Steel City Blues: Behind the Collapse of a Teacher Residency

BY SUSAN HEADDEN

Raksha Kumar had rented an apartment. She had signed a lease and moved in her furniture. She had turned down several job offers from well-established programs to take a chance on an offer that, when it came right down to it, did not seem so much like a gamble at all. It was a position in her hometown of Pittsburgh, and it represented an extraordinary chance to fulfill both a personal dream and a crushing public need.

Pittsburgh Public Schools had selected Kumar and 37 other recruits last spring from among nearly 1,000 applicants to join an innovative teacher residency program that combined a master’s level education with hands-on classroom training. The competition for the program had been particularly tough. Applicants had to sit through several interviews, show their stuff in panel discussions, write a long essay, and conduct model lessons. But it was worth it, Kumar said. Instead of sitting in a graduate school classroom getting lessons on pedagogical theory, they were going to put theory into practice in real classrooms while being guided by seasoned educators. For the privilege of learning by doing, they would receive a salary of $39,000 a year. In exchange, providing they proved competent, they had to promise to work for the Pittsburgh school system for five years.

It was a long time, to be sure. But for Kumar, who had taught for several years elsewhere, it was a pledge worth making. She would emerge from her first year dually certified in both special education and mathematics—fields in which teachers were in great demand—and she would have her fellow recruits for emotional and intellectual support. “I liked the fact that it required a five-year commitment,” Kumar says, “because it made me feel like my peers would be fully committed to education—to devote such a significant portion of their lives to teaching.”

Kumar was making good on her commitment to Pittsburgh. But, as it turns out, Pittsburgh did not make good on its commitment to her.

One day last summer, less than three weeks before the residency was scheduled to start, Emily Silberstein of The New Teacher Project (now TNTP), the national nonprofit that Pittsburgh had contracted to do the hiring, called Kumar and the other recruits with some stunning news. The state of Pennsylvania was projecting a budget shortfall of some $4 billion, which was sure to cause painful cutbacks in education throughout the state, including layoffs in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT), which had originally endorsed the residency, was now saying that it could not support new recruits if existing teachers were going to be let go. District officials felt they had no choice but to agree. So on June 18, they announced that they were cancelling the program.

“It was crushing,” says Silberstein, recalling the decision. “It honestly makes your heart ache, to think of the raw potential these recruits were going to bring to the district.” Not only that, Silberstein says, the program was going to raise the game of the existing teachers doing the mentoring, and it was going to be mined for lessons that could be replicated in the future. “We were very excited as an organization about how we could apply this to other sites,” says Silberstein. “It is frustratingly sad to not to be able to learn from this.”

As educational initiatives go, the Pittsburgh residency program would seem to have had everything working for it: a smart, proven idea; a distinct demand; an abundant supply of talent to fill that demand; full funding from public and private sources; a supportive organizational network; and, crucially, buy-in from a
union whose members might have found the program threatening. Indeed, Pittsburgh has been held up as a national model of union–district collaboration at a time when such alliances are understood as essential to making reforms work. “Five years ago Pittsburgh wasn’t even part of the national conversation,” says Mike Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. “It is now [in that conversation] and is on the leading edge of it.” That may still be. But in one particular respect, the Pittsburgh residency stands as a reminder of what happens to many promising educational initiatives—it fell victim not just to an unforgiving economy but, more important, to an established bureaucracy that even as it protects teachers’ livelihoods still treats them as if they are interchangeable parts.

A RESIDENCY ‘REVOLUTION’

By almost all measures, teacher preparation in the United States is a flawed enterprise, and one badly in need of new approaches. According to research, most programs provide prospective teachers with insufficient classroom experience despite its importance to learning the craft. In a survey by The Education Schools Project, 62 percent of new teachers said they felt unprepared for the realities that faced them in the classroom. In another, only half of respondents said they got any clinical training. “What if 62 percent of doctors felt that way?” asked U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in announcing new oversight reforms to teacher training programs. “We’d have a revolution.” At the same time, accountability by the colleges and programs that produce these teachers is weak to non-existent. According to a study by Education Sector, more than half of all states have failed to identify a single low-performing education school.

