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**Poor Working Conditions Make
Urban Schools Hard-to-Staff**

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Abstract

Qualified teachers powerfully influence student achievement. However, some schools and some groups of students, namely Latinos, African Americans, and students whose families are poor, have far less access to qualified teachers than other groups. This brief explores reasons for the unequal distribution of qualified teachers.¹ *Why do some schools have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified teachers?* Poor working conditions are at the heart of the problem. Facilities that are not clean and safe, poor administrative support, large class sizes, insufficient resources for students, and school policies made without teacher participation discourage qualified teachers from working at some schools. The study does not dismiss commonplace ideas about why teachers decide where to teach - salaries and student demographics, for example. However, new ideas and their policy implications emerge from this study. When seeking to recruit and retain teachers to work at “hard-to-staff” schools, education leaders and policy makers should collect data that reveal the quality of teachers’ working conditions and improve those conditions that are disincentives for qualified teachers.

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THE PROBLEM: Teachers Tend to Move Away from Schools Which Serve Large Concentrations of Low-Performing Students, Low-Income Students, and/or Students of Color

Of the many disparities evident in the U.S. educational system, one of the most glaring is students' access to qualified teachers.ⁱⁱ Although research has demonstrated that access to qualified teachers is one of the most powerful determinants of student achievement, there is great inequality in access to this critical resource. Low-performing students, low-income students, and students of color are the least likely to have qualified teachers because these students often attend hard-to-staff schools that have difficulty recruiting and retaining these teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The issue of access to qualified teachers was central to the settlement of *Williams v. California*, which argued that the state has failed to give millions of students the basic tools of a decent education, including qualified teachers, sufficient materials, and adequate school facilities. The plaintiffs argued that the absence of these three essential components of a quality education are highly correlated with each other and with certain student characteristics – namely low-income students, low-performing students, and students of color.^{iv} This Brief suggests a possible connection between the inadequate school facilities and insufficient learning materials and students' unequal access to qualified teachers. Specifically, this study found that when teachers decide where to work they place more value on school facilities, administrative support, class size, resources for students, and input on school-wide decisions than on student ethnicity, student socioeconomic status, and student performance. Since school working conditions and student characteristics are often highly correlated, teachers may choose to not work with low-income students, low-performing students, and students of color because of the poor working conditions which are often associated with these students.

Recent studies conducted in California, Texas, New York, and Georgia show that teachers systematically move away from schools with low levels of achievement and high concentrations of poor children of color.^v Superficially, it might appear that teachers are moving away from certain students. However, data from the study suggest that teachers do not avoid particular groups of students; rather they avoid undesirable school environments. Working conditions, not student characteristics, are the more powerful determinant of where teachers choose to work.

THE STUDY: A Survey of Teachers' Preferences for Characteristics of Schools

This study used a web-based survey^{vi} to examine the tradeoffs teachers would make among ten attributes when selecting a school in which to work: salary, class size, administrative support, input on school-wide decisions, commute time, resources for students, school facilities, student performance, student ethnicity, and student socioeconomic status. 547 teachers in a large, urban elementary school district in California were surveyed, representing 49% of all the full-time, regular education elementary classroom teachers in the district.

THE FINDING: Working Conditions Are Significantly More Important to Teachers than Student Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, or Performance

This study disentangled characteristics of teaching jobs that can potentially be impacted by policy from student characteristics and found that working conditions are statistically more important than student characteristics when teachers select a school in which to work. Of the ten attributes, school facilities, administrative support, and class size are the three most important to teachers. Additionally, having clean and safe facilities is more than twice as important to teachers as each of the three student demographic attributes and is 30% more important than receiving an additional \$8,000 in annual salary. Figure 1 lists the ten attributes from greatest to least important and reports how important each attribute is on average to the sample of teachers.^{vii}

