



# Attracting Talent to Providence: The Challenge of Teacher Recruitment

John Papay, Nate Schwartz, and Kate Donohue

Providence Public School District (PPSD) made significant progress last year in ensuring that most classrooms were fully staffed by the start of the 2020-21 school year (see the [previous brief](#) in this series for more detail). Despite more positions to fill and higher-than-usual retirement numbers during the pandemic, PPSD hired earlier across the spring of 2020 and significantly reduced vacancies by the start of the school year. The district also hired more teachers of color – a high-priority item given the large disparity between the racial/ethnic make-up of PPSD teachers and their students. Going forward, the district must contend with ongoing areas of challenge, particularly in filling open positions for English learner (EL), math, and science classrooms.

Accelerated hiring timelines appeared to contribute to this year’s success. However, continued progress in PPSD depends upon not only maintaining an early hiring process but also developing a large and qualified pool of candidates from which principals can choose. This brief looks at applicant recruitment. Specifically, we ask: **To what extent does PPSD attract a sufficient pool of well-qualified applicants to its open positions and what can be done to improve the pool going forward?**

## Key findings

- ▲ The PPSD applicant pool is small compared to peer districts and relatively local, with the lion’s share of candidates coming from Rhode Island.
- ▲ Reflecting national shortage areas, recruitment challenges are particularly acute for EL teachers and teachers in math and science.
- ▲ This year, PPSD attracted more external candidates and more out-of-state candidates than in past years.
- ▲ Racial/ethnic diversity remains low among job applicants, and the rate of growth in new hires of color is not sufficient to meet PPSD’s goals.
- ▲ Average salaries are high relative to other states, but not for new teachers and not compared to other RI districts.

## Opportunities

- ▲ Revitalize a **recruitment and media campaign** that includes state/district efforts as well as outreach from principals and teachers.
- ▲ Continue to **post jobs early and extend posting windows**. Most jobs in the district remain open in the system only for a 7-day window.
- ▲ **Expand the pool** by strengthening pipelines for teaching assistants, cultivating unsubmitted applications and prior year applications, reaching out to certified teachers not in the workforce, and leveraging local teacher education providers.

Using data from PPSD’s application database and human resources system, we find that Providence attracts relatively few applicants for each open position, and the teachers who apply tend to be mostly white and mostly local. Despite the pandemic, the district made some modest improvements in 2020, but substantial changes will require a redoubling of efforts in 2021.

As part of our ongoing research-practice partnership with PPSD and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), the [Center on the Study of Educators](#) at the Annenberg Institute has been exploring teacher staffing in the state. We have combined rich datasets from several sources to better understand these processes. This is the second in a series of briefs describing the teacher workforce in Providence. Our first described PPSD’s successes and challenges in filling teacher vacancies before the start of the year. Our next will explore teacher retention.

## The PPSD applicant pool is small and local

Over the past several years, Providence has had about 200 open positions that are posted externally. On average, each position that is posted externally receives 13 applications, 5 from internal candidates and 8 from external applicants. This compares unfavorably to other districts – nationally, the average teaching position receives 28 applications.<sup>i</sup>

