



A call for meaningful performance evaluations of teachers

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Among the school-based factors that contribute to a child's academic success, the quality of a teacher may be the most important one. Unfortunately, the personnel policies regarding teachers against the neediest children in many ways.

The New Teacher Project, a teacher-founded nonprofit in Brooklyn, N.Y., wants to change that.

“Give high-need students three highly effective teachers in a row,” says a new report from the group, “and they may outperform students taught by three ineffective teachers in a row by as much as 50 percentile points.”

The New Teacher Project, which works to close the achievement gap by getting high-quality teachers into public schools with large numbers of poor and minority students, has trained about 33,000 teachers in its 12-year history.

Its most recent publication, released in June, is “The Widget Effect” and is available online at www.widgeteffect.org. The title reflects the authors' argument that public schools treat teachers as widgets: One is as good as another, and all are interchangeable. Both teachers and students suffer from perfunctory evaluation practices that treat all teachers not just as not only above average, but excellent.

It seems the children of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon (where “all the children are above average”) have become teachers.

The report looked at 12 districts in four states, ranging in size from Jonesboro Public Schools, Ark., (enrollment: 4,450 students) to Chicago Public Schools (enrollment: 413,700). Regardless of the differences among these districts, the outcomes of performance evaluations were nearly identical. When teachers are rated as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, 99 percent are considered having a satisfactory performance. When they are rated on a multi-point scale, 94 percent are rated in the top two categories, and only 1 percent are deemed unsatisfactory.

This is simply incredible—as in “not at all believable.” As official with the teachers' union in L.A. (the United Teachers Los Angeles) told the Los Angeles Times in a May 3 article, “I don't know any workplace where 98 percent of the people are doing a good job.”

It's understandable, then, if many teachers think that evaluations are a joke. Roughly 68 percent of the 15,000 teachers interviewed for the report say that administrators overlook poor performance; 43 percent say they know at least one tenured teacher who should be dismissed for poor performance.

Here are the number of teachers dismissed for poor performance in recent years in Chicago; Cincinnati, Rockford, Ill., and Toledo, Ohio: 9, 2, 2, and 0.

The lack of a rigorous evaluation system means that some students suffer through lousy teachers. Just as bad is that teachers do not receive meaningful suggestions for improvement: Nearly three out of four teachers said they did not receive any suggestions for improvement or development, and less than half of those who did said they received useful support.

Another problem with the “everyone’s a winner” approach is that truly excellent teachers are not recognized. As one Akron teacher told researchers, “Poorly performing teachers are rated at the same level as the rest of us. This infuriates those of us who do a good job.”

The paper offers four recommendations for making evaluations an effective part of school management. First, schools should develop comprehensive ways of evaluating teaching effectiveness. (This is not a call to using student test scores as the only or even dominant criteria.)

Second, districts must teach administrators how to provide meaningful evaluations, and take steps to alleviate teachers’ fears of arbitrary evaluations.

Third, and most important, actually use the results of evaluations in the running of schools--. use them for determining which teachers work at which schools, perhaps assigning the most effective teachers to the most challenging schools within a district. Pay the most effective teachers more. Tailor professional development that's suited to the needs of the teacher. Don't give tenure to ineffective teachers.

Fourth, develop dismissal policies that ease the way out for teachers who aren't cutting it. “As in other professions, teachers who see significant, credible evidence of their own failure to meet standards are likely to exit voluntarily.”

As much as I appreciate the work of the authors, they underestimate the power of teacher unions. Their strength—and the power their officials enjoy—depends on the widget effect being the culture of education. Union contracts reinforce a culture in which seniority, not suitability, rules, and in which some teachers actually think that all teachers are excellent.

I believe that students and their parents must be able to choose charter schools.

Charters are important for at least two reasons. First, they are free to operate free of unions that lead to the widget effect. As such, they offer immediate alternatives to its harms. Doing away with the widget effect will take time, and a child who doesn't wish to wait until reform is complete should be given more alternatives, not fewer.

A second value of charter schools is that their mere existence puts some pressure on non-charter public schools to overhaul their work rules. So far, only a few school systems have instituted anything approaching merit pay or other. (Denver comes to mind, Minnesota's Q-Comp is a big toe in that direction.) If the traditional school system ever looks like The New Teacher Project would like it to, the competitive pressures from charter schools will be one reason.