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Where Teachers Thrive: Organizing Schools for Success

by Susan Moore Johnson

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019. 296 pp. $34.00 (paper).

A commonly cited research finding states that a child's teacher is the single-most-important school-based factor that affects a student's learning (Chetty Rockoff, Friedman, 2014). Following this premise, policy makers and researchers have advanced and evaluated policies meant to improve the quality of teachers at almost every level of schooling, including teacher evaluation, hiring and firing decisions, and reforms in teacher compensation. Though few of these policies were created or implemented for the first time in the past twenty years, they have received enormous attention during the period, most notably with the 2008–2009 Race to the Top initiative that heavily incentivized states to adopt these policies in a strong and uniform way.

Drawing on almost a decade of field research, Susan Moore Johnson adds important evidence to how these policies support and constrain schools in their efforts to improve. In *Where Teachers Thrive*, Johnson draws on data from three studies featuring fourteen schools in which she and coinvestigators conducted extensive interviews with teachers, administrators, and other staff to examine eight challenges facing schools as they seek to hire, develop, and retain quality teachers for their students.

The three studies that support the evidence provided in the book were each conducted with a different focus. Because different criteria were used to recruit schools in each case, Johnson was able to draw from a diverse cast of schools and practices to provide evidence on various approaches to practice. In the Second Stage Teachers in Urban Schools study, Johnson and colleagues focused on teachers in years 4–10 of their careers to understand whether and how teachers at this stage continue to learn and grow, as well as to solicit their opinions on professional development, evaluation, and curriculum. In the Teaching in Context study, the researchers focused on examining schools in a single struggling district and recruited a set of schools that varied on both academic performance (as measured by test scores) and teachers' workplace satisfaction (as measured by a state survey). Finally, the Teaching in Successful Schools study focused closely on schools that served predominantly poor and minority students, that had all received the highest rating for effectiveness from the state, and that represented an even mixture of both district and charter schools. The fourteen schools showcased throughout the book are similar in the students they serve and the settings in which they do so, but they are diverse in terms of their outcomes and practices. In large part, the book is successful because it is able to learn deeply from comparing these schools. The

data allow Johnson to show how different approaches by administrators can yield dramatically different results in both the perceptions of teachers and outcomes for students.

Each chapter focuses on a specific challenge that schools face in relation to their teaching staff, beginning with the question of how schools recruit and hire teachers. Other chapters focus on how schools navigate curriculum decisions with teachers, the potential of teacher teams, teacher leadership roles, how teachers' time is organized, and how teachers are compensated. Chapters generally begin with Johnson surveying extant literature. Drawing heavily, but not exclusively, on research published by John Papay, Matthew Kraft, and other former students of Johnson, these primers provide an overview of existing causal and descriptive evidence that certain practices do seem to be associated with improved school outcomes. However, this type of evidence is rarely able to explain how or why certain practices work better than others. For this, Johnson delves into her qualitative interview data to showcase how schools approach and implement policies meant to affect teachers with varying degrees of effectiveness.

For example, in her chapter focusing on teacher evaluation, Johnson begins by noting a widespread myth in teacher evaluation literature that teacher performance improves in the first three to five years of a teacher's career but plateaus thereafter. This understanding has led many policy makers to design teacher evaluation systems that heavily focus on evaluations for early career teachers while ignoring many mid- and late-career teachers. These dynamics, coupled with implicit and explicit policy messages that position teacher evaluation as a way to "weed out" weaker teachers, mean that teachers often view evaluation as a waste of time at best and, more often, as something to be avoided or resisted. Contrary to some popular depictions, teachers in the featured schools were not opposed to evaluation in principle. In fact, the most common complaint was that the evaluation process was not as useful as it could be. In schools where evaluation was implemented by administrators as a policy to be complied with for accountability purposes, teachers found that if they received any feedback, it was curt and rarely helpful. In contrast, when principals dedicated significant time to conducting multiple evaluations for each teacher and were able to have conversations and provide feedback based on those observations, teachers generally felt as though the process was useful for improving their instruction, a sentiment shared by both novice and experienced teachers.

