

Incompetent Teachers or Dysfunctional Systems?

Re-framing the Debate on Teacher Quality and Accountability

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This work was supported through funding from the Ford Foundation and by Teachers Network, a New York-based national nonprofit organization that leverages the creativity and expertise of a national and international community of outstanding educators to transform public schools into creative learning communities. Over the past three decades, Teachers Network has brought together 1.5 million classroom teachers in over 20 network affiliate communities for professional development that hones both classroom practice and instructional leadership. A recent study by Teachers Network and the Center for Teaching Quality in North Carolina found that teacher collaboration and teacher leadership networks contribute to teacher quality by retaining and developing effective classroom teachers.



Introduction

Fifty years ago most of the education policy in America was shaped at the local level by educators, education experts, and elected school boards. The primary role of the federal and state government was to support public schools and to supplement local funding. In recent decades, however, school funding has shifted from municipalities to state and federal government giving leverage to lawmakers who have taken an increasingly active role in the way schools are run. This shift occurred largely in response to pressure to address injustices caused by segregated schools, poverty, and inequitable funding. Not surprisingly, policy debates over matters such as academic standards, standardized testing, and teacher certification have become highly contentious, political, and polarized. *Change Wars*, the title of Michael Fullan's new book about school reform in America, aptly captures the tenor of today's debates in education.¹

Recently, however, the warring parties have found common ground on two matters about the current state of the nation's schools: (1) there is a large and unacceptable achievement gap between rich students on the one hand and poor and minority students on the other; and (2) improving *teacher quality* is the single most important thing policy makers and education officials can do to close this gap. This second point was reflected in a recent report from the Brookings Institution:

*[U]ltimately, the success of U.S. public education depends upon the skills of the 3.1 million teachers managing classrooms in elementary and secondary schools around the country. Everything else—educational standards, testing, class size, greater accountability—is background, intended to support the crucial interactions between teachers and their students. Without the right people standing in front of the classroom, school reform is a futile exercise.*²

Congress and the Obama administration will soon craft the next iteration of their education strategy when they consider how to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal government's primary vehicle for school funding and the law that funded the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There are clear signals that the administration intends to place *teacher quality* at the center of this strategy. In 2007, President Obama made this observation in his remarks at the annual meeting of the National Education Association: "The single most important factor in determining [student] achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from. It's not who their parents are or how much money they have—it's who their teacher is." The federal Race to the Top program, the creation of United States Education Secretary Arne Duncan, will provide over

\$4 billion, a sum that the administration has said it will soon augment, in grants to a small number of states who, among other things, promise to staff their schools with “effective” teachers.

While there is widespread agreement on the importance of teacher quality, there is considerable disagreement about what should be done to improve it, or even what teacher quality means. A growing number of researchers, policy makers, and writers in the popular press are promoting a seemingly simple and straightforward solution: remove poor quality teachers from the workforce. In the past, policy makers have dismissed this “draconian” solution over concerns about teacher rights and strong opposition from teachers unions, but many are re-thinking their position in view of claims that this approach is justified on the grounds of social justice and the ends it will achieve for students.

Despite the growing popularity and the seemingly common sense appeal of this approach to improved teacher quality, it suffers from three fundamental flaws that prevent it from accomplishing all that its advocates claim it will. First, it ignores other correctable problems like teacher attrition that do more to diminish overall teacher quality than the presence of incompetent teachers. Second, it falsely assumes there is a ready supply of effective teachers to replace those who would be removed. Third, it fails to recognize that struggling teachers often do not have adequate support and resources that give them a reasonable chance to succeed. While there are some classroom teachers who simply entered the wrong profession, others who lost their will or ability to help students succeed, and still others who have become unforgivably abusive to their students, poor teaching is more often the result of poorly functioning systems than it is of individual shortcomings.

I will begin by examining the case in favor of teacher removal and then describe the three problems with this approach. Finally, I will offer an alternative solution that addresses the problem of unfit teachers but, more important, also makes significant improvements to the overall quality of teaching in our schools.