### PPSD receives few applications relative to other districts

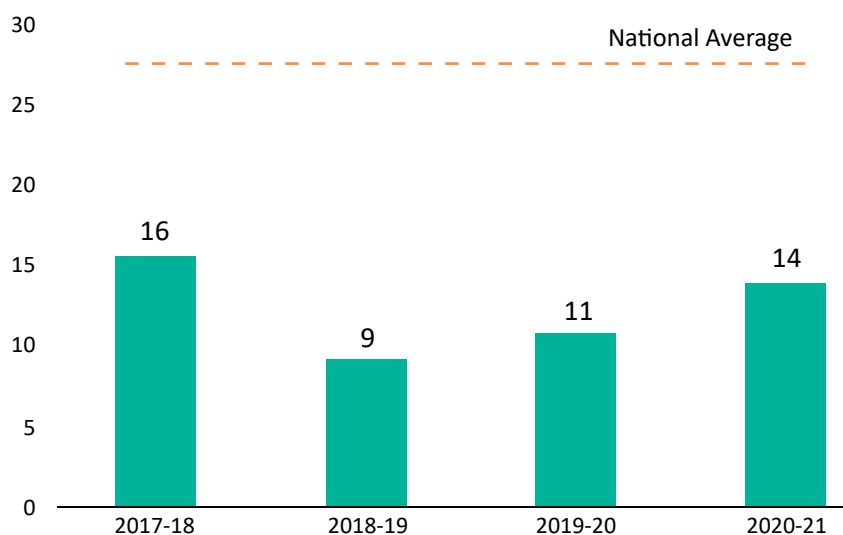


Figure 1: Comparison of applications in PPSD over time to national average

The number of *applications* submitted to each position tends to overstate the attractiveness of teaching in the district, as many candidates apply to more than one position. If the district has 10 high school science positions to fill, having 5 applicants who apply to all of these positions will lead to vacancies at the start of the year. Instead, we prefer to focus on the number of unique *applicants* for each position (i.e., the number of individual applicants divided by the number of posted jobs).

Here, Providence falls well short of other districts. Over the past 4 years, PPSD has attracted only about 2 unique external applicants per externally posted teaching position, while other districts routinely attract many more.<sup>ii</sup>

One reason why the applicant pool is quite small in PPSD is that the teacher labor market is quite local. In general, teachers tend to teach close to where they grew up or where they completed their preparation program.<sup>iii</sup> We see the

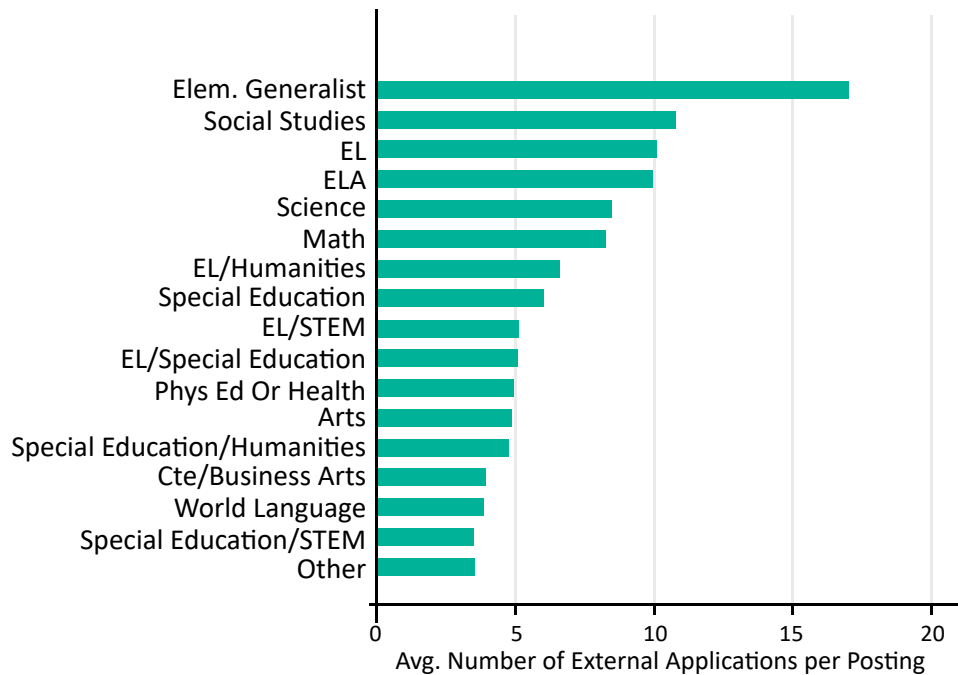
same patterns in Providence – over the past 4 years, 70% of external applicants to PPSD teaching positions are candidates who live in RI, and 15% are currently teaching in other RI districts.<sup>iv</sup> Despite close proximity, only about 55 external applicants (13 %) each year come from Massachusetts and 10 (2.4%) from Connecticut.

One implication of this local labor market is that many candidates are prepared by RI teacher education programs. Nearly half of early-career external applicants come from a RI teacher education program, overall and in high-needs areas, mostly from Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island.

### Recruitment challenges are particularly acute for EL teachers and teachers in math and science

Application averages mask clear differences across subject areas. Some types of positions – like elementary school generalists – are much more popular than others that are hard-to-staff – such as math, science, EL, and special education. In Providence, each elementary generalist position receives 17 external applications, while mathematics and science positions receive half as many.

