



# Discerning, Developing and Rewarding Effective Teachers

By James W. Mahoney

Several years ago, while speaking to a group of largely non-educators, I posed the question: “Do you believe we can take something as complex as the development of intellectual capital (aka student learning), measure the effectiveness of this learning through standardized achievement tests, accurately link teachers to the students they taught, and label teachers based on that measure to pay them differently, offer promotions or fire those who aren’t producing positive results?”

The group’s answer was an overwhelming “yes.” Yet, anyone who has ever spent a warm afternoon with middle school students in an un-air-conditioned building teaching them to successfully convert fractions to percentages to decimals, understands how incredibly complex teaching really is. And, it’s usually the people who haven’t been in that classroom who quickly advocate how easy this process would be.

Why is it that the same groups of students, who go from one classroom to the next, behave and engage differently? Is it the subject? Perhaps. But in all likelihood, it’s the teacher. We often treat teachers the same, expect the same of them, and even act as if they are interchangeable assets, but they aren’t.

The unfortunate reality is that the status of groups of teachers is often linked to the financial well-being of their students’ parents. In a wealthy community, a teacher’s status is often quite different from a teacher working in lower-income, rural and urban districts. Status ought to be about the academic progress that teachers help each student make who enters their classroom—not about which students they get.

Research confirms that teachers are our most important asset in schools—accounting for 65 percent of the impact on student progress in a given school year. As states and districts *Race to the Top* and strive to ensure that every classroom has a highly effective teacher, the critical question is this:

*How can we discern, develop  
and reward effective teachers?*

# Discerning Talent

It's a disservice to the complexities of teaching to suggest that student learning can be captured by a single measure. But, it's an equal disservice to suggest that teaching talent and effectiveness are too complex to be discerned. They aren't. How can schools begin to capture and discern the differences among teachers? The use of multiple, strategic measures seems to hold the largest promise and appeal.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, referred to multiple measures in a recent Press Club speech stating, "We must use good and meaningful data—but the real value of data is to show us what is working and should be replicated, as well as what isn't working and needs to be abandoned."

## What should we be measuring?

Using a reliable growth metric, or value-added measure, is critical because it measures the rate of academic progress that districts, schools and teachers are helping students make from year to year. We need to review progress and achievement measures together to gain the most comprehensive picture of student learning. The purpose of progress is to get somewhere, and knowing location relative to the final destination (achievement), is essential.

The Gallup organization has developed an instrument to measure the hope, engagement and well-being of students. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in arguably the largest teacher effectiveness study ever done, is in part reviewing how students perceive teachers, how principals rate them, the effort demonstrated by students and teacher knowledge. Some school districts are using peer review and assistance. Districts are also using rubrics developed by education experts, such as Charlotte Danielson, Robert Marzano and others, to measure important teacher behaviors that support learning.

These are all hopeful approaches to considering different measures. What gets measured, of course, gets improved. When it comes to improving teaching and learning, having an imperfect measure of the right thing is far more important than having a perfect measure of something that tells you little. We need to think creatively and capture the essential elements that showcase effective teaching practices.

## Why is discerning teaching talent so important?

Because understanding who is making great strides in helping his/her students to be successful and how, offers great promise in teacher recruitment, growth and retention. In any profession, we learn from those who do it best. School leaders don't need a rubric or student test results to determine if a classroom is adequately organized and managed. Repeated walkthroughs show first-hand carte blanche boredom, organizational disarray and student misbehavior. Will all of the measures be empirical? No. You don't need to drink a gallon of milk to know it's spoiled. Einstein probably had it right when he suggested, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

Discerning talent must be approached thoughtfully. We can no longer throw our hands up and declare that teaching is too noble of a profession to measure its impact.

We cannot treat teachers as commodities. In this challenge lies enormous opportunities to develop consistent measures that help schools discern teaching effectiveness.

### About the Author

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# Developing Talent



Think of anything you do well. Did you start at that level of proficiency? Probably not. Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson suggests that the real difference between average and superior performance is 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. You build skills and expertise through practice, receiving feedback and improving your performance.

For too long, teachers were given their grade book, lesson planner, box of chalk and a red grading pencil and told to have a good year. There was an expectation that teachers were adequately prepared to teach by their university or college. All of the pre-service programs in the world rarely prepare teachers for their own class full of students with different abilities, motivations, challenges and parents. Teaching is hard work, but we know with focused and personalized support, teachers can improve their skills and become vastly more effective.