Addition by Subtraction: The Case for Teacher “De-selection”

School officials, policy makers and some academics and superintendents have publicly and persistently complained that too many teachers are simply lost causes who have to be dispatched if there is any hope schools can be saved. Teachers have become the demons to be slain if school reform is to succeed. Eric Hanushek, an educational researcher at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, is convinced that poor quality teachers are to blame for America’s education woes. He writes: “The bottom end of the teaching force is harming students. Allowing ineffective teachers to remain in the

classroom is dragging down the nation.”³ He supports this position using a statistical model showing that significant gains in student achievement could be obtained simply by removing underperforming teachers. He argues that since teacher mentoring, professional development and other efforts to improve teacher quality have failed (a claim that he does not substantiate), education officials have no choice but to enact “de-selection” policies that would make it easy for principals to remove their least effective teachers. Hanushek proposes for the nation’s schools what Jack Welch, the legendary CEO did each year at General Electric: fire the bottom 10% of the company’s poorest performers.

The long-standing controversy about what to do with ineffective teachers has been re-fueled recently in the public media. Nikolas Kristof, an Op-Ed writer for *The New York Times*, wrote: “It’s difficult to improve failing schools when you can’t create alternatives such as charter schools and can’t remove inept or abusive teachers. In New York City, for example, unions ordinarily prevent teachers from being dismissed for incompetence — so the schools must pay failed teachers their full salaries to sit year after year doing nothing in centers called ‘rubber rooms.’”⁴ Journalist Steven Brill’s disturbing exposé last fall in *The New Yorker* about these “rubber rooms” was greeted enthusiastically by union critics like Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review* who said, “This is just a small illustration of a larger mess. America’s school systems are a disaster...But of all the myriad problems with public schools, the most identifiable and solvable is the ludicrous policy of tenure for teachers.”⁵

But it is not just the pundits or researchers like Hanushek who think teacher quality has been severely compromised by tenure policies that make it difficult to remove teachers.⁶ Joel Klein, the chancellor of New York City’s schools, said recently, “The three principles that govern our system are lockstep compensation, seniority, and tenure. All three are not right for our children.”⁷ In an article co-written with Al Sharpton, they argue, “Previous efforts to improve teacher quality have failed because they have misdiagnosed the problem... Instead of raising barriers to the teaching profession, government officials must work much harder to identify and reward the best teachers—and dismiss the worst ones.”⁸ Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of schools in Washington D.C., has placed teacher quality at the center of her reform agenda and has attempted to negotiate a deal with the local teachers union (unsuccessfully, so far) to swap job security for higher compensation. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, Superintendent Ray Cortines announced recently that the district would increase its scrutiny of beginning teachers to make sure ineffective ones are not granted tenure after two years in the classroom. He made this announcement after learning that less

than 2% of the probationary teachers in his district are denied tenure. A task force appointed by Mr. Cortines is now working on a comprehensive new evaluation plan for all teachers in the district.⁹

Political leaders are also taking a stand on teacher tenure and its effect on teacher quality. In 2005 California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger actively campaigned for a ballot initiative that would have made it easier for districts to fire teachers.¹⁰ Even President Obama weighed in on this issue in a March, 2009, speech to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce describing his school reform plan. “Let me be clear: If a teacher is given a chance or two chances or three chances but still does not improve, there's no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences.”¹¹ Obama’s concerns about incompetent teachers are addressed in his administration’s Race to the Top program, which requires districts to evaluate teachers annually and to use gains in standardized test scores in decisions about compensation, tenure, and dismissal.¹²

The “if-only-we could-fire-them” argument has given hope to conservatives and liberals alike that such a simple solution will help solve America’s education crisis, and there is growing bi-partisan support for fundamental changes in tenure and dismissal policies even if doing so is resisted by teacher unions.

An Argument That Does Not Add Up

If, for argument’s sake, we put aside questions about the rights of teachers and assume that it would be easy to de-select ineffective ones, how much would this improve the nation’s schools and narrow the achievement gap as advocates predict it would? Unfortunately, very little. While districts should do more to remove teachers who truly do not meet an acceptable definition of teacher quality, this silver bullet solution—i.e., get-the-lousy-teachers-out-of-here—will not solve the larger teacher quality problem. What’s worse, as long as policy makers and unions fight over *this* issue and are thereby diverted from other more pressing threats to teacher quality (described below) there is little chance of achieving the ultimate goal that we all embrace: closing the student achievement gap. The case for addition by subtraction is a weak one, but the good news is that there are promising alternatives that can significantly improve teacher effectiveness and the quality of our schools. Before I describe these alternatives I will describe three problems with the case for teacher “de-selection.”

