

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: August 20, 2010

Published in Print: August 25, 2010, as *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?*

Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?

Foolishness in the Pursuit of 'Effective Teaching'

By Phillip Harris & Bruce Smith

The troubles of the U.S. economy over the past couple of years have recently come home to roost in state budgets. Federal stimulus money (don't get us started on the troubles of the federal budget) kept serious consequences at bay for more than a year, but now that those funds have dried up, the states are forced to face stark economic realities and trim their budgets accordingly. And that has proved devastating for school systems in nearly every state, as they face layoffs, school closings, and reductions in co-curricular activities.

Such "big picture" consequences are hard enough to contemplate, but they become truly unsettling when you identify layoffs with real, live teachers. Here's an example from our home state of Indiana. We learned

in early May that Bloomington's Jackie Macal, a middle school English teacher and one of just six Indiana teachers to be honored by the state superintendent for "outstanding service to Hoosier students," was among those to be laid off from our local schools because of budget cuts. Joining her on the layoff list was another of the six honorees, Gaylene Hayden of Lafayette. Such episodes make our schools and those who manage them look like the New York Mets of the 1960s, a troop so hapless that manager Casey Stengel was moved to ask, "Can't anybody here play this game?"

You've probably guessed by now that award-winning teachers who find themselves on a RIF (reduction in force) list are relative newcomers to the classroom. Macal, for example, is a 2008 graduate of Indiana University and was completing just her second year in the classroom. We could launch a rant about seniority rules and union contracts, but that's not our aim. On many levels, such rules and agreements make sense. All other things being equal, a more experienced teacher will be a better teacher than a newbie. You do learn a lot about teaching from your colleagues and from being on the job for a while. But all other things are rarely equal, so what can we do about keeping effective teachers in the classroom, for surely those who win statewide recognition are apt to be—at the very least—effective?

By our rough count, the Obama administration's "[blueprint for reform](#)" in education calls for "effective teachers" (or "effective teaching") 83 times in its brief, generously spaced 39 pages. Let's celebrate effective teachers. Let's reward them. Let's use them as change agents in our toughest-to-improve schools. They are the keys to student learning and to successful school reform. So go the arguments. And who can argue with such sentiments?

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The unspoken answer you're supposed to give to that rhetorical question is "no one." But that's not our answer. In fact, like that annoying friend whose answer to every question is another question, our answer is this: How do we know which teachers are effective? Or, though still a question, you might prefer it this way: What does effective teaching look like anyway?

If you try seriously to answer that question, you might soon find yourself lost in a maze of follow-up questions and ready to throw in the towel and look for other ways to improve the schools. Or you might do what the U.S. Department of Education has done and grasp at the flimsy straw of a "value-added model" of teacher evaluation. We and others have argued that "value added" assessment, a growth model that appears superficially to make sense, is not yet ready for prime time and still needs lots of investigation before we hang our students' and teachers' futures from it.

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But the correct answer to what makes a teacher effective or what constitutes effective teaching is, "We don't really know." But we do know that teaching is complicated, involves interactive relationships, and can't be well described by a single number, not even when that number derives from two administrations of a test and the subsequent mathematical legerdemain associated with the various value-added models of judging teacher effectiveness. So many things ought to figure into our judgments about teaching effectiveness, including not just student achievement and supervisor ratings, but also a teacher's background knowledge and coursework, skill in managing a classroom and in organizing and delivering instruction, and understanding of students and their differences.

There are even more possibilities, but we wonder: How much can we really know about a teacher's effectiveness without peeking behind the classroom door? How much informational weight can a difference in student test scores bear? Today, even the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, through its **Measures of Effective Teaching** study, is trying to look behind classroom doors because, as the study's home page puts it, "Current measures of teaching rarely take into account the full range of what teachers do, or the context in which they teach."

We agree that it's important to try to learn more about good teaching and how to recognize and develop it. For that reason, we want to lend our endorsement to Monty Neill's recent call in an online essay on edweek.org ("**A Better Way to Assess Students and Evaluate Schools**," *June 18, 2010*) for an evaluation system that would depend heavily on "local and classroom evidence of learning" and on "school-quality reviews," a U.S. version of an "inspectorate." This would admit many more people—and not just trained professionals—behind America's classroom doors, where they could see firsthand what good—and not-so-good—teaching looks like. Surely some of the information learned in the Gates study will be helpful to such efforts. Adopting this approach would go a long way toward enabling us to focus accountability on *communication* and *reporting*, and evaluation on whether we have achieved our *purpose*.

We join Neill in supporting the limited and specifically targeted use of large-scale standardized tests, as long as we don't waste time and money testing everyone at every opportunity. But no one

in the policymaking establishments, at the federal and state levels, seems really interested in such an alternative right now. More's the pity.

By adopting the kind of sensible approach to accountability and evaluation that Neill and others have proposed, we would hope to avoid the kind of foolishness that leads school districts, even those under dire budgetary constraints, to lay off the best and the brightest of their teachers. We really have to learn to play this game better.

Phillip Harris is the executive director of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, in Bloomington, Ind. Bruce Smith retired after 27 years on the editorial staff of the Phi Delta Kappan. They are co-authors, along with Joan Harris, of Myths of Standardized Tests: Why They Don't Tell You What You Think They Do (Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

Vol. 30, Issue 01, Pages 26-27

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