

EDUCATION REFORM

The current state of the education reform movement has been referred to as the Civil Rights movement of our time. This description is certainly justified. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared the racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional, recognizing that every child in the United States has the right to quality public education, regardless of personal background. Newly integrated public schools provided exciting arenas of study for those interested in the movement's real impact. In 1966, the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study – often referred to as the “Coleman Study” – sought to determine the degree to which all students were offered equal opportunities for educational success. The study famously concluded for the first time that student achievement is more influenced by a student and school's socioeconomic circumstances than by the school's quality, laying the theoretical precedent for what would later become known as the achievement gap.

In 1983, the Department of Education released “A Nation at Risk”, a landmark report decrying the “rising tide of mediocrity” in America's public schools. While the Coleman Study established the links between poverty and student achievement, *A Nation at Risk* turned the national conversation toward the need to address the inadequacies of American schools by citing America's need to stay competitive within a rapidly changing world economy. *No Child Left Behind* has been seen as the legacy to *A Nation At Risk*. The 2002 legislation's ultimate aim was to have every student score at proficient levels in reading and math on standardized state exams by 2014. Its novel approach represented a more powerful role for the federal government in education, signaling that the issue of inadequate schools had reached a new level of national importance. Schools would be encouraged to improve by the government's new set of high standards and system of salient incentives and disincentives. Critics of the law took issue with its heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing and what they saw as harsh penalties instead of strong supports for schools that failed to meet ambitious test score improvement targets.

Ten years later, education reform still fights to address the educational inequalities that leave millions of children – many of them racial minorities and from low-income households – without access to quality educational opportunities. President Obama's “Race to the Top” initiative, an innovative competition among states for billions of dollars in federal education funds, exemplifies these groups' agendas. The competition pushed states to make policy changes in areas like low-performing school turnarounds and teacher performance. Obama's policies, however, have encountered opposition from critics who disagree with what they see as a penalization of schools that are underperforming. Overall, Obama and his allies are clashing with two historically loyal members of the Democratic base: teachers unions and civil rights groups. This year might feature a major political realignment in education.

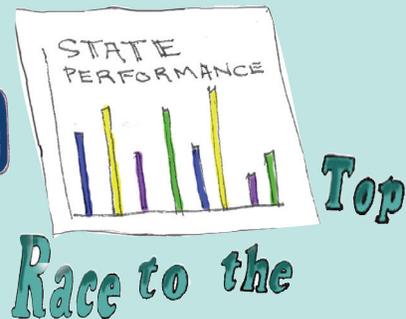
1983



2001



2009



TEACHER EVALUATIONS



Diane Ravitch
Former Assistant Secretary
of Education

The best method to evaluate teachers is by experienced professionals who observe their practice and performance in the classroom, their interactions with students and colleagues, and the quality of student work produced in their classroom (such as essays, projects, and other demonstrations of student learning). Test scores are the least valuable way to evaluate teacher quality because test scores reflect demography and because they may be changed by rote drilling, by cheating, and by the composition of the class.

“Teacher evaluations should be a collective effort. You cannot reduce it down to the individual teacher. We lose so many teachers in the first three years, and I think that points to the lack of support in their development. Teaching is very hard and complex. They have to understand cultural factors that can influence kids, and they also have to manage a classroom and discipline problems. And now you have to handle people in the press saying the worst things about your profession and saying that the solution to underperforming schools is enthusiastic young teachers who will devote 24/7 to the classroom. This is not sustainable as a profession, and it is grossly unfair.”

PRO : By Leah Metcalf

Everyone intuitively knows that having a good or bad teacher is the difference between longtime learning and just dropping in. According to Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, the amount teachers can teach students ranges from 0.5 to 1.5 years of material, depending on the skill of the instructor. How does the United States make sure that only high quality teachers are teaching its students? The best answer is “value added ratings”. Value added ratings show an individual teacher’s impact on a student’s standardized test scores.

Policies need to connect test scores with teacher performance in order to inform decisions that will help students perform better. Detractors of evaluating teachers based on testing cite the discrepancies in classroom makeup and the pressure to perform as flaws in testing strategy. These are fair criticisms, but these discrepancies can be resolved by other means. In New York State’s new teacher evaluation system, for instance, tests will not be the only factor in deciding a teacher’s performance; others, such as the socioeconomic makeup of a class, will be considered in hiring and firing decisions.