There is perhaps no better recommendation for the teacher residency model. Unlike traditional teacher preparation programs, which accept most applicants who apply, “UTRs” are driven by the needs of a particular school district. Modeled after a medical residency, in which future doctors actually take care of patients while being supervised and taught by an experienced physician, the teacher residency program combines master’s level content with a full year of real classroom practice. Teachers work with trained mentors who guide them in their own classrooms. According to Urban Teacher Residency United, a national umbrella group, the arrangement also serves as a powerful professional development tool for the mentors themselves. “These seasoned teachers learn the new craft of mentoring at the same time they are examining their own teaching,” says the organization in a prepared overview. “The residents, meanwhile, are continuously practicing what they are taught, reflecting daily on what happens in the classroom.” The residencies also create an instant learning community—not just for moral support but for collaborative reflection, dialogue, and inquiry. “These communities are grounded in the notion that any group knows more than individuals alone.”

Dozens of these residency programs have started in recent years—19 in just the last year—all in cities that want to make sure their teachers can actually do the job before they cut them loose on students. And in a departure from Teach For America, another selective training program that has been criticized for the short tenures of its recruits, they want to make sure they stay for a while. New York City, for instance, requires a commitment of at least four years; the Academy of Urban School Leadership in Chicago requires five.

The beauty of the UTR is in the targeted training. The residents learn in the same district in which they will work, and their course curriculum is specifically tailored to that district’s needs. Thus in Pittsburgh, the residents were going to focus on the Kaplan K–12 Learning Core Curriculum, the new curriculum adopted by the district in 2006. The idea is that teachers with relevant course
work with guided practice are more likely to teach in ways that best serve students.

This set-up necessitates a big shift in the traditional funding of teacher training; it moves from a college or university—and from the students majoring in education who pay the tuitions—to the district itself.

MUTUAL GOALS, BOLD STEPS

Once a thriving steel manufacturing town, Pittsburgh has managed to stave off decline by reinventing itself over the past several decades as a center of health care, technology, finance, and higher education. (The University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon are prominent employers.) But while Pittsburgh is relatively strong economically, its school system has suffered all the usual troubles of big city systems, including declining enrollment, a problem that would figure heavily into the demise of the residency program. Of the district’s 25,000 students, 60 percent are non-white and 71 percent qualify for federally subsidized lunch. Nearly half of African-American ninth-graders fail to graduate from high school. After years of dismal academic achievement, Pittsburgh finally reached a crucial federal benchmark, Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, in 2009.

So, also like other urban districts, Pittsburgh has embarked on some dramatic changes, taking particular aim at boosting the effectiveness of its teachers. With the help of federal money and a $40 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it has been busy implementing a new teacher evaluation system, performance pay, alternative paths to certification, new career ladders, and teacher academies.

All of these initiatives were smoothed by a ground-breaking contract between the district and the PFT in June 2010. As explained in a report on the city’s labor-management collaboration by The Aspen Institute, the negotiation of the contract was distinguished by the absence of lawyers and the inclusion of teachers; the parties moved from “positional bargaining to problem-solving.” It helped that then-superintendent Mark Roosevelt, now the president of Antioch College, and union president John Tarka, who retired last summer, were non-traditional leaders. Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts legislator, was experienced in turning around businesses, and Tarka was seen as more realistic and less antagonistic than his autocratic predecessor. But as grant competitions have done elsewhere, it was applying for the Gates money—which demanded measurable efforts to improve teaching—that really pushed the leaders together. Their mutual goals were to increase the number of highly effective teachers in Pittsburgh, to put more of these teachers with high-needs students, and to promote college readiness.

On this last goal, Pittsburgh has taken a bold step. It has promised each public school student with a minimum 2.5 GPA a scholarship of up to $40,000 to any public or private college in Pennsylvania. In exchange, the district has pledged to students that it will make the reforms necessary to prepare them for college. To pay for the initiative, it has secured $147 million in pledges from the region’s largest employers, including the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, which has contributed $10 million to the effort and pledged $90 million more. Significantly, it has also collected a $10,000 gift from the PFT.

THE ‘PERFECT STORM’

It was into this mix of dire need, fresh promise, and unprecedented collaboration that the idea for the Pittsburgh residency program took root and bloomed. The need was this: despite teacher surpluses resulting from school closings and population declines (the district lost 5.5 percent of its students in 2005 alone, resulting in a student-to-teacher ratio of 13 to 1) the district believed it still had a shortage of educators who
were capable of closing achievement gaps and otherwise producing needed results. Of the 1,300 people who applied for teaching jobs in 2010, according to district data, only half met the minimum criteria even to be considered for the posts.

