CASE STUDY
The Teachers of San Francisco Unified School District

By Pavel Vanegas, December 2014.

Overview. In San Francisco, the majority of the city’s K-12 students attend a traditional public school that is a part of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). For these students, the quality of instruction that they receive often hinges on the ability and effectiveness of their classroom teacher. Therefore, from the district’s point of view – as well as many other stakeholders – SFUSD teachers can be seen as an integral resource of the district in that they are charged with delivering the service (i.e., “education”) that SFUSD, as an institution, is responsible for.

Given the important role of teachers in K-12 education, in this case study, I focus on teachers (the “resource”) working at a large school district (the “domain”). In particular, I have narrowed my scope to look specifically at the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and the more than 3,300 teachers (the “scale”) that SFUSD employs.

This case study highlights the way in which these teachers are placed and assigned to particular schools within SFUSD. Since teachers are the primary resource I focus on, the goal of this case study is to emphasize the importance of the resource description process - What are the qualities that teachers should have? How do these qualities align with the district’s preferences for where they should work? Three key concepts within resource description that this case study touches upon include:

1) the purposes of resource description (TDO §4.3.2)
2) complications that arise when conducting resource description
3) the evaluation of resource descriptions (TDO §4.3.7)

Lastly, in this case study I have chosen to create an artifact that is a policy brief on the implications of this organizing system and any improvements that might be applied. The policy brief provides analysis of the current organizing system as it relates to teacher placements and discusses how this system is affected by a highly prescriptive teachers contract that is in place. In this constrained system, what matters most is teacher seniority. ¹ In addition to juxtaposing the current organizing system with that of the one imposed by the contract, the brief leaves open the possibility for the creation of a new, third system, one which can adhere to the legal requirements entailed by the union contract, while managing to change certain design decisions that can allow for a more effective teacher placement process.

What is being organized? Teachers are being systematically placed at one of the 103 schools that make up the San Francisco Unified School District. Some are assigned to work at elementary schools, others are placed in middle schools and a fewer number are given high school assignments. When teacher vacancies occur, the district makes placement considerations primarily on the basis of credential requirements and union contract constraints. Sometimes, but rarely so, the district takes into account school and teacher preferences.

Why is it being organized? SFUSD, first and foremost, wants to make sure that on any given day, each district classroom has a qualified teacher that meets the state, city, and district requirements. Beyond this, SFUSD has, as a long-term goal, a vision of preparing SFUSD graduates to “live, thrive and succeed in San Francisco and beyond.” ²

¹ The union contract does not leave room for over descriptors that would be beneficial such as teacher enthusiasm to work in a certain area of the city.
How much is it being organized? With over 53,000 students, SFUSD is the eighth largest school district in California. SFUSD has invested heavily in PeopleSoft (a human resource management system) and SearchSoft (recruitment, selection, hiring, and retention software). Decisions about teacher placement are often aided by this technology. Placement decisions are also aided by the more traditional written policies that SFUSD is required to have.

When is it being organized? Teachers are assigned and placed to schools year-round, however the majority of teacher assignment activity takes place around the beginning and the end of the academic school year (August and June). Some teachers wait until right before the school year begins to make a decision as to whether they are going to work in a different school district or are going to seek a different school placement. Towards the end of the school year, some teachers already know they will not be returning to the same position and therefore the district often tries to fill these vacancies as they arise.

This is not to say that organization does not occur during the school year – it does and sometimes teachers may “swap” positions. Placement activity during this time tends to be lower because it is often when school administrators - principals and central office staff - are on vacation.

How or by whom is it being organized? In general, there are various SFUSD personnel who take part in the organizing process. These personnel are assisted and aided by the two HR management systems. Also, in order to become a teacher in SFSUD, all teacher candidates are required to complete and submit an application via the district’s SearchSoft applicant database. The human resources “credentials analysts” then ensure that applications are fully completed and that any missing information is taken care of. Credentials analysts are also charged with scoring each application and verifying the authenticity of each applicant by answering questions such as: Is the applicant a citizen? Is the credential valid and up to date?

Because the district has several credential analysts, at times overlap occurs and the same applicant may be reviewed twice. Such duplication of work can arise even though there are supposed checks in place to prevent this from occurring.

Other considerations. As the demographics of San Francisco change, it may not be necessary to involve so many different SFUSD personnel in the placement and assignment of teachers. It is important for the district to also be aware of the recruitment and retention strategies of adjacent school districts. For example, the Novato Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, San Mateo Union High School District, and other nearby districts, may at times be courting the same teacher candidates. So in a sense, SFUSD is competing with them for resources (i.e., teachers).