The achievement gap in this country mandates that students demonstrate knowledge of subject matter that has been deemed crucial on a national level. Achievement levels can only be raised if the United States ensures that teachers are judged on how well they have taught their students that crucial knowledge, as demonstrated on tests.

CON : By Michelle Abell Jacobo

It is generally agreed that evaluating teaching methods is important to helping students succeed, but some disagree on what kind of evaluation methods should be adopted and how evaluation information should be used.

Successful teacher evaluation methods are still being developed, and many studies that have been conducted lack statistical validity and reliability. A recent study conducted by three researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research, for example, made the claim that a student’s lifetime earning potential is associated with the quality of their teachers. The study itself was designed to establish, at best, a correlation between the two. Popular media, however, communicated a causal effect – in their story, high-value teachers cause students to perform better not only on tests, but also in life. Over-extrapolated interpretations manipulate the average reader, who may not have the time or interest to read the study closely.

Finally, in a future when we are better able to identify stronger teachers, it is still unclear whether the current testing-evaluation system would help to determine what kind of methods high quality teachers are employing to increase student success. If the purpose of evaluating teachers is to help students learn and succeed, it does not make sense to punish or fire teachers who do not “perform” because doing so further limits the teacher pool. Instead of spending time and money on identifying which teachers to fire, resources should be used to find better teaching methods with the potential to systematically change our education system.

HIGH-STAKES TEACHING

“There should be testing – it is still a tool we should use. Through testing, you want to measure what students are exposed to. In addition, you want to use testing to give teachers feedback of what they need more of. In addition to using tests, we should be looking at other evidence of learning such as student work – can they write well, read at grade level, etc. We see students that pass tests but still cannot do college level work. We need more evidence to understand their skills and content knowledge.”



Pedro Noguera
Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education
at New York University



Lee Ann Bell
The Barbara Silver Horowitz Director
of Education at Barnard College

“I think high-stakes testing is a failure in improving the educational system and it has led to the narrowing of curriculum. It creates different incentives and problems that detract from real learning. Kids who find their way to literacy and find excitement in learning through social studies, the arts, physical education, and other subjects that are pushed to the wayside do not get to have the same opportunity as more privileged kids. It is a travesty. Focus on standardized tests also teaches kids that learning is filling in the right answer in the bubble. Learning should be about curiosity and gaining knowledge, to think about big questions.”

PRO : By Samantha Lopez

High stakes testing – the practice of placing major emphasis on standardized test scores in decisions affecting students, teachers, administrators, and schools – is one of the most highly debated issues in education. Some say the tests do more harm than good because they put too much emphasis on scores instead of other measures of student learning, forcing teachers to “teach to the test.” However, they provide a valuable way of directly comparing student performance through a single standard of evaluation. Although everything students learn during the school year cannot be assessed in one test, if there are truly good teachers in classrooms, high test scores will come as a byproduct of good all-around instruction.

It is not a perfect system, and there are problems with what certain tests actually measure. Standardized testing, however, is still the only feasible way to quickly and objectively compare achievement across classrooms and schools. This helps identify areas of success and weakness and allows for the isolation of individual classrooms where problem areas exist.

Standardized tests can also play an important role in the reform of teacher evaluations. A recent study conducted by Harvard and Columbia concluded that test scores are a good way to measure teacher quality and that teachers who raise scores improve students’ long-term prospects, including lifetime earnings. In combination with other forms of evaluation, test scores can provide a valuable first insight into which teachers and schools can be looked to as models of success – and which need immediate attention and reform.

CON : By Irene Izaguirre-Lopez

Public school students in grades three through eight will spend approximately six hours per year taking standardized tests. At this rate, the average 13-year-old will have spent sixty hours taking standardized tests. At first glance, this number may seem low, and maybe even manageable. However, one must remember the untold hours that are spent on test preparation, both in the classroom and at home. Sixty hours over the course of five years is actually a gross underestimation. Proponents of standardized testing state that the tests provide educators and policymakers with objective measures of student achievement and learning, which are highly correlated to teacher effectiveness and overall school quality. Standardized tests, however, only measure a student’s performance at a particular point in time and by no means adequately demonstrate a year’s worth of learning, nor can they assess critical skills and traits like creativity, motivation, curiosity, or critical thinking.