In particular, Pittsburgh needed teachers in math and the sciences—the so-called STEM fields—along with teachers qualified to instruct its growing number of students with disabilities. Of the applicants last year, according to the district, there was only one candidate for every physics opening, two for each opening in chemistry, and five for each opening in special education. And a district that was predominantly black had a teaching corps that was overwhelmingly (nine out of 10 new teachers) white. The residency promised to address all these problems. Like Kumar, most of the 38 recruits had backgrounds in science and math, and 29 percent of them were minorities. Also like Kumar, several others were going to be dual-certified in a high-need area and in special education.

Pittsburgh had already enjoyed some success with an alternative certification program for principals, a partnership with nearby Duquesne University that included a 13-month residency. It wanted to model the teacher residency on this program. In a departure from usual practice, the district was not going to partner with an institution of higher education to provide the course work, instead leaving that duty to TNTP, which would serve as the certifying agent. “This was a huge paradigm shift,” says Christine Brennan, a program manager with Urban Teacher Residency United. After training, teachers would be gradually released into their responsibilities. They would be paid tuition of about $3,000 for one certificate and $5,000 for two, and they would be required to pay back $20,000 if they didn’t stay the required five years.

The teachers union, for its part, needed if not convincing then at least enlightening. “This was a new phenomenon, so they needed to understand things deeply,” says Jerri Lynn Lippert, the district’s director of curriculum and professional development who negotiated the terms of the new program with the union. “It was not a disagreement with the union so much as it was a need to provide everyone with a lot of information.” Compared to other issues, Lippert says the residency was not a particularly hard sell, and so it was that the program was officially launched in October 2010. Widespread recruiting drew responses from solid candidates with a range of backgrounds—from fresh college graduates to established professionals with 20 years of experience in other fields.

In March, however, alarm bells started going off in Harrisburg. Gov. Tom Corbett was calling for $550 million in cuts to education funding, and projections were that Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), where enrollment was still declining, would have a shortfall of $70 million in 2011. Because the district had avoided layoffs in the past, this time teachers were particularly vulnerable. “Over time it became clear that there would be massive reductions in force,” says Brennan. The district had originally said that cuts would affect only the operating fund. Since the residency was funded by the Gates grant, “we thought we were going to be OK,” says Brennan. Later that spring, however, a decision was made to cut the number of recruits down to 40. And then in June, the threats to the residency grew: the State Legislature voted to allow teacher furloughs for budgetary reasons (previously they had been allowed only for enrollment drops), and, responding to heavy lobbying by unions throughout the state, it voted to preserve a provision in state law requiring that the last hired be the first fired. All of this meant that the teachers that PPS was about to invest the most in—$75,000 to $100,000 per recruit—would be the first to go. In the end, even though the district was free to spend the money it had received from Gates and a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG), Lippert said, “neither source...
was optimistic that there was going to be a return on their investment."

The district, the union, and Gates discussed ways to save the residency program, including having the residents serve as long-term substitutes or as teachers’ aides. Citing a loophole in the state law, the district even advanced the idea of creating a sort of protected class of teachers that would be exempt from the “last in, first out” provision. “We were asking for about 120 or 150 [protected] teachers,” Lippert says. “But we couldn’t get the union there. We just couldn’t. So our plan came tumbling down.” Neither Tarka nor current union president Nina Esposito-Visgitis returned numerous calls, but PFT representative Sylvia Wilson said, “we couldn’t justify keeping teachers who weren’t even certified when existing teachers were being laid off.” Over the summer, the district laid off 250 people in the central office and 23 para-professionals. Today, looking at a projected 2013 deficit of $50 million, the district is proposing the layoffs of nearly 400 teachers. Meanwhile, the seasoned teachers who left their classrooms, often with mixed feelings, to become mentors to the residents have been assigned the new role of evaluating existing teachers. Lippert concedes that evaluating peers is a job far from what these teachers had originally signed on for, and she says that some are not comfortable with it. “[The training] is providing professional growth, and some teachers have embraced it,” says Lippert, “but I would say that about 20 percent are still struggling.”

One question for those trying to learn from Pittsburgh’s experience is why the partners who worked so hard on creating the teacher residency did not envision the grim budgetary scenario that emerged, or if they did, why they didn’t have a written agreement on how to address it. “I don’t know,” responds Lippert. “It’s a valid question.” The district knew it was losing more and more students to charters, and officials knew they could not sustain the $21,000 they were spending on each remaining pupil as a result. They knew they would have to close more schools. But they also thought they would lose more teachers than they have to retirement. “What threw us over the top, why we didn’t consider this serious,” Lippert says, “was that [throughout the population decline] state funding stayed the same or increased.”

