



**SDP FELLOWSHIP  
CAPSTONE REPORT 2016**

# Improving First-Year Teacher Retention through a Centralized Hiring Process

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## **Executive Summary**

Huntsville City Schools aims to ensure that every student has an effective teacher in his or her classroom. In order to support this goal, they wanted to know: How does a centralized hiring and evaluation process impact teacher quality and retention?

The SDP Fellow at Huntsville City Schools created a six-step process for centralized hiring that utilized data points—teacher attendance, student discipline referrals, principal input, math and reading growth scores, classroom observations, student surveys, and teacher evaluation scores.

Following implementation of this new process, Huntsville City Schools experienced a dramatic increase in teachers retained based on evidence of effective teaching. Huntsville City Schools was able to norm best practices in talent management across schools and support the hiring of higher and retention of high quality teachers that administrators want to keep and that students deserve.

## **Strategic Data Project Fellowship Capstone Reports**

Strategic Data Project (SDP) Fellows author capstone reports to reflect the work that they led in their education agencies during the two-year program. The reports demonstrate both the impact fellows make and the role of the SDP network in supporting their growth as data strategists. Additionally, they provide recommendations to their host agency and may serve as guides to other agencies, future fellows and researchers seeking to do similar work. *The views or opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.*

## **Introduction**

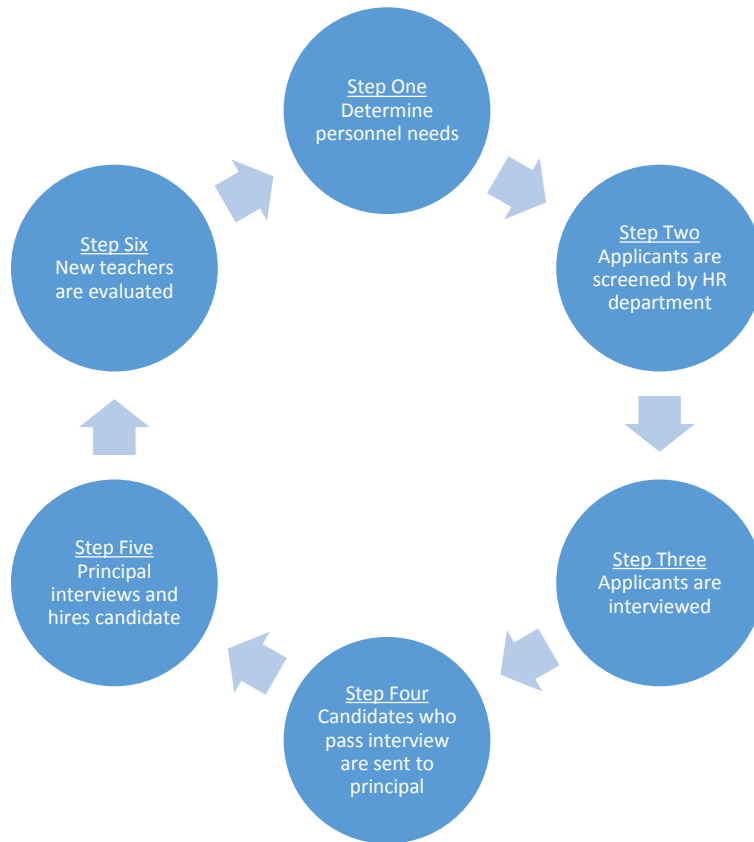
One of the guiding principles of Huntsville City Schools (HCS) is for every student to have an effective teacher in his or her classroom. To help accomplish this goal, HCS implemented a centralized hiring and evaluation process for new teachers beginning with the 2012–2013 school year. In prior school years, HCS had given each school autonomy, but this decentralized hiring and review processes created two issues that prevented HCS from meeting the goal of providing every student with an effective teacher. First, the principal at each of HCS’s 41 schools was responsible for developing a process for screening, interviewing, hiring, and evaluating new teachers. This resulted in 41 different methods, with varying levels of rigor at each step of the process. Some principals used highly stringent techniques (checking references, verifying teacher certifications, using high level interview techniques and evaluation systems that looked at multiple data points); others used far less stringent approaches. Second, it caused an inequitable distribution of effective teachers. By giving candidates the ability to apply directly to specific schools, high-performing schools were sufficiently staffed before the start of the school year, while low-performing schools were not.

