

COMMENTARY

Don't Gamble ESEA on Teacher Performance

By Jay P. Urwitz

Everybody breathe a sigh of relief. As we bake in the summer heat, at least we know that the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act won't be reauthorized until next year. That gives us some time to think before barreling ahead with the newest nostrum for what ails us.

The Obama administration plans to build the reauthorization around four areas. One is a strong curriculum and good tests of student learning; the second is good information about each child, so educators and parents can track and try to correct weaknesses; and the third is intensive intervention to improve student achievement in our lowest-performing schools.

But the core of the administration's reauthorization plan, and the way in which it proposes to achieve academic excellence, is stated in its premier aspiration: "Improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader."

As President Barack Obama elaborates: "This effort will require the skills and talents of many, but especially our nation's teachers, principals, and other school leaders. Our goal must be to have a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school. We know that from the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents—it is the teacher standing at the front of the classroom. To ensure the success of our children, we must do better to recruit, develop, support, retain, and reward outstanding teachers in American's classrooms."

But what if we don't actually know what makes an effective teacher? Worse, suppose

that other levers work better to raise student performance, but we are stuck with the “teacher effectiveness” model for another 10 years (the last reauthorization of the ESEA was the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed into law in January of 2002 and remains the law of the land today). There is a thicket of competing theories about what makes an effective teacher. And, more troubling, studies show that while effective teachers are certainly important, they explain only a fraction of the difference in student performance.

We have seen these magic potions before. In NCLB, the potion was to assure that every teacher was “highly qualified” to teach the subject matter he or she was assigned to teach. When the magic potion was thought to be limiting class size, Florida and California spent billions of dollars on new classrooms and new teachers.

It is important not to be wrong. If we are wrong, we risk squandering the kids of this decade. One of the saddest stories of the last 40 years is that spending money in itself has a dishearteningly small effect on student achievement. The real increase in per-pupil expenditures over the last 40 years is more than double, and federal support has more than tripled. By contrast, the increase in achievement is mostly measured in low to middle single digits. Money does not seem to produce a general “Kumbaya” effect.

A second consideration is that if we don’t see more significant results, we may not get additional chances. The fact that there are relatively fewer school-age children, a concomitantly smaller voting constituency of parents, and greater financial demands from other social programs will make it harder to fund education substantially. The Congressional Budget Office predicts fewer and fewer dollars available for nondefense discretionary funding, a consequence of increases in entitlement spending. And the new health-care-reform legislation, whatever its virtues, will direct that much more money into non-education spending.

Most critically, despite the hype, we don’t have a high assurance that teacher effectiveness is in fact the most likely path to higher student achievement. And, even if it

is, we don't have a clear understanding of how to make teachers more effective.

Several analyses show that being assigned to different teachers can explain between 7 percent and 15 percent of the difference in student results in a particular year. A couple of outlier analyses show percentage results in the 20s in math. That is a good amount. If it cumulates year after year because students are getting good teachers in all these years, it can make for a huge difference, more than any factor we know of so far that social policy can change.

But assigning students to different teachers does not account for the vast majority of the variation in student performance in any year. And we can't hope to provide highly effective teachers to all students year after year, so the likely mix won't achieve uniformly the level of change that excellent teaching might otherwise provide.

Moreover, we don't know what goes into making an effective teacher. Several elements seem to count, but sorting them out will take time. One element is the teacher's years in service. A second is subject-matter knowledge, the last ESEA reauthorization's savior. A "new" entrant in the "here's what does it" sweepstakes is the old ed. school standby, pedagogical technique: Circulate around your classroom, and break down questions not answered correctly into smaller questions. These differing approaches suggest that we don't yet know the best ways to change teachers so that they can help significantly alter student outcomes.

Meanwhile, emphasizing the individual teacher will slight other factors that may prove more important. For example, promising neuroscientific research is now telling us more about how kids learn. Differently designed curricula or electronically based education may allow for the pacing and explanation that could prove most significant. Or, an understanding of cognitive differences may affect the way a particular student is taught. It may be best to base awards on who picks the best curricula. Or it may be that some factor currently in the mix proves far more influential than expected, such as a student's health and fitness. The greatest bang for the buck may be in green beans. In the meantime, though, we'll be stuck with a reauthorized federal education law that centers the action on relating the teacher to the outcome.

So, what should be the objective for the next authorization? How about keeping the effectiveness yardstick but not prejudging what's considered effective—letting the marketplace of functionality make the choice. This could be somewhat like the criteria used in the federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, competition. There, funds are to go variously to proposals with a “strong base” of evidence that student achievement will be significantly improved, or “good” evidence, or “high potential.” The link to achievement should be direct, not through a way station. We would reap greater rewards when different approaches worked out, and when new developments allowed for new approaches.

Luckily, we know the main measures of student growth. The differences in emphasis—student test scores alone or graduation rates, too, for example—will need to be resolved. This is true whether improvement is seen as the direct measure of school effectiveness or a proxy for teacher effectiveness. When there is so much uncertainty about whether we are right, let's put our true objective in the forefront, rather than what we currently think may be most closely associated with it.

Of course, teacher effectiveness may very well turn out to be the key to student learning—in which case, states and school systems will gravitate to a teacher-based evaluation system anyway. But if other methods work better, or the best methods change over time, let's allow our school systems to follow the sun.

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