

# Incompetent Teachers or Dysfunctional Systems?

Rather than blame teachers, we must ensure that teachers work within a highly functional system that provides meaningful evaluations, high-quality professional development, reasonable class sizes, reliable and stable leadership, and time for planning and collaboration.

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Experts and officials widely agree on the importance of teacher quality. However, they don't agree on how to improve it or even on what it means. A growing number of researchers, policy makers, and journalists are promoting a seemingly simple and straightforward solution: Remove low-quality teachers from the workforce. In the past, policy makers have dismissed this "draconian" solution due to concerns over teacher

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rights, but many are rethinking their position and justifying this approach on the grounds of boosting student achievement and enhancing social justice.

Despite its rising popularity and its commonsense appeal, however, this approach to improving teacher quality suffers from three fundamental flaws that prevent it from achieving all that its advocates promise:

- First, it ignores other correctable problems, such as teacher attrition, that do far more to lower overall teacher quality than the presence of incompetent teachers.
- Second, it falsely assumes that a ready supply of effective teachers is available to replace those who would be removed.
- Third, it ignores the fact that struggling teachers often lack adequate support and resources to give them a good chance to succeed.

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To be sure, some classroom teachers simply entered the wrong profession, others have lost their will or ability to help students succeed, and still others have become unforgivably abusive to their students. But poor teaching results more often from poorly functioning systems than from individual shortcomings.

### THE CASE FOR REMOVING TEACHERS

School officials, policy makers, and some academics have publicly and persistently complained that too many teachers are simply lost causes who must be dismissed in order to save the schools.

Eric Hanushek, an educational researcher at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, argues that poor-quality teachers explain America's education woes. "The bottom end of the teaching force is harming students," he writes. "Allowing ineffective teachers to remain in the classroom is dragging down the nation" (2009). Hanushek uses a statistical model to show that just removing underperforming teachers could significantly improve student achievement. He proposes for the nation's schools what Jack Welch, the legendary CEO, did each year at General Electric: Fire the bottom 10% of the company's poorest performers.

The issue of poor teachers has also received significant media attention of late. In a recent cover story, *Newsweek* declared that the key to saving U.S.

education is to fire bad teachers. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote: "It's difficult to improve failing schools when you can't create alternatives such as charter schools and can't remove inept or abusive teachers. In New York City, for example, unions ordinarily prevent teachers from being dismissed for incompetence — so the schools must pay failed teachers their full salaries to sit year after year doing nothing in centers called 'rubber rooms'" (2009: A35). Journalist Steven Brill's disturbing 2009 exposé in *The New Yorker* about these "rubber rooms" was greeted enthusiastically by union critics like Jonah Goldberg (2009) of *The National Review*, who wrote, "This is just a small illustration of a larger mess. America's school systems are a disaster. . . . But of all the myriad problems with public schools, the most identifiable and solvable is the ludicrous policy of tenure for teachers."

Education officials and public activists seem to agree. "The three principles that govern our system are lockstep compensation, seniority, and tenure," New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein said recently. "All three are not right for our children" (Brill 2009). In a March 2009 article, Klein and activist Al Sharpton argue, "Previous efforts to improve teacher quality have failed because they have misdiagnosed the problem. . . . Instead of raising barriers to the teaching profession, government officials must work much harder to identify and reward the best teachers — and dismiss the worst ones" (Sharpton and Klein 2009).

Sharpton and Klein are getting their wish. Federal education funding now requires school officials to choose from among four intervention models for their worst performing schools. If they choose the "turnaround" model, administrators must replace the school principal and at least half of the teachers. This is what Frances Gallo, a local superintendent in Rhode Island, chose to do at Central Falls High School, where half of the students drop out, almost none are proficient in math and reading, and union leaders refused to accept her reform proposals. In February, she made national headlines and received accolades from President Obama when she threatened mass teacher firings.

The President had already voiced similar views about unfit teachers. "Let me be clear," he said in a March 2009 speech to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce about his school reform plan. "If a teacher is given a chance or two chances or three chances but still does not improve, there's no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences" (Obama 2009).