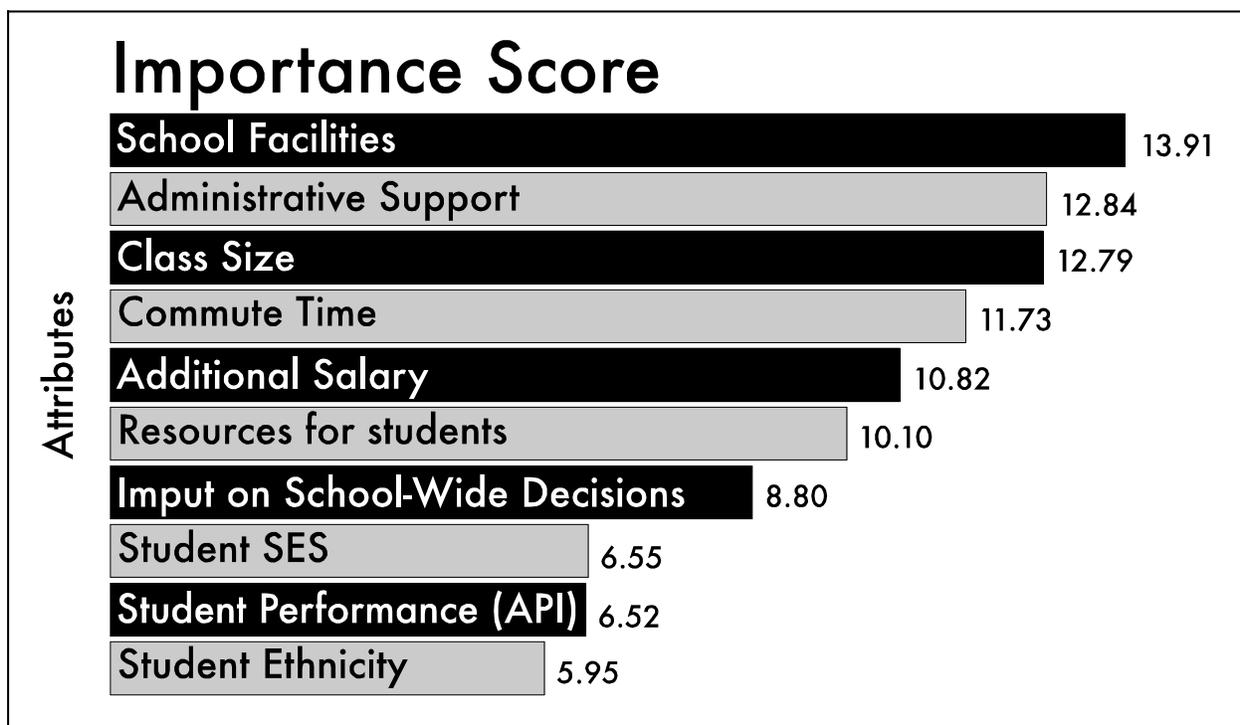


Figure 1. Ten attributes listed from most to least important and the average importance score for each attribute.

AN EXAMPLE: Teachers' Preferences for Schools Are Based More Upon School Facility Conditions than Student Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status

The results of the study were used to calculate the desirability or relative “worth” of the attribute levels, such as “33 students in a class” or “facilities that are clean and safe.” This desirability is represented by a number called a utility value. These utility values can be added together to calculate another number, an overall utility, which represents the desirability of “school profiles” or unique combinations of the attribute levels. The greater the overall utility, the more preferred the school profile is to the teachers, on average. Figure 2 displays the overall utilities of four hypothetical school profiles. Teachers’ responses to these “hypothetical” schools suggest quite a lot about their decision making and, therefore, about the distribution of qualified teachers among different schools and groups of students.

The model represented in Figure 2 predicts teachers’ preferences when they are presented with different school profiles. Since student characteristics and school facility quality are highly correlated, many schools will fit Profiles A or B:

- ❖ School Profile A - most of the students are low-income, 95% of the students are African American or Latino, and facilities are not clean and safe
- ❖ School Profile B - most of the students are middle-income, 5% of the students are African American or Latino, and facilities are clean and safe

If only these two types of schools are compared, this study predicts that teachers would greatly prefer School Profile B with an overall utility of +76.09 to School Profile A with an overall utility of -77.70. This would account for the teacher transfer patterns that other researchers have observed – namely, when teachers transfer from one school to another, they tend to move away from schools serving large concentrations of low-income students of color to ones which do not (in this case, from School A to School B). In other words, one might presume that some schools are hard-to-staff because teachers do not want to teach certain kinds of students.