The first part of this report explains the steps involved in both of HCS’s centralized processes, hiring and evaluation. The second part examines the data HCS has collected through these processes and evaluates whether they have been successful in providing every student with an effective teacher.

### **Steps in the Centralized Hiring Process**

Figure 1 illustrates the six steps in the HCS centralized hiring process. Once personnel needs have been determined, applicants are screened and interviewed. Those who qualify are

sent on to meet with the principal, who interviews and makes hiring decisions. Finally, new teachers are evaluated and, as necessary, the cycle begins again the following year. Each of these steps is explained in greater detail in the remainder of this section.



*Figure 1.* Steps in the centralized hiring process.

### **Step 1: Determine Personnel Needs in the District**

Each spring, the HCS talent management department conducts staffing meetings with every principal to discuss staffing needs for the next school year. Before these meetings occur, the department conducts an evaluation of all non-tenured new teachers, called probationary review (see Step 6 for more detail). The results from probationary review are communicated to principals during the meetings (e.g., Teacher A was not recommended for continued employment as an English teacher during probationary review, so the principal is informed that she will need

to hire a new English teacher once the school year ends). During these meetings principals also identify any specific staffing needs that will need to be addressed (e.g., Teacher B will be moving to Georgia, so the principal explains that the school will need a new band teacher once this school year ends). Following these meetings, the talent management department has a general idea of what vacancies exist, where they will be, and how many will need to be filled.

### **Step 2: Screen Applicants**

In order to work for HCS, a teacher candidate must apply online on the Alabama Department of Education website. He or she does not apply for a vacancy at a specific school or in a specific classroom, but rather for an open vacancy in the district (e.g., open positions in K–6). As part of the online application, a candidate must submit a resume, provide evidence of certification, fill out a background questionnaire, and submit three references.

The human resources department uses a standardized 10-step instrument to screen online applications. These steps are designed to ensure that the application is complete. Moreover, they allow the department to determine, among other things, if the applicant: has a current Alabama teaching certificate; has passed an ABI/FBI background check; has no red flags in his or her background information (e.g., no misdemeanors, felonies, or other areas of concern); has no questionable gaps in his or her employment history; and has three satisfactory references.

### **Step 3: Interview Applicants**

Candidates who pass the initial screening are then scheduled for an interview, either in person or by video conference, with a committee of three HCS employees. The interview committee is typically made up of one administrator (principal or assistant principal) and two effective teachers. Principals identify these effective teachers as outstanding instructors and leaders. Administrators and effective teachers who serve on an interview committee are provided

a stipend for their time—\$3,000 for each year spent they do so. The interview process consists of a standardized set of 10 questions for each candidate. Table 1 lists these questions and associated “look fors” that help guide the committee in scoring the candidate’s responses.

Table 1

*Standard Interview Questions and “Look Fors”*

<b>Q#</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Look Fors</b>
1	What does 21st century learning mean to you? How does this learning address the social, behavioral, and academic needs of your students?	Academic, behavioral, and social expectations addressed
2	Please explain the data set you analyzed and the instruction you planned to address the needs of the students.	Interprets data and provides examples to meet needs of students
3	How do you measure student learning and/or check for understanding? Can you describe how you use formative assessments in your classroom?	Can differentiate between instruction and how to use formative assessments
4	Briefly describe your approach to discipline/classroom management.	Identifies need for classroom and lesson structure
5	Subject-/content-level question. Example (social studies): How would you introduce current events and related topics of interest to students through course instruction?	Identifies specific methods/technology
6	Describe the characteristics of an effective teacher.	Provides and explains three to five characteristics
7	What qualities and talents do you bring to this district?	Identifies three to five qualities and shows a willingness to serve/lead
8	If we walked into your classroom, what would we see? How would technology be used in your classroom?	Active engagement/ Facilitator of learning/ Use of technology
9	Describe a recent problem that you had to solve. (This can be a problem not related to education.)	Identifies problem and solution
10	Do you feel that all children can learn? Are you willing to teach in a school where HCS needs you the most?	Success of students / Parental involvement / Strengthen school programs

