How to Ensure and Improve Teacher Quality

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Introduction:

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has proposed major changes to teacher evaluations in New York. The changes emphasize student scores on standardized tests as a way to rate a teacher’s performance. It is a trend that is popping up across the country, raising concerns among teachers, administrators and public school parents, some of whom are refusing to let their children take the exams.

If this approach is not the way to go and yet American students are still academically behind their peers in other countries, how do we ensure and improve teacher quality such that student success is a given?

An Evaluation System Linked to Retention and Reward Is Vital

*Eric Hanushek is an economist and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University. He is co-author of "Endangering Prosperity: A Global View of the American School."*

Despite decades of study and enormous effort, we know little about how to train or select high quality teachers. We do know, however, that there are huge differences in the effectiveness of classroom teachers and that these differences can be observed.

Given this situation, the path to improvement rests with enhanced evaluation systems for teachers combined with better personnel systems that link retention and reward to effectiveness.

Without knowing the background, preparation or attributes that make a good teacher, we cannot rely on the credentialing process to regulate the quality of people who enter the profession. Therefore the most sensible approach is to expand the pool of potential teachers but tighten up on decisions about retention, tenure and rewards for staying in teaching. Many states have already begun to endorse alternative routes into teaching so that there is a wider pool. We will still make the best judgment we can about who will do well, but we simply have to recognize that mistakes happen. We then need to make active decisions about who to retain and who not to retain.

Evaluation of teacher performance becomes key. Gains in student achievement should be one element, because improving student achievement is what we are trying to do, but this is not even possible for most teachers. Moreover, nobody believes that decisions should be made just on test scores. What we need is some combination of supervisor judgments with the input of professional evaluators.

Public schools in Washington, D.C., provide evidence that improved personnel policies work. In Washington, a sophisticated and reliable evaluation system for teachers is used to make both pay and retention decisions. The best teachers get large rewards including substantially higher base salaries. The worst teachers are dismissed. And evaluations of this program indicate that it is working and that student achievement is rising. The problem is that unions and schools resist active personnel decisions – to the detriment of students.

The U.S. Needs More Rigorous and Selective Teacher Colleges

*Amanda Ripley, a senior fellow at the Emerson Collective, is the author of "The Smartest Kids in the World — and How They Got That Way."*

The first time Heikki Vuorinen applied to teacher-training college, he was rejected. The same thing happened the second time around. Finally, after spending years gaining experience as a substitute teacher, Vuorinen got accepted at one of the elite universities that trains teachers in Finland, which may have the world’s healthiest and most equitable school system. He was a touch sheepish about this record, but not mortified. Rejection stories are common in Finland, almost a point of pride for teachers.

Would Vuorinen have been just as good a teacher if he’d been accepted on the first try? Perhaps. But his story is not just about him. It is about the value his country places on teaching. If teaching is one of the most intellectually and emotionally challenging professions in the modern world, then it makes sense to act like it is — from the beginning. All of Vuorinen’s students (and their parents) knew how hard he had worked to become a teacher, and that awareness shaped how they viewed the teacher, the school and the pursuit of learning.

Of all the lessons from other countries, this is the one the United States has been most reluctant to embrace: To elevate the teaching profession, start with the education colleges. Make them rigorous and selective, and make sure everyone else knows it.

Once you’ve done that, miraculous things begin to happen. People start to trust teachers more. Politicians give teachers more autonomy — and even more pay.

American policy makers and university deans usually reject this model for two reasons. First, they claim that more rigorous teacher-training programs will lead to teacher shortages. But many districts currently have teacher surpluses, especially among elementary teachers. Secondly, they worry that more selective programs will lead to more homogenous teaching forces. But here again, it depends. Teach for America is our nation’s most selective teacher preparation program — and also one of the most diverse. That’s because Teach for America’s leaders have prioritized diversity and worked hard over time to recruit minority candidates (something many deans in U.S. colleges have not done). And selectivity does not need to be a blunt instrument. Finland’s education colleges do not just select based on test scores; they preference candidates who have spent time in a classroom (usually as an aid), proving their commitment and gaining experience. That is smart selectivity.

Back in Finland, I asked Vuorinen if he had any advice for the U.S. “You should start to select your teachers more carefully and motivate them more,” he said. “One motivation is money. Respect is another. Punishing is never a good way to deal with schools.”

Stop Testing and Punishing Teachers

*Mercedes Schneider is a high school English teacher and the author of "A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Public Education."*

When I began teaching in 1991, the quality of a teacher would never have been reduced to a student's score on a standardized test. However, it is 2015, and standardized-test-driven education “reform” dominates the political and business minds driving nationwide education policy. “Quality” in the public education classroom has become synonymous with “high test scores,” and a good teacher is the one who raises student scores on standardized tests.