First, it ignores and draws attention away from other factors that diminish teacher quality far more than teacher incompetence. In many urban school districts, staffing statistics show that more

good teachers are lost than bad ones are retained. In New York City, for instance, the Department of Education reports that 36% of the city's teachers hired in 2004-05 quit after just three years. Granted, some of the beginning teachers who left were likely not well-suited for teaching, but even if half of them fell into this category, 18% of the city's best new teachers walked out, along with millions of dollars invested in their preparation. The costs associated with recruiting, screening and training replacement teachers should not be underestimated. The Alliance for Education estimated the annual cost of teacher turnover (not including retirements) to be \$363million in the state of New York.¹³ And these costs do not reflect the non-monetary costs and the dysfunction caused by the constant churning of teachers that is common in low-performing schools.

In addition to teacher attrition, teacher quality is severely compromised in many low-performing schools when teachers are assigned to courses in which they have little subject matter knowledge. Again, in New York City's high schools, 32% of all core academic subjects were taught by out-of-field teachers in 2003-04.¹⁴ These "mis-assignments" occur when district administrators do not have enough teachers qualified to teach a subject like math, science, or English, and they are forced to assign under-qualified teachers.

Let's compare these statistics with the number of unfit teachers that administrators like Joel Klein might want to fire. Steven Brill was talking about one-twentieth of one percent of the district's teaching workforce who landed in New York City's rubber rooms.¹⁵ Perhaps those who end up there represent only the worst of the worst, but the City's Department of Education reports that only 1.8% of its teachers now receive an unsatisfactory rating by their administrators. One might concede this percentage is low because, like administrators in many other districts, they are conducting only cursory evaluations that would not justify low teacher ratings.¹⁶ But even if we assume the percentage of incompetent teachers in a school is as high as 5%, as suggested by studies that examine administrator and teacher perceptions about incompetence,¹⁷ this number pales in comparison to the stunningly high numbers of mis-assigned teachers and those who leave the profession voluntarily. The cost of *these* problems is far greater than the loss of revenue paid in salaries to one-twentieth of one percent of New York's idle rubber room teachers.

Curiously, while attrition of effective teachers and mis-assignments do far more to diminish teacher quality (and student performance) than incompetence, these problems have not generated anything close to the public uproar that ineffective teachers have. Perhaps it is because journalists know that quick-fixes grab headlines, and policy makers assume attrition and mis-assignments are facts of life in schools that are inherently unattractive places to work. But in fact teacher mis-

assignments and attrition are no more a fact of life than the outdated and costly practices that force the public to pay incompetent teachers to sit in rubber rooms. Researcher Richard Ingersoll found that teacher mis-assignments (which are made 27% of the time in core courses in the nation's high-poverty schools¹⁸) are not primarily a symptom of intractable teacher shortages; in other words, for example, that there just aren't enough math teachers to fill open positions at these schools. Rather, he found that conditions in high-poverty schools can be improved through competent principal leadership, reasonable class size, better compensation, and other collegial support making it easier to fill these positions with qualified teachers.¹⁹

Further, leaders in some districts have dramatically reduced teacher attrition and mis-assignments by making fundamental improvements to the teaching environment.²⁰ The important point here is that attrition and mis-assignments *as well as* incompetence can and should be addressed, but one should not lose sight of the fact that far more students fail to learn and far more money is wasted as a result of one set of problems than by the other currently in vogue.

A second flaw in the “if-only-we-could-fire-them” argument is that even if districts could easily get rid of unfit teachers, teacher quality would improve only if a sufficient supply of good ones was available to take their place. In fact, the nation's lowest-performing schools have for years faced severe shortages of teachers who are even minimally qualified. This is why many of these schools continue to employ ones who are un-credentialed and teaching out-of-field, despite being out of compliance with NCLB, which prohibits the use of under-qualified teachers.

Of course, school officials like Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee are keenly aware of the supply problem that would be exacerbated if they could force more teachers out. Joel Klein's solution is to remove the barriers new teachers must cross to enter the field, a position he defends by claiming that teaching credentials are a poor predictor of teacher quality. Michelle Rhee believes she can attract quality replacements by offering candidates a chance to earn as much as \$130,000 per year (the current average teacher salary in Washington D.C. is \$65,902). Even if these separate staffing strategies worked—a supposition that is highly questionable—they treat only the symptoms of the teacher quality problem and not the conditions that cause them.

