

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# THE IRREPLACEABLES

Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools

## URBAN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE ARE FACING A TEACHER RETENTION CRISIS—BUT NOT THE ONE THAT EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT

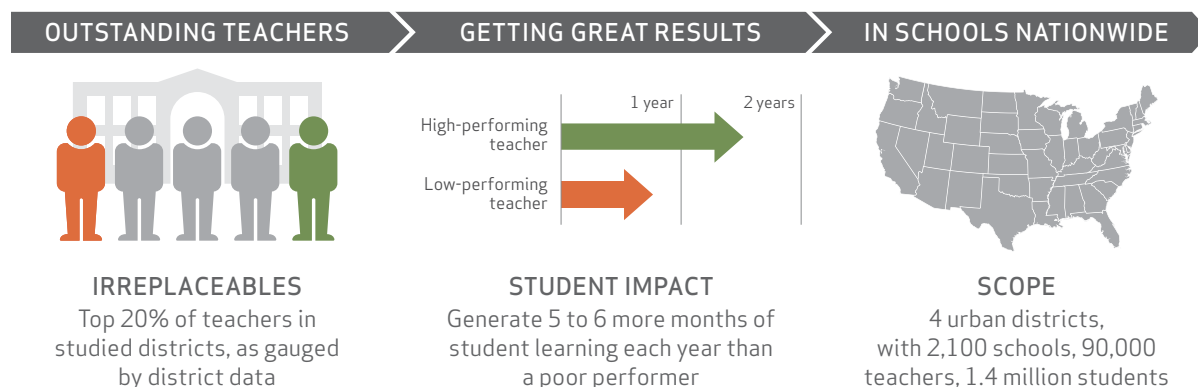
Discussions of teacher turnover usually focus on *how many* teachers leave schools each year, without regard for their performance in the classroom. This oversimplification masks the real teacher retention crisis: not only a failure to retain enough teachers, but a failure to retain the *right* teachers.

This paper examines the real retention crisis through the experiences of a group we call the “Irreplaceables”: teachers who are so successful that they are nearly impossible to replace. Teachers of this caliber provide more engaging learning experiences for students and help them achieve five to six more months of learning each year than students of low-performing teachers—academic results that can be life-changing.

Of the 90,000 teachers we studied across four large, geographically diverse urban school districts, we estimate that about 20 percent are Irreplaceables. When one of them leaves a low-achieving school, it can take 11 hires to find just one teacher of comparable quality.

These are the teachers our urban schools desperately need to keep. Yet we found that they are ignored and undervalued at almost every turn. Their experience illuminates the true obstacles to turning around chronically low-performing schools and raising the status of the teaching profession.

FIGURE 1 | WHO ARE THE IRREPLACEABLES?



The “Irreplaceables” are teachers so successful that they are nearly impossible to replace.

Estimates of Irreplaceables percentage based on teachers with value-added or growth data; District A high performers: 21%; District B high performers: 20%; District C high performers: 20%; District D high performers: 18%; Student impact estimates calculated following the methodology of Hahnel and Jackson (2012). Source: District data from SY 2009-10 and SY 2010-11.



“If we set high expectations that everyone would follow then I would love to remain at my job.”

