

A Descriptive Analysis of High Need Districts' Inequitable Access to Talent-centered education HR Systems

Henry Tran, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership and Policies
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC

David G. Buckman, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, GA

Abstract

This study draws from the SHRM and TCEL literature to apply an HR systems typology to categorize school districts based on their personnel policies. The researchers descriptively examine whether types of HR systems are related to district demographics and outcomes. Sources for analysis included a comprehensive review of sample district's websites, personnel handbooks, board policies, and conversations with HR directors/management. The study found partial support for the theories of SHRM and TCEL. Districts with Strategic Developmental HRM systems experienced higher student achievement, lower student-to-teacher ratios, higher teacher retention, and fewer teacher vacancies than districts with all other HRM typologies. These districts were less likely to be high-needs districts.

Key Words

human resources, human resources system, talent-centered education leadership, strategic human resources, district HR, HR, teacher turnover, personnel, strategic human capital, district human resources

A large body of research suggests education working conditions matter (Burkhauser, 2017; Ladd, 2011). For example, working environment such as positive school climate (e.g., emphasizing collaboration and learning) have been linked to improvement in student achievement (Bear, Yang, Pell & Gaskins, 2014; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009) and teacher staffing outcomes (Kraft et al., 2016).

Much of this research has focused on the school level, based on the idea that school-based management has the most direct impact on teachers' day-to-day experiences. This work suggests school leaders can create the school conditions necessary to enhance teacher effectiveness.

Although research exists on the effectiveness of individual HR practices (Goldhaber, Grout, & Huntington-Klein, 2017; Taylor & Taylor, 2012), scholarship on district-level Human Resource (HR) systems is scant. The work that has been done primarily identifies how the research is outdated and in need of improvement (Konoske-Graf, Partelow, & Benner, 2016; Hanushek, 2016; Odden, 2011).

On the other hand, Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) literature has a robust theoretical foundation, with strong empirical evidence supporting a positive relationship between organization level HR practices and employee outcomes and performance (Belias & Koustelios 2014; Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011).

Moreover, in the field of education specifically, Tran (2020) introduced Talent-centered education leadership (TCEL) as a model that draws on progressive HR practices

and the education working conditions literature to suggest the value for evolving education HR further.

Education Human Resources Management

Education human resources management (HRM) has a long-standing reputation for being reactive, outdated, and often criticized for failing to link its practices with outcomes (Konoske-Graf et al., 2016; Tran, 2015).

For example, workforce reductions often occur based solely on seniority without any consideration of employee performance. Because of this status quo, districts often lose more effective or high-quality early-career teachers. These occurrences can dampen the released teachers' enthusiasm from the field altogether, which may contribute to teacher shortages.

With the increasing focus of education accountability, education reformers argued that HR practices should be linked to organizational outcomes (Odden, 2011), most often defined by student standardized test scores. The result was an increased emphasis on test score-based HR policies.

One example of this is the promotion of teacher evaluations based on value-added metrics, which have been linked to further inequity of teacher quality distributions (Bates, 2020). The accountability-based HR practices and paradigm have also been linked to workplace demoralization and stress, which has been associated with teacher turnover (Wronowski, et al., 2019).

Based on the importance of relationships from the education working conditions literature and progressive education HR practice, TCEL has been recently

introduced to the field to evolve education HRM (Tran, 2020; Tran & Smith, 2020). With TCEL, employees are not treated as a means to an end. TCEL employers are not only focusing on organizational outcomes, but they are also encouraged to be intentional in their response to employee needs.

The latter is critical given that being responsive to employee needs has strong linkages to the organizational outcomes in a more sustainable fashion than merely focusing on organizational outcomes in isolation. Given the importance of education HR, this study was conducted to advance understanding of education HR systems by:

1. Drawing from the SHRM literature to apply a typology to categorize the HR systems of school districts based on their personnel policies
2. Descriptively examine whether types of HR systems are more:
 - a. Likely to exist based on districts' demographics or their staffing problems
 - b. Advantageous for organizational outcomes (based on teacher staffing and student performance metrics)

Theoretical framework

Our work is grounded in the SHRM scholarship that links HR practices to organizational outcomes (Boselie, 2014) and the work on TCEL that further prioritizes the value of responding to employee needs (Tran, 2020; Tran & Smith, 2020). This strategic developmental approach to HR has been advocated over the often relied upon administrative (personnel) approach practiced in schools (Tran, 2015).