This brings us to the third and most serious flaw in the “if-only-we-could-fire-them” argument. Struggling teachers, the ones proponents of this approach so quickly want to fire, often do not get a reasonable chance to succeed. To illustrate the problem, let's imagine that a high school principal has observed one of his teachers—let's call him Mr. Davis—struggling with an algebra class. Each time the principal comes to Mr. Davis's class he notes that several students are not paying

attention and that he has difficulty explaining concepts from the textbook. The principal has also discovered that test results from Mr. Davis's algebra students from last year showed no overall improvement. The principal would seem to be justified in telling Mr. Davis that he would seek to dismiss him if he doesn't see improvement. Mr. Davis has now been put on notice and been given a chance to improve. If he doesn't, should he be fired? What if it turned out that Mr. Davis was really an English teacher and, like many of the teachers in New York City, he was teaching algebra only because the principal could not find a qualified math teacher? Is Mr. Davis really an incompetent teacher? Should he be sent to a "rubber room" if he doesn't do better? Perhaps one would make an exception under these extraordinary circumstances.

But it turns out Mr. Davis's circumstances aren't so extraordinary. As noted earlier in Richard Ingersoll's research, many teachers are in the same boat, not just in New York City but in most of the nation's high-poverty schools. A recent national Education Trust study found that four in ten math classes in high-poverty high schools are taught by teachers without a teaching credential or a major in mathematics.²¹ So, unless Mr. Davis and other mis-assigned teachers were to violate some other professional standard, should they be fired for not succeeding at a job they should not have had in the first place? Who would a principal replace them with anyway if he or she were able to dismiss them?

Surely, however, ineffective teachers should be removed if they've been assigned to courses they are certified to teach and, as President Obama recommends, they have been given several chances to improve and haven't. But it's hard to make the case to remove them if giving them a chance simply means giving *ample notice* that they are not meeting expectations. The district must ensure that the conditions under which teachers work are hospitable to good teaching—that struggling teachers receive quality professional development to address identified deficiencies, and that they have the resources that will give them a reasonable opportunity to improve.

Suppose Mr. Davis is re-assigned to teach English—the subject he majored in in college. Let's also suppose that half of his students are English learners and a quarter of them are special needs students. Ten years ago, when Mr. Davis earned his teaching credential, he took a course on bilingual education, but none was required in special education. After being hired, Mr. Davis has never received any professional development or coaching to help with the challenges these students present. While it might seem like piling on to make a point, let's say Mr. Davis has 40 students, only enough textbooks for 30 of them, and no budget for duplicating handouts. And to complete the dreary picture let's add that he has had four different principals over the past five years.²² If his

current principal warns him repeatedly that his teaching must improve, should he be fired if it doesn't? Here, too, this action doesn't seem appropriate, and even if the principal could fire him, we must ask again, would there be someone better with whom to replace him? Perhaps the problem is not that Mr. Davis is incompetent (although he could be) but rather that the system is dysfunctional—dysfunctional because it is unable to offer an environment that gives a teacher like Mr. Davis a chance to succeed.

Giving Teachers a Real Chance at Success

What then do we do about Mr. Davis and countless others working under untenable teaching conditions? Even President Obama does not seem to think it's enough simply to put the ineffective ones on notice. Responding to a question at a town hall meeting about how he would define teacher quality, the President said:

*"...we want to work with teachers to figure out how do we get peer review, how do we have evaluation—I was just talking to Bill Gates yesterday and he was talking about the use of technology where you can use videos to look at really successful teachers and how they interact with their students, how they're monitoring students, et cetera, and then you bring in the teachers at the end of the day and, just like a coach might be talking to his players about how you see how on that play you should have been here and you could have done that—same thing with teachers. But they don't get that feedback. Usually, especially beginning teachers are completely isolated. They're in this classroom—they're sort of just thrown in to sink or swim. Instead, let's use a variety of mechanisms to assess and constantly improve teacher performance."*²³

President Obama recognizes that teachers do not have a chance to succeed if they are left alone without support to help them improve. To be fair to Chancellors Klein and Rhee, they too believe teachers need support to be effective. In his proposal for transforming the teaching profession, Klein says, "Fledgling teachers should receive better professional development support, including on-the-job mentoring and supervision from peers and master teachers." Under Rhee's direction, the District of Columbia Public Schools have developed an impressive new system of teacher evaluation which, if implemented well, will provide helpful feedback to teachers under review.