The "if-only-we could-fire-them" approach has given hope to both conservatives and liberals that

there is a simple solution to America's education crisis. Consequently, there is growing bipartisan support for fundamental changes in tenure and dismissal policies even as teacher unions resist.

### THE ARGUMENT DOESN'T ADD UP

If, for argument's sake, we put aside questions about teachers' rights and assume we can easily dismiss ineffective teachers, how much would this improve the nation's schools and narrow the achievement gap? Surprisingly, very little. While districts surely should do more to remove teachers who don't meet an acceptable quality, this silver bullet will not solve the larger teacher-quality problem. What's worse, as long as policy makers and unions fight over *this* issue and do not focus on more pressing threats to teacher quality, there is little chance of closing the student achievement gap. There are three problems with the case for teacher "de-selection."

First, it diverts attention from other factors that diminish teacher quality far more than teacher incompetence does. In many urban school districts, the number of good teachers who are lost exceeds the number of bad teachers who are retained. Nationally, 46% of teachers leave the profession after five years, and a U.S. Department of Education study found that new teachers who scored the highest on college entrance exams are twice as likely to leave as those with lower scores. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) pegs the annual cost of teacher turnover (not including retirements) at nearly \$5 billion to recruit, hire, and prepare replacement teachers. And that doesn't reflect the nonmonetary costs and dysfunction caused by the constant churning of teachers that's common in low-performing schools.

Along with teacher attrition, teacher quality suffers significantly in many low-performing schools when teachers are assigned to courses in which they have little knowledge. In New York City high schools, 32% of core academic subjects were taught by out-of-field teachers in 2003-04 (Education Trust 2008). These "mis-assignments" occur when district administrators don't have enough qualified teachers to teach such subjects as math, science, or English, and they're forced to assign underqualified teachers.

Compare these figures with the number of unfit teachers that administrators like Joel Klein might want to fire. Steven Brill (2009) said that about one-twentieth of 1% of New York City's teaching workforce landed in its rubber rooms. Meanwhile, the city's Department of Education reports that only 1.8% of its teachers now receive an unsatisfactory rating by their administrators. Perhaps this percentage is low because, like administrators in many other districts, New York's administrators conduct only cursory evaluations that wouldn't justify low teacher

ratings. So, let's assume the percentage of incompetent teachers in a school is as high as 5%, as suggested by studies of administrator and teacher perceptions about incompetence. This number still pales in comparison to the stunningly high numbers of mis-assigned teachers and those who leave the profession voluntarily. The cost of *these* problems far exceeds the cost of salaries for one-twentieth of 1% of idle teachers in New York's rubber rooms.

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Curiously, while attrition and mis-assignments do far more than incompetence to diminish teacher quality (and student performance), these problems haven't generated anything close to the public uproar caused by ineffective teachers. Perhaps it's because journalists know that quick fixes grab headlines and because policy makers assume that attrition and mis-assignments are facts of life in schools that are inherently unattractive places to work. But, in fact, teacher attrition and mis-assignments are no more a fact of life than are the outdated and costly practices that force the public to pay incompetent teachers to sit in rubber rooms. An Education Trust study (2008) found that teacher mis-assignments (which total 27% in core courses in the nation's high-poverty schools) don't reflect intractable teacher shortages for these courses. Rather, it found that competent principal leadership, reasonable class size, better compensation, and other collegial support would make it easier to improve conditions enough in high-poverty schools to fill these positions with qualified teachers.

Indeed, leaders in some districts have dramatically reduced teacher attrition and mis-assignments by improving the teaching environment. The important point is that while attrition and mis-assignments *as well as* incompetence can and should be addressed, one should not lose sight of the fact that far more students fail to learn and far more money is wasted as a result of another set of problems than the one currently in vogue.

