

COMMENTARY

Maximizