

PHILANTHROPY & PUBLIC EDUCATION

Ensuring Teacher Accountability

IN OUR OPINION

Teacher accountability should be part of a broader system of human capital management in public education. School districts should implement, and the state should encourage, systems that not only measure teachers' year-to-year performance, but that adequately prepare teachers, provide them with rich professional development opportunities and create a challenging career ladder, all while facilitating the process of recruiting, evaluation, rewarding and retaining effective teachers.

“Teacher accountability” refers to a growing movement in the United States to hold school teachers accountable for their work by compensating, promoting or dismissing them based on the results they produce in the classroom, as measured in part by their students’ test scores.

Not surprisingly, teacher accountability efforts can be highly controversial, pitting the interests of politically influential teachers unions against those of would-be reformers. Nonetheless, teacher accountability initiatives have begun to proliferate across the country, stimulated in part by U.S. Department of Education incentives.

BACKGROUND & TRENDS

The teacher accountability movement has its roots in the 1983 report *A Nation At Risk*, which chronicled the shortcomings of America’s public education system and ushered in an era of standards-based education. In the years that followed, standardized testing at the state level became de rigeur, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required school districts not only to test, but to measure student progress.

This opened the door to using students’ scores — and their academic progress — as a tool to measure teacher effectiveness.

In recent years, school districts across the country have adopted — or attempted to adopt — systems that measure teacher performance at least in part through student performance.

Since 2007, at least 11 states have passed legislation related to teacher evaluation, much of which ties those evaluations to student performance. ⁽¹⁾

In Denver, New York and Washington, D.C., for example, student data are one part of revamped teacher evaluations. Denver was among the first major cities to gain national attention for its system of professional compensation for teachers, which provides rewards for professional accomplishments and links pay to student performance. ⁽²⁾

In some locales, such as Denver, teachers unions have been involved in the design of new systems and have been supportive of change. More often, however, significant tension exists between teachers unions and those wishing to reform evaluation systems. Seattle schools, for instance, narrowly missed a delayed opening in 2010 as the union and school district fought over proposals to make student academic performance a part of teacher evaluation. ⁽³⁾

Spurring the trend toward teacher accountability are financial incentives — both from philanthropy and the federal government. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested almost \$300 million in programs in four U.S. cities (including Hillsborough County, FL) to encourage teacher accountability initiatives. And Race To The Top, the competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Education, lists as one of its four core aims:

“Recruiting, evaluating, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and principals.” ⁽⁴⁾

THE SCENE IN FLORIDA

The battle over teacher accountability took center stage in Florida during the 2010 Legislative session. The Florida Senate voted to approve Senate Bill 6 (SB6), which called for ending traditional tenure for teachers hired after July 1, and replacing it with contracts that would base more than 50% of a teacher’s wages on students’ test performance. The House passed a similar bill, but after weeks of acrimonious debate, the measure was vetoed by Gov. Crist.

In August, Florida was among 10 states named winners in the second round of the Race To The Top competition. That win, which brings roughly \$700 million in federal funding for education to Florida, requires each of the state’s 67 school districts to develop plans to base at least 50% of a teacher’s evaluation on student progress on standardized tests. Planning was scheduled to begin in November 2010. ⁽⁵⁾

The effort to revamp teacher evaluation in Hillsborough County, funded by the seven-year, \$100 million grant from the

Gates Foundation, may prove instructional for other districts. The Hillsborough plan takes a systemic approach to teacher “talent management” from recruitment, placement and induction, through evaluation, professional development and the career ladder. When implemented, the program calls for a teacher’s evaluation to be comprised of the principal’s written evaluation, mentor and peer evaluators’ written evaluations, and gains in student achievement. Hillsborough officials are training teachers to be peer evaluators, and working with the University of Wisconsin to develop the methodology for determining student achievement.⁽⁶⁾

PROS AND CONS

Proponents of teacher accountability systems argue that the teacher is THE most important factor in student learning and the traditional system of teacher evaluation and rewards (classroom observation and tenure) is not rigorous enough to meet today’s demands. If the teacher’s job is to advance student learning, they argue, then performance should be measured against that benchmark.

However, the mechanics of some accountability systems — particularly those that measure a teacher by the academic progress students make (value-added systems) are often criticized. Critics argue that students are not taught consistently by the same teacher (student mobility is particularly chronic in low-income neighborhoods) and that student performance is influenced by many factors

including after-school programs, tutoring and other outside academic supports. High-performing students routinely “max out” on standardized tests, thus showing no “gains” from year to year, potentially penalizing their teachers. Likewise, teachers who take on the most challenging students, who may make only modest gains from year to year, could also be penalized.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Instead of focusing solely on teacher evaluation, an alternative model focuses on the entire teacher “life cycle,” from recruitment and selection to induction, in-service supports, evaluation, and professional and career development. Such a “human capital” approach can be challenging — it takes more time and is more deliberate — but it has the potential to be more lasting, and to find greater favor with teachers.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Learning Point Associates: Emerging Trends Reflected in the State Phase I Race To The Top Applications.
- 2) Denver Public Schools.
- 3) Seattle Times.
- 4) Learning Point Associates: Emerging Trends Reflected in the State Phase I Race To The Top Applications.
- 5) Orlando Sentinel, Leslie Postal, “Florida one of 10 winners for Race To The Top grant,” August 24, 2010.
- 6) Empowering Effective Teachers: The Gates Foundation Historic Investment in Hillsborough Schools, Florida Philanthropic Network webinar, June 25, 2010.
- 7) Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Intensive Partnerships to Empower Effective Teachers, 2009.

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEACHER CAREER LADDER

Hillsborough County’s performance-based career ladder for teachers clearly defines the performance level required for each level. The Apprentice period can last four years until adequate student learning gains can be compiled for assessment. At the other end of the spectrum are Teacher Leaders, highly experienced teachers who wish to remain in the classroom.⁽⁷⁾

TEACHER LEADER
MENTOR/PEER
EVALUATOR
MASTER
ADVANCED
CAREER
APPRENTICE

FLORIDA PHILANTHROPIC NETWORK & THE EDUCATION FUNDERS AFFINITY GROUP

Florida Philanthropic Network is a statewide association of grantmakers working to build philanthropy to build a better Florida. FPN’s members are private independent, corporate and family foundations, community foundations, public charity grantmakers and corporate giving programs — from Miami to Jacksonville, Naples to Pensacola — who hold more than \$6 billion in assets (excluding members located outside Florida) and invest more than \$420 million annually to improve the quality of life for our citizens. FPN’s members share a commitment to promoting philanthropy, fostering collaboration and advancing public policy by *Floridians for Floridians*.

Through the years, FPN members have expressed concern about the state of public education in Florida, noting the state’s consistently low rankings on various measures and the challenges of providing adequate public funding. In 2009, a group of FPN members joined together to create the informal Education Funders Affinity Group, with the goal of building stronger partnerships with government around education policy in Florida.

These reports are intended as a tool to build the foundation for productive collaborations between state policymakers and education funders going forward. The viewpoints represented in this Issue Brief do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of any individual FPN member.