Second, even if districts could easily shed unfit teachers, teacher quality would improve only if enough good ones were available to take their places. For years, the nation's lowest-performing schools have faced severe shortages of teachers who are even minimally qualified. That's why many of these schools continue to employ teachers who are uncredentialed and teaching out of field, despite NCLB's

prohibition on the use of underqualified teachers.

While the supply of qualified teachers has recently increased due to recession-induced teacher layoffs, there really is no silver lining for schools in this economic downturn. The overcrowded classrooms that have resulted from these layoffs have their own devastating effects on instruction, and whatever increases in supply that the layoffs may have produced are only temporary and will be offset

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by sharp declines in the number of students enrolling in teacher preparation programs. In California, for instance, enrollments in these programs declined by 33% over a recent five-year period in part because of uncertainties in the job market, but also, some speculate, because teaching has lost the appeal it once had. It could be that all of the talk about failing schools and incompetent teachers is causing prospective candidates to consider other career options.

Third and most important, struggling teachers — the very ones that proponents of the “just fire them” approach want to summarily dismiss — often don’t get a reasonable chance to succeed. To illustrate this point, imagine that a high school principal has observed one of his teachers (Mr. Davis) struggling with an algebra class. Each time the principal visits Mr. Davis’ class, he sees that several students aren’t paying attention and that the teacher finds it hard to explain concepts from the textbook. The principal has also discovered that test results from Mr. Davis’s algebra students from last year showed no overall improvement. The principal would seem justified in telling Mr. Davis that he will move to dismiss him if he doesn’t see improvement.

Mr. Davis has been put on notice and given a chance to improve. If he doesn’t, should he be fired? What if Mr. Davis was really an English teacher and, like many teachers in New York City, was teaching algebra only because the principal couldn’t find a qualified math teacher? Is Mr. Davis really incompetent? Should he go to a “rubber room” if he doesn’t do better? Perhaps one would make an exception under these extraordinary circumstances.

As it turns out, Mr. Davis’ circumstances are not extraordinary. As noted earlier in the Education Trust study, many teachers are in the same boat, not just in New York but in most of the nation’s high

schools. In fact, four in 10 math classes in high-poverty high schools are taught by teachers without a teaching credential or a major in mathematics. So, presuming Mr. Davis and other mis-assigned teachers did not violate some other professional standard, should they be fired for not succeeding at a job that they shouldn’t have had in the first place? And just whom would a principal replace them with if he or she could dismiss them?

Of course, ineffective teachers should be removed if they’re teaching courses they’re certified to teach and, as President Obama recommends, they haven’t improved after having several chances to do so. But it’s hard to argue for removing teachers if they have merely received *ample notice* that they aren’t meeting expectations. Districts must ensure that the conditions under which teachers teach are hospitable to good teaching — that struggling teachers receive high-quality professional development to address identified deficiencies, and that they have the resources to give them a reasonable chance to improve.

Now, let’s imagine that Mr. Davis is reassigned to teach English, the subject in which he majored in college. Suppose that half of his students are English learners and 20% are special needs students. When Mr. Davis earned his teaching credential 10 years ago, he had no courses in bilingual education or special education, nor were any required of him. Since he was hired, he has never received any professional development or coaching to help with the challenges that these students present. Now, let’s say that Mr. Davis has 40 students but only enough textbooks for 30 of them, and he has no budget for duplicating handouts. And, just to complete the dreary picture, let’s say that Mr. Davis has served four different principals over the past five years.

If his current principal warns him repeatedly that his teaching must improve, should he be fired if it does not? Here, too, this action seems unfair and brings us back to a basic question: Where would the principal find someone better than Mr. Davis if he decided to fire him?

Mr. Davis’ tale may be a fictitious one, but the story about teachers in Rhode Island’s Central Falls High School is not. That school had five principals in seven years, and the district has eliminated professional development for those who teach large numbers of English learners and special education students. Did Central Falls Superintendent Frances Gallo have great teachers and a strong principal to replace those she wanted to fire? If so, where did they come from and why weren’t they available when the current batch was hired? And if Dr. Gallo were to cherry-pick the best teachers from neighboring high schools, where will that leave those schools if they also are struggling? (By the way, after firing the en-

tire staff in February, the board of trustees voted three months later to rescind the terminations because of concessions made by the union.)