—Irreplaceable Teacher

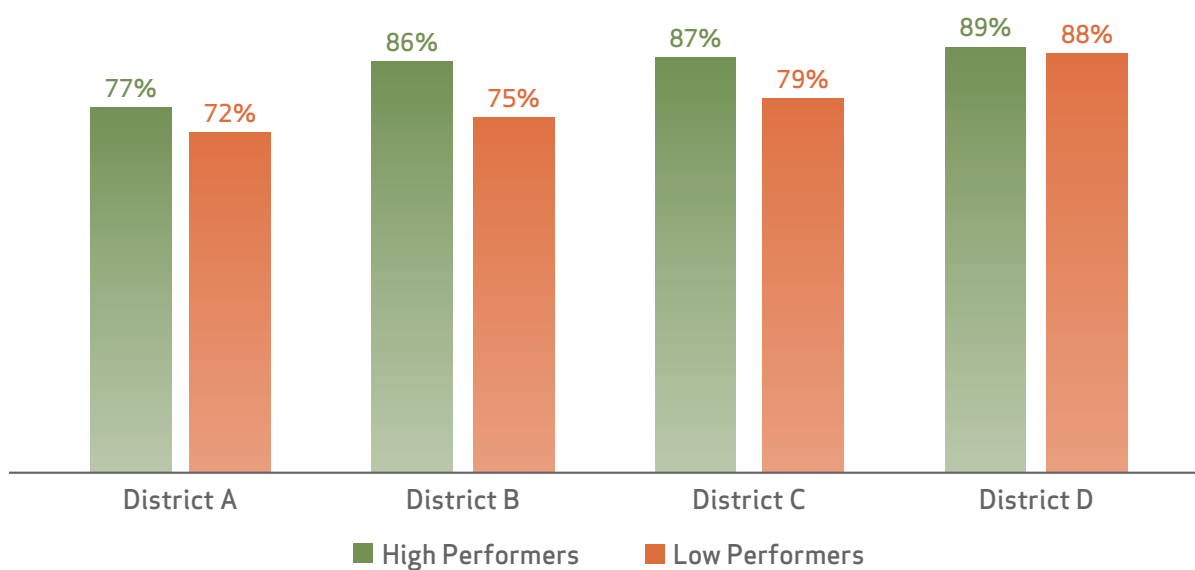
## THE REAL CRISIS: NEGLIGENT RETENTION

Knowing the power of great teachers, one would expect schools to be sharply focused on keeping far more of their best teachers than their lower performers. Instead, they retain all teachers at strikingly similar rates; and about half of all Irreplaceables leave within their first five years (*Figure 2*).

This means too many Irreplaceables are leaving too early—**we estimate that the nation’s 50 largest school districts lose approximately 10,000 every year**—while too many struggling teachers remain for too long. We found that 1 in 10 classrooms in the districts we studied is led by an experienced but low-performing teacher. In fact, in these districts, **40 percent of teachers with more than seven years of experience are less effective at advancing academic progress than the average first-year teacher.**

The result: Rather than steadily improving the quality of instruction, schools are running in place.

FIGURE 2 | SCHOOL RETENTION RATES BY TEACHER PERFORMANCE, 2009-10



Most schools retain Irreplaceables and low performers at strikingly similar rates.

School retention defined as teachers remaining at their school from one year to the next.  
Source: District data from SY 2009-10 through SY 2010-11.

"An effective teacher is worth his/her weight in gold. Too few people really know this."  
— School Leader



## THE CAUSES

These destructive retention patterns occur mainly because leaders at all levels let them happen. We identified three main causes of negligent retention:

### 1 Principals make too little effort to retain Irreplaceables or remove low-performing teachers

Less than 30 percent of Irreplaceables plan to leave for personal reasons beyond their school's control, and principals' actions have a significant impact on the decisions of the other 70 percent. We identified eight simple, low-cost strategies that helped boost teacher retention at the schools we studied—things like giving positive feedback or public recognition for a job well done. Irreplaceables receiving two or more of these strategies planned to remain at their schools *up to six years longer* than those who didn't, yet many Irreplaceables experienced few or none of these strategies. Two-thirds told us that nobody even encouraged them to return for another year (*Figure 3*).

Meanwhile, principals rarely attempt to dismiss or counsel out chronically low-performing teachers, though we found teachers are nearly three times as likely to plan to leave if encouraged to do so. In fact, principals often work to retain low-performing teachers, even though a brand-new teacher will pay off in improved performance about 75 percent of the time. Most principals focus on development instead—more than 70 percent insist it is a top priority—even though the average experienced low performer we studied remained less effective than an average beginning teacher even three years later (*Figure 4*).