The candidate’s response to each question is scored on a scale of 1 to 4 based on the consensus of the interview committee. A score of 1 indicates “no evidence of knowledge or skill

set”; a score of 2 indicates “minimal evidence of knowledge or skill set”; a score of 3 indicates “evidence of a good level of knowledge or skill set”; and a score of 4 indicates “evidence of extensive knowledge or skill set.” The total possible interview score is 40 points. Candidates who obtain a total score above 26 are considered to have “passed” their interview and are notified that they have been placed in a pool of candidates and may be contacted by a principal for a teaching position at a school.

#### **Steps 4 and 5: Principals Interview and Hire Candidates**

When a principal has an open position, the talent management department sends the principal the online interview files of four candidates who passed their interviews and who are certified to teach that subject. The principal then interviews each of these candidates and selects someone for the position. A principal can also request additional candidates if none of the original four seem to be a good fit for the school.

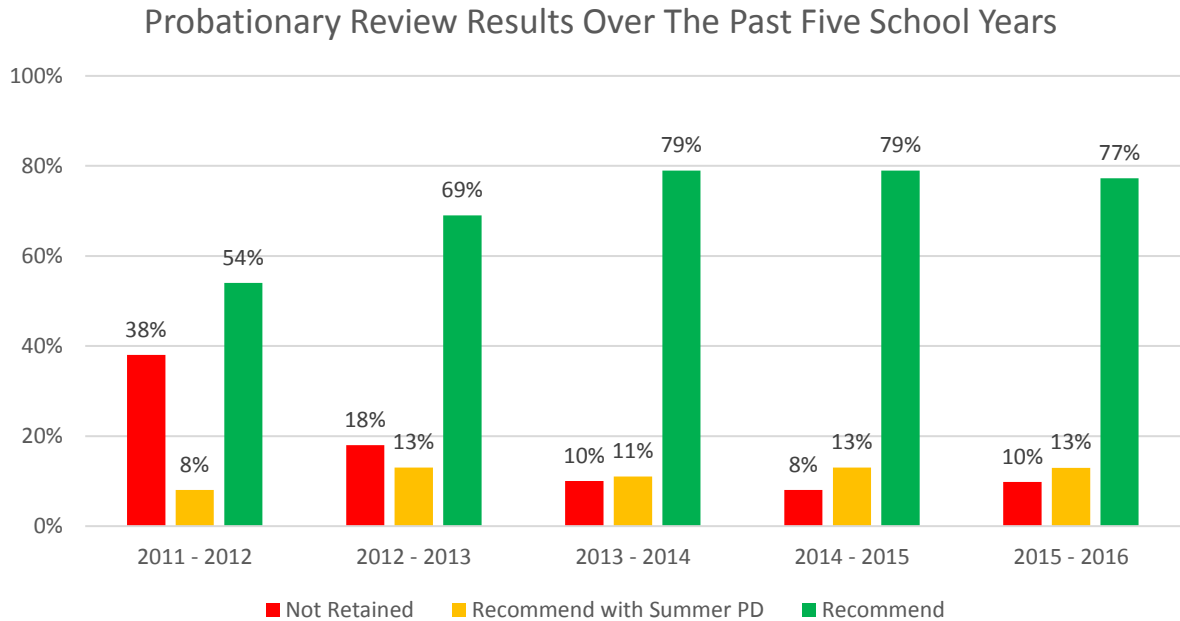
#### **Step 6: New Teachers Are Evaluated (Centralized Evaluation Process)**

In the first, second, and third years of employment with HCS, newly hired teachers are evaluated each year through a centralized probationary review process. This process examines six components to compute an overall evaluation score: (1) teacher attendance; (2) student discipline referrals; (3) principal input; (4) STAR math and reading growth scores; (5) classroom observations; and (6) student surveys. Each factor is assigned a weight and teachers receive a score out of 100. Teachers who score below 65 are not retained by HCS. Teachers who score between 65 and 75 are recommended for continued employment with the stipulation that they attend professional development during the summer. Teachers who score above 75 are recommended for continued employment by HCS.