Importantly, the data from this study allow insights into the desirability for schools (or profiles) that do not exist in numbers as large as Profiles A and B, such as Profiles C and D:

- ❖ School Profile C - most of the students are low-income, 95% of the students are African American or Latino, and facilities are clean and safe
- ❖ School Profile D - most of the students are middle-income, 5% of the students are African American or Latino, and the facilities are not clean and safe

The overall utilities of School Profile C (+61.30) and School Profile D (-62.91) indicate that good school facilities are a much more powerful incentive for teaching in a school than the demographic composition of the students who attend the school. Therefore, previously documented teacher mobility patterns are more likely due to teachers moving away from poor working conditions, such as unclean and unsafe facilities, than to teachers moving away from low-income students of color.

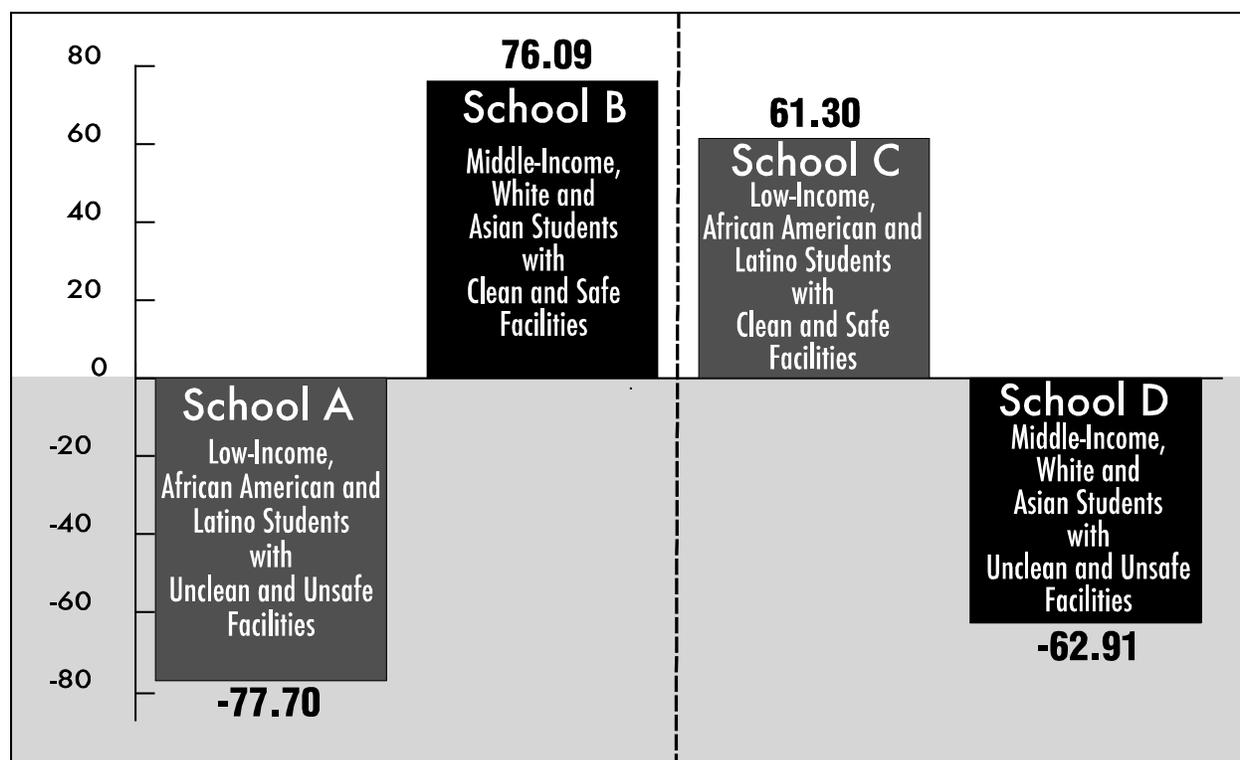


Figure 2. Hypothetical school profiles demonstrating that clean and safe school facilities are more important to teachers than student ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: Improve Working Conditions at Hard-to-Staff Schools and Collect Data on Working Conditions at All Schools