#### Over the last several years, only elementary and social studies positions attract more than 10 external applications per position



Note: English Learner (EL) positions include Bilingual and English as a Second Language positions  
STEM includes science, technology, engineering and math

Figure 2: Average number of external applications per position, by subject area, 2017-2020

Not only do hard-to-staff positions receive fewer applications, but the applicants tend to be less experienced and less likely to hold the proper certification. For example, among candidates for elementary generalist positions, 97% report having prior teaching experience and 70% report holding a relevant certification. By contrast, 20% of STEM applicants report having no prior teaching experience and only 30% report having a valid STEM certification. This has serious implications for staffing – PPSD posted 55 STEM positions for the 2020-21 school year but attracted just 116 external candidates. Only 33 of these candidates reported holding appropriate certification.

## This year, PPSD attracted more external candidates and more out-of-state candidates

The Rhode Island Department of Education invested in a statewide recruitment campaign starting early in the summer of 2020 to attract teachers to the state. PPSD also restructured its Central Office support of teacher hiring. And, RIDE passed new guidance that provided full reciprocity to teachers who were licensed in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The pandemic also affected many applicants' decisions about when and where to apply. While it is difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of any of these factors, we do see that PPSD's recruitment efforts were somewhat more successful this year than in past years.

These improvements mainly happened in two areas:

**Out-of-state applicants.** While the number of local (RI) applicants has remained quite flat over the past four years, the number of out-of-state applicants has increased. In particular, in the past 3 years 11% of applicants came from Massachusetts. In 2020, 17% did.

**Non-high-needs subjects.** Most of the increase comes in subject areas that are not high-needs. While the total number of applicants to high-needs positions has increased, so has the number of open positions. Thus, the total number of unique applicants per position has remained quite flat over the past 4 years. Instead, much of the increase in applications has come for other positions, such as English language arts and social studies positions.

### PPSD attracted more out-of-state applicants this year, but saw no increase in applicants per position to high-needs subjects

