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Nation's Schools Failing to Assess Teacher Effectiveness, Treating Teachers as Interchangeable Parts

Study Describes "Widget Effect," Which Prevents Schools from Recognizing Excellence, Providing Support, or Removing Ineffective Teachers

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen, U.S. Representative George Miller (D-CA) Join in Call for Overhaul of Teacher Evaluation Systems and Policies Governing Use of Evaluation Ratings

NEW YORK, NY – America's schools operate in a policy environment that assumes all teachers are the same, according to a comprehensive study by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a national nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that all students get excellent teachers. Though a teacher's effectiveness is singularly important to student success, schools do not distinguish great teaching from good, good from fair, or fair from poor, and a teacher's effectiveness in helping students to succeed academically almost never factors into critical decisions such as how teachers are hired, developed or retained.

This pervasive indifference to teacher performance is fundamentally disrespectful to teachers and gambles with the lives of students. It means that excellent teaching goes unrecognized, hard-working teachers who could improve are ignored, and poor performance goes unaddressed.

The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness is the product of an extensive and collaborative research effort to quantify this fundamental problem and offer solutions for school districts and policymakers.

"Effective teachers who are fairly compensated are vital ingredients in the reforms our schools need," Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said. "Schools need to have evaluation systems that fairly and accurately identify effective teachers."

"If we expect every child to receive a world-class education, we must provide teachers with the fair compensation and opportunities they deserve," said U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee. "This includes a thorough and meaningful evaluation process. Education is key to a lasting economic recovery; building a professional, well-rewarded and appreciated teaching workforce is in the best interest of both our students and our economic future."

The two-year research project spanned four states – Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois and Ohio – and 12 diverse districts, ranging in enrollment from 4,000 to over 400,000 students. TNTP analyzed survey responses from over 15,000 teachers and 1,300 principals, and data from more than 40,000 teacher

evaluation records. Advisory panels in each state—including over 50 district and state officials and 25 teachers' union representatives—actively informed the research, and panel members' written responses to the study are available, unedited, on the report website (www.widgeteffect.org).

The study illustrates that teacher evaluation systems reflect and codify the “Widget Effect” – the tendency of school districts to treat teachers as essentially interchangeable—in several major ways:

- **All teachers are rated “good” or “great.”** Less than 1 percent of teachers receive unsatisfactory ratings, even in schools where students fail to meet basic academic standards, year after year.
- **Excellence goes unrecognized.** In districts with more than two ratings, 94 percent of teachers receive one of the top two. When superlative ratings are the norm, truly exceptional teachers cannot be formally identified. Nor can they be compensated, promoted or retained on a systemic basis.
- **Professional development is inadequate.** Almost 3 in 4 teachers did not receive any specific feedback on improving their performance in their last evaluation.
- **Novice teachers are neglected.** Low expectations for beginning teachers translate into benign neglect in the classroom and a toothless tenure process.
- **Poor performance goes unaddressed.** Half of the districts studied have not dismissed a single tenured teacher for poor performance in the past *five years*. None dismiss more than a few each year.

“Improving instructional quality is the cornerstone of successful school reform,” said Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen. “This report clearly shows that states must revisit their evaluation of educators - just as we have revisited assessments for students - to ensure great results. Every teacher deserves to have an evaluation process that will strengthen their skills in the classroom.”

According to the study, the Widget Effect is deeply ingrained in the fundamental policies that determine the composition and quality of the nation’s teacher workforce. To reverse the Widget Effect, evaluation systems must generate accurate and credible information about each teacher’s effectiveness in realizing student academic success. This information must then be used to drive professional development and inform decision-making throughout the school district. Effective teaching must be recognized; ineffective teaching must be addressed. The study offers four major recommendations:

1. **Adopt** a performance evaluation system that fairly, accurately and credibly differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness promoting student achievement.
2. **Train** administrators and other evaluators in the teacher performance evaluation system and hold them accountable for using it fairly and effectively.
3. **Integrate** the performance evaluation system with critical human capital policies and functions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention and dismissal.

4. **Address** consistently ineffective teaching through dismissal policies that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to exit the district and a system of due process that is fair but efficient.

“Enacting these common-sense recommendations will require uprooting decades of ingrained complacency about teacher performance,” said Daniel Weisberg, a study co-author and Vice President of Policy for TNTP. “But we can’t afford to wait. When an excellent teacher leaves, an entire school suffers. When a poor performer remains year after year, whole classrooms of children fall behind, sometimes forever. This is happening every day, in thousands of schools around the country. We have to stop treating teachers like widgets.”

Taken together, the recommendations represent a comprehensive approach to improving instructional effectiveness and maximizing student learning. But the study emphasizes that they cannot be implemented piecemeal; adopting some while ignoring others will not reverse the Widget Effect or close the achievement gap that has long disadvantaged poor and minority students.

“The current political climate creates an incredible opportunity for districts and states to tackle the Widget Effect head on,” said Ariela Rozman, CEO of The New Teacher Project. “President Obama and Secretary Duncan are putting an unprecedented focus on teacher effectiveness, and the economic recovery package includes substantial education funding for states and districts to implement new policies on this issue. Now it is up to everyone committed to the success of our students – teachers, administrators, policymakers – to turn a new page on an old problem. It’s time to treat our teachers like the professionals they are – if we care about the success of our students, we have to start caring about the success of their teachers.”

The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness is available along with other resources and information at www.widgeteffect.org.

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About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap by ensuring that poor and minority students get outstanding teachers. Founded by teachers in 1997, TNTP partners with school districts and states to implement scalable responses to their most acute teacher quality challenges. TNTP recruits and trains thousands of exceptional new teachers annually, supports school principals in staffing their classrooms, provides teacher certification in high-need subjects, and documents the policy barriers that keep students from getting the teachers they need. Since its inception, TNTP has trained or hired approximately 33,000 teachers, benefiting an estimated 4.8 million students nationwide. It has established more than 70 programs and initiatives in 28 states. *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, is part of an ongoing series of studies on the policies and practices that determine the composition and quality of the nation’s teacher workforce. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.