

Student Tests – And Teacher Grades

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By JOHN MERROW

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Suppose a swimming instructor told his 10-year-old students to swim the length of the pool to demonstrate what he'd taught them, and half of them nearly drowned? Would it be reasonable to make a judgment about his teaching ability?

Or suppose nearly all the 10-year-old students in a particular clarinet class learned to play five or six pieces well in a semester? Would it be reasonable to consider their achievement when deciding whether to rehire the music teacher?

These questions answer themselves. Only an idiot would overlook student performance, be it dismal or outstanding.

However, suppose test results indicated that most students in a particular class don't have a clue about how to multiply with fractions, or master other material in the curriculum? Should that be considered when the math teacher comes up for tenure?

Whoops, the obvious answer is wrong. That's because public education lives in an upside-down universe where student outcomes are not allowed to be connected to teaching.

Ten years ago, I encountered this view in an interview with Jack Steinberg, the vice president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Here is the exchange:

He said, "You're asking, can you evaluate a teacher on the performance of the students?"

I said, "Yes or no?"

He said, "No, you cannot."

I, incredulously, said, "You cannot evaluate a teacher on the performance of his or her students?"

He said, "Right."

Today, the notion that student performance cannot be used to judge teacher performance is the law in New York.

Until recently, New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein could consider whether teachers successfully used "analysis of available student performance" to improve their teaching when he was deciding whether to grant tenure. This isn't the same as using student test scores to judge a teacher's performance, of course. But the mere hint of connecting student performance to teacher effectiveness caused fits at union headquarters. Richard C. Iannuzzi, the president of the New York State United Teachers, complained that "Student assessments are designed to assess students, not teachers."

State and city teacher unions lobbied the state legislature, and last month Albany gave in to the pressure. Today, the law reads, "The teacher shall not be granted or denied tenure based on student performance data."

Celebrating the victory, United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said, "There is no independent or conclusive research that shows you can accurately measure the impact of an individual teacher on a student's academic achievement."

Independent analysts disagree. Eric Hanushek, who specializes in the economics of education at Stanford University, told me recently that "It is very clear from the research into variations in teacher quality that such information would be useful." Calling this "very bad public policy," Prof. Hanushek added dryly, "I guess only friendships and politics count – just what the unions have always railed against."

Ms. Weingarten denies that her members are afraid of accountability. That may be a hard sell to the public.

School administrators have reams of data about student performance, thanks largely to the No Child Left Behind Act. Now that administrators are required to "drill down" to find out who is learning and who is not, they can also pinpoint who seems to be an effective teacher.

I've met superintendents, principals and department chairmen armed with this data. They all have named teachers who, they said, were either outstanding or deficient at teaching specific skills. One educator singled out a specific teacher and said he "doesn't seem to be able to teach his students how to multiply with fractions." He then showed me student performance data and contrasted it with data from another teacher's class.

Of course, not every kid comes to class equally able to complete the day's assignment. Some are new immigrants, others are gifted, and still others might have a learning disability. These factors affect test scores as much as or more than who is teaching.

Still, students at whatever level of performance can also be evaluated on how much they've improved over a given period of time.

Test data is not going to go away. So it is up to union leadership to decide if they'll ignore it, or if they will help school administrators figure out how to use it in the years ahead – and help the public understand its limitations.

Forward-looking union officials would push for creative uses of student performance data – such as using it to help teachers in areas where the data reveals they are not reaching their students. This would put union officials in a position of pushing to improve the quality of our public schools, instead of simply wielding their political power to protect every union member's job.

Denying any connection between teaching and learning is a dangerous course for teacher unions to chart. It contradicts what experience teaches us. And it flies in the face of common sense. If unions are telling us that there's no connection between teaching and learning, why should we then support teachers, or public education?

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