But what if districts don't provide this kind of assistance, or the quality of assistance is poor? If little is done to help a struggling teacher like Mr. Davis succeed, should he be held accountable or should the district be held accountable in some way? Before we address this critical

policy question, we must devote a bit more attention to the question of what it really means to have a chance at success. In addition to meaningful performance evaluation of teachers that is tied to high-quality professional development, peer mentoring, and classroom assignments that effectively match their training and preparation, teachers must also have supports such as:

- Adequate time for planning and collaboration
- A trusting and respectful professional environment
- Stable, competent, and accountable leadership
- Reasonable class sizes
- Adequate access to supplies and quality learning materials
- Current and reliable data about students' academic achievement
- Minimal bureaucratic interference
- Special assistance through programs like peer-assistance and review when one's performance remains unsatisfactory²⁴

These *system* supports give teachers a real chance to succeed, and if fledgling teachers don't improve when these supports are present, they should be removed. And if a school district gives its teachers a reasonable chance at success, unions should be willing to accept dismissal processes that can be conducted fairly and expediently. That's exactly what Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), announced recently that her union was prepared to do. In a January 2010 speech titled, *A New Path Forward*, she said, "We recognize...that too often due process can become a glacial process. We intend to change that. We will lead the way in developing a fair, efficient protocol for adjudicating questions of teacher discipline and, when called for, teacher removal."²⁵

The AFT seems serious about this pledge, having engaged the services of the federal government's compensation czar, Ken Feinberg, to develop a new protocol for teacher dismissals. But this groundbreaking offer was made in conjunction with a call for other system reforms. Weingarten says, "We are prepared to work with any district willing to work with us to take both steps: to design and implement a real teacher development and evaluation system and to create a due process system that's aligned to it. But only if they're prepared to do both." Teacher evaluations must be comprehensive and robust; there must be professional standards to assess teacher practice; and teachers must have other supports like the ones listed above to ensure they have a reasonable chance to succeed. Absent these supports, even the most capable and experienced teachers are likely

to struggle and become disillusioned. Ironically, the system becomes self-defeating by undermining its own capacity to develop talented teachers and provide quality education to all of its students.

The bargain Weingarten offers here is very different from the one Chancellor Rhee made to her union in Washington D.C. Both want to make it easier to remove unfit teachers, but Rhee's bargaining chip has been compensation; Weingarten's is better support, and it is likely to be the more attractive offer to teachers. As Thomas Toch, Co-Director of Education Sector in Washington D.C. observes:

It's hard to overstate the importance to school reform of creating a more professional working environment in teaching. In a national survey of public schools, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and Public Agenda found that if given a choice between two otherwise identical schools, 76 percent of secondary teachers and 81 percent of elementary teachers early in their careers would rather be at a school in which administrators strongly supported teachers than at a school that paid significantly higher salaries.²⁶

Thus far union members in Washington have rejected Chancellor Rhee's offer of additional compensation, but perhaps now the union and Rhee will come back to the table to consider the one put forward by Weingarten. They should, because it offers four additional benefits that will improve the quality of the teaching environment—benefits that are far more significant than simply being able to get rid of unfit teachers.

- 1) Many struggling teachers (like Mr. Davis) will turn out to be effective teachers, eliminating the costs associated with recruiting and training suitable replacements.
- 2) High rates of teacher turnover, which are especially harmful to students in high-poverty schools, will be reduced. Schools will lose fewer of the effective teachers they have already invested in.
- 3) When teaching positions become available, schools will have larger supplies of quality replacements from which to choose because supportive schools, even in high-poverty neighborhoods, become more attractive places to work.
- 4) The largest group of all—capable teachers who nobody wants to fire and who aren't planning to leave—will become better teachers. That's because well-administered teacher evaluation and quality support raise *everyone's* game.

If Weingarten's proposal for dismissals were to be adopted in Washington, D.C., it would not be the first school district to do so. In places like Montgomery County, Maryland; Toledo, Ohio; and Poway, California, district and union officials have for years used peer-assistance-and-review (PAR) programs to provide rigorous evaluations and intensive support to struggling teachers. The goal of PAR is to help teachers improve, and when they don't they either leave voluntarily or they are forced out. In Toledo, PAR was first developed by local school officials *and* union leaders over 28 years ago; the program has trimmed nearly 500 underperforming teachers from the district. This number is impressive, but the test of any system of evaluation is not just the number of unfit teachers it pushes out but the number of teachers it helps get better. Thomas Toch writes about the benefits of systems like PAR:

Unlike traditional teacher evaluations, the systems in Toledo and Connecticut are part of programs to improve teacher performance, not merely weed out bad apples. They are drive-in rather than drive-by evaluations. At a time when research is increasingly pointing to working conditions as being more important than higher pay in keeping good teachers in the classroom, the teachers in the comprehensive evaluation programs say that the combination of extensive evaluations and coaching they receive makes their working conditions more professional, and thus more attractive.²⁷

The problem is that only a handful of districts in the nation use PAR. A likely reason that its use has not spread is that district officials and local unions in places that use it have had to work collaboratively in building strong *systems* of support that enable teachers and their students to succeed. This is hard work that demands trust, mutual respect, and a spirit of compromise. Other districts will not adopt similar programs as long as relations between district officials, union leaders, and the teachers who elect them remain acrimonious and adversarial. Public pressure should be placed on *all* parties to work collaboratively and in good faith toward solutions that have proven to be successful elsewhere.

Improving Teacher Quality: Re-framing the Problem

Improving the quality of the teaching environment will require a better grasp of the challenge. Educators and policy makers must come to view the barriers to quality in terms of “systems” rather than attributes of individual teachers.²⁸ That's because variations in teaching performance are largely a function of variables—e.g., pre-service preparation, induction programs for new teachers, evaluation, professional development, school climate, and time for professional

collaboration to name a few—that have little to do with the qualities of teachers themselves. More fundamentally, policy makers, school board members, and school administrators cannot agree on a clear vision of what quality teaching looks like. In its Race to the Top program, the Obama administration has attempted to solve this problem by issuing these simple definitions. An “effective teacher” is one whose students achieve one grade level of academic growth on standardized tests. A teacher is deemed “highly effective” if his or her students improve by one and one-half grade levels.²⁹ These bare-bones, outcomes-based definitions establish clarity and they will undoubtedly make it easy to evaluate (and potentially remove) teachers, but they have little connection with richer concepts of teacher quality that are imbedded in the professional teaching standards adopted by many states and by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.³⁰ They say nothing about a teacher’s ability to develop social skills, her respect for diversity, or her ability to stimulate interest in subjects and to produce learning that is meaningful over time and relevant outside of school.

A systems perspective leads one to realize that improving the quality of the nation’s teaching force will not occur simply by trimming away the weakest performers. Nor will it help to entice *capable* teachers to failing schools simply by offering additional compensation. Student learning will improve only when education policy is tied to more meaningful definitions of teacher quality and when the conditions in schools enable teachers to meet these standards.

Getting there will require educators and policy makers to adopt a different approach to school accountability than the one that is currently pervasive in our nation’s school systems. Accountability in most segments of the system operates in one-direction only: people with lesser authority are accountable to people with more. The job of people at the top is to make sure people below meet standards and comply with regulations. District offices and government agencies also provide funding and support services to schools, but standards that define adequate levels of funding and support seldom exist. In the absence of such standards, one cannot say what these offices and agencies are really expected to provide making it impossible to hold them accountable.

What is worse, when accountability operates in one-direction, pressures to perform trickle down to the bottom of the authority chain. The sheer weight of these pressures (in the form of high stakes testing, threats of school closure, and frequent public reminders of school failure) and the unfairness that is felt when support and funding from above is missing cause teachers to become discouraged, if not resistant and disdainful. These pressures account for much of the costly teacher turnover that is common in low-performing schools. The purpose of accountability is to improve

the performance of a system, but when only some in that system are held accountable it virtually guarantees that nothing will change. In fact, it makes matters worse.

An alternative and more promising approach to accountability would require all members of a system, regardless of one's authority, to be mutually obligated to one another. Under this notion of *reciprocal accountability*, people with greater authority don't just monitor performance and impose sanctions when it is lacking; they are responsible for ensuring that the ones being monitored have what they need to be successful. Richard Elmore, a Harvard researcher and advocate of this approach, describes it this way:

For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance. This is the principle of 'reciprocity of accountability for capacity.' It is the glue that, in the final analysis, will hold accountability systems together.³¹

When the educational system provides the capacity for success, there is no guarantee, of course, that individuals will be successful because capacity is merely a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. Reciprocal accountability doesn't eliminate personal responsibility or the need to impose sanctions. Instead, it establishes clear standards of performance up and down the system. In her new book, The Flat World and Education, Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond describes the virtues of two-way accountability and the types of standards that should be adopted in our systems of education:

Standards are not just for students. If all students are to have the opportunity to learn, then there must be standards for teachers, schools districts, and states as well. Thus in addition to standards for learning for students, there should be standards of practice that can guide professional training, development, teaching, and management at the classroom, school, and systems levels, and opportunity to learn standards that ensure appropriate resources to achieve desired outcomes. In this system of shared accountability, standards cannot be reduced to the administration of tests and the attachment of sanctions to low test scores.³²