As result, teachers are being forced to choose between viewing students as multifaceted human beings worthy of opportunities for well-rounded, healthy development via a dynamic teacher-student relationship and our professional self-preservation, gained by twisting our students’ classroom lives into a largely dehumanizing, career-saving vehicle. Get those scores up, or lose your job.

I choose the healthy development of my students, without reservation. However, I understand the pressure teachers are under to put test scores ahead of students.

This school year is the second time in which I must “prove my effectiveness” based on my students’ test scores. Their performance is 50 percent of my rating. Classroom observations will count for the other 50 percent, unless my students’ test scores are too low, in which case low test scores override any positive administrative rating.

Last year I was rated “highly effective.” Many of my talented colleagues did not fare as well. For my "highly effective" rating, I received a "bonus" of $427.76. But since I don’t control test selection nor test results, and since there is no selective admission into my classroom, this year’s “highly effective” rating could easily be next year’s “ineffective” one. And then what?

We are sailing a test-score-driven sea of professional uncertainty.

If this skewed thinking continues to drive educational policy, no smart person will want to be a teacher. And there will be no teaching profession, because dedicated classroom teachers will give up in the face of this insanity.

If we want to assess and retain good teachers, for starters we need to stop the test-and-punish ratings systems. A second step would be to ask teachers what they need to do their jobs effectively. I know, for instance, that if my classes exceed a certain size (around 20 students), it becomes difficult for me to work individually with students and to differentiate based on skill level. I also need time to plan during the day, talk to my colleagues and discuss what works in the classroom. And I need support and trust from administrators.

To thrive, the teaching profession must be afforded respect and autonomy. Teachers choose teaching because they desire to invest their lives in other human beings. No test score can capture the value of such an investment.

Treat Teacher Education Like a Medical Residency

*Jal Mehta, an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the author of "The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling," and co-editor of "The Futures of School Reform."*

Getting a well-trained teacher in every classroom is a generation-long project. It would require new approaches to training, higher entry standards and substantial opportunities for continued learning within the profession, including occasions for master teachers to mentor new ones.

How could we achieve this transformation? A good first step would be to raise standards for teacher licensure and simultaneously radically revamp teacher training over the first three years. Teacher tenure, now generally acquired after three years, would not be automatic: It would be more equivalent to making partner at a law firm or getting tenure at a university. The required assessment for tenure would not be a paper and pencil test, but a demonstration of actual teaching skill.

We need an education system that can do for teachers what medical residencies do for doctors. These institutions would be modeled after teaching hospitals, designed to provide vertically integrated training over the first three years, eliminating the current split between teacher preparation institutions responsible for year one and the school districts responsible for years two and three.

Teachers would learn to teach in these specialized residency schools, and they would gradually take on more responsibility as they showed more competence. These "teaching" schools would attract master teachers who want to educate new entrants to the profession and could also function as places to learn the latest in cutting-edge research and practice.

Such a system would assure the public that tenured teachers had met significant standards and signal to prospective teachers that teaching is a demanding endeavor. It would move teacher training into the "field" and support new teachers in their aims to meet raised standards.

Real Respect Is the Path to Great Teaching

*Kaya Henderson is the chancellor of the Washington, D.C., school system.*

Great teaching is one of the most magical things you will ever see. As chancellor of the District of Columbia public schools, I have the privilege of seeing that magic in action every day. Our teachers inspire me with their passion, skill and unwavering dedication. They are the reason the students in D.C. are growing faster than those in every other state, as evidenced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, America’s gold standard for measuring student learning.

How did we get here? I think it all comes down to doing everything possible to truly respect teachers, not just pay them lip service. What does that look like? First, it means having high expectations. Truly respecting teachers – just like truly respecting students – means believing in their capacity for greatness. Before you can achieve the seemingly impossible, you must believe in your ability to do so.

Second, it means giving teachers the resources they need to meet those expectations. That means hiring the very best principals, who lead with vision, passion and humanity. It means providing teachers with training that actually makes a difference in their classrooms. It means giving teachers a rich curriculum that liberates them to express their creativity. And it means making sure teachers never have to worry about having enough paper, pencils or computers.

Third, truly respecting teachers means going the extra mile to recognize their greatness. That is why we now pay our best teachers more than $125,000. It is why we celebrate them every single year at a gala at the Kennedy Center. It is why I depend on them to guide me by serving on advisory committees and policy task forces of every kind.

Real respect – the kind you have for the people you most admire – is the only path to great teaching.