Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness

How Teacher Performance Assessments Can Measure and Improve Teaching

Linda Darling-Hammond   October 2010

Introduction and Summary

Parents, practitioners, and policymakers agree that the key to improving public education in America is placing highly skilled and effective teachers in all classrooms. Yet the nation still lacks a practical set of standards and assessments that can guarantee that teachers, particularly new teachers, are well prepared and ready to teach.

This report discusses a promising approach to the question of how to measure teacher effectiveness. Specifically, it describes the ways in which assessments of teacher performance for licensing and certification can both reflect and predict teachers' success with children so that they can not only inform personnel decisions, but also leverage improvements in preparation, mentoring, and professional development. It outlines progress in the field of teacher assessment development and discusses policies that could create much greater leverage on the quality of teacher preparation and teaching than has previously existed in the United States.

For more than two decades, policymakers have undertaken many and varied reforms to improve schools, ranging from new standards and tests to redesigned schools, new curricula and new governance models. One important lesson from these efforts is the repeated finding that teachers are the fulcrum determining whether any school initiative tips toward success or failure. Every aspect of school reform depends on highly skilled teachers for its success. This is especially true as educational standards rise and the diversity of the student body increases. Teachers need even more sophisticated abilities to teach more complex curriculum to the growing number of public school students who have fewer educational resources at home, those who are new English language learners, and those who have distinctive learning needs.

One of the few areas of consensus among education policymakers, practitioners, and the general public today is that improving teacher quality is one of the most direct and promising strategies for improving public education outcomes in the

United States, especially for groups of children who have historically been taught by the least qualified teachers. Teachers can have large effects on student achievement, as suggested by a recent large-scale study in North Carolina, which found that the differences in achievement gains for students who had the most qualified teachers versus those who had the least qualified were greater than the influences of race and parent education combined.[1] These very large differences were associated with teachers' initial preparation for teaching, licensing in the field taught, strength of academic background, level of experience, and demonstration of skills through National Board Certification, all of which are variables that could be directly addressed through policy.

Unlike most high-achieving nations, however, the United States has not yet developed a national system of supports and incentives to ensure that all teachers are well prepared and ready to teach all students effectively when they enter the profession.[2] Nor is there a set of widely available methods to support the evaluation and ongoing development of teacher effectiveness throughout the career, along with decisions about entry and continuation in the profession. Meeting the expectation that all students will learn to high standards will require a transformation in the ways in which our education system attracts, prepares, supports, and develops expert teachers who can teach in more powerful ways—a transformation that depends in part on the ways in which these abilities are understood and assessed.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in moving beyond traditional measures of teacher qualifications, such as completion of a preparation program, number of degrees, or years of experience, in order to evaluate teachers' actual performance as the basis for making decisions about hiring, tenure, licensing, compensation, and selection for leadership roles. A key problem is that current measures for evaluating teachers are not often linked to their capacity to teach. Existing federal, state, and local policies for defining and measuring teacher quality either rely almost exclusively on classroom observations by principals who differentiate little among teachers and offer little useful feedback, or focus on teachers' course-taking records and on paper-and-pencil tests of basic academic skills and subject matter knowledge that are poor predictors of later effectiveness in the classroom.

Looking ahead to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind Commission called for moving beyond the designation of teachers as "highly qualified" to an assessment of teachers as "highly effective" based on student learning evidence. Other recent federal proposals—for example, the Teacher Excellence for All Children Act—have suggested incentive

pay to attract effective teachers to high-need schools and to pay them additional stipends to serve as mentors or master teachers. The questions are now squarely on the table: "How should we measure teacher effectiveness?" And how can we develop more effective teachers much more consistently, rather than leaving teacher effectiveness to chance?

This report describes progress currently underway to achieve a system of reliable, valid, and nationally available performance assessments—from a teacher's point of entry through the development of accomplished teaching. Such a system would create a more useful and more common standard for the profession, just as national assessments do in fields such as nursing, engineering, accounting, medicine, and other skilled professions. A system of performance assessments could also leverage improvements in practice and professional learning opportunities.

As this paper details, some states have already begun to develop and implement standardized assessments of teacher performance that more accurately gauge the classroom effectiveness of beginning teachers, and a group of 20 states has joined together to build on these efforts to create a common tool for assessing novices. In addition, most states now recognize the National Board Certification program, which identifies veteran accomplished teachers who are more effective in developing student learning. The best practices from these initiatives can support a continuum across the teaching career for identifying and supporting stronger teaching and making more grounded personnel decisions based on a common, comprehensive set of standards that can be adopted nationwide to ensure that only the most well-prepared and effective teachers are instructing our public schools students.

In addition to raising the bar for teacher preparation and professional development, nationally available performance assessments at the points of the initial license, the professional license—usually about three years into the profession, just prior to tenure—and advanced certification could reflect the greater commonality in student expectations reflected in the so-called Common Core standards already adopted in more than 30 states. Such a system could also solve some of the problems created by the current Byzantine set of different licensing requirements across the 50 states and help create a national teacher labor market that supports mobility from states with surpluses to those with shortages while enhancing teacher quality.

A reliable and valid system of performance assessments based on common standards would provide consistency in gauging teacher effectiveness, help track educational progress, flag areas of need, and anchor a continuum of performance

throughout a teaching career. Such a system could also be used to establish standards for a National Teacher License that would allow mobility across states, ensure school districts that a new hire meets the requirements necessary to become an effective teacher who can advance student learning, and enable districts to identify and recruit the most able teachers to the most needy schools.

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