

The A+ Teacher

Deciding who is effective in the classroom
is not as easy as it seems.

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SENATOR MICHAEL JOHNSTON, COLORADO

BY MICHELLE EXSTROM

Effectiveness.

Decades of debate over how to improve schools and student achievement boils down to that word.

It seems simple enough. Teachers and principals who can help students do better in school and are effective at increasing competency and achievement are the key to a successful education system.

But the debate continues over what “being effective” even means. And if it can be defined in a generally accepted way, how do teachers accomplish it and how is it measured? The even greater challenge is changing a system that has long-held and deeply entrenched attitudes about teacher tenure and retention. Maybe the only thing everyone agrees on is that it won’t be easy.

DEFINITION, PLEASE

Lawmakers know teachers and principals are the two most important components in schools. Recent efforts have opened the education field to a wider array of people, recruited them into hard-to-staff schools and subjects, provided better support and training once in they were in the classroom, and changed the way they were paid. Yet student achievement continues to stagnate.

Consider these statistics on U.S. educational rankings among 29 countries from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

- ◆Ninth on math scores among 8th grade students.
- ◆15th in reading literacy.
- ◆24th in problem-solving skills considered necessary to meet emerging workforce demands.
- ◆20th for years of educational attainment.

Add to these statistics, a national average high school graduation rate of 76 percent and a graduation rate in many big cities as low as 50 percent.

Many advocates for education reform argue the focus is misplaced. Instead of rewarding teachers and principals for years of experience and dwelling on the classes and degrees needed

Michelle Exstrom tracks teaching quality policy issues for NCSL.

to meet the federal definition of “highly qualified,” they say we should focus on “effectiveness” instead. Can the teacher push students to make solid academic achievement each year? Are struggling students improving under the teacher’s watch? Is the principal effectively leading the school and creating the best working conditions for teachers?

This change of focus demands a vision of what it means to be an effective educator. Researchers have struggled to answer this very straight-forward question because it is so difficult to quantify. But legislators have argued that if it’s important to put an effective teacher in every classroom, don’t we first need to know what we are looking for?

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REPRESENTATIVE MARK MADDOX, TENNESSEE

Laura Goe, a research scientist at Educational Testing Service and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, suggests an effective educator should:

- ◆Have high expectations for all students and help students learn, as measured by student growth benchmarks.
- ◆Create an atmosphere where students want to attend school, are promoted on time to the next grade and graduate.
- ◆Make learning interesting, monitor student progress, adapt instruction as needed, and evaluate learning using different kinds of tests.
- ◆Value diversity and civic involvement.
- ◆Collaborate with other teachers, administrators, parents and educators to help students with special needs and those at high risk for failure to succeed.

WHAT TEACHERS NEED

Even with a firm grasp of what effectiveness looks like, how do you measure which

teachers and principals are effective?

For years, state statutes have been vague about teacher evaluations. The National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonpartisan research and advocacy group focused on putting an effective teacher in every classroom, conducts a yearly inventory of state policies and recommends changes.

The group points out that only 15 states require yearly evaluations and only 30 require principals to observe teachers in the classroom. Until the past few months, only 16 states even took into account whether students were actually learning. For several years, the group has urged lawmakers to put their expectations into statute rather than leaving the process up to local districts.

The New Teacher Project, a national organization that works with school districts and states to address teacher quality, agrees. In its publications since 2003—“Missed Opportunities,” “Unintended Consequences,” and the “Widget Effect”—the group argues if schools are to be successful, local and state policies must be coordinated so schools can find, hire and retain great teachers. The project points out that policies treat teachers as interchangeable parts, not professionals. Excellence is not recognized, the group maintains, and poor performance goes unaddressed.

Goe of the Educational Testing service points to major challenges. She believes most evaluations have little or no impact on teacher effectiveness for several reasons.

“Classroom observations are used for most teacher evaluations. Even with a high-quality observation tool and trained observers, the results may not match very well with student learning outcomes,” says Goe. “By using multiple measures, you can collect information about a teacher’s performance that gives you a more accurate, well-rounded picture of that teacher’s effectiveness.”

THE PUSH FROM D.C.

In 2009, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan signaled a major shift in federal policies on teaching by encouraging states to ensure that every student has a good teacher and principal.

The federal Race to the Top competition

used the term “effectiveness” repeatedly, rather than the “highly qualified” definition from the No Child Left Behind Act. For the first time, federal policy focused on both teachers and principals, calling for “educator effectiveness,” and it was one of the four areas where states were required to make progress to receive State Fiscal Stabilization Funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It also was a key requirement of the Race to the Top competition, with states being urged to make student achievement a significant factor in evaluating teachers.

As governors put together applications promising to improve educator effectiveness, many state policymakers realized the hard work ahead. Evaluations and tenure hadn’t been changed in years, in part because they are political hot potatoes. Local control, teacher contracts and union opposition often get in the way. And traditionally, teachers and principals were rarely linked in these evaluations. Now, some lawmakers are beginning to think of teachers and principals as a team, and some new evaluations link the performance and effectiveness of teachers to the evaluation of the principal.

Many lawmakers already working on reform saw these policy changes as natural next steps. Others saw them as a unique opportunity to capture national attention and major funding for needed changes during tough fiscal times.

Still other legislators aren’t happy with the the push from the federal government and aren’t sure if they will consider educator evaluation and tenure reforms.