To categorize the unique bundle of HR practices employed by each district into

different HR systems, we relied on the SHRM systems typology framework used by Ridder, Bauluch, and Piening (2012) on organizations and modified by Vekeman, Devos, and Valkcke (2019) for school principals. The typology draws on the SHRM literature to consider employer's orientation, either "Strategic Orientation" or "Human Resource Orientation."

The former is related to aligning organizational goals with practice with consideration for the external context, while the latter is related to a resource-based view that suggests the organization must make investments internally to create value.

For the purpose of our study, district HR practices were examined across six domains: HR capacity (i.e., teacher to HR personnel ratio), recruitment and selection, economic incentives, professional development and recognition/rewards, to determine each district's alignment with four different HR system typologies as identified by Vekeman et al. (2019).

These systems include:

- 1) *Administrative HRM*, where districts provide little to no substantial investments into the HR function of the school district and are the least strategic of the HR systems. They are reactive, with their personnel practices guided by administrative rules and standard procedures;
- 2) *Developmental HRM*, where districts are also reactive in their approach towards external challenges; however, they emphasize employee development. Unfortunately, the development supports are not linked to its goals;

- 3) *Strategic HRM*, where districts install HR practices aligned with district goals and are proactive to external challenges; and
- 4) *Strategic-Developmental HRM*, where districts adopt a balance of district goals, as well as employee needs, while proactively approaching external challenges (Vekeman et al., 2019).

While Strategic HRM's focus on organizational outcomes reflects a strategic human capital approach to education HRM (Odden, 2011), Strategic-Developmental HRM's attention to organizational outcomes and employee needs reflects a modern Talent-centered education leadership perspective (Tran, 2020).

Sample

We examine the HR systems typologies in education with a random sample of public school districts (n=23) in a Southeastern state. The sample represents 28% of the districts in the state, spread across a diverse set of geographic regions, including districts located in the city (n=3), rural locales (n=5), suburbs (n=11), and town (n=4) based on NCES definition.

The sample districts' have an average of 807.30 teachers, 12,190.45 students, and 13% average teacher turnover. The districts spend an average of \$14,336.54 per student, with an average of 40 and 44 percent of their students meeting or exceeding state standardized English and Math performance standards, respectively. The districts have an average of 8.8 HR staff, an average of 63% of students in poverty, and their number of schools range from 3 to 82.

Method

Our study builds on Kolbe and Strunk's (2012) work by embedding their economic incentive typology and building onto those categories (see Table 1) to include five other domains. Data from the six HR domains were collected from a comprehensive review of each sample district's websites, personnel handbooks, board policies, and conversations with HR directors/management.

Because the state is a non-collective bargaining state, the HR systems are void of the influence of collective bargaining agreements, the HR policies and decisions are more reflective of the employers' orientations. Each domain and its assessed subareas are listed in the table below.

Table 1

*HR Domains Assessed***HR Capacity**

Number of Teachers to HR Personnel Ratio

Recruitment

Recruitment Sources

Month exiting teacher must provide notification of departure

Month district begins teacher recruitment

Policy concerning internal hiring preference

Selection

The selection process (e.g., whether districts collaborate with the school with hiring)

The number of rounds of interviews for selection, representation of stakeholders in the interview

The presence of other selection protocol (e.g., teaching demonstration, written examination)

Economic Incentives*

Salary Enhancement

Limited Duration Incentives

Education/Certification Funds

In-Kind Incentives

Retirement Benefits or Waivers

Professional Development

Types of Professional Development

Financial Allotment for Professional Development

Incentives for Professional Development

Formal Leadership Development Opportunities for Teachers

Orientation Program

Induction Program

Rewards and Recognition

Degree of Teacher Rewards and Recognition

* As defined by Kolbe & Strunk (2012)

Our content analysis of the sampled district's HR systems was conducted through an iterative and deductive coding process to identify themes that emerged from the analysis (Crano & Brewer, 2002).

The qualitative data were quantified according to a standardized scoring rubric by two independent assessors to increase rating validity. Interrater agreement between two individual coders was 96%.

Empirical HR system research has typically treated HR practices as additive in its strategic value (Lepak & Snell, 2002), and we use such an approach to rate the HR practices.

For example, for recruitment sources, we counted each district's number of recruitment resources. Districts with more recruitment sources received higher scores, whereas districts that only recruited via their website received the lowest score.

We relied on the literature that suggests earlier notifications and recruitment resulted in better outcomes and therefore rated districts that required earlier notification and recruitment higher than those that did not (Liu & Johnson, 2006). Some policies were rated

according to their presence; for example, if districts reserved funds for professional development, they were rated higher than those that did not.