Teachers may be motivated to teach at traditionally hard-to-staff schools by improving the working conditions at these schools. This study demonstrates that when teachers move away from schools serving large concentrations of low-income students, low-performing students, and/or students of color, they are more likely to be moving away from the correlated dismal working conditions than away from the students themselves. Consequently, teachers can be encouraged to stay at these schools by providing clean and safe school facilities, very good administrative support, small class sizes, sufficient resources for students, and opportunities to participate in school policy decision making.

Additionally, data on the working conditions at all schools is necessary to 1) better document the relationship between teacher turnover and working conditions^{viii} and 2) target resources on the schools with the poorest working conditions. For example, data on the cleanliness and safety of all schools should be collected and made available to policy makers, school district leaders, and the general public.

NOTES

- ⁱ Horng, E. L. (2004). Teacher tradeoffs: Retaining teachers at hard-to-staff schools by examining their preferences for workplace characteristics. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- ⁱⁱ The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 defines a qualified teacher as one who has been licensed or certified by the State, holds at least a bachelor's degree, and has passed a rigorous State test on subject knowledge and teaching skills.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Darling-Hammond, L. (2002). *Access to quality teaching: An analysis of inequality in California's public schools*. Expert report prepared for *Williams v. State of California*.
- ^{iv} Corley, R. (2002). *The condition of California school facilities and policies related to those conditions*. Expert report prepared for *Williams v. State of California*.; Darling-Hammond, L. (2002). *Access to quality teaching: An analysis of inequality in California's public schools*. Expert report prepared for *Williams v. State of California*.; Oakes, J. (2002a). *Access to textbooks, instructional materials, equipment, and technology: Inadequacy and inequality in California's public schools*. Expert report prepared for *Williams v. State of California*.; Oakes, J. (2002b). *Education inadequacy, inequality, and failed state policy*. Expert report prepared for *Williams v. State of California*.; Oakes, J., Rogers, J., Silver, D., Goode, J., & Horng, E. (2004). *Separate and unequal 50 years after Brown: California's racial "opportunity gap"*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA/IDEA.
- ^v Carroll, S. J., Reichardt, R. E., Guarino, C. M., & Mejia, A. (2000). *The Distribution of Teachers Among California's School Districts and Schools*. (MR-1298.0-JIF). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.; Hanushek, E.A., Kain, J.F., & Rivkin, S.G. (2003, September). Why public schools lose teachers [Electronic version]. *Education Next*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationnext.org/unabridged/20041/76.pdf>; Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002, Spring). Teacher sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(1), 37-62.; Scafidi, B., Sjoquist, D. L., & Stinebrickner, T. R. (n.d.). *The relationship between school characteristics and teacher mobility*. Retrieved June 27, 2003, from the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies Web site: <http://frp.aysps.gsu.edu/sjoquist/works/Teacher%20Mobility%20paper%2006-06-03.pdf>
- ^{vi} The survey used conjoint analysis to estimate the value respondents place on attributes that define a job profile by providing them with hypothetical tradeoff situations.
- ^{vii} An importance score is a measure of the relative importance of an attribute to a teacher. The greater the score, the more important the attribute is to a teacher when selecting a school. Note that importance scores are relative not absolute measures. Therefore, the average importance score of student ethnicity (5.95) does not mean that student ethnicity is not important to teachers but rather that it is not as important as the other attributes included in this study. Also note that importance scores are ratio data. Therefore, an attribute with an importance score of 10 is twice as important to a teacher as an attribute with an importance score of 5.
- ^{viii} This study investigated the relative importance of school characteristics to teachers but was unable to predict cause and effect - for example, how teacher turnover rates may or may not change when working conditions are improved. School-level data on working conditions and teacher turnover is necessary for such an analysis.

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