When system standards are established and performance at any level is lacking, we can then ask: Is the problem due *primarily* to an individual's performance or to a failure of a person or group of people to meet standards elsewhere in the system? Or, does it have nothing to do with people at all but rather to flaws in policy or system design that would prevent any qualified person from

succeeding? A basic tenet of systems theory is that if a large portion of people in the same position are failing, the problem is likely due to a system failure or at least to others who have not provided adequate support to those who are failing. When so many high-poverty schools and the teachers in them struggle to perform, the problem cannot be resolved *simply* by holding individual teachers accountable. When the source of a performance problem can truly be tied to individuals then they should be held accountable. If not, something elsewhere in the system needs to be corrected.

Successful Teachers—or a System That *Enables* Them to be Successful?

In late 2008, Time Magazine's cover story focused on Michelle Rhee and her efforts to reform Washington, D.C.'s schools. The author, Amanda Ripley, wrote: "In the view of Rhee and reformers like her, the struggle to fix America's failing school system comes down to a simple question: How do you get the best teachers and principals to work in the worst schools?"³³ If reformers like Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and current U. S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, fail to solve this problem, they will undoubtedly blame the teachers' unions which may very well have prevented them from reforming schools the way these reformers want. But the reason for the failure will also have been an unwillingness to recognize that teacher quality is a function of two things: the people themselves *and* the quality of the system that is created for them in large part by leaders with the authority that people like Klein, Rhee and Duncan hold.

If the shift in control over America's public schools from local municipalities to state and federal officials is to mitigate educational injustices, and if reformers are serious about eliminating the student achievement gap, the questions we must answer are: How do we create continually self-correcting systems that give teachers and the people who support them a real chance to succeed? How do we incorporate meaningful definitions of teacher quality into the policies that govern schools? Are we willing to adopt performance standards and hold people accountable at *all* levels of the educational system? Rather than coaxing teachers to the worst schools, how do we invest resources and transform struggling schools into places where educators *want* to work?

All of these questions are about capacity, funding, policy, and fundamental human relations. But they are also about the will to frame the problem of teacher quality differently—to give up the short sighted, overly impatient treatment of underperforming classroom teachers and to embrace a systems view that tries to help *all* teachers become committed, caring, and effective teachers. Not every one of them will be able to meet this high standard, but we must be sure they are all given the chance.