Consistent with Ridder et al. (2012) and Vekeman et al. (2018), we treated strategic and HR orientations as ranging from high to low. For each HR domain, we totaled the score of each of its practices and divided the total score in half. The upper 50% were considered "high," and the lower 50% were considered low. We used these groupings to further categorize the mix of each district's bundle of HR practices into one of four quadrants (i.e., Strategic-developmental HRM, Strategic HRM, Developmental HRM, and Administrative HRM) representing different HR systems. See table 2.

Table 2

HR Systems Configuration

	Administrative HRM	Developmental HRM	Strategic HRM	Strategic-Developmental HRM
	Low	Low	High	High
HR Capacity	Limited number of HR personnel to address personnel matters	Limited number of HR personnel to address personnel matters	Larger number of HR personnel to address personnel matters	Larger number of HR personnel to address personnel matters
Recruiting	Weak efforts with leveraging multiple sources for recruitment	Weak efforts with leveraging multiple sources for recruitment	Strong efforts with leveraging multiple sources for recruitment	Strong efforts with leveraging multiple sources for recruitment
Selection	Unclear policy regarding the district's hiring process and	Unclear policy regarding the district's hiring process and	Clear policy regarding the district's hiring process and	Clear policy regarding the district's hiring process and direct

	ambiguous protocols pertaining to screening and interviewing	ambiguous protocols pertaining to screening and interviewing	direct protocols pertaining to screening and interviewing	protocols pertaining to screening and interviewing
	Low	High	Low	High
Salary/Incentives	Limited to no salary enhancements, duration incentives, and other incentivizing mechanisms	Multiple forms of salary enhancements, duration incentives, and other incentivizing mechanisms	Limited to no salary enhancements, duration incentives, and other incentivizing mechanisms	Multiple forms of salary enhancements, duration incentives, and other incentivizing mechanisms
Professional Development	Limited opportunities and incentives to participate, create, pursue professional development	Multiple opportunities and incentives to participate, create, pursue professional development	Limited opportunities and incentives to participate, create, pursue professional development	Multiple opportunities and incentives to participate, create, pursue professional development
Rewards and Recognition	Limited types of rewards and opportunities to receive recognition during the school year	Multiple types of rewards and opportunities to receive recognition during the school year	Limited types of rewards and opportunities to receive recognition during the school year	Multiple types of rewards and opportunities to receive recognition during the school year

Analysis

The results from the analysis are displayed in Table 3 and Table 4 below. As seen in table 3, the modal HRM system was Administrative HRM, encompassing approximately 35% of the sample, while only approximately 13% fall into the Strategic Development HRM system (n=3).

This finding is expected as most districts are often cited for being reactionary and administrative in their orientation (Odden, 2011; Tran, 2015). It is worth noting the study only found strategic Development HRM systems in suburban districts in our sample.

Table 3

Frequency of HR System by Location

	Rural	Suburban	City	Town	Total
Administrative HRM	1	5	1	1	8
Developmental HRM	1	2	0	2	5
Strategic HRM	3	1	2	1	7
Strategic Development HRM	0	3	0	0	3
Total	5	11	3	4	23

The descriptive statistics in table 4 illustrate how HR systems might be related to district characteristics. The analysis of percentages of students who met or exceeded in the areas of English and Math on their respective state standardized test compared to the different HR systems showed that increases in student achievement (i.e., Math and English) were higher in Administrative HRM and Strategic Development HRM districts as opposed to those with Developmental HRM and Strategic HRM systems.

Because Strategic Development HRM systems have both high strategic orientation and high human resources orientation, while Administrative HRM systems have both low strategic orientation and low human resources orientation, one would think the associated student achievement of these two polarizing systems would be vastly different. Instead, data indicates they are very similar.

To better understand this finding, attention should be placed on the “students in

poverty (%)” variable. Both Administrative HRM and Strategic Developmental HRM districts have the lowest percentage of students in poverty, one of the strongest predictors of student achievement (Sirin, 2005). This finding provides evidence as to why administrative HRM has elevated levels of student achievement.

In this study, districts with Strategic Development HRM systems had the lowest percentage of students in poverty; but, Administrative HRM had lower percentages of students in poverty as compared to Developmental HRM and Strategic HRM districts. Relatedly, when reviewing the percentage of teacher vacancies, both Administrative HRM and Strategic Development HRM have less than 1% teacher vacancies (0.8% and 0.4%, respectively). While Developmental HRM and Strategic HRM districts respectively report 1.7% and 1.5%.

This finding seems to suggest the highest need school districts *must* be more

proactive to address their staffing needs (as failing to do so may render the school inoperable); however, they are unable to provide strategic developmental HRM due to

capacity constraints. Responses by district administrators and employees supported this hypothesis.

