

What Matters Most

by Randi Weingarten
President, United Federation of Teachers

Using Student Test Scores To Evaluate Teachers: Common Sense Or Nonsense?

We all remember teachers who made a huge difference in our lives. When asked to describe what made those teachers special, we say they “made me believe in myself,” “opened up a whole new world for me,” or “made me like going to school.” No one ever says, “Ms. Jones made my test scores go up.”

Nonetheless, with “accountability” being the most popular buzzword in education, standardized test scores are threatening to become the sole measure of teacher quality and student success. Education policy-makers across the country are proposing that tenure decisions, pay and even the right to teach in high-poverty schools be based on student test scores. The idea sounds reasonable. Kids are supposed to learn in school, so what’s wrong with using test scores to rate teachers? Plenty.

Using test scores alone for evaluating teachers is just as flawed as using them as the sole criteria to judge children. It distorts and constricts our understanding of quality teaching and learning. Our nation’s experience with the No Child Left Behind law demonstrates that the focus on test scores narrows the curriculum to subjects that are tested and, especially in schools with large numbers of poor and minority children, replaces multifaceted classroom instruction with test preparation and rote learning. The focus on test scores also causes educators to concentrate on children who are close to the passing mark at the expense of children who are way behind or ahead. And, many important learning outcomes that good teachers promote — love of learning, perseverance, civic engagement, independent thinking and creativity — cannot be measured by standardized tests.

Equally problematic, the current methods for using test scores to determine the “value-added” of a teacher are neither fair nor accurate enough to separate the teacher’s contribution from other factors that affect student learning, such as the school’s resources, other teachers, student mobility and attendance, and parent support. And then there are the technical limitations of the available data and the quality of the standard-

ized tests. Because the tests are not designed to measure changes from year to year and often do not measure the knowledge and skills that the district has required students to learn, they are not accurate measures of what the teacher may have contributed to a child’s academic growth. Finally, only one in four teachers actually teaches the subjects in which students take annual standardized tests.

Because of these problems, most experts, including the well regarded RAND Corporation, recommend against using “value-added” analyses for evaluating teachers. Even Dale Ballou, no friend of teacher unions and an outspoken critic of current teacher pay systems, concluded, “There are too many uncertainties and inequities to rely on such measures for high-stakes personnel decisions.”

The evidence is clear: using student scores alone to evaluate teachers would be a grave mistake. To ensure

quality, the criteria for judging a teacher’s performance should be rigorous and multifaceted. They should include *multiple measures* of student learning and instructional practices associated with exemplary teaching, such as knowledge of subject matter, the ability to tailor instruction to the needs of their students, and engagement with par-

ents and the greater school community. Those who rate teachers must themselves be knowledgeable about best practices and able to ensure that teachers get the help they need to succeed. This help includes high quality professional development, time to work with other teachers, smaller classes and a safe and orderly school environment.

If we are serious about ensuring high teacher quality for our kids, we need to develop evaluation systems that fairly and accurately measure each teacher’s contribution to a student’s total intellectual growth. We also must ensure that school leadership fosters a collaborative working environment and provides the resources and conditions that support high-performance teaching and learning. That would be a true accountability system that teachers and parents would embrace.



Randi Weingarten
President
United Federation of Teachers