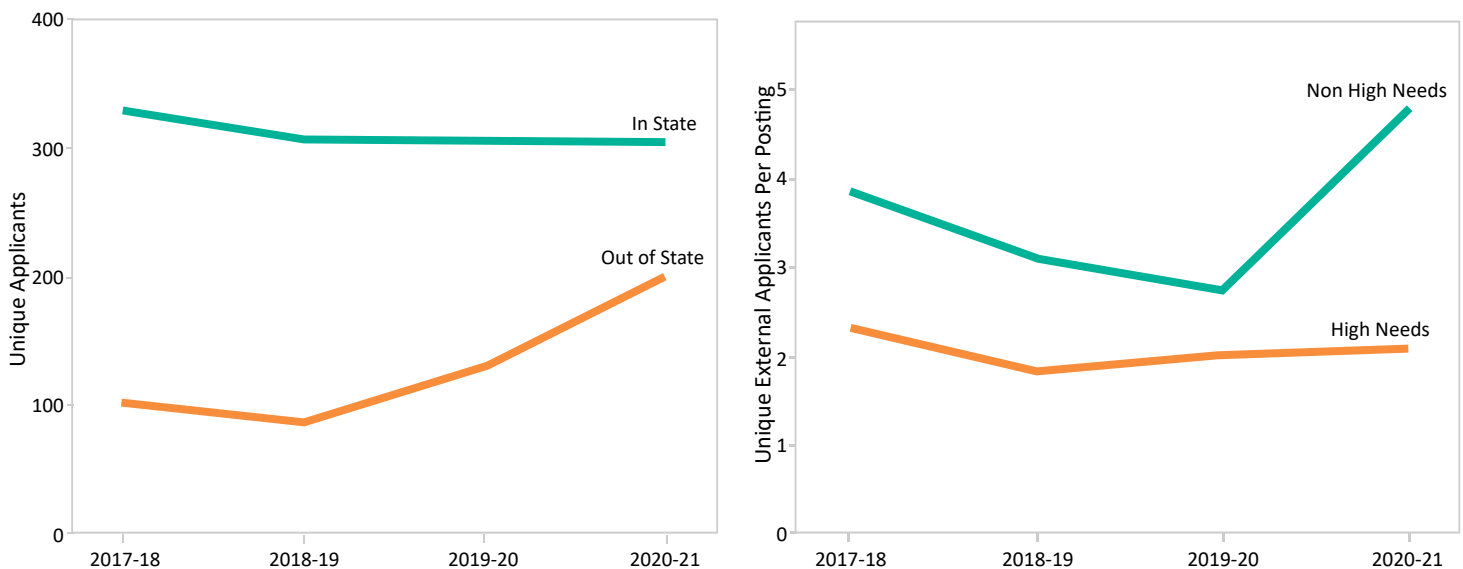


Figure 3: Unique number of applicants overall (left) and per posting (right), over time.

## Racial/ethnic diversity remains low among job applicants, and the rate of growth in new hires of color is not sufficient to meet PPSD's goals

One key challenge – and central goal of Providence's Turnaround Action Plan – is to ensure that the PPSD teacher workforce better represents the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body. Nearly 80% of PPSD teachers identify as white, while 81% of students identify as Black or Latinx. In 2020, 74% of applicants were white, 7% Hispanic, 6% Black,

4% Asian, and 4% of two or more races. Applicants are thus more diverse than the teacher workforce, but similar to the racial make-up of new hires.

### PPSD applicants are somewhat more diverse than the workforce and similar to new hires

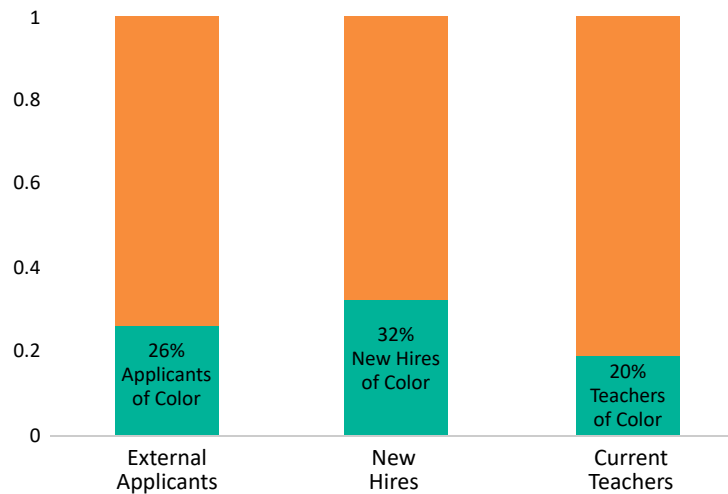


Figure 4: Proportion of teachers, applicants, and new hires of color in PPSD for the 2020-21 SY.

This pattern is both promising and problematic. On the one hand, PPSD principals are hiring teachers that reflect the racial diversity of the applicant pool. However, to meet the goals stated in the Turnaround Action Plan, PPSD would need to ensure that fully half of all new hires were teachers of color. This suggests two parallel opportunities – PPSD must continue to attract more candidates of color and, if increasing the diversity of the workforce is a priority, prioritize hiring candidates whose backgrounds reflect those of their students.

At the same time, the applicant pool has increased in linguistic diversity over the past several years. Given the district’s needs to support multi-lingual learners (MLLs) and to respond to the Department of Justice consent decree related to instruction for these students, it is reassuring that nearly 40% of external applicants reported that they could speak at least some Spanish.

### Overall salaries are high relative to other states, but not for new teachers

Although salary is not the driving force behind teachers’ career decisions, on the margin it does matter for recruiting and retaining teachers. Providence’s teacher salaries offer some clear opportunities for recruitment, but highlight some important constraints.

Overall, PPSD salaries are high relative to other large districts across the country – the average PPSD teacher earned \$71,409 in 2019. In general, Rhode Island as a whole has relatively high teacher salaries compared with other states. A recent analysis by the Economic Policy Institute found that Rhode Island teachers were among the highest paid relative to similar professions. This is a clear opportunity for recruitment, highlighting the relatively high pay for Rhode Island teachers.

However, this average hides the fact that teachers, and particularly early career teachers, earn relatively low salaries compared with counterparts in other Rhode Island districts. This is true for two reasons.

First, the PPSD salary scale is back-loaded, with teachers' salaries improving rapidly over the first decade in the classroom. Providence teachers with 10 years of experience and no graduate credit earn \$73,440, ranking 8th of 148 large urban districts in the country. In contrast, novice PPSD teachers rank only 88th in salary level among the 148 large urban districts.

### PPSD novice teacher salaries are low compared to other large districts nationally, but experienced teacher salaries are quite high

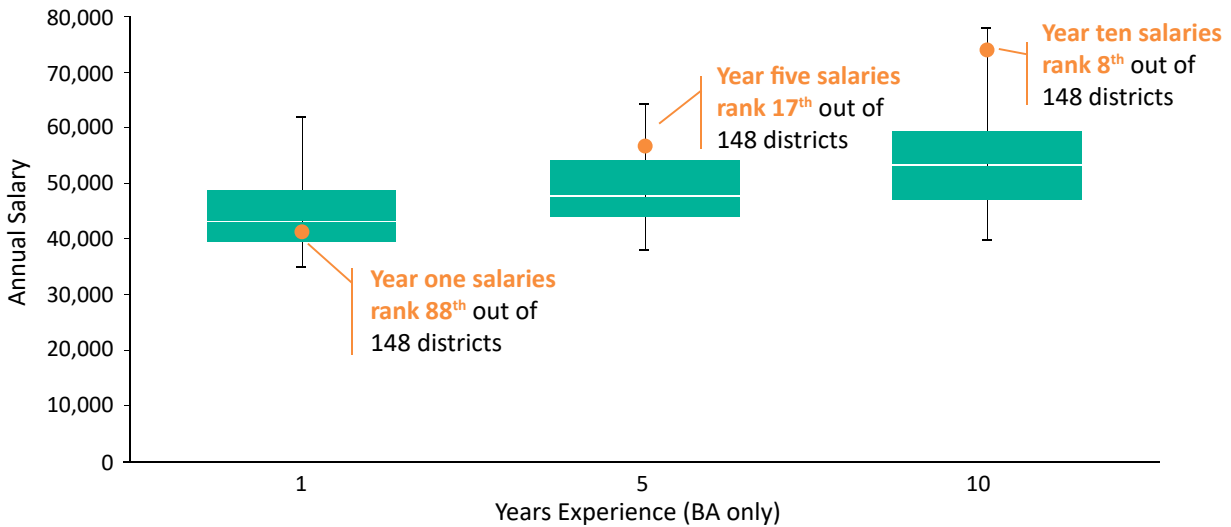


Figure 5: Distribution of teacher salaries by teacher experience in large urban districts (top)

Second, the high pay for RI teachers in general means that salaries for PPSD teachers fall somewhat below those of other RI districts, again particularly for novice teachers. Novice teacher salaries fall 2.1% below the average of other districts in the state, while those at the highest end of the scale are 1% below the average district.

### Looking Forward: Clear opportunities for improvement

The district goal of developing “World Class Talent” in PPSD is to ensure that the district can staff all classrooms with a diverse set of highly effective teachers. This entails several key challenges – retaining effective educators, supporting teachers to be effective in their classrooms, and developing teachers’ capacities to improve instruction. However, any strategy to staff classrooms effectively also requires efforts to recruit a large, diverse, and well-qualified applicant pool. Here, PPSD has traditionally struggled.

Encouraging teachers to apply to positions is a multi-faceted challenge. We know that local labor markets matter – teachers tend to work close to where they grew up or completed their teacher preparation.<sup>v</sup> As teachers are choosing among possible districts, things like pay matter. And, teachers are more likely to want to work in schools and districts that provide supportive working conditions, including strong school leaders who manage the school effectively and enable teachers to be successful. Improving all of these dimensions – the local supply of qualified candidates, compensation, and the professional environment in schools – can help with teacher recruitment.

However, the recruitment *process* itself is also key. There are two key aspects to recruiting world class talent:

- (1) attracting large enough pools of well-qualified candidates to apply to teaching positions in the district, and
- (2) ensuring that the best of these candidates become permanent hires.