Another important consideration is that public support for funding traditional public education ebbs and flows. This sentiment also often reflected in the political views of elected officials catering to their constituents. In some cases, these political views may end up being codified into law in a way that directly affects how teachers are assigned and placed.

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3 In 2013, San Francisco had 8,000 fewer school-aged children as to compared to the number of school-aged youth in 2000. See SFGate, “Families' exodus leaves S.F. whiter, less diverse” at http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Families-exodus-leaves-S-F-whiter-less-diverse-3393637.php
ARTIFACT
Policy Brief: The Implications of Redesigning the Teacher Assignment Process in SFUSD

By Pavel Vanegas, December 2014.

Ask anyone who works for the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and they will most likely tell you that the way in which SFUSD assigns teachers to schools is highly dysfunctional. Despite the district’s (SFUSD) numerous attempts to improve this process, over the years, little has changed. Often teacher and principals have no say in the placement process of teachers. As a result, it is not uncommon to hear of cases where principals are simply “forced” to hire a teacher who they did not want. Though not an easy undertaking, I believe it is possible, through improved resource description, to design a better organizing system that takes into account the preferences of both teachers and principals in order to select teachers who are a good fit for their school.

Improving the current organizing system though which this process takes places requires a thoughtful analysis of various policy-related implications that may result. For example, part of the challenge with SFUSD’s organizing system of teacher assignment stems from significant constrains that are placed on the system by the teachers contract between SFUSD and the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF). In a sense, these are two competing systems in the same domain. The teachers contract has a myriad of rules and regulations, some of which sometimes seem to run counter to what might actually lead to a better staffing process.

Such constraints should not be an excuse for not seeking improvement however. Why? First, it is important to note that these are not new constraints and the contract between SFUSD and UESF has been in place for years. Additionally, district administrators are certainly savvy enough to recognize the particular issues for which the teachers union will draw a line in the sand.\(^1\)

Interesting, the legal limits (via labor law) that SFUSD faces in its ability to seek explicit improvements pertaining to teacher placements accentuates possible technological solutions that might be arise from improvements to the district’s existing human resource management systems.

For example, it is fairly easy to implement certain fields in the HR management systems such that a teacher candidate or current teacher’s work preferences are taken into account. These preferences can then be used and aligned with the preferences of particular SFUSD schools. As mentioned in the case study, when vacancies occur under the current organizing system, often consolidated teachers (teachers who positions are eliminated but, due to the contract, are still retained by the district) are slotted into whatever position might be open, regardless of the “fit.” However, if SFUSD’s HR systems were able to drawn upon preference information, the matching process would become much more effective as both teacher and principals would be providing a form of mutual consent to placement.

\(^1\) This brings up an important point: In addition to any technological changes, there first needs to be the political will for change.
And while such a technological change might seem benign, the fact that SFUSD is a public institution and required to publicly report expenditures means that certain tradeoffs will inevitably occur. The rest of this brief touches upon some of these tradeoffs.

The Policy Implications of Modifying the District’s HR Management Systems

It would seem that for SFUSD, a practical way of improving the current teachers’ school assignment process would be through the development of more descriptive HR management systems that would enable HR personnel to better adequately describe certain teacher qualities and preferences.

However, because SFUSD leases the use of this software (PeopleSoft and Searchsoft), SFUSD is limited in its ability to implement new form fields, different workflows, and other process improvements. Obviously, SFUSD has the option to contract with the software companies to implement certain changes, however, this is an additional expense with unknown benefits. Also, to the extent that changes in the current HR management systems result in any new tasks or responsibilities for HR employees, then this might rankle the union that represents them (SEIU Local 1021).

The Policy Implications of Assessing Risk Tolerance for Change

Any process change in the teacher placement workflow entails time and money. Training personnel how to process a teacher placements in a different way will inevitably lead to mistakes. The degree to which the district is willing to accept such mistakes and errors affects how big a change might be possible. Part of this depends on a single individual: the district superintendent. Determining the superintendent’s threshold for risk means that what one may think of as a small change might actually not align with the superintendent’s definition.2

It could be that certain changes to the teacher placement process lead to some classrooms being overlooked and stuck with long-term substitute teachers. Involved parents who are aware of such changes may decided to take matters into their own hands might seek legal recourse through the courts in order to revert to the old way of doing things.

Any change to the current way in which teachers are placed at SFUSD schools needs to take into account these various policy implications. To some degree, this is to be expected. As public institutions, schools need to address the concerns of its constituents. However, at the same time, schools need to be improved. One way in which schools can improve is through smarter and more efficient teacher placement process that actually takes into account the preferences and strengths of both teachers and principals.

2 In other words, it’s better to start small – whether this means a minor change in the HR system or some other policy, incremental changes allows for better determination of risk averseness.