Perhaps the difficulties experienced by Mr. Davis and the Central Falls High teachers aren't attributable to incompetence, but to a dysfunctional system that doesn't enable them to succeed. Absent adequate support, even the most capable and experienced teachers struggle and become disillusioned. Failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the system undermines its own capacity to provide high-quality teaching to all of its students.

What, then, do we do about Mr. Davis and countless others like him? We must ensure that they work within a highly functional *system* — one that, at a minimum, provides meaningful performance evaluations, high-quality professional development, reasonable class sizes, reliable and stable leadership, and time for planning and collaboration. Such a system gives teachers a real chance to succeed. Then, if fledgling teachers don't improve, administrators should remove them and unions should not stand in the way.

A systems approach to reform will have a much greater effect on teacher quality than simply getting rid of unfit teachers. That's because the largest group

of all — capable teachers whom nobody wants to fire — will become *better* teachers.

### REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

To improve the teaching environment, educators and policy makers need to better understand the challenge. They must view the barriers to quality in terms of "systems," rather than merely the attributes of individual teachers. That's because variations in teaching performance flow largely from variables that have little to do with the qualities of teachers themselves. Thus, improving the quality of the nation's teachers won't come simply from trimming away the weakest performers. Nor will we attract *capable* teachers to failing schools simply by offering them monetary incentives.

Educators and policy makers must adopt a different approach to school accountability than the one that now pervades our nation's school systems. Across those systems, accountability generally operates in one direction only: People with less authority are accountable to those with more. When accountability operates this way, the pressure to perform falls mostly on those at the bottom of the authority chain. These pressures account for much of the costly teacher turnover that is common in low-

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performing schools. Accountability is supposed to improve the performance of a system. But, when only some people in that system are held accountable, the system almost certainly will not change for the better. If anything, things will get worse.

A more promising approach to accountability would require that all members of a system, regardless of one's authority, be mutually obligated to one another. Under this notion of *reciprocal accountability*, people with greater authority would not just monitor performance and impose sanctions when it's lacking, they would be responsible for ensuring that those being monitored have what they need to succeed. Richard Elmore, a Harvard researcher and advocate of this approach, describes it this way:

For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance. This is the principle of 'reciprocity of accountability for capacity.' It is the glue that, in the final analysis, will hold accountability systems together. (Elmore 2002: 5)

To be sure, even an education system that provides the capacity for success can't guarantee that it will come to pass; capacity is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for success. Reciprocal accountability doesn't eliminate personal responsibility or the need to impose sanctions. Instead, it establishes clear standards of performance up and down the system.

When system standards are in place and performance at any level is lacking, we can then ask: Is the problem due *primarily* to an individual's performance or to a failure of a person or group of people to meet standards elsewhere in the system? Or, does it have nothing to do with people at all but, instead, is rooted in flaws in policy or system design that would prevent *any* qualified person from succeeding? When a performance problem can truly be tied to an individual, then others in the system should hold that individual accountable. If not, they should fix whatever else in the system needs fixing.

To improve teacher quality, we must answer these questions:

- How do we create continually self-correcting systems that give teachers and the people who support them a real chance to succeed?
- How do we incorporate meaningful definitions of teacher quality into the policies that govern schools?
- Are we willing to adopt performance standards

and hold people accountable at all levels of the education system?

- Rather than coaxing teachers to the most challenging schools, how do we transform these schools into places where educators want to work?

All of these questions are about capacity, funding, policy, and fundamental human relations. But they're also about the will to frame the problem of teacher quality differently — to give up the short-sighted, overly impatient treatment of underperforming classroom teachers and to embrace a systems view that tries to help *all* teachers become committed, caring, and effective teachers. Not every teacher will be able to meet this high standard, but we must make sure that all of them are given the chance. **K**

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