Schools and districts that attract many candidates begin by **building awareness and recruiting active job seekers**. They also seek to **build the pool of future applicants**, expanding the supply and engaging in targeted outreach efforts to candidates who could become teachers. Once they have a strong pool, they work to **cultivate top candidates**. While we do not have much data on this conversion process in PPSD, we know that successful schools and districts invest substantially in this phase, staying in contact with promising applicants throughout the process.

Our data suggests several key areas for further investment:

**Building awareness & recruiting active job seekers to apply:** Building a robust applicant pool requires that potential candidates know that a school is hiring for positions that they are qualified for and believe that the school will be a good place to work.

*Refine and expand a recruitment and media campaign.* Recognizing some of the challenges in attracting applicants to teach in Providence, RIDE launched a nationwide social media campaign in June of 2020. This was well-warranted, as existing outreach efforts had been limited. Over the last two years, nearly two-thirds of applicants appear to have

## Recruiting Teachers of Color: Best Practices from the Field

States and districts across the country struggle to recruit teachers of color. Nationally, 80% of teachers are White, compared to less than half of students. Research suggests several promising approaches for addressing this challenge.

Districts and states have begun investing in diverse teacher pipelines, primarily through active engagement with local universities. Three prominent approaches have shown success:

- ▲ Authentic **university-district partnerships** enable open communication about hiring needs and facilitate feedback on the content and design of a program to better prepare teachers of color.<sup>vi</sup>
- ▲ **Grow Your Own partnerships** that recruit high school students to college and into the teaching profession promote a workforce that reflects the diversity in a local community.<sup>vii</sup> In these efforts, exposure to teaching is important; early experiences in teaching can lead Black men in particular to enter the profession.<sup>viii</sup>
- ▲ **Teacher residency programs** provide an alternative pathway to certification for promising candidates. These programs follow the medical residency model, placing pre-service teachers in classrooms for a year-long apprenticeship tied to coursework from a university partner. Across the country, teacher residency programs are far more diverse than traditional teacher preparation programs: 45% of teacher residents identify as people of color compared to just 19% of new teachers entering the field.<sup>ix</sup>

While a focus on longer-term pipeline development is critical, schools and districts have had shorter-term success by:

- ▲ Including current teachers of color on local hiring committees, which can facilitate a more inclusive hiring process.<sup>x</sup> Actively including educators of color has proven more effective than simply highlighting a diverse workforce in advertising material.
- ▲ Actively recruiting candidates from HBCUs or regional universities with more diverse student bodies.
- ▲ Encouraging promising candidates of color who do not have valid teaching licenses to apply anyway, and supporting these candidates to become emergency certified and eventually licensed.

found positions by actively searching for them -- 35% of external candidates listed their referral source as SchoolSpring, an on-line platform to which PPSD posts jobs, while another 21% listed the PPSD website.<sup>xii</sup>

This has implications for diversity as well. White candidates were much more likely to rely on SchoolSpring than teachers of color – 40% of White applicants but only 23% of applicants of color listed SchoolSpring as their referral source. As RIDE continues to expand the reach of the recruitment campaign by starting earlier in the hiring cycle, it can both increase the number of teacher applicants who know of open positions as well as showcase the opportunities and benefits of working for PPSD. Ultimately, we would expect such a campaign to result in a larger and more diverse applicant pool.

PPSD might also consider efforts that other districts have found successful, including:

- Post job opportunities in regional cities on free or low-cost job boards such as Indeed, Craigslist and TFA Opportunity Hub.
- Use social media advertising to better target qualified teacher applicants.
- Launch a referral campaign. 20% of applicants say they were referred by a district employee. This is a particularly important source for applicants of color – nearly 1/3 of Black and 1/4 of Hispanic applicants reported being referred by a district employee, compared to just 1 of every 6 White candidates.
- Leverage school principals to do additional outreach. Effective principals in other districts mount substantial recruitment efforts for their schools (see sidebar). In PPSD, some schools attract more candidates through referrals than others, suggesting that some schools may be engaged in this type of pro-active outreach.

*Post early and extend posting windows.* As we showed in our last brief, posting positions for external applicants earlier in the hiring season has real advantages. Positions posted earlier get more applicants and principals have a chance to select teachers before they take jobs elsewhere. The local teacher labor market is competitive. While few teachers move across districts, about 15% of external applicants to PPSD are current teachers in other RI districts.