In 2015–2016, 602 teachers were evaluated through HCS’s centralized probationary review process. In all, 465 teachers (77%) scored above a 75 and were recommended for continued employment. Seventy-eight teachers (13%) were recommended for continued employment, provided they attended summer professional development. And 59 teachers (10%) scored below 65 on their probationary reviews and were not retained by HCS.

Figure 2 below provides the results of HCS’s centralized probationary review over the past five school years. During the 2011–2012 school year, HCS did not have a centralized interview process (principals had complete discretion to screen, interview, and hire); however, HCS required all newly hired teachers to be evaluated by the centralized evaluation process. In the 2011–2012 school year, 38% of all new teachers were not retained for continued employment with HCS. Starting with the 2012–2013 school year and continuing through 2015–2016, all new teachers were hired through the centralized interview process and evaluated by the centralized evaluation process. With the implementation of both processes, HCS has seen a dramatic decline in the number of teachers who are not retained, while also seeing an increase in the number of teachers who are recommended for continued employment.





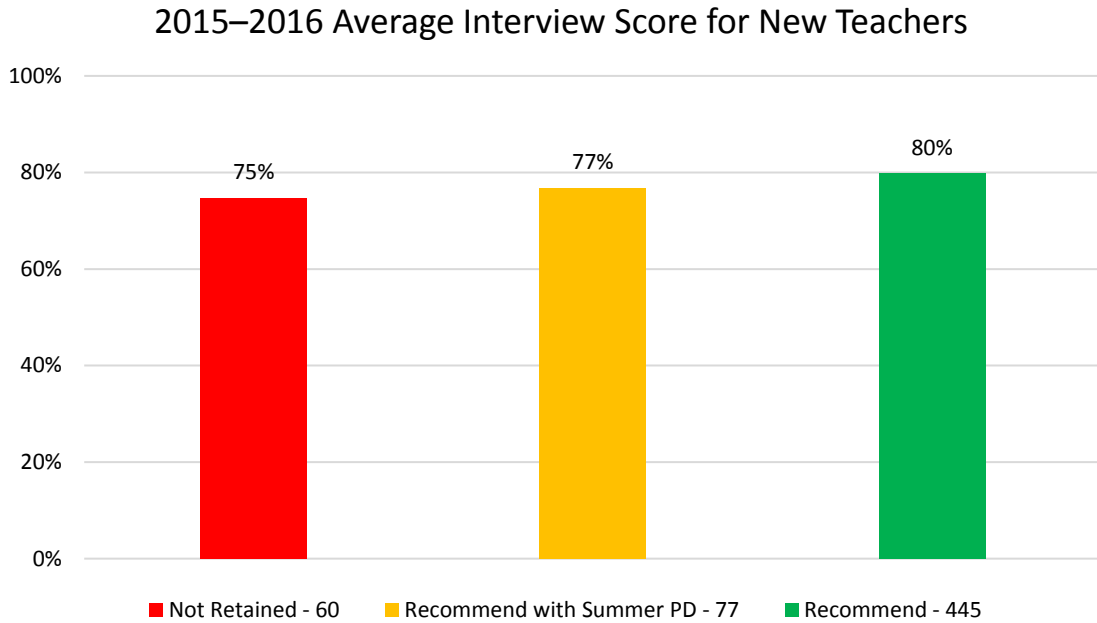
*Figure 2.* Probationary review results in HCS, 2011–2012 to 2015–2016.

