Richard Long
is IRA's Director of Government Relations, rlong@reading.org

Teacher Evaluation, Teacher Effectiveness, and School Reform

During the White House ceremony on September 23 dealing with NCLB waivers, President Obama again praised teachers as one of the most important factors behind students' success. But beyond his praise lies a complex stratagem: changing how teacher effectiveness is measured and how that information is being used in the wider school reform picture. Unfortunately, this issue is being addressed in isolation from the wider question of how instruction can be improved.

President Obama speaks about NCLB waivers at a White House ceremony on September 23

This disconnect has not been lost on the administration. While the president was releasing the new NCLB rules allowing states to avoid the requirements of making adequate yearly progress, the benefit was essentially being proffered as part of a trade. The states will get more flexibility, but only under specific terms. One of those terms is that the US federal government is going to continue to push states to adopt teacher evaluation systems that include student performance as part of the criteria in determining compensation.

Why is Washington doing this? The short answer is that the teacher is the major factor that determines whether a child becomes a reader and a learner, or not. Therefore having more effective teachers in the classroom is vital to improving schools. The long answer is much more complex. If the short answer is driving policy, the long answer is driving reality. Let's take it step by step.

Compensation: A Limited Incentive

First, even the often heralded business community is split on the value of compensation. As Jeffry Pferrer points out in his now classic *Harvard Business Review Six Dangerous Myths About Pay* (1998), confusing incentive, rewards, and effectiveness is a classic mistake. While everyone works for compensation, most educators also work for non-compensation rewards, such as job satisfaction. Employers who view compensation as the key motivator usually find that they have low producing employees compared to employers who see compensation *and* job satisfaction as critical factors.

Pfherrer's review of compensation incentives finds that "the problems with individual merit pay are numerous and well documented. It has been shown to undermine teamwork, encourage employees to focus on the short term, and lead people to link compensation to political skills and ingratiating personalities rather than to performance."

Does this finding translate directly to the school building? No, but neither do most comparisons to the business community. Educators do seek fair

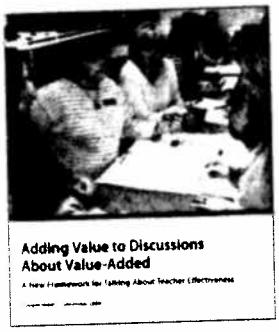
compensation, and will change jobs to better provide for their families. However, as several NEA studies point out, when negotiating for a new union contract, most educators list job satisfaction above compensation. So what does this tell us about the current federal push on teacher effectiveness/evaluations?

Value Adding: A One Dimensional Measure

One problem with current practice is that most teachers receive very high marks from their evaluators. This system is ineffective as far as measuring who is teaching better than someone else. If one is trying to maximize the number of highly-effective teachers, then the applicable measurement system should create divides between rankings of great, average, and below average. But even in the policy community it is understood that the teacher is only one element of the equation that determines which student will be a better learner than another. Hence comes the idea that teachers should be adding value to student performance.

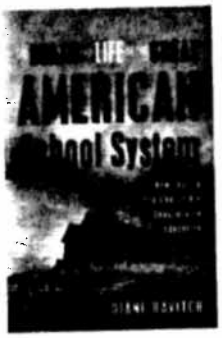
This idea of value-adding was discussed in an *Education Week* article by Stephen Sawchuck (published January 12, 2011). The article outlines how a recent study by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation "shows that teachers' value-added histories were among the strongest predictors of how they would perform in other classrooms or school years-as were students' perception of their teachers' ability to maintain order and provide challenging lessons."

That the value-added histories of a single teacher are relatively stable over time is the proposition now being applied by several districts and states, and most recently by the federal government. In low-performing schools, one of the findings is usually that the teachers are not as "good" as teachers in middle class communities. But this is a measure that interprets being good at one's craft solely as a function of longevity.



Another helpful critique was supplied by Raegen Miller of the Center for American Progress, who wrote *Adding Value to Discussions About Value-Added*, also a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supported study (December 2009). Miller outlined the history of the term and explained what lies behind the drive to evaluate teachers. He concluded that value adding is a one dimensional measure based on student achievement data collected by summary evaluations. But this is not the full story of our current predicament.

Other Recommended Criteria



Diana Ravitch, in her book: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010) presents an array of research findings that essentially make the case that a good teacher is someone who has been well-educated, mentored, and has had five plus years of experience. She also points out that teachers who get good evaluations can do very poorly if they are suddenly shifted from a class where they have been well prepared to work to one they have little experience working with. Ratvich's overall findings, if implemented, would send the teacher effectiveness and evaluation movement in entirely new directions.

The Perspective of Teacher Groups

The more informed policy makers and principals are able to see great complexities in the performance-evaluation challenge, and are coming around to what many teachers have been saying. In measuring teaching as well as learning, a one-factor measurement is simply ineffectual. For example, NEA's 2011 statement calls for:

- "high quality teacher evaluation systems that provide regular, comprehensive, meaningful and fair evaluations by trained evaluators, based on multiple indicators that include teacher practice, teacher growth and contribution to students to student learning"

Likewise, the AFT 2010 Working Paper outlines specific principles to design and implement any teacher development and evaluation system. These include:

- Focused on school improvement
- Developed collaboratively
- Continuous professional development
- Be both formative and summative
- Multiple sources
- Context specific
- Continually updating the evaluation system as the capacity of the system changes.

The Ultimate Goal

These points are important for all policy makers to note. Adding value is only one dimension of teacher effectiveness. But that really isn't the goal; the goal is to improve instruction and to have a system that supports continual improvement. Education policy makers need to move beyond the simple idea of measuring teachers based on a single achievement score and develop comprehensive approaches instead.

There are many questions concerning how to make this drive towards teacher evaluation work. The purpose should not be to "weed-out" the poor teachers, but rather to build a system that improves instruction and learning. Unfortunately, the current policy regime seems to have forgotten this ultimate goal. ■