Extending posting windows can also help generate more robust applicant pools as it gives more time for applicants to learn about the job. Most jobs in PPSD remain open only for 7 days. The district then closes the position before principals review applicants. Jobs that are not filled can be reopened -- in the last two years, half of all externally posted positions were reopened past the original 7-day window. Keeping job postings open and continuing to review applications until the position is filled could substantially increase the number of applicants for a given position. Jobs that were reopened for an extended posting window received over 50% more applications. When given the opportunity, many applicants also continue to apply. While 40% of external applicants apply to only one position, those who do remain actively apply to positions for an average of about one month. Extending posting windows would enable positions to capture more of these applicants.

**Expand the pool of possible candidates.** Districts across the country have taken a range of approaches to expanding the applicant pool, particularly for candidates from underrepresented groups and for teachers in high-needs areas. This includes both targeting teacher candidates who may not be active job seekers as well as providing pathways into the teaching profession. There are clear opportunities for similar approaches in Providence.

*Strengthen pipelines for Teaching Assistants.* The majority of the TA workforce identifies as Black (20%) or Latinx (35%). While nearly one-third of TAs have a post-secondary credential, very few transition to classroom teaching positions. Of the nearly 600 TAs who had worked in PPSD in the past three years, only 4 were classroom teachers in the 2020 school year. The district employs about 80 TAs of color who are under 45; 14 of them already have a BA degree and 9 have an AA degree.



*Cultivate unsubmitted applications and prior year applications.* Each year, 150 to 200 external candidates begin an application but do not submit it. Some districts have had success with low-cost outreach to these candidates, encouraging them to follow through and apply. About 40 of these candidates each year identify as Black or Hispanic. Similarly, 11% of applicants apply in more than one year. Low-cost outreach to applicants from past years – teachers who at one point expressed interest in working in PPSD – can help to boost the pool.

*Reach out to certified teachers not in the workforce.* In 2018-19, more than 2,000 valid RI certifications in ESL, math or science were not in use. While some of these certified teachers were teaching out-of-state or in private schools, many were likely living locally and not in the teaching workforce. Outreach efforts might encourage some of these candidates to return.

*Partner with local teacher education.* Only about 1/3 of RI teacher education graduates remain in-state. In part, hiring processes and late timelines encourage candidates to take jobs elsewhere. As PPSD works to reform its hiring process, it can continue to leverage local teacher education programs. Hosting more pre-service candidates is a clear opportunity – teachers who do their student teaching in a school are much more likely to want to work in that school.<sup>xiv</sup> PPSD can also prioritize recruitment and support early hiring for promising candidates. While local teacher preparation programs currently produce predominantly White graduates who do not teach in hard-to-staff subjects, this is changing. Many providers are working to make their programs more diverse and to better meet the needs of the district. Research suggests that partnering more directly with local teacher preparation can improve the pipeline of candidates of color and in hard-to-staff subjects.<sup>xv</sup>

## Deliberate and Active vs. Generic and Passive. Evidence on Teacher Recruitment in Successful Schools

Researchers at Harvard recently studied the human resources practices in six highly successful high-poverty schools in a large city in Massachusetts.<sup>xii</sup> They noted three key themes from this work:

- ▲ *Principals took an active role.* Many schools rely on district recruitment efforts. By contrast, principals in these six successful schools took an active role in recruitment. They partnered with non-profit organizations designed to help urban schools with staffing (e.g., TFA, TeachPlus, CityYear, TNTP), engaged with local universities, and leveraged the district's human resources office, for example by reaching out to teachers who applied to other related positions in the district. All of these principals leaned heavily not only their own personal networks but those of their teaching staff.
- ▲ *Recruitment was deliberate and tailored.* Recruitment efforts – led by districts or schools – tend to be passive and generic. Schools and districts may post advertisements but rarely conduct outreach to promising candidates. Recruitment pitches tend to provide generic information about a district rather than detailed information about a particular school's unique character. Principals in these successful schools engaged in active and targeted outreach efforts.
- ▲ *Principals attended to school climate.* Principals in these schools built a foundation for recruitment by developing a robust "organizational identity" and highlighting this in recruitment materials. In addition, they worked actively to build schools where teachers wanted to work.

