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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.

Want Reform? Ask the Teachers

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“Hoping to attract and keep top teachers in public schools, Georgia is changing the way educators are hired, paid and rated through a new evaluation system with far greater emphasis on student performance.” So began Jaime Sarrio's recent article in the AJC on the latest effort to grade teachers, and post those grades to the public, based on students' standardized test scores.

Tying teacher performance to test scores is one of several efforts to grade teachers' performance, and is the centerpiece of the \$400 million Race to the Top grant awarded to Georgia in the hopes of improving teaching and learning. Because the money has been awarded and linked to scores, this plan is a fait accompli. But it is but one of many plans circulating presently to make teachers—and teachers only—accountable for learning in schools. Administrators, taxpayers who vote against funding initiatives, policy makers, politicians, parents, and students themselves are not among those whose performances are identified as contributing factors to students' learning, however measured.

One plan reported recently proposes that teachers be evaluated by the parents of their students. As a parent of two who have now finished their secondary education, I can see why some parents would want input, given the stories their children bring home from school. But for the most part, their information is provided solely by their kids. I'm not sure I'd want my pay linked to what kids tell their parents about what's happening in school. If you think that grade inflation is a problem now, wait till this plan goes into effect.

As a regular reader of Maureen Downey's AJC education blog and column, and of the many comments that readers make in response to what she writes and shares, I have had an opportunity to eavesdrop on, and often participate in, discussions among teachers, parents, taxpayers, people who oppose taxation, and others who are invested in education in Georgia. The one group that continually impresses me in terms of their knowledge about education, their understanding of teaching and learning, their passion about schooling, their intimate knowledge of the lives of 21st century youth, their frustration with political and administrative meddling in their work, and their profound commitment to their profession is the group of Georgia schoolteachers who contribute to these discussions.

The discussion in general identifies many causes for the perceived problems in Georgia schools: pervasive poverty, uncommitted families, bureaucratic interference, administrative incompetence, indifferent students, and terrible teachers. Now, I'm no doe-eyed innocent; I know

that there are bad teachers. There are also bad politicians, journalists, cops, parents, priests, lawyers, and college professors. Getting rid of bad teachers would be great for the system, and I think every good teacher would agree that there are some real losers on their faculties. I taught in some of the best schools in Illinois, and amidst our generally exemplary staffs were some embarrassing colleagues.

But their presence in the teaching force should not demean the many thousands of dedicated, intelligent, reflective, and knowledgeable professionals who provide the rank and file of school faculties. In reading Maureen Downey's readers' comments, I hear these teachers speak of the tremendous pain that they feel in being part of a profession that is continually battered by public commentary from education officials, taxpayers, and other stakeholders from outside the system. All of the solutions posed from without emphasize punitive approaches to addressing problems of student performance that villainize classroom teachers and reduce their complex and challenging work to students' scores on multiple choice tests. Teachers' judgment is routinely ignored as people from outside the teaching force impose assessments on them that are as superficial as the scores by which kids themselves are deemed successful or not.

Remarkably, in all the discussion about how to improve education in Georgia, the people closest to the action and most knowledgeable about schools are routinely and systematically ignored: the teachers. Perhaps the general lack of confidence in teacher competence makes policymakers wary of enlisting them in discussions of how to determine their effectiveness. But given the solutions proposed thus far—test scores, and then more test scores—I would say that we are not presently in an era of administrative enlightenment when it comes to evaluating teachers.

I propose consulting a new set of stakeholders to come up with an accountability system for teachers: classroom teachers in Georgia. I suspect that more than anyone, they want to sift out ineffective teachers who make their own work more difficult and create perceptions that are generalized to the whole profession. Based on my reading of comments on AJC education articles, they care more about teaching and kids than anyone else in the discussion, know more about what matters in school, and know what distinguishes good teaching from bad. So far their perspective has been ignored by policymakers. But if you want a system that has buy-in and credibility, and that is informed by sound professional judgment, put together a commission of respected classroom teachers and see what they come up with. It couldn't be any worse than what we're getting from outside the classroom.