### 2 Poor school cultures and working conditions drive away great teachers

At schools that retain high percentages of Irreplaceables, principals created cultures of respect and trust, but were also less likely to tolerate ineffective teaching. Turnover rates among Irreplaceables were 50 percent higher in schools with weak instructional cultures than in those with strong cultures. In three out of the four districts we studied, retention rates were higher at schools where teachers reported a low tolerance for poor performance—yet fewer than half of the teachers we surveyed believed that their own school has a low tolerance for ineffective teaching.

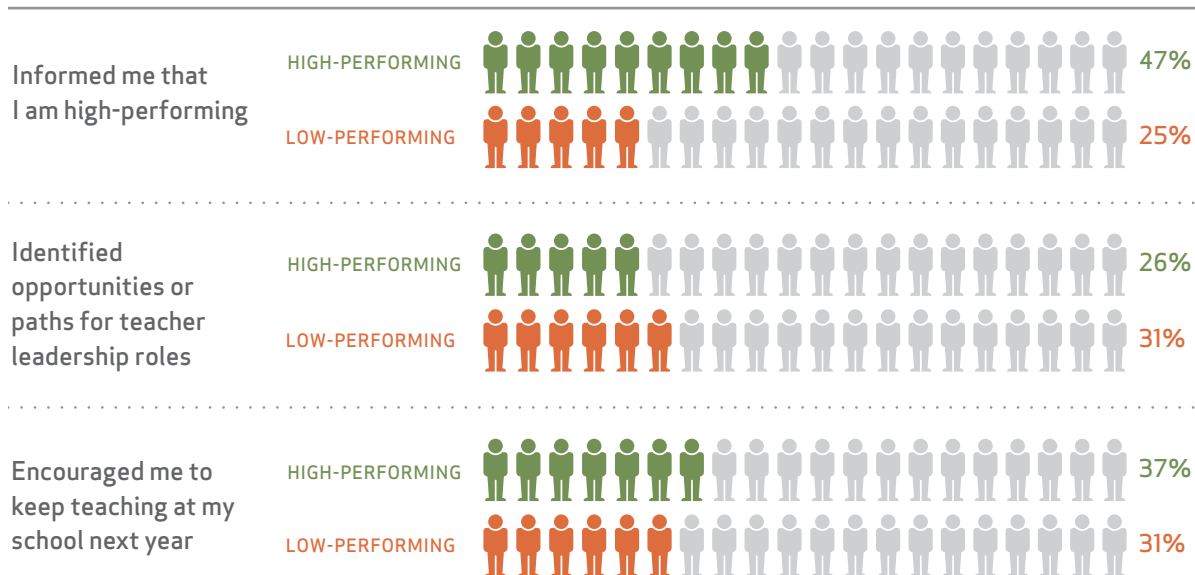
We believe the lesson is clear: Good teachers don't leave demanding schools that hold them to high expectations; they leave schools that aren't serious about good teaching.

### 3 Policies give principals and district leaders few incentives to change their ways

In most school districts, smart teacher retention is simply not a priority. In three of the four districts we studied, only 20 percent of principals agreed that their district had effective strategies to retain its best teachers. Furthermore, principals in most districts encounter a number of policy barriers that discourage or prevent them from making smarter retention decisions. Most notably, they are hamstrung by lockstep teacher compensation systems that are hard-wired to undervalue great teaching. Because these systems award most raises for seniority and advanced degrees, about 55 percent of Irreplaceables earn lower base salaries than the average ineffective teacher. Not surprisingly, **compensation was one of the reasons most frequently cited by Irreplaceables for leaving their schools.**

