Teacher Accountability to Colleagues, Not Test Scores: The Magic Johnson Effect

As states are given more discretion about evaluation under the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act they will encounter a fundamental problem in education. On one hand, we need some sort of accountability for teachers and schools. On the other, standardized tests may not provide the best information about teacher performance and may have negative side effects.

Having grown up in Michigan, we think of Magic Johnson when we think of measures of performance and standardized metrics. During his time at Michigan State, Earvin "Magic" Johnson scored an average of 17 points. Good, but many other players have had higher averages. Yet, Magic Johnson's collaborative team player approach provided an unmeasured return—he added value to everyone around him. In this sense, the best teachers may be those that make everyone around them better, a characteristic that is unmeasured by test score models.

So what should we do? Our proposal draws on the knowledge that colleagues and teammates have of one another. In September, a third grade teacher knows when last year's second grade teacher didn't teach reading well or spent little time on math. It shows up in the kids. And teachers know when their colleagues have little to offer others in the school. It's there in the lunchroom, after school, and on professional development days. Even without test scores, teachers recognize their best and worst colleagues. They know who they are and where they shine or falter. Therefore we propose to leverage the knowledge teachers have of one another to make teachers accountable to one another. There is solid evidence synthesized by Rachel Lerner of Harvard and applied to education by Brian Gill of Mathematica that peer evaluation encourages high-effort strategies and stimulates systematic thinking and attention to evidence.

Our approach involves a simple trade-off: principals should be allowed to use streamlined procedures to remove a small percentage (say 5%) of the teachers in their school in a given year. In exchange, if a modest percentage (say 20%) of the teachers in a school put in for unanticipated leave or transfer, the principal will be evaluated for replacement with a streamlined procedure. Similarly, a majority of teachers could sign a collective grievance (sort of a vote of no confidence) to trigger an evaluation of a principal. A weak teacher will be held accountable by peers who accept the principal's action by not putting in for transfer or filing a collective grievance. And committed teachers may rely on one another to hold a principal accountable by signaling their disagreement, voting with their feet or raising a collective voice.

Blasphemy, a conventional union may cry, to allow principals to remove teachers at a whim. It will undermine morale. But what is the cost in morale of working next to an ineffective, unmotivated teacher? And what about the kids who suffer year after year with an ineffective teacher? Unfair, the
administrators may charge, to be vulnerable to the career decisions of subordinates. But if 20% of the teachers put in for leave or 50% of the teachers do not have confidence in the principal, the school has lost before it has begun. The principal can't lead because many of the teachers are out the door, and likely many others are almost there.

The trade-off is based on the idea that other teachers know when one of their colleagues is not doing his or her job year after year. And they won't put their careers on the line for a weak teacher. On the other hand, if a principal attempts to replace a decent teacher who is doing his or her job and helping others to do so, then enough teachers will respond in solidarity to challenge the principal.

It's the bottom 5% of teachers we're worried about, that do the most damage by leaving almost every child behind, and undermining the morale of colleagues. Those who work in schools will evaluate each other not based on a single statistic, but on the contribution to the whole that they observe every day. In the end, this will be better for the school as a team, and therefore for the students.

687 words

The ideas presented here are based Articles IV and V of a Constitution for Effective School Governance which can be found at:


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