North Dakota Representative RaeAnn Kelsch has been critical of this federal approach. “They are rewarding the states already doing well on education and leaving the other states already struggling to remain the same. North Dakota will consider some of the policies to see if they are right for our state, but we will not buy into the recommendations lock, stock and barrel.”



REPRESENTATIVE
RAEANN KELSCH
NORTH DAKOTA



She’s concerned legislators are rushing to pass legislation just to compete for Race to the Top, but may regret the long-term ramifications of that “knee-jerk response,” especially if they don’t get the money.

Since late 2009, more than one-third of the states have introduced legislation, and 13 state legislatures have passed laws requiring student achievement be a significant factor in teacher evaluations. Some states specified that achievement count for at least 50 percent. Some have taken it a step further with plans to change principal evaluations, professional development requirements, tenure rules and layoff policies.

COOPERATION ON COMPETITION

It became clear that Tennessee lawmakers were serious about winning money in round one of the Race to the Top competition during a special session earlier this year. The final law that passed requires rigorous new evaluations, half of which are based on student achievement. Tennessee is one of just a handful of states that can confidently match teachers with student data and measure the effect of a particular teacher. Until the new law passed, however, the information could not be used as a significant factor in teacher evaluations.

“Tennessee saw an opportunity to improve

its education system. We knew that we’d increase our eligibility if we made these changes,” says Tennessee Representative Mark Maddox. “Now administrators will be more aware of the effects of teachers, and teachers will be more aware of their impact on students.”

Illinois and Michigan passed similar legislation in late 2009, but Tennessee captured the spotlight because it seemed to be putting all the pieces together. Lawmakers, educators and unions cooperated to reach the common goal of winning the Race to the Top competition. Other states struggled to gain support of local districts and teacher unions.

“We all knew what we had to do to get this through,” Maddox says, “and we all came to the table. We were determined.”

Delaware and Tennessee were the only two first-round winners of Race to the Top, prevailing because of their legacy of reform



REPRESENTATIVE
MARK MADDOX
TENNESSEE

efforts and celebrated data systems. In the end, Tennessee's legislature proved its ability to lead the effort for change. While Delaware's reforms weren't put in place with major legislation in 2010, state policymakers worked over the past few years to ensure effective teachers for all students.

AN EMOTIONAL ISSUE

The Colorado legislature also tackled major reform this year. With the legislative session about half over, Colorado policymakers were disappointed to learn they did not win the Race to the Top competition. A few legislators became determined to pass stronger reforms to teacher evaluations and tenure.

Newly appointed Senator Michael Johnston, a former principal, says he came into office determined to improve student learning.

"If we want to do that, then research shows us that the solution begins with effective teachers and principals," he says.



SENATOR
MICHAEL JOHNSTON
COLORADO

Representative Christine Scanlan joined the effort as House sponsor of the bill to change how teachers and principals are hired, evaluated and fired. Together, they pushed the bill through difficult committee hearings and emotional protests during the final days of session.

"Teachers are successful only if students are, and principals are successful only if teachers are," he says. "That's completely opposite from how it used to be. Now we know that teachers and principals have their jobs because their students are learning."

The nation took notice. Colorado's legislation is one of the most comprehensive efforts of its kind. The new law changes teacher and principal evaluations, provides professional development and support for struggling teachers, allows for dismissal of ineffective teachers, gives principals more flexibility in hiring, and changes the way districts determine layoffs.

During the debate, emotions ran high. The Colorado Education Association initially argued the legislation was dangerous, and the president of the National Education Association testified against it.

Concerns were raised about whether teachers would be evaluated on a single test score and whether the law would account for poor learning conditions and outside factors that affect student achievement. And there were other questions. How should teachers of subjects not regularly tested be evaluated? Can principals effectively evaluate teachers every year? Should teachers lose their jobs after just a few years of lackluster student performance? Can the state data system effectively and reliably match teachers with student data?

Surprisingly, representatives of the American Federation of Teachers Colorado, as well as representatives from the Douglas County Federation of Teachers, testified in favor of the bill. Douglas County already had negotiated a similar evaluation system for its teachers and is now making the changes.



REPRESENTATIVE
CHRISTINE SCANLAN
COLORADO

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In the end, the bill's sponsors felt strongly that the legislation was not only important for the state's Race to the Top application, but also crucial to complete the state's efforts to put an effective teacher in every classroom.

The legislature already had enacted a number of education changes.

"This was the logical next step," Scanlan says. "We are not only holding teachers accountable, we are showing how important they are to students."

KEEPING WATCH FOR RESULTS

Enacting laws is just a start.

"Legislation and getting the federal money is just the first step, not the end product," Maddox says. "The real work has just begun."

Most states have created an advisory group to hammer out the details of the new evaluation systems. Reformers, researchers and policy experts will share their expertise and watch closely to see how these states put the pieces together to make the new evaluation approach work.

A third of the states introduced major changes in 2010, and there are almost certain to be more efforts in the 2011 legislative session. When lawmakers are ready to take action, those who have been in the trenches have some advice.

"This is an important conversation. Remember that people's careers are on the line. You must be fair with the right process," Scanlan says. "Engage in dialogue early and up front. Keep your good intent, and continually look for solutions." 

 **CHECK OUT** more on teacher effectiveness and learn about steps states have taken at www.ncsl.org/magazine.