FIGURE 3 | TEACHERS REPORTING RECOGNITION AT SCHOOL

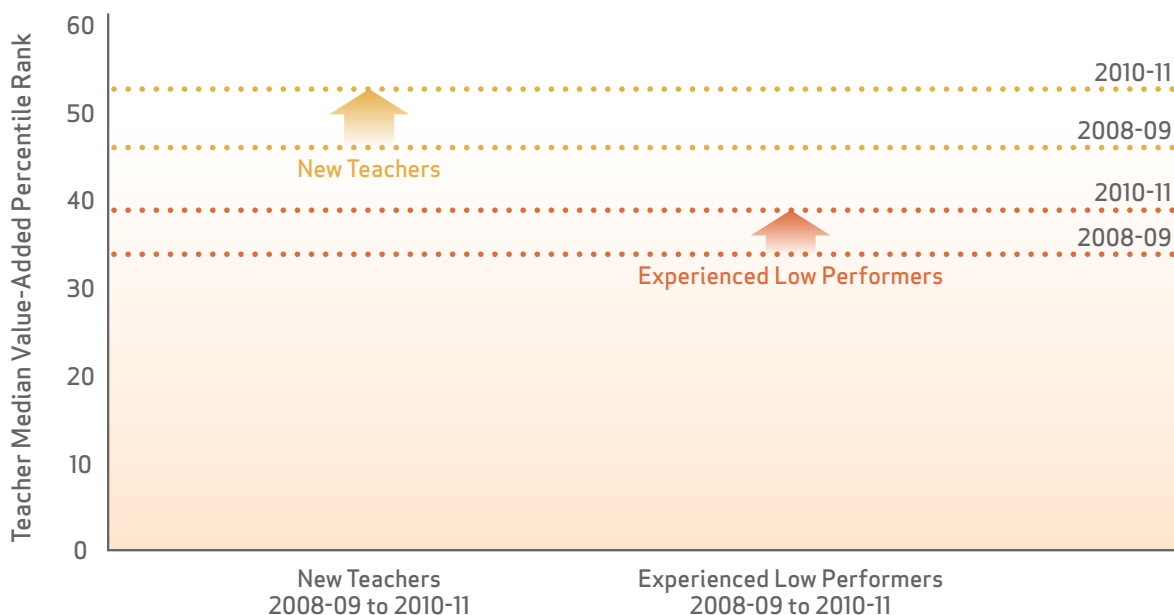
“Last year, someone from my school leadership team...”



Principals use retention strategies at similar rates for high and low performers.

Source: District B data and survey data. Trends confirmed across districts.

FIGURE 4 | PERFORMANCE COMPARISON OF NEW TEACHERS AND EXPERIENCED LOW PERFORMERS OVER THREE YEARS



Low performers rarely improve significantly. Even three years later, most perform worse than the average first-year teacher.

Median percentile ranks by population scores; Populations defined in SY 2007-08. Source: District C data from SY 2007-08 through SY 2010-11. Trends confirmed across districts.

## THE CONSEQUENCES

Negligent retention has dire consequences for students, teachers, and schools. Specifically:

### 1 School turnaround is nearly impossible

Current retention patterns lock our lowest achieving schools into a cycle of failure, keeping them from ever having enough good or great teachers to improve. Our analysis shows that **struggling schools can reach an average teacher composition after three to four years of smart retention practices**, but may never do so under a pattern of negligent retention (*Figure 5*).

Put simply, most struggling schools won't ever have as many high-performing teachers as other schools—and are unlikely to improve significantly—without making smart retention a top priority.

### 2 The teaching profession is degraded

The neglect of Irreplaceables is just one glaring symptom of a wider problem: a profession that has become one of low performance standards and the lack of respect that accompanies them. Negligent retention sends the dangerous message that great teachers are expendable and that anyone can make a career out of teaching, regardless of how well they perform.

Tolerating poor performance keeps ineffective teachers in the classroom indefinitely, **demoralizes outstanding teachers, and allows the entire teaching profession to be defined by mediocrity** rather than excellence.

