

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: ENSURING COMMITTED AND QUALIFIED STAFF

ORCHARD GARDENS K–8 PILOT SCHOOL

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS ♦ BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Turnover among school leaders and staff was a persistent impediment to establishing and maintaining school improvement strategies at Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School (Orchard Gardens). During a period of seven years, Orchard Gardens had six different principals, and the teacher turnover rate was approaching 50 percent. Prompted by the SIG award, Orchard Gardens’ principal uses district- and state-granted autonomy to make staffing decisions, including hiring teachers who have competencies that best meet student needs. The principal also has the autonomy to involve teachers in determining the school’s instructional strategies and curriculum. This involvement plays a key role in improving teacher engagement and increasing teacher retention.

## THE STRATEGY: Hiring and Engaging Teachers Who Fit the School Model

Orchard Gardens’ autonomy over hiring staff allows the principal to ensure that newly hired teachers possess the skills necessary for success in working with inner-city students, support the school’s expanded school day, and focus on improving all students’ academic performance.<sup>1</sup> The principal’s autonomy over instruction and curriculum allows teachers to participate in decisions that address and customize instruction to meet the needs of Orchard Gardens’ students.

Orchard Gardens’ approach to hiring and retaining teachers relies on two components:

- Structuring the new-teacher hiring process to focus on identifying candidates who are both highly skilled at meeting the needs of students and who support the overall mission of the school
- Empowering teachers to guide schoolwide instructional improvement by actively participating in and driving decisions about curriculum and instruction

**Hiring Teachers for Fit.** The first step in hiring new teachers who fit the mission of the school is to clearly define the school’s priority areas of need and the competencies and skills that candidates must possess to meet these areas of need. To guide the hiring process, the school leadership team (the principal, other school administrators, and teachers) identified five core teaching competencies<sup>2</sup> that are necessary for teachers to thrive at Orchard Gardens:

### Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School at a Glance

**SIG Model:** Turnaround  
**Start of SIG Implementation:** 2010–11  
**Locale:** City, Large  
**Grades:** PK–8  
**Enrollment:** 766  
**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 71%  
**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 56% Hispanic, 40% Black, 2% Other, 1% Asian, 1% White, <1% American Indian  
**English Learners:** 54%  
**Students With Disabilities:** 15%

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	20%	30%	36%
Math % proficient	20%	34%	38%

*Note:* Percentages for English Learners and students with disabilities are from the Civil Rights Data Collection and may be based on a different total enrollment of students than the enrollment figures reported by the Common Core of Data.

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- Competency 1: Commitment to high achievement for all students
- Competency 2: Demonstrated effectiveness in enabling students to achieve high levels of academic growth
- Competency 3: Evidence of building and valuing strong relationships in diverse, multicultural settings with students, families, and the community
- Competency 4: Evidence of working collaboratively with school leadership and other colleagues
- Competency 5: Deep content and pedagogical knowledge and skills, and interest in seeking to improve their practice

After establishing these competencies, school leaders developed a five-stage process for hiring teachers who meet the competencies:

- Stage 1: Application review
- Stage 2: Screening
- Stage 3: Interview
- Stage 4: Lesson demonstration
- Stage 5: Reference check

The principal and school operations director oversee each stage of the hiring process. Each stage further narrows the pool of applicants, with less than one third of the applicants advancing to an interview (Stage 3).

*Application Review.* The principal and the school operations director review all applications, including those submitted directly to the school or forwarded by the district. Orchard Gardens posts vacancy announcements at career service centers as well as colleges and universities (locally and nationally). For each open teaching position, Orchard Gardens typically receives more than 100 applications. The principal and operations director review the résumés that are submitted and identify qualified applicants for screening interviews. The primary qualification for applicants to move to the screening stage is prior experience teaching inner-city students and English Learners—or other relevant experience, such as tutoring and community service activities serving similar student populations.<sup>3</sup>

*Screening.* The screening, a 20-minute telephone interview, is conducted by the principal or operations director and focuses on three to five questions about the applicants' expertise and instructional approach. For example, an applicant may be asked: "What's the most amazing lesson that you have taught?" Orchard Gardens' leaders look for descriptions of an "a-ha" moment during the lesson or the development of a new understanding of the teacher's practice or student learning that contributed to the significance of the lesson. Questions also focus on assessing the applicant's classroom management skills. For example: "What are the non-negotiables in your class regarding student behavior?" or "What are the systems and structures you have in place to manage student behavior?" Finally, the screener attempts to assess the applicant's content knowledge by asking content-specific questions, such as "What is the difference between tone and mood?" to an English/language arts candidate. In order to move on to the next stage in the process, applicants must be able to articulate how they structure their instruction and set expectations for student learning. Applicants selected to advance to the interview stage are provided with information about Orchard Gardens, including newspaper articles and media clips. This comprehensive screening allows applicants to opt-out of the hiring process if any part of Orchard Gardens does not match the applicants' job aspirations.

*Interview.* During the interview stage of the process, applicants living within the local area participate in an on-site interview. Applicants living outside of the immediate area participate in an extended telephone interview. For on-site interviews, applicants receive a one- to two-hour tour of the school, which affords them the opportunity to meet staff and observe the school in operation. In addition, the visit provides the principal or operations director with an

opportunity to further assess whether an applicant is likely to be a good fit for the school. For example, the operations director noted that a visiting applicant asked why the students in the school walked in lines when moving through the hallways; another applicant asked why students raise their hands in class before speaking. The operations director noted that such questions open the door for conversations about the alignment between the applicant's and the school's core instructional and classroom management philosophies.

