

For Immediate Release

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STRATEGIC DATA PROJECT PROVIDES NEW FINDINGS ON TEACHER PLACEMENT AND RETENTION PATTERNS

First-Year Teachers Found To Be Assigned To Students Who Are Already Behind Academically

Cambridge, MA. (July 18, 2012) – According to findings released today by researchers at the Strategic Data Project (SDP), first-year teachers tend to be assigned to students who are academically behind their peers, potentially perpetuating achievement gaps by putting kids who most need to catch up into the classrooms of the least experienced teachers. SDP is based at the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.

Today, SDP is releasing two Strategic Performance Indicators (SPIs) that highlight specific areas that education leaders should examine to improve the overall effectiveness of their teacher workforce and the performance of their school districts. The first of these SPIs focuses on teacher placement patterns, examining which students are generally assigned to first-year teachers. The second SPI looks into teacher turnover, asking if districts are identifying and working to retain their most-effective novice teachers.

SDP developed these indicators through a series of studies conducted in partnership with four large urban school districts across the United States. SDP's analyses help school systems more accurately understand how specific movements and improvements in teachers' careers may influence student outcomes.

"Research tells us that a teacher's effectiveness has more impact on students than any other factor controlled by school systems," said SDP Director Sarah Glover. "So districts should examine all of their available data to inform how they support the best resource they have to improve student outcomes: their teachers. These findings can help education leaders fine-tune their teacher retention efforts and consider how to place teachers strategically to meet student needs."

“We cannot deliver on our promises to students if we are not retaining the right teachers,” said Tim Daly, President of The New Teacher Project. “This research shows that we can take smart steps to build and maintain a world-class workforce and to help teachers succeed with their students.”

The Novice Teacher Placement Pattern and *The Effective Teacher Retention Rate* are the two SPIs being released today.

In *The Novice Teacher Placement Pattern*, SDP researchers observed that first-year teachers are systematically being placed with students who start the year performing considerably behind their peers. These results were seen in each of the districts studied, regardless of the demographic make-up of that district, across all schools in the district. In three of the four districts examined, these patterns persisted within schools as well.

This is important because on average, first-year teachers are less effective than teachers with more experience. Therefore the students most in need of accelerating their academic performance are being placed in the classrooms of teachers who are not likely to help them catch up.

The Effective Teacher Retention Rate shows whether districts retain their most-effective novice teachers at higher rates than their least-effective teachers. When SDP researchers examined teacher retention by level of teacher effectiveness, they found that there is very little difference in retention rates between the most-effective teachers compared to their least-effective ones, and that this difference is virtually indistinguishable after the first year. Since districts should ideally try to retain their most-effective teachers, and counsel out their least-effective ones, this suggests that districts aren't yet differentiating retention strategies by teacher effectiveness. It also raises the question of how, or even if, districts are considering effectiveness when forced to lay off teachers.

The Strategic Data Project developed the SPIs with the goal of establishing common indicators – not unlike a debt-equity ratio in business finance or the on-base percentage of a hitter in baseball – that can be measured in a standard way and analyzed repeatedly over time and in many places. Education systems can use these indicators to benchmark their progress – against themselves, over time, and in relation to other districts with similar populations.

In the last 50 years, sectors such as business, health care, public safety and even professional sports have been transformed through increasingly sophisticated analyses of the huge amount of information being collected. Currently, a vast amount of educational data is left untapped for policy development and strategic planning. For example, few school districts track where they find or place their most effective teachers or what their students go on to after high school. SDP's goal is to work with its partners – school districts, state education agencies, and charter school networks – to build a growing network of leaders who use rigorous and thoughtful analysis to transform K-12 education in America.

“School districts have gotten good at using information to show which students or schools performed well or poorly, but they haven’t always taken the leap to use data proactively,” said Vicki Phillips, Director of Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “This project encourages the education sector to use data strategically, so they can get a better understanding of how progress is being made and what can be done systematically to shape better outcomes for students.” The Gates Foundation has supported this project with a multi-year grant.

Several pioneering districts across the US partnered with SDP to make this possible. They shared up to 10 years of historical data, allowing the research team to pull together enormous data sets and assemble and link data across organizational silos. SDP staff and district staff worked side-by-side to identify questions and analyze these data for a deep understanding of current performance and opportunities to improve. The partners highlighted in these initial reports –Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Charlotte, North Carolina), Fort Worth Independent School District (Texas), Fulton County Schools (Georgia), and Gwinnett County Public Schools (Georgia) – collectively serve over 465,000 students, 54 % of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and 70 % of whom are ethnic minorities.

SDP is developing and releasing SPIs at regular intervals. This is the second group to be released this year. In the spring, SDP released three SPI’s on College-Going outcomes (available here: www.gse.harvard.edu/sdp/spi). Two additional analyses are in production and scheduled for release in early fall.

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The Strategic Data Project’s mission is to transform the use of data in education to improve student achievement. Better access to appropriately analyzed data will allow system leaders to better diagnose issues, develop solutions, and monitor the results of implementing these solutions. Our theory of action is that if we bring together the right people, assemble the right data, and perform the right analysis, we can improve the decisions that leaders make such that student achievement improves significantly.

The Center for Education Policy Research

The rapid accumulation of student achievement data represents an untapped national resource, one that holds the promise of breaking longstanding stalemates in the education policy debate. The Center for Education Policy Research works with University-based researchers and policymakers to bring these new data to bear in evaluating policies and drawing implications for reform. As a national convener with alumni in leadership positions in districts around the country, the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard University are uniquely placed to play this national leadership role.

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