Unfortunately, activity is often confused for accomplishment with one-shot professional development marginally related to teachers' real needs. Or, the "race to the right" where teachers load up on courses that warrant a pay raise and have nothing to do with their role in education. If we expect teachers to differentiate instruction to meet students' individual needs, why wouldn't we do the same for teachers' professional development? For example, some teachers may struggle with helping low achievers to succeed while others may want improved ways to work with gifted students. In his recent book, *Drive*, Daniel Pink argues that mastery—the urge to get better and better at something that matters—is very motivating. What better way to motivate teachers than to provide real support for their practice?

## **What does effective professional development and support look like?**

It comes in many forms, including a first-rate principal who knows how to praise, involve and stand beside teachers. A principal who can connect teachers with professional development that is applicable to both their and their students' needs. Effective support includes reviewing student data and planning strategies around that data to inform practice, and learning together in a community. Maybe more than anything—the right support system is grounded in listening and paying attention. Professional development should be focused, goal driven and useful. It should be evaluated, and it should be personalized.

Professional developers should consider these same strategies. Teachers need what their students need. Good teachers make learning targets transparent, provide and encourage feedback and modify their instruction in response to reliable data.

It's hard to imagine that any teacher does not want to get better. Simply labeling a teacher according to student performance results is judgment—not improvement. Will every teacher succeed? No. But neither does every salesman, architect, mechanic or other professional. Teacher ineffectiveness can no longer be tolerated. And, we cannot wait for some teachers to gain the experience necessary to become effective because some of them never will.

# Rewarding Teaching Excellence

Perhaps the most contentious argument in education today is HOW to reward teaching excellence. It's the centerpiece in the current national administration and one of the four assurances in securing *Race to the Top* funds. While there is no clear roadmap, school districts need to explore the question of how to reward effective teachers in a way that is fair, serves to motivate others and honors the profession.

The answer in many circles is "money." The current unity salary schedule treats everyone the same, and acknowledges only experience and formal education beyond a bachelor's degree. Neither is tied, necessarily, to greater teaching effectiveness. But if additional money suggests that teachers have been withholding services waiting for larger paychecks, it is highly disingenuous. Teachers are working as hard as they can now.

## How do you devise a recognition program that is fair, consistent with what is known about motivation and does what it is intended to do?

The first step in devising any program is to be clear about the problem you're trying to solve. Do you want to reward superior individual and team performance? Do you want to attract more qualified math teachers? These questions are at the heart of understanding challenges and solutions.

Once the challenges have been defined, school districts must think through possible approaches. If not done carefully, it is entirely possible to raise salaries, increase costs, de-motivate teachers and have no improvements in student learning. Districts must thoughtfully consider anticipated and unanticipated consequences of various approaches and solutions.

Pink suggests that the three most important intrinsic motivators today include autonomy, mastery and purpose.

- **Autonomy** is being tight about the standards, but flexible about how they can best be taught. Teachers need flexibility and ownership to call their own plays, but must still be held accountable for results.
- **Mastery** is about development—creating and monitoring your own metrics for improvement.
- **Purpose** is doing service larger than oneself, and has a built-in calling for educators.

## What about money?

Many districts have successfully raised student achievement by using a combination of money to reward teachers, teaching teams and individual schools, while at the same time, offering teachers a cadre of support services and professional development to improve.

## What about leadership?

Many teachers would forgo money for the chance to work with capable, inspiring and strong leaders. We know coaching conditions and culture matter immensely in making schools places where students and teachers want to be, learn and grow.

In many respects, talking about who teaches our children and how to develop and reward them for excellence is probably the most discussed and least acted upon topic in America. With *Race to the Top*, growing global competition and an economy that is increasingly dependent on effective education, it's time to move forward with ideas that offer promise and transformation.

Ultimately, who teaches our children matters a great deal. Having the right teachers and school leaders, effectively developing their skills, and rewarding them in ways that are motivating and encouraging are the keys to ensuring that all students have the greatest opportunities for success.



## About Battelle for Kids

Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization that provides strategic counsel and innovative solutions for today's complex educational-improvement challenges.

Our mission-driven team of education, technology, communications and business professionals specializes in creating strategies that advance the development of human capital, the use of strategic measures, and the implementation of effective practices in schools. We partner with state departments of education, school districts and education-focused organizations to advance these strategies with the shared goals of: improving teaching effectiveness and student progress; informing instructional practice in real time; recognizing and rewarding teaching excellence; and aligning goals and maximizing impact in schools.

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