FIGURE 5 | SIMULATED TEACHER RETENTION PATTERNS IN 10 LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS, EACH WITH 20 TEACHERS

NEGLIGENT RETENTION		200 Teachers Start Year 1	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	200 Teachers End Year 4 <i>Includes New Hires</i>
14% Low Performers Leave	Low Performers	38	5 leave	5 leave	5 leave	5 leave	34
14% High Performers Leave	High Performers	24	3 leave	4 leave	4 leave	4 leave	25
SMART RETENTION		200 Teachers Start Year 1	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	200 Teachers End Year 4 <i>Includes New Hires</i>
33% Low Performers Leave	Low Performers	38	13 leave	10 leave	7 leave	7 leave	17
4% High Performers Leave	High Performers	24	1 leaves	1 leaves	1 leaves	1 leaves	36

**By changing which teachers leave, low-performing schools can reach an average teacher composition in a few years.**

Number of total teachers is 200. Starting composition is 24 high performers, 138 mid performers, and 38 low performers. Ending composition for negligent retention is 25 high performers, 141 mid performers, and 34 low performers. Ending composition for smart retention is 36 high performers, 147 mid performers, and 17 low performers. Analysis only includes schools with a minimum of 7 teachers with value-added or growth data in each year. Composition data based on an average of 3 years; attrition and pipeline data based on an average of 2 years. Models using the teacher composition at low- and mid-proficiency schools, defined by school-level math proficiency quintile. Model does not assume any fluctuation in teacher populations at schools and assumes population of teachers with performance data reflects the effectiveness of all teachers at these schools. Overall attrition and incoming pipeline rate held steady each year. Source: District D data from SY 2007-08 through SY 2009-10.

## THE SOLUTION: SMART RETENTION

Solving the real teacher retention crisis requires a new approach that revolves around smart retention: keeping more Irreplaceables and fewer low-performing teachers.

This approach could improve the quality of teaching at almost any school right away, and it has the potential to boost student learning substantially. We believe it represents the best way—possibly the only way—for low-performing schools to break their cycles of failure, and for the teaching profession to achieve the elite status it deserves.

Lamenting the low prestige of the teaching profession without addressing the low standards that perpetuate it will not solve the real retention crisis, nor will focusing on greater accountability for teachers without regard for the challenging circumstances in which they work. Education leaders at all levels need to embrace the more difficult, more complex work of demanding better working conditions for teachers along with higher performance standards. We make two main recommendations for solving the real retention crisis.

### 1 Make retention of Irreplaceables a top priority

A combination of focused strategies, focused leadership and focused policies will help keep the best teachers in the classroom longer. Education leaders should:

**Set a goal of retaining more than 90 percent of Irreplaceables annually**, and report progress towards that goal publicly

**Overhaul principal hiring, support and evaluation** to focus on instructional leadership abilities that result in smart teacher retention, like the ability and commitment to give teachers frequent, high-quality and rigorous feedback

**Monitor school working conditions** and address concerns at the policy and individual school level that drive away Irreplaceables

**Pay Irreplaceables what they're worth** and create career pathways that extend their reach

**Protect Irreplaceables during layoffs**

### 2 Strengthen the teaching profession through higher expectations

Education leaders must also address the other side of the retention crisis: the indifference to performance that has allowed so many unsuccessful teachers to remain in the classroom for years or even decades. This will require difficult decisions and long-deferred actions, but further delay will only exacerbate the problem.

**Set a new baseline standard for effectiveness:** Teachers who cannot teach as well as the average first-year teacher should be considered ineffective and dismissed or counseled out (unless they *are* first-year teachers)

**Encourage low performers to leave voluntarily** by creating alternatives to formal dismissal

**Remove the policy barriers to higher expectations**, such as forced-placement staffing rules and onerous dismissal processes

Neither the teaching profession nor our schools can move forward without these changes. Leaders at every level helped create the real retention crisis; they now have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to help solve it. The alternative is to continue standing by as thousands of Irreplaceables every year leave the schools and students who need them most.