At the same time, principals were clear that even though the evaluation process was used for formative feedback, this did not mean that the process was not also used to make employment decisions. Indeed, the two purposes reinforced each other. If observations and feedback cycles were completed regularly, teachers generally were not surprised by their end-of-year summative evaluation, which could be used either for employment decisions or to award bonuses.

A strong, impactful evaluation system within a school did not come without costs, however. Schools that were able to implement these programs had administrators who were willing to devote large portions of their time exclusively to this process. All administrators reported having not enough time to observe all teachers as often or for as long as they would like and sometimes forwent observations on more senior teachers in order to provide novice teachers with more support. Similarly, while teachers appreciated the general feedback that principals and other administrators were able to provide, even in schools where evaluation was being done well, teachers often expressed a wish that more content-specific feedback was available.

The findings presented in this and other chapters go beyond outlining a specific set of practices. By engaging with both teachers' and principals' perspectives, Johnson is able to explore how participants believe good practices could be made better and why they feel that other practices aren't right for their school. That is, what comes through clearly is the fact that school context and culture have a large impact on the success of similar policies in different schools. The trust between teachers and principals, as well as among teachers themselves, was a key determinant of whether teachers embraced or resisted policy changes. Teachers were easily able to recognize when they were being treated as valuable members of a team or whether their presence in reform efforts was a mere formality. A key takeaway for policy makers and school administrators is that neither teachers nor the policies that affect them operate in a vacuum. Simply assembling a high-quality staff of teachers will not ensure that they work or improve together. Similarly, even the best-designed programs require teachers and principals to be active participants in the implementation, execution, and improvement of policies like teacher evaluation, hiring decisions, and curricular design and adoption.

If *Where Teachers Thrive* has a weakness, it lies in the sheer volume of data that Johnson has collected. Although she helpfully grants alliterative pseudonyms to each school, its teachers, and its administrators, across chapters it is difficult to keep track of which schools were engaged in which practices. Thus, while we are introduced to Ms. North, the principal of Naylor Charter School in the first chapter on hiring practices, we do not hear in depth about this school again until a couple of chapters later when we hear about Naylor's approach to teacher evaluation. While this approach allows the reader to delve deeply into the issues that are presented in each chapter, it stymies the reader's ability to gain a complete picture of a single school. As a result, while we are given vivid descriptions of how certain facets work within schools, we must imagine for ourselves what is possible when a school is able to do everything right, or what it looks like when only some elements are present.

This difficulty is somewhat resolved in the conclusion. Although not represented in a single case study of a school, Johnson does conclude that there are a number of practices that all successful schools seem to employ and others

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that seem to be important but are not as ubiquitous. One of the key takeaways is that there are many ways that schools can address each of these challenges. In some cases, the successful approaches look very similar to each other, as with schools' hiring and recruitment processes. In others, such as teacher teams, there seem to be a number of ways to make them an effective part of teachers' responsibilities.

While this book does not promise silver bullets, it is willing to take a clear stand on the fact that there do seem to be some clearly right and wrong answers to the difficult policy choices that have faced district administrators and principals in the past. Similarly, although policies pertaining to teachers are the primary focus of the book, it also shows that a common difference between successful and stagnating schools is the presence of a principal who is willing to provide direction and leadership while simultaneously allowing teachers to have an active and meaningful voice. Organizing schools for success requires both components—well-designed policies built on firm evidence and a professional and active workforce of teachers to implement and improve them.

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Redefining Success in America: A New Theory of Happiness and Human Development

by Michael B. Kaufman

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 304 pp. $35.00 (paper).

Why would anyone want to get a degree from Harvard University? For many, the answer seems so obvious as to not need an explanation. In addition to its potential to launch a successful and lucrative career, a degree from such a prestigious institution means that you have successfully beaten the competition—and a good, happy life awaits. But is the prospect of economic security enough to guarantee a happy life?

In *Redefining Success in America: A New Theory of Happiness and Human Development,* Michael B. Kaufman challenges this mythical belief of a happily-ever-after. He argues that there is more than "objectively measured career success"—a commonly conceived notion combining "occupational prestige" and "household net worth" (p. 121)—to how happy people are. Critiquing the use of the cross-sectional, self-report survey method commonly used in happiness research, Kaufman uses in-depth, longitudinal interview data to explore the meaning of "happiness" and to develop a paradigm that is "holistic, specific,