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COMMENTARY

Charlotte Danielson on Rethinking Teacher Evaluation

By Charlotte Danielson

The idea of tracking teacher accountability started with the best of intentions and a well-accepted understanding about the critical role teachers play in promoting student learning. The focus on teacher accountability has been rooted in the belief that every child deserves no less than good teaching to realize his or her potential.

But as clear, compelling, and noncontroversial as these fundamental ideas were, the assurance of great teaching for every student has proved exceedingly difficult to capture in either policy or practice.

The immediate challenge is that those with the responsibility to ensure good teaching in schools—primarily building administrators—don't always have the skill to differentiate great teaching from that which is merely good, or perhaps even mediocre. This idea was highlighted in **"The Widget Effect,"** a 2009 report from the organization TNTF that had enormous influence on the design of Race to the Top, the federal initiative that required states to implement rigorous systems of teacher evaluation to qualify for billions of dollars in federal grant money.

There is also little consensus on how the profession should define "good teaching." Many state systems require districts to evaluate teachers on the learning gains of their students. These policies have been implemented despite the objections from many in the measurement community regarding the limitations of available tests and the challenge of accurately attributing student learning to individual teachers.

Even when personnel policies define good teaching as the teaching practices that promote student learning and are validated by independent research, few jurisdictions require their evaluators to actually demonstrate skill in making accurate judgments. But since evaluators must assign a score, teaching is distilled to numbers, ratings, and rankings, conveying a reductive nature to educators' professional worth and undermining their overall confidence in the system.

I'm deeply troubled by the transformation of teaching from a complex profession requiring nuanced

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judgment to the performance of certain behaviors that can be ticked off on a checklist. In fact, I (and many others in the academic and policy communities) believe it's time for a major rethinking of how we structure teacher evaluation to ensure that teachers, as professionals, can benefit from numerous opportunities to continually refine their craft.

Simultaneously, it's essential to acknowledge the fundamental policy imperative: Schools must be able to ensure good teaching. Public schools are, after all, public institutions, operating with public funds. The public has a right to expect good teaching. Every superintendent, or state commissioner, must be able to say, with confidence: "Everyone who teaches here is good. Here's how we know: We have a system."

There is professional consensus that the number of teachers whose practice is below standard is very small, probably no more than 6 percent of the total, according to the Measures of Effective Teaching study and others. It's essential, therefore, that school districts ensure that every teacher who receives a continuing contract demonstrates adequate knowledge and skill to promote student learning. In most districts, this is the purpose of the tenure decision, although in some cases that decision falls to the state, thus ensuring a consistent standard of teaching across the state for all career educators. Ohio has done this with its Resident Educator Support and Assessment Program.

Given this landscape, it makes sense to design personnel policies for the vast majority of teachers who are not in need of remediation. And, given the complexity of teaching, a reasonable policy would be one that aims to strengthen these educators' practice. Personnel policies for the teachers not practicing below standard—approximately 94 percent of them—would have, at their core, a focus on professional development, replacing the emphasis on ratings with one on learning.

"A comprehensive personnel policy must not only ensure good teaching on the part of every teacher, it must also ensure opportunities for ongoing professional learning by all teachers."

So what do we know about professional learning?

First, professional learning requires active intellectual engagement. In the context of an evaluation process, this means using observation and evaluation processes that promote active engagement: self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation.

Second, learning can only occur in an atmosphere of trust. Fear shuts people down. Learning, after all, entails vulnerability. The culture of the school and of the district must be one that encourages risk-taking.

Third, a culture of professional inquiry requires challenge as well as support. The culture must include an expectation that every teacher will engage in a career-long process of learning, one that is never "finished." Teaching is simply too complex for anyone to believe that there is no more to learn.

And fourth, policymakers must acknowledge that professional learning is rarely the consequence of teachers attending workshops or being directed by a supervisor to read a certain book or take a particular course. Overwhelmingly, most teachers report that they learn more from their colleagues than from an "expert" in a workshop. When teachers work together to solve problems of practice, they have the benefit of their colleagues' knowledge and experience to address a particular issue they're facing in their classroom.

In practical terms, a comprehensive personnel policy must not only ensure good teaching on the part of every teacher, it must also ensure opportunities for ongoing professional learning by all

teachers, principally through collaborative planning, analysis of student work, and the like.

I look forward to being part of a dialogue among policy leaders and practitioners on what such a comprehensive personnel policy might look like and how it could be implemented. Here are my preliminary thoughts:

- Any system must be able to identify seriously underperforming teachers and be designed to promote professional learning.
- An essential step in the system should be the movement from probationary to continuing status. This is the most important contribution of evaluation to the quality of teaching. Beyond that, the emphasis should be on professional learning, within a culture of trust and inquiry.
- An evaluation policy must be differentiated according to whether teachers are new to the profession or the district, or teach under a continuing contract.
- Novice teachers should be evaluated each year on an instructional framework, supported by a mentor using the same framework. After roughly three years, a decision can be made regarding continuing contract status. Once teachers acquire this status, they are full members of the professional community, and their principal professional work consists of ongoing professional learning.
- Experienced teachers in good standing should be eligible to apply for teacher-leadership positions, such as mentor, instructional coach, or team leader. These positions may carry enhanced compensation or have released time during the regular school day.
- Teachers who serve in leadership roles must receive training in the skills specific to those roles, such as facilitating group work and conducting professional conversations with colleagues.
- Career teachers should be assessed periodically to ensure they are still in good standing.

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Such a comprehensive approach to personnel policy would also impose demands on site administrators, central-office personnel, and union leaders. They must construct a differentiated system, including designing and supporting a mentoring program; selecting teacher leaders and determining their compensation, support, and supervision; and designing collaborative evaluation procedures for novice and experienced teachers and training for evaluators.

Most important, it's essential that site administrators be able to establish a culture within the school conducive to professional learning, one that's supportive as well as challenging. Only then will schools truly be learning organizations.

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