Who Decides

Listening to today’s rousing debates in education, it often feels as if we are employing the tyranny of “or” vs. the synergy of “and.” Deciding whether to make hiring systems more centralized (controlled by the central office) or decentralized (controlled at the building level) seems to be one of those situations. Having held jobs in both camps—and having worked extensively with practitioners on designing and implementing these systems—it may be more productive to view this as a natural tension. Battelle for Kids’ experience is that the hiring process can be balanced in a manner that values all stakeholders, leads to more efficiencies, results in better decisions, and most importantly, benefits all students.

There are good reasons to create a decentralized hiring process that allows building leaders to make personnel decisions, including:

- **Building leaders are closer to the action.** They understand their students’ needs and are positioned to select candidates that match those needs best.
- In today’s high-stakes education environment, **school leaders are accountable for their students’ performance.** It seems unfair to hold individuals accountable for performance, but not allow them to pick their team.
- If you believe **culture trumps strategy,** then the notion of “fit” is important. Hiring individuals that fit the school’s core values (and those values often vary across districts) seems logical and is a decision best made by building leaders.

There are also strong arguments for employing a more centralized system in which the central office makes the hiring decisions, including:

- **Certain knowledge and skills are so crucial we need to ensure all employees, regardless of placement, possess them.** Those judgments are most efficiently and consistently made at the central office level.
- **Central office leaders often have more extensive training and experience with hiring,** so centralizing the process puts these critical decisions in the hands of those best equipped to make them.
- **Decentralizing the system can lead to wide differences in how the hiring process unfolds in each school and what data is used to make the final decisions.** Hiring the right people is too important to have large degrees of variance in the system.
We would argue there is truth on both sides of this conversation. The tension is a natural one, and thoughtful people can disagree. However, it need not be a contentious conversation. We have had great success facilitating conversations and designing hiring systems that balance these tensions. Some guiding questions to engage key stakeholders in your district around this topic are:

- What is our current hiring system? To what degree do we see the system as centralized vs. decentralized?
- How consistent are we in our hiring approach?
- What data do we use to make hiring decisions? What other data sources might be available to us?
- To what degree do we involve technology in our hiring process? How can we be more efficient?
- If we tackle this challenge and design a new system, how will we ensure compliance with our new commitments?

No matter what direction your district decides to go with its hiring system, having thoughtful conversations about what educator talent you want to attract and how best to bring them aboard will have a positive impact to provide a learning experience that best prepares students to succeed in college, careers, and life.

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