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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

## **Assessing Teachers**

Peter Smagorinsky

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When I was a kid growing up in Fairfax County, Virginia, in the 1950s and 1960s, my father became head of the school PTA at one point. Among his goals was to institute a merit pay system to reward the school's best teachers. Around the house, he'd say, "There's no one more overpaid than a bad teacher, and no one more underpaid than a good one." But as my father found then, the question of how to reward the best teachers and get rid of the worst is much easier to achieve on paper than in the real, teeming, highly subjective, and political world of public education. He never got his merit pay system, and for many of the same reasons that the issue remains contentious today: Identifying what is meritorious, what is normal, and what is inferior remains difficult in light of the many perspectives available on teaching and teachers, especially in a job so complex that a teacher might excel in some areas and struggle in others.

One thing that people of divergent perspectives might all agree on is the adage, "What you assess is what you get." The evaluative means and process for assessing teaching will provide the endpoint toward which teachers work. It matters a great deal, then, how teachers are assessed; and assessing teachers according to their students' standardized test scores is the fad of the day. Relying so heavily on test scores, however, is fundamentally damaging to the teaching profession in that it reduces teaching, and in turn student learning, to tasks that bear little resemblance to the sorts of complex disciplinary thinking that a field of study requires.

Although standardized tests were never meant to measure teacher effectiveness, they increasingly are used to terminate the teachers of students with low scores. These tests, as they are used in Arne Duncan's Race To The Top initiative, now serve as the Obama administrations' educational drone strikes, designed to wipe out teachers whose students test poorly but aimed so broadly that they create widespread collateral damage to the whole of the teaching profession and the communities they serve.

In order for a teacher evaluation system to be legitimate, it should have a related set of qualities that go well beyond the simplistic approach imposed by the Duncan Department of Education. A credible evaluation system is valid (it has buy-in from multiple stakeholders' perspectives, including the teachers for whom it is developed); it is reliable (similar results would be available from different assessors); it has utility for all participants regardless of the outcome of the evaluation (including those who are found deficient); it fosters the development

of better teachers; it provides data that contribute to this development by attending to multiple facets of faculty performance; and it is conducted respectfully in terms of the magnitude of the job and the resources provided to undertake it.

In current policy, what matters most in assessment is the teacher as technician. Few would argue with the idea that teachers ideally have pedagogical skill, even though beliefs about effective instruction vary. The problem is that teaching involves more than good technique. For example, it's common for people to say that they appreciated a teacher from their education who gave them the confidence to take a risk, or encouraged them to persist with their learning, or opened up new pathways through support and reassurance. Such actions get little recognition in most teacher assessment programs, because it's highly unlikely that they produce immediate measurable outcomes.

A student in English who reconsiders his or her beliefs about a successful life after studying *Death of a Salesman*, or one whose study of biology leads to reflection on the interactions between people and their environment, or one who begins to inquire beneath historical myths and narratives after studying a problematic political era, may not produce evidence that satisfies evaluators, even though the student's life may be changed, and the world along with it. Teachers, while being careful not to impose a particular political agenda on such issues, can provide the setting in which such inquiries unfold and are enriched. This impact is neither visible nor valued in the current corporate and product-oriented approach to teacher evaluation.

Teachers can also have an effect on students in vital areas that are not part of the official curriculum. An enduring image I have of my school visits concerns an English teacher who had a great reputation as an AP teacher. I was walking down the corridor to visit a class, and came across her in the hallway, where she was comforting a girl who was emotionally distraught and crying helplessly. My immediate thought was this: Now I know why she's beloved. She really, really cares about these kids and will pause in her instruction to help out a student going through a personal crisis.

As a coveted AP teacher in a college town high school, she had already passed the profession's primary sniff test, that of producing students with high test scores. What made her such a great asset to the school, however, was that she went beyond such "objective" measures and nurtured her students in many other areas, a matter of great importance as students endure the capriciousness of adolescence and its developmental and emotional challenges. Although schools typically claim to have a commitment to caring for children in their mission statements, it's hard to see how that dedication is evident when test scores drive teacher assessment.

Teachers also contribute to schools in many ways outside the classroom, from taking on extracurricular activities for a pittance of salary relative to the time invested, to bridging schools with communities, to linking classroom learning to learning in the broader conduct of life, to providing students with personal guidance in times of need, to spending time before and after school helping kids with schoolwork, to learning about the obstacles facing struggling learners and designing classrooms that help them achieve, and to embracing other aspects of a faculty member's role in the whole operation of a school.

I have outlined one proposal for teacher evaluation, far too detailed to report in this space (but available upon request), that I'm presenting to my professional association at a conference this summer and later to be published in its scholarly journal, *English Education*. This proposal departs from most of what I read about teacher evaluation in several regards.

First, it takes into account multiple factors in a faculty member's responsibilities in the whole school, rather than one reductive consequence of classroom teaching.

Second, it is two-tiered, providing annual evaluations designed to improve teaching and periodic evaluations at 3-5 years for high-stakes assessment. Teachers would not, in this system, be at the mercy of annual fluctuations in test scores that typically follow from their students' life circumstances outside school rather than being a direct consequence of classroom instruction. Nor would they be granted lifetime employment. Rather, every year an effort would be made, school-wide, to improve teaching through assessments that are developmental in nature; and every few years, teachers would be evaluated on whether they should be retained or dismissed, based on their performance over multiple years. Because teachers' start times would be staggered, every year would involve both developmental and high-stakes assessments across the whole faculty.

This system would resemble the university post-tenure review system (see, e.g., <http://provost.uga.edu/index.php/policies-procedures/appt-promotion-tenure/policy-for-review-of-tenured-faculty>). Universities grant tenure after a trial period of 5-6 years, then conduct post-tenure reviews at 5-year intervals to determine either continued employment, a plan of improvement, or a decision to terminate. A review system of the sort I've described would build on this model, using different review criteria given that schools are not publish-or-perish environments, with the fundamental purpose of improving learning and instruction and building a better school in all its many dimensions.

I also think that the university system would benefit from more consequential post-tenure reviews, but that's an issue for another time.

A final element of this approach would be that the evaluations, both the annual developmental review and the periodic high-stakes review, would be conducted by teams that include teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders, including perhaps parents and others with an understanding of the educational process (known in some forms as Professional Learning Communities). Such an approach would involve more people in the process, reduce the possibility that individual animosity or loyalty would play a role in high-stakes personnel decisions, and provide a greater range of perspectives on any one teacher's performance.

Will this system work? It's never been tried, so I can only guess. I'll take my chances on this approach, however, rather than what passes for teacher assessment under the Duncan Department of Education.