Reflecting on the experience, Lippert now says she might have done a few things differently. “If I ended up in a similar situation elsewhere or got to hit the restart button, what I think is critical would be to understand the link financially, and to see clearly through to the end of the grant. To ask: What are all the threats?” Further, she says the agreement should have been tied to the collective bargaining agreement. Brennan, for her part, says that in all the months of talking there was some sort of oversight in a crucial part of the communications. And she suggests that partnership roles could have been made clearer. “We learned about the importance of partnerships each step of the way, about the kinds of questions to ask each other,” she says.

Was this basically a labor dispute? Brennan does not characterize it as such. But, she says, “It was not a labor agreement either. It was just one of those perfect storms.”

**BEYOND PITTSBURGH**

So the city of Pittsburgh will not be implementing this promising program for training bright teachers and serving needy students. At least not this year. But what about other school districts? Is the teacher residency still a viable model? The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education has called for a complete shift from loosely connected academic curricula to programs that embrace clinical practice. School districts generally rate residency programs highly, and according to UTR United, 90 to 95 percent of recruits are still in the classroom after three years. That figure is significant, given the high cost of teacher turnover and
the damage it has proven to wreak on student achievement. But even though most residency programs cost less than Pittsburgh’s, they are expensive in the short term, particularly so when considered against current budget cutbacks. Perhaps more important, whether residencies actually improve student learning is still an open question.

Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, recently weighed in on teacher residencies in a blog post for Education Week. He says that teacher residencies are “a cool idea,” but one that comes with important questions. One has to do with selectivity. Like Teach For America, a program that recruits heavily from elite colleges, teacher residencies tend to be very choosey. This raises the question of to what extent a program’s success is due mainly to the quality of the candidates. And, Hess says, it suggests that success is hard to sustain if a lot of programs are competing for the same people. “Far more likely, I think,” writes Hess, “is the too-familiar routine in which promising boutique programs (which benefit from selection effects, enormous enthusiasm, philanthropic support, and a sharply honed sense of mission) become one more disappointing fad when adopted by a slew of district and university officials eager to sign on for the best practice of the moment but who don’t ultimately have any stomach for the wrenching changes needed to do it right.”

Hess says residencies make a lot of sense for teachers working in challenging environments with students who demand an intensive approach and a high “touch” factor. (This would seem to describe Pittsburgh.) But he says one size does not fit all. Instead of establishing all residencies along the lines of the Boston/New York/Pittsburgh model, he suggests that shorter customized programs could be offered for, say, part-time or online instructors. “The clinical residency for a cardiovascular surgeon is different from that for a general practitioner,” he says. “Both are trained rather differently than are RNs or EMTs. And all of these are trained differently than the guy who is going to read X-rays.”

But it is on his final criticism of teacher residencies that Hess now seems prescient. He cautioned against embracing residencies without considering current budgetary constraints. Referring to an Aspen Institute report on the Boston residency, he says, “The budget picture still hasn’t sunk in.” Hess grants that despite the high training costs, these residents will presumably be shovel-ready on Day One, but he says the evidence of cost-effectiveness remains lacking. “In the current fiscal climate,” he says, “to call for new outlays without proposing offsetting savings—or even giving some broad estimates of the anticipated costs—shows a troubling tone-deafness to the fiscal situation.”

Does this describe Pittsburgh? Maybe. Says Lippert: “We knew this was going on around the country, the four-day weeks, the half days, the cutting of intra-school athletic. But somehow we felt protected. It didn’t seem real.”

In the end, though, it was not really the troubled economy that kept a group of eminently qualified recruits from entering the teaching profession in one American city. All the stars were in alignment in Pittsburgh. The district did have the money. Its leaders did have the political will. And the union was willing to embrace a whole new idea. Even the National Education Association, in the reform plan it released in December, called for one full year of residency to ensure that new teachers are effective practitioners before they become educators of record. “Our educational system acts as if a teacher is a teacher is a teacher,” wrote NEA President Dennis Van Roekel. “But not all teachers are the same.”

Evidently not everyone in Pittsburgh agreed.
Notes


7. A 2007 report by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, which looked at five districts, found the average cost to be $15,325 for Milwaukee Public Schools and $17,872 for Chicago Public Schools. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the average cost of turnover is at least 30 percent of an employee’s salary.


About the Author

Susan Headden is a senior writer at Education Sector. She can be reached at sheadden@educationsector.org.

About Education Sector

Education Sector is an independent think tank that challenges conventional thinking in education policy. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to achieving measurable impact in education, both by improving existing reform initiatives and by developing new, innovative solutions to our nation’s most pressing education problems.