The principal and operations director interview all applicants, either separately or jointly, depending on their schedules. The interviews focus on assessing the extent to which applicants possess the five core competencies. During the interview, the principal and operations director learn how applicants use data to inform instruction and improve student achievement. As part of the interview, applicants are asked to bring an example of data they have analyzed and explain what they learned from the analysis, how the analysis informed their practice, and what improvements of student outcomes occurred—if any. There is no specific guidance on the type of example that applicants should bring to the interview; but, according to the principal, the evidence must drill down to the school or classroom level and demonstrate the applicant's ability to identify student needs, develop strategies to support student needs, and monitor and assess student improvement. After each interview, the principal and operations director meet to discuss the applicant's strengths and weaknesses. Based on these discussions, they select a pool of applicants to move to the lesson demonstration stage of the hiring process.

*Lesson Demonstration.* Only the strongest applicants participate in the lesson demonstration process,<sup>4</sup> which requires applicants to teach a lesson in their chosen subject area for 30 to 60 minutes. During the lesson demonstration, the principal and operations director observe the applicant's instructional practices, such as how the applicant involves students in the lesson and checks for understanding. In addition, they observe and evaluate the applicant's classroom management skills. After the demonstration, the principal and operations director jointly determine whether the applicant will move on to the final stage of the hiring process.

*Reference Check.* Orchard Gardens uses reference checks as a way to fill in gaps in knowledge identified in the earlier stages of the hiring process. Potential topic areas for discussion with references include the applicant's professionalism, character, judgment, and areas in need of improvement. The principal and operations director use this information to assess whether the applicant fits the culture of the school and follows through on tasks. The principal and operations director then make final decisions about extending offers to selected candidates.

**Empowering Teachers to Guide Schoolwide Instructional Improvement.** Orchard Gardens' newly hired and current teachers play an active role in the instructional decisions and leadership of the school. Newly hired teachers share responsibility with their experienced colleagues for ensuring that schoolwide decisions about instruction and curriculum enhance teaching and learning for Orchard Gardens' students.

At Orchard Gardens, providing teachers with decision-making and leadership opportunities in curriculum and instruction is an important strategy for engaging and retaining teachers. Teachers share leadership responsibilities with school administrators, thereby growing their own leadership skills. According to a school leader, "Orchard Gardens emphasizes people owning the initiatives and owning the work." Teachers work in teams to analyze and identify areas for curricular or instructional improvement, and then monitor implementation. Teachers in a select group receive a \$6,000 stipend for serving as teacher leaders. For example, in the 2013–14 school year, 18 Orchard Gardens' teachers received such stipends. These teachers are selected through a process developed by an external provider with expertise in developing teacher leaders who support their peers.

Teacher leaders serve on the school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) with the principal, two assistant principals, and the operations director. The teacher leaders are responsible for attending twice-monthly 90-minute ILT meetings, providing professional development to other teachers, developing instructional plans, and serving as grade-level chairs. The teacher leaders support and shepherd their peers in the implementation of new strategies.

According to the principal and a school administrator, empowering teachers to serve in these capacities generates greater staff buy-in to change strategies. For example, analysis of student performance data showed that students did not have the foundational skills to be successful in mathematics. As a result, the ILT chose to move away from the district's mathematics curriculum and instead create lessons based on assessment of student performance and progress toward meeting standards.

During the summer, the ILT meets to review Orchard Gardens' student performance data and establish three to four strategic priorities for the year. The ILT then creates professional development plans to support those instructional priorities. The instructional priorities for the 2012–13 school year included aligning writing instruction with the Common Core State Standards, developing strategies for differentiating instruction, and integrating arts across content areas.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

A challenge for Orchard Gardens has been that not all highly qualified teachers are the right fit for the school. School leaders have determined that a teacher's experience working with similar student populations and willingness to engage in continuous improvement are critical to Orchard Gardens' turnaround efforts. Dedicating time and resources to identify the right new teachers and build the leadership skills of current teachers supports Orchard Gardens' improvement efforts and contributes to teacher retention. Since receiving SIG funding and implementing the new hiring and empowerment strategies, teacher turnover has declined. Prior to 2010–11, due to staff turnover, Orchard Gardens hired approximately 30 teachers annually out of a staff of 60. In 2013–14, the number of needed new hires decreased to five.

## **CONCLUSION**

Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School faced the dual challenge of having high staff turnover and low student achievement. By assembling a teaching staff who meet the unique needs of their student population, support the school's turnaround vision, and are empowered to make instructional decisions to address students' learning needs, Orchard Gardens has built a cohesive staff with a common focus.

## **SOURCES**

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: School at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); SIG information is from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>; students with disabilities and English Learner student percentage enrollment data are from the Civil Rights Data Collection (2011–12); and student outcomes data are from *EDFacts* (2009–10, 2010–11, 2011–12).

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## **IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS**

<sup>1</sup> Because Orchard Gardens has been a Boston Pilot School since 2003, school leaders have autonomies beyond traditional schools in the district. Autonomies include budgeting, staffing, governance, curriculum, assessment, and the school calendar. The SIG model also triggered active use of autonomies in staffing, curriculum, and the school calendar (extending the school day).

<sup>2</sup> Orchard Gardens' staff drew on a number of organizations' resources to develop the competencies and the interview process: The New Teacher Project; Achievement First Public Charter Schools; Citizen Schools; Teach For America; and Public Impact, which provided turnaround leader competencies ([http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround\\_Leader\\_Competencies.pdf](http://www.publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> To teach at Orchard Gardens, teachers must meet district certification requirements.

<sup>4</sup> Out-of-state candidates must submit a sample video of a classroom lesson.