These practices align with those from effective charter school networks. CRPE researchers studied 24 charter schools in three states, showing that these schools described clearly the types of teachers they wanted and then actively engaged in efforts to find such candidates.<sup>xiii</sup> In particular, they spent substantial resources cultivating recruitment networks, building formal connections with teacher preparation providers who had provided excellent candidates in the past, and engaging with promising candidates throughout the search process.

Efforts throughout the recruitment cycle can draw a larger, more effective, and more diverse pool of applicants and new hires to the district.

Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

	Short-term	Long-term
<b>Building awareness &amp; recruiting active job seekers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment &amp; media campaign</li> <li>• Targeted social media advertising</li> <li>• Regional job boards</li> <li>• Referral campaign</li> <li>• Principal outreach</li> <li>• Early postings</li> <li>• Extended posting windows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve school working conditions and climate</li> <li>• Build recruitment networks with preparation programs</li> </ul>
<b>Expanding the pool</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsubmitted applications</li> <li>• Past-year applicants</li> <li>• Certified teachers not in workforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching Assistant pipeline</li> <li>• Local teacher preparation partnerships</li> </ul>

<sup>i</sup> Combs, E. & Silverman, S. (2018). A Leak in the Pipeline: How Hiring Bias Might Be Compounding the Teacher Shortage. Frontline Research.

<sup>ii</sup> While there is no comprehensive information about applications from other states and districts, several analyses have explored application behavior in other states. In Vermont, schools received 23 applications per job on average, and 13 per position in shortage areas, in 2010. In 2014-15, Connecticut schools received 19 applicants per available position. In Spokane, Washington, the district received 135 applications per elementary generalist position, on average, and 34 per position for other jobs.

<sup>iii</sup> Boyd, D., Lankford, H., Loeb, S. & Wyckoff, J. (2005). The draw of home: How teachers' preferences for proximity disadvantage urban schools. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 24(1), 113-132.; Cannata, M. (2010). Understanding the teacher job search process: Espoused preferences and preferences in use. *Teachers College Record*, 112(12), 2889-2934.

<sup>iv</sup> We only observe whether teachers are teaching in another RI district for the 2018-19 school year.

<sup>v</sup> Boyd Loeb et al. (2005); Cannata (2010).

<sup>vi</sup> Bristol, T. J. & Goings, R. B. (2019). Exploring the boundary heightening experiences of Black male teachers: Lessons for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(1), 51-64.

<sup>vii</sup> Carver-Thomas, D., & Learning Policy Institute. (2018). *Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color*. Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>viii</sup> Bristol, T. (2014). *Black men of the classroom: An exploration of how the organizational conditions, characteristics, and dynamics in schools affect Black male teacher's pathway into the profession, experiences, and retention*. Unpublished Dissertation. New York, NY: Columbia University.

<sup>ix</sup> Guha, R., Hyler, M. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *The teacher residency: An innovative model for preparing teachers*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Papay, J. P., West, M. R., Fullerton, J. B., Kane, T. J. "Does an Urban Teacher Residency Increase Student Achievement? Early Evidence From Boston." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2012, pp. 413-43.

<sup>x</sup> Carver-Thomas, D., & Learning Policy Institute (2018); Simon, N., Johnson, S.M., & Reinhorn, S.K. (2015). *The challenge of recruiting and hiring teachers of color: Lessons from six high-performing, high-poverty, urban schools*. Working Paper, The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<sup>xi</sup> We exclude candidates who report entering the district through Teach For America.

<sup>xii</sup> Simon, N.S., Johnson, S.M., & Reinhorn, S.K. (2015). *A Quest for 'the Very Best': Teacher Recruitment in Six Successful, High-Poverty Urban Schools*.

<sup>xiii</sup> DeArmond, M., et al. (2012). *Managing talent for school coherence: Learning from charter management organizations*. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

<sup>xiv</sup> Cannata, M. (2010). ; Krieg, J., Theobald, R., Goldhaber, D. (2016). *A foot in the door: Exploring the role of student teaching assignments in teachers' initial job placements*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38, 364-388.

<sup>xv</sup> Papay, J. P., et al., (2012).