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- ¹ Fullan, M. (2009). *Change Wars*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.
- ² Gordon, R., Kane, Thomas J., & Staiger, Douglas O. (2006). *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*, The Brookings Institution.
- ³ Hanushek, E. A. (2008). Teacher Deselection. In D. G. a. J. Hannaway (Ed.), *Creating a New Teaching Profession*. The Urban Institute Press.
- ⁴ Kristof, N. D. (October 15, 2009). Democrats and Schools. *The New York Times*.
- ⁵ Goldberg, J. (September 12, 2009). *Teacher Tenure Must Go*. Retrieved January 4, 2010, from www.unionleader.com
- ⁶ Teacher tenure policies do not prevent districts from firing teachers; districts must demonstrate cause such as incompetence or immoral conduct, but many districts do not try because doing so can be a time consuming and expensive process.
- ⁷ Brill, S. (August 31, 2009). The Rubber Room. *The New Yorker*.
- ⁸ Klein, J., & Sharpton, A. (March 12, 2009). *Teacher Rx: The Perfect Storm For Reform*. Retrieved January 4, 2010
- ⁹ Felch, J., Garrison, J., & Song, J. (December 20, 2009). Bar set low for lifetime job in L.A. schools. *Los Angeles Times*.
- ¹⁰ The ballot initiative called, "Put the Children First Act," was supported by 45% of the voters and did not become law.
- ¹¹ These comments were part of speech President Obama's delivered to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, 2009.
- ¹² Race to the Top also requires school districts to use the teachers' evaluations as the basis for the professional development provided to teachers.
- ¹³ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2005). *Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States*. Retrieved June 1, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TeacherAttrition.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Ingersoll, R. (November 25, 2008). Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses, Especially in America's High-Poverty and High-Minority Schools. Retrieved June 4, 2010, from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/core-problems-out-of-field-teaching-persists-in-key-academic-courses-esp>
- ¹⁵ Steven Brill's piece in *The New Yorker* originally reported the percentage as one-half of one percent. This error was noted later in the online version of the article.
- ¹⁶ It's hard to know for sure because teacher evaluations in most districts are seldom more than perfunctory exercises. The writer Thomas Toch describes typical teacher evaluations as "drive-bys" explaining that they consist "...of a single, fleeting classroom visit by a principal or other building administrator untrained in evaluation who wields a checklist of classroom conditions and teacher behaviors that often don't focus directly on the quality of instruction." Toch, T. (2008). Fixing Teacher Evaluation. *Educational Leadership*, 66(2), 32-37.
- ¹⁷ See, for instance, Tucker, P. D., & Kindred, K. (1997). Legal context for teacher evaluation. In J. H. & S. (Ed.) (Eds.), *Evaluating teachers: A guide to current thinking and implications for practice* (pp. pp. 59-90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Also, see Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The Widget Effect: The New Teacher Project*.
- ¹⁸ Jerald, C. D., & Ingersoll, R. (2002). *All Talk No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching*. University of Pennsylvania: GSE Publications.
- ¹⁹ Ingersoll, R. (November 25, 2008). *Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses, Especially in America's High-Poverty and High-Minority Schools*. Retrieved June 4, 2010, from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/core-problems-out-of-field-teaching-persists-in-key-academic-courses-esp>
- ²⁰ Berry, B., Smylie, M., & Fuller, E. (2008). *Understanding Teacher Working Conditions: A Review and Look to the Future*. Retrieved December 2, 2009, from http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/TWC2_Nov08.pdf. For examples of strategies that have reduced teacher mis-assignments, see Ingersoll, R. (November 25, 2008). *Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses, Especially in America's High-Poverty and High-Minority Schools*. Retrieved June 4, 2010, from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/core-problems-out-of-field-teaching-persists-in-key-academic-courses-esp>
- ²¹ The percentage of mis-assigned math classes in low-poverty high schools is approximately 20%, about half the rate for high-poverty high schools. The report by the Education Trust also cites research showing a strong link between student achievement and teachers' knowledge of mathematics and credential status. Ingersoll, R. (November 25, 2008). *Core Problems: Out-of-Field Teaching Persists in Key Academic Courses, Especially in America's High-Poverty and High-Minority Schools*. Retrieved June 4, 2010, from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/core-problems-out-of-field-teaching-persists-in-key-academic-courses-esp>
- ²² As with the high percentage of mis-assigned teachers in high-poverty schools, poor working conditions like the ones described here are also common. Studies that identify the factors that cause teachers to leave the profession point

frequently to the problems cited in this fictitious example. See, for instance, Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). *Teacher Turnover, Teacher Shortages, and the Organization of Schools*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy; Futernick, K. (2007). *A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn*. Sacramento: California State University; Berry, B., Smylie, M., & Fuller, E. (2008). *Understanding Teacher Working Conditions: A Review and Look to the Future*. Retrieved December 2, 2009, from http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/TWC2_Nov08.pdf

²³ Transcript: White House 'Open for Questions' Town Hall. (March 26, 2009). *New York Times*.

²⁴ The supports play a key role in teacher attrition. "Lack of bureaucratic interference" may seem like a trivial issue but in my research on teacher retention bureaucratic factors such as unnecessary meetings, paperwork, and interruptions were among the leading causes of teacher attrition. Futernick, K. (2007). *A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn*. Sacramento: California State University.

²⁵ Weingarten, R. (Speech delivered at the National Press Club on January 13, 2010). *A New Path Forward: Four Approaches to Quality Teaching and Better Schools*. Retrieved January 20, 2010, from www.aft.org

²⁶ Toch, T. (2008). Fixing Teacher Evaluation. *Educational Leadership*, 66(2), 32-37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ After studying productivity patterns in private industry, the systems theorist W. Edwards Deming developed the "85-15" rule. He believed that 85% of an employee's productivity is a function of the system in which they work, the other 15% by the effort and qualities of individual employees. Deming, W. E. (2000). *Out of crisis*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

²⁹ These definitions appear in the Race to the Top application which can be downloaded from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>

³⁰ See, for instance, White, M. E., Makkonen, R., & Stewart, K. B. (July 2009). *A Multi State Review of Teaching Standards*: Regional Education Laboratory at WestEd., the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (<http://www.isbe.state.il.us/profprep/pdfs/ipts.pdf>), the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (<http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/standards/CSTP-2009.pdf>); the teaching standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (http://www.nbpts.org/the_standards).

³¹ Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. Washington, D.C. Albert Shanker Institute.

³² Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

³³ Ripley, A. (November 26, 2008). Rhee Tackles Classroom Challenge. *Time Magazine*.