### **Does a Centralized Hiring and Evaluation Processes**

#### **Provide Students with Effective Teachers?**

The centralized hiring process provides HCS with a large amount of background information that can be used in conjunction with evaluations of newly hired teachers—the colleges they graduated from; their college GPAs; their years of experience; and the interview scores they were given by the screening committee. Likewise, the centralized evaluation process provides HCS with outcome information—teacher attendance; student discipline referrals; principal input; STAR math and reading growth scores; classroom observations; student surveys; and teacher evaluation scores.

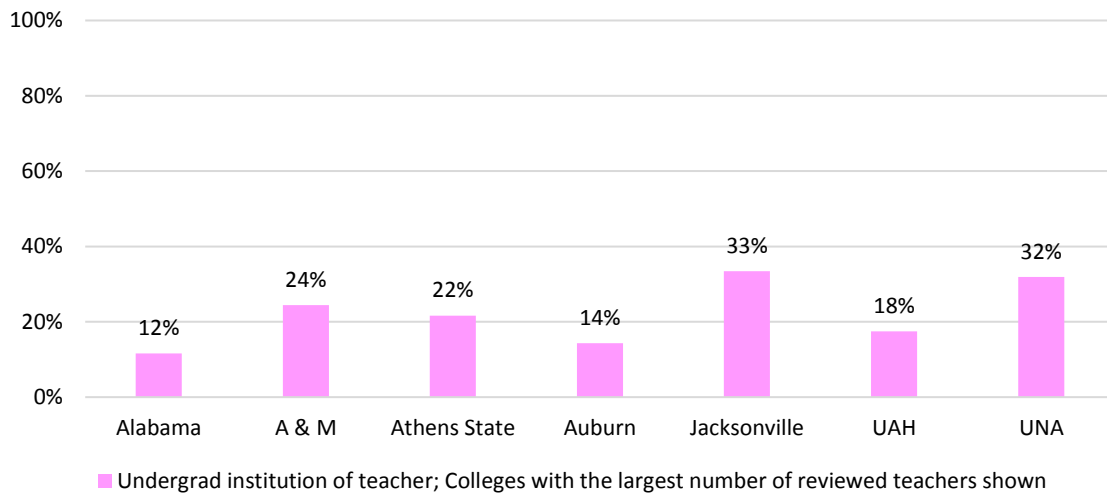
HCS’s centralized evaluation process provides some validation of HCS’s centralized interview process. As shown in Figure 3, teachers who receive higher interview scores do better on their evaluations during their first year(s) of teaching.



*Figure 3.* 2015–2016 average interview scores for new teachers by evaluation recommendation.

The in-state colleges that provide the largest number of graduates hired by HCS are represented in the Figure 4, along with the percentage of those graduates working in the district who received low scores during the centralized evaluation process. Here, a low score is defined as either not retained (< 65) or recommend with summer professional development (65–75). Based on this information, HCS can focus its recruiting efforts on state colleges that appear likely to produce candidates who score higher on their evaluations—such as University of North Alabama and Jacksonville State—rather than on those that do not have a strong record of producing candidates who score well.

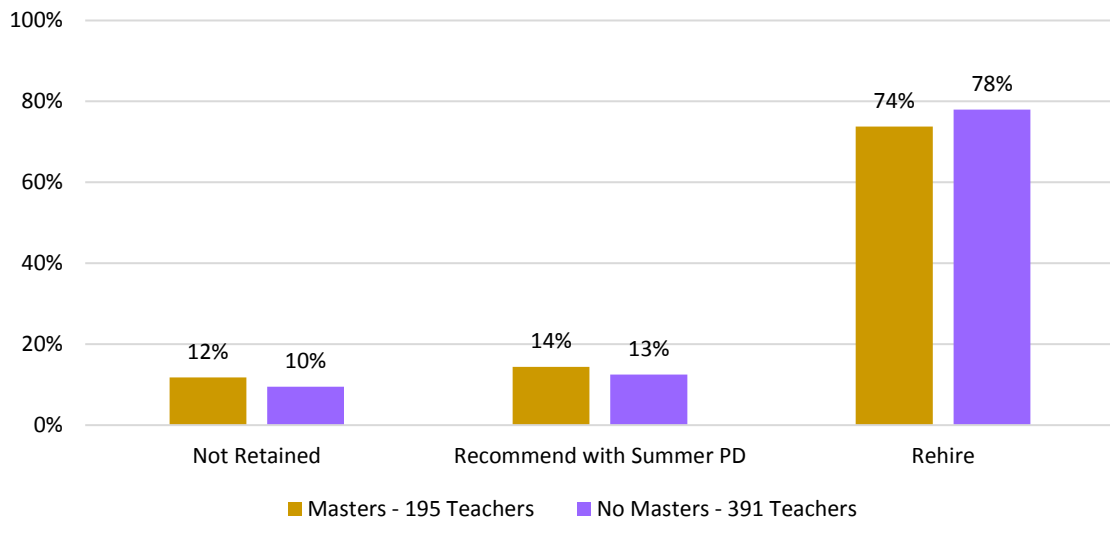
### Percent of New Teachers with Low Evaluation Scores by In State Undergraduate College



