writing to your representatives on the city council and the state assembly. (City Council representatives can often give funds directly to schools for specific educational purposes.) Attend and testify at budget meetings at the Board of Education and the Mayor's office.

RESOURCES

Contact these organizations that provide resources on teacher quality and other issues affecting the quality of your child's education:

Advocates for Children: (212) 947-9779

www.advocatesforchildren.org

Alliance for Quality Education

www.citizenactionny.org/educationmain.html

Campaign for Fiscal Equity: (212) 867-8455

www.cfequity.org

Class Size Matters Campaign: (212) 254-1491

www.picket.com/class

Educational Priorities Panel: (212) 964-7347

www.edpriorities.org

Institute for Education and Social Policy: (212) 998-5880

www.nyu.edu/iesp

Learning Leaders: (212) 213-3370
www.learningleaders.org

National PTA: (312) 670-6782
www.pta.org

New York City Board of Education: (718) 935-2000
www.nycenet.edu

BOE Office of Parent Advocacy and Engagement: (718) 935-5202
Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council: (718) 935-5880

United Federation of Teachers: (212) 598-6800
www.uft.org

United Parents Associations of NYC: (212) 594-3940
www.upanyc.org

United Way: (212) 251-2500
www.uwnyc.org

You can also get more information about New Visions' survey of new teachers through the New Visions website, www.newvisions.org or call (212) 645-5110.

NOTES:

NOTES:

NOTES:

NOTES:



NEW VISIONS
FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

96 MORTON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014
WWW.NEWVISIONS.ORG
212-645-5110
FAX: 212-645-7409