

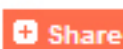
# Improving The Assessment Of Teachers

Tuesday, July 19, 2011

## Opinion



2



*By Stephen Preskill*

WAGNER COLLEGE NEWS SERVICE

How to improve the evaluation of teachers has become a hot topic. For one thing, the U.S. Education Department's Race to the Top competition, which has added billions to reform efforts, demands more selective and rigorous teacher assessment systems. For another, public funds are so scarce that making sure schools recruit and retain the best people has become more urgent than ever. Additionally, a series of research studies about what contributes most to education improvement has consistently shown that good teaching is, by far, the most decisive variable.

So how do we come up with a system that supports and further develops excellent teachers, mentors struggling teachers toward greater effectiveness, fairly and efficiently eliminates the weakest instructors who don't get better, and reflects the complexities of good teaching at its best?

If teacher evaluation is going to work, there is no doubt that good teaching needs to be defined carefully, that a comprehensive program of professional development to help all teachers improve needs to be in place, and that workable but fair procedures for eliminating weak teachers must be established. All of these are non-negotiables.

We also know that, according to studies done by the OECD countries — including the U.S., Canada and most of Europe — far too many school systems don't even evaluate teachers on a regular basis. As a result, many of these teachers do not have a basis on which to gauge their own effectiveness. This must change.

But we can also be certain that teaching — and, therefore, schools — will not significantly improve until we take at least some of the pressure off the evaluation of individual teachers and apply it more systematically and creatively to evaluate how whole groups of teachers work together to help children learn.

School teaching, we now know, can no longer be regarded strictly as a private, individualistic, behind-closed-doors endeavor. Teaching is, in fact, at its best when it is a highly public, collaborative and communal enterprise. When teaching and curriculum development are openly and widely shared, and when colleagues know each other's professional strengths and weaknesses well, it is unquestionably the case that teaching — and, as a result, schooling — gets better. Strong teachers become even stronger, and struggling teachers often blossom.

When communication throughout a school is transparent and free across subject matters and grade levels, educators are better able to work together to serve the children in their charge. They can plan and coordinate lessons and curricula so that they build on what has come before and anticipate what is to come. When a school creates a culture where teaching and learning are shared enterprises, the areas in need of improvement can be more easily spotted, and strategies for making change can be arrived at collaboratively. Such collaboration pushes everyone to perform at their best.

Of course, we will always need to evaluate individual teachers, and these individual evaluations will always figure prominently in any teaching assessment system. But because teaching is increasingly a public and a shared enterprise, all educators must be involved in assessing how every professional is contributing to a culture that is designed, above all, to help kids learn. Future systems of evaluation must put more far more emphasis on whole school effectiveness and improvement and on the role that individuals are playing in supporting teamwork, mutual accountability and responsibility for attaining shared goals.

The next step for evaluating teaching, therefore, must pair measures of whole school improvement with the assessment of individual performance. Only then will teacher evaluation begin to capture the complexities of K-12 instruction and begin to meet the challenges of 21st century school reform.

*Stephen Preskill is chairman of the Education Department at Wagner College, a U.S. News & World Report Top 25 regional university located on Staten Island in New York City. You can email Dr. Preskill at [stephen.preskill@wagner.edu](mailto:stephen.preskill@wagner.edu).*