Table 4

Comparison of HR System by District Demographic and Accountability Metrics

		Administrative HRM	Developmental HRM	Strategic HRM	Strategic Developmental HRM
Enrollment	M	13309.26	9448.00	14280.71	12017.00
	SD	9660.836	10848.77	16849.37	2610.324
Teachers	M	821.56	628.03	961.97	790.56
	SD	588.29	736.89	1116.47	159.83
Student Teacher Ratios	M	15.97	15.3	14.4	15.1
	SD	2.15	1.05	2.05	.261
Met/Exceed English (%)	M	.443	.339	.338	.542
	SD	.082	.084	.086	.119
Met/Exceed Math (%)	M	.491	.369	.365	.588
	SD	.113	.090	.086	.121

Teacher Retention (%)	M	.874	.869	.859	.887
	SD	.045	.014	.025	.040
Teacher Vacancies	M	.008	.017	.015	.004
	SD	.008	.016	.011	.002
Per Pupil Expenditure	M	10014.43	26686.40	11695.29	10001.33
	SD	949.51	39174.20	2745.97	2108.96
Students in Poverty (%)	M	.611	.684	.701	.424
	SD	.118	.125	.135	.214

N=23

Conclusion

While the bulk of education working conditions research has focused on the school level, missing from the literature is an extensive analysis of how districts and policymakers can augment school leadership and management efforts to develop and sustain a better work environment for teachers.

Recent teacher hiring research has demonstrated that HR departments can provide much value to school-level efforts, e.g., by improving the chances of more effective teacher selections during the school hiring process (Goldhaber, Grout, & Huntington-

Klein, 2017). We drew on the SHRM and TCEL literature to frame our work.

While the sample size of our study leads to inevitable limitations of generalizing our results, our work has produced several important findings. Specifically, the results from this study provide partial support for SHRM and TCEL theory.

Consistent with the literature, districts that employed Strategic Developmental HRM systems are associated with higher student achievement in English and Math, lower student-to-teacher ratios, higher teacher

retention, and fewer teacher vacancies than districts relying on any other HRM system.

That said, our study did produce some surprising findings. While the assumption, based on the literature, suggests Strategic Development HRM systems would outperform other systems across various organizational outcomes, it would also suggest Administrative HRM systems would perform worse. That wasn't always the case in our study, and deeper probing indicates reasons why.

To start, districts with Developmental and Strategic HRM have higher percentages of students in poverty and relatedly lower student performance than their counterparts at either end of the spectrum (i.e., Administrative HRM and Strategic Developmental HRM).

This study's cross-sectional nature does not allow us to detect the direction of influence (i.e., are administrative HRM systems causing the better outcomes (which would be inconsistent with the literature? Or are the better outcomes causing organizations to adopt less strategic systems).

We have some evidence to suggest the latter may be occurring. Based on our conversations with district personnel, some of the more attractive districts (e.g., because of locale) feel less of a need to be strategic with their recruitment because the teacher supply is more abundant for these districts. They then have the ability to be more selective and employ

higher-quality teachers, which results in stronger student academic performance.

Conversely, some hard-to-staff districts must offer incentives to attract teachers for employment. Still, they are not overall more strategic, resulting in them being classified as either Developmental or Strategic HR systems. These districts are most often teaching a large percentage of students in poverty, which explains the findings. Ultimately, this pattern results in an inequitable access to education HR support based on differential district resources, capacities, and needs.

In sum, in support of SHRM theory, Strategic Developmental districts have the best organizational outcomes. However, those employing Administrative HRM systems may not have the worst outcomes because they are often districts that need not be as strategic to achieve their goals because of their attractiveness.

Poorer performing districts tend to congregate in the middle of the spectrum because they are often districts with worse working conditions requiring them to be more strategic to attract teachers. Yet, they often do not have sufficient resources or capacity to employ the ideal Strategically Developmental HRM systems. This pattern of inequity will likely persist unless the public is aware of the inequalities and willing to accept responsibility to confront them.

Author Biographies

Henry Tran is an associate professor at the University of South Carolina's Department of Educational Leadership and Policies. He is also the editor of the *Journal of Education Human Resources* and the director of the Talent Centered Education Leadership Initiative. E-mail: TRANHE@mailbox.sc.edu

David Buckman is an associate professor of educational leadership and EdS program coordinator in the Department of Educational Leadership at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, GA. He studies school human resources and school finance issues. E-mail: dbuckman@kennesaw.edu

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