*Figure 4.* Percentage of new teachers with low evaluation scores by in-state undergraduate college. Alabama = University of Alabama; A&M = Alabama A&M University; Jacksonville = Jacksonville State University; UAH = University of Alabama in Huntsville; UNA = University of North Alabama.

In an average year, around 35% of newly hired teachers have a master’s degree. There is no statistical difference between the two groups based on their performance during the centralized evaluation process. As shown in Figure 5, roughly three-quarters (74%–78%) of each group in 2015–2016 were recommended for continued employment.

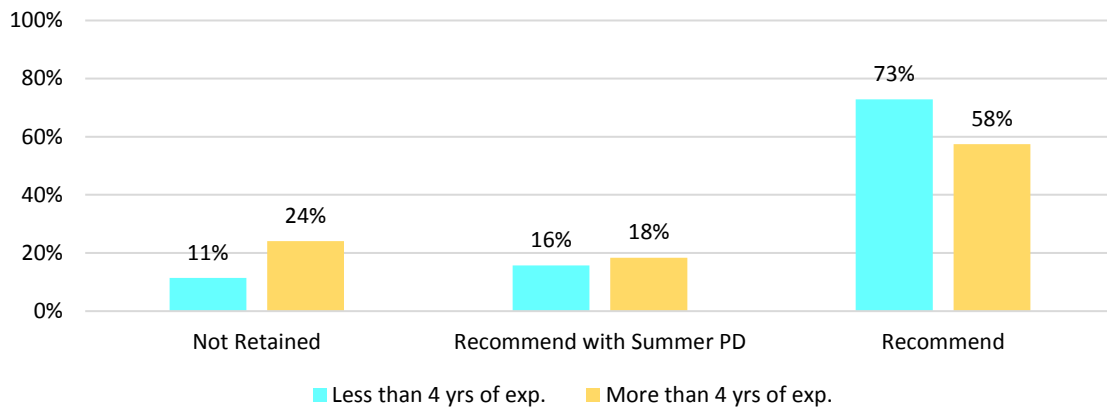
### 2015–2016 Results of Centralized Evaluation Process -- Master's Degree vs. No Master's Degree



*Figure 5.* 2015–2016 results of centralized evaluation process for new teachers with master’s degrees and new teachers without master’s degrees.

Interestingly, teachers with more experience tend to receive lower scores on their centralized evaluations than teachers with less experience (Figure 6). It would be worthwhile to examine this further to determine if the difference can be traced to any other variable. For example, these teachers may have different educational backgrounds or they may have had different experiences with the interview process. It is also possible that teachers with more experience have been unsuccessful at previous school districts and that they bounce between teaching jobs.

### 2015–2016 Results of Centralized Evaluation Process -- Years of Experience Comparison



*Figure 6.* 2015–2016 results of centralized evaluation process by years of experience.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

Huntsville City Schools implemented centralized hiring and evaluation processes to ensure equity for applicants, teachers, and students. Determining whether HCS has made progress in this area is challenging, as the work associated in developing and evaluating these two processes is ongoing and ever-changing. While by no means done, progress has been made.