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Editorial

Bumping in Schools

The United States has a long and shameful history of dumping its least effective, least qualified teachers into the schools that serve the neediest children. The No Child Left Behind Act requires the states to end this practice. But the states are unlikely to truly improve teacher quality – or spread qualified teachers more equitably throughout the schools – until they pay more attention to how teachers are trained, hired, evaluated and assigned.

To get control of the assignment process, districts will need to abandon union rules that basically guarantee senior teachers the right to change schools whenever they want – even if the principal of the receiving school does not want them – by bumping a less senior teacher out of his or her job.

Obviously, not every teacher who moves to a new school is a bad egg. But principals who wish to shed ineffective teachers often induce them to transfer by threatening negative evaluations, turning the transferring teacher into the receiving school's problem. A study by a nonpartisan New York research group, the New Teacher Project, found that the transfer dance goes on well into the summer, creating a logistical train wreck in staffing. Unable to determine their hiring needs in a timely fashion, school administrators delay making decisions – thus losing better-qualified applicants who grow frustrated and take jobs elsewhere.

Talented novices, with no seniority rights to protect them, often quit the field after being shunted from one place to another. Others give up on the urban school systems where the bumping process is most prevalent and high-tail it to the suburbs. Meanwhile, back in the city, schools are still cobbling together their staffs after the school year has begun. The revolving door turns, instructional time is lost and children suffer.

States and localities are beginning to recognize the problems with this system. New York City, for example, eliminated the forced transfer right in contract negotiations. In California, the State Legislature has passed a law giving principals at low-performing schools the power to veto forced transfers. The law also requires that seniority-based transfers be completed for all schools by April 15 for the following school year.

Urban systems all over the country need to move toward reform. A senior teacher who has been forced out elsewhere or who simply wishes to move elsewhere should be guaranteed an interview at the preferred school, but not a job. School managers, who are increasingly being held accountable for student performance, need to be able to hire the candidate best suited for the position.