

Student performance must be linked to teacher evaluation

by Bambi Betts

The concept of creating a tighter link between student achievement and teacher evaluation has evoked strong reactions among teachers and administrators. It questions a set of education's "sacred" assumptions and for many, implies the "corporatizing" of education.

Here, we argue that it is the next obvious step on the road to improving learning for all students. Most current teacher evaluation and appraisal schemes rely largely on "inputs":

- ? Did the teacher prepare adequately?
- ? Is the classroom environment conducive to learning?
- ? Does the teacher employ a broad range of appropriate instructional and assessment strategies?
- ? Does the teacher fulfill professional responsibilities (e.g, timely contact with parents)?

The assumption is that these provide the essential pieces of information and, if well done, should lead to learning for most students. Each of these is a vital part of effective "teaching."

The problem is that these types of schemes place a large equals sign between teaching and learning. There are few teachers who would argue that "because I taught it, therefore the students learned it." If this is true, and the primary goal of teaching is to produce student learning, then we have an obligation to extend the equation; we are compelled to look at not only how the teacher does his job, but also at if and what the student learned. Can I claim to be an effective teacher without seriously examining my students' learning? And can principals in the school also make that claim?

While most of our systems closely examine "quantity" and report student learning, the loop is rarely closed. If a child isn't learning, the teacher reports that fact to appropriate audiences, but ultimately bears little responsibility; neither does the principal. We are unwilling to use that data as even a small piece of the information to determine if a teacher is effective.

What if 50 percent of second-graders can't read after spending one year in your school? What if 50 percent of the graduating 12th graders can't write a reasonable editorial? Is this not at least partially the responsibility of teachers? Without some examination of "results," such standards could continue to go unmet. And we talk here of real students, lacking real skills for real life.

"Linking" achievement to teacher evaluation does not automatically imply contract renewal or merit pay. This is about a first step toward being more realistic about what the teaching "profession" is. It is about expanding the current set of tools used to evaluate teachers to include one additional tool, student results. Further steps might include contract renewal and pay issues but these are not the central issue. The central issue is utilizing any tool we have to improve student learning.

The objections to using student results as partial evidence for teacher evaluation seemed to be rooted in several "unwritten" premises:

1. The "product" of education is not and never will be quantifiable enough to use as "hard" evidence of learning.
2. Each individual is so different that it is unfair to hold all to the same standard.
3. There is no real agreement on what meeting a standard looks like; how can we hold ourselves accountable to this mythical "standard"?

4. If we do have a common standard, it would have to be so low that it could undo what we are already achieving.
5. Good teachers will automatically hold themselves accountable: a "system" isn't needed.

It is paradoxical that we regularly "quantify" learning (teacher made tests, standardized tests, "grades"), yet are shy of using that information in any way as a measure of effective teaching.

The "closed" loop of the current classroom makes this an impossible paradox. I choose what to teach, I teach it, I decide how to assess learning and I evaluate what learning took place. But that information should not be used even as a small part to determine if I am an effective teacher. In few if any other human enterprises is there such a closed, unexamined loop.

Regardless of all of these variables, as "professionals" we have an obligation to look at what our "system" produces. A "profession" comprises several ingredients: specific knowledge and skills, clear performance standards, accountability. We as educators deprive ourselves of the status of "professional" if we are unwilling to open ourselves to a healthy examination of the connection between what we do and to what extent students learn.