It is important to differentiate between standardized tests and high-stakes testing. While most standardized tests are high stakes, high-stakes testing implies that negative consequences will ensue if results are less than proficient. Because of the shortcoming of standardized tests in measuring real achievement, the link between tests and harsh consequences needs to be reevaluated.

Although the history of standardized testing in the United States is long and ingrained, educators, policymakers, parents, and students can still come together and devise new measures of student achievement that encompass true learning.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

PRO : By Maddy Joseph

It is difficult to hear any description of the educational gaps in the United States and not be stirred to action, or at least overcome by a sense of injustice. These statistics represent American children who do not have access to the educational opportunities they deserve. The achievement gap is also a symbolic device used by advocates to draw attention to the American education crisis. Their framing represents a welcome emphasis on the mission of transforming underperforming schools.

The constant repetition of the achievement gap frame does have the inescapable consequence of shifting our focus onto poor and minority students. While those who talk about the achievement gap do not intend to lay blame on disadvantaged communities and students, the frame has potentially negative consequences – not only does it distract from national educational deficiencies, it also emphasizes the failures of certain schools in these communities.

It would be a greater injustice to allow the debate about education to move away from how to support and fix the schools and districts that serve (or underserve) the 16 million children living in poverty – many of whom are black or Hispanic.

We cannot allow the language of the achievement gap to distract from what it is intended to highlight: that certain students - the vast majority of whom are poor and many of whom are racial minorities - are not getting the opportunities they need and deserve. If talking about the achievement gaps will bring our country to address the inadequacies of such a system, then discussion of achievement gaps is an essential element of the national conversation about education.

The best strategies to narrow (and someday to close) the gaps is to reduce their causes: make sure that all pregnant women have good medical care so that their babies are born healthy; make sure that children have access to good medical care as they grow up, so they are healthy; require class sizes small enough so that children get the time and attention they need to succeed; insist that all schools have a full, rich, balanced curriculum including daily physical education, and time to play, as well as experienced teachers and excellent facilities in which to learn; and ensure that the schools have the social workers, guidance counselors, and librarians needed to help students learn. As you may have deduced, I don't believe that teachers are the cause of achievement gaps. Poverty is.

Shamus Khan

Associate Professor of Sociology
at Columbia University



Before even entering kindergarten, wealthy students perform 60 percent better than poor students on standardized tests. Schools actually do pretty well to close this gap. But it is resilient in part because of out-of-school factors like poverty and inequality and in part because students spend several months every year out of school (where the continued investment of wealthier parents mimics “schooling,” helping the achievement gap return). Schools are often the villains in our story about poverty, inequality, and achievement gaps. But we must remember that out-of-school factors often matter more than in-school factors. In short, to close the gap, we need to worry less about schools and worry more about constructing a coherent poverty and inequality policy.

CON : By Ashley Williams

In 2011, New York white students were approximately twice as likely to meet basic test standards in reading and mathematics as their black and Hispanic counterparts. This dramatic difference in academic performance between black and Hispanic students and their white and Asian counterparts, as well as between higher and lower income students, is defined as the achievement gap. Framing this issue in terms of the underperformance of specific racial minorities and low-income background students evinces an incomplete understanding of the nature of the crisis.

Those who cite the achievement gap as the central issue in education policy often overlook the fact that the gap is a reflection of a national education deficiency. In the current reform movement's haste to “close the gap,” conversations about the relationship between the roles of federal and state governments in education policy, school funding on the district and state level, and the purpose of a strong American education falls to the wayside.

Our entire public education system is in a crisis, and educational issues are merely magnified in poorer communities. The problem affects all American students, even the most privileged. We are still not able to compete internationally: In 2010, the United States ranked 14th in reading skills, 17th in science, and 25th in mathematics out of the 34 nations in the OECD.

Perhaps it is easier for us to address this behemoth of a crisis by focusing on the lack of education given to a certain population of students. But in doing so, we risk making education a racial and socioeconomic issue rather than recognizing it as a national problem.



Columbia's Students for Education Reform (SFER) strives to close the achievement gap and ensure an excellent education for all children by mobilizing the next generation of leaders in education reform. We fill the void of student voices in the education reform movement by advocating the policies that drive improved student outcomes. Through numerous events and informal local workshops, we aim to promote awareness and conversation on closing the achievement gap. We welcome new voices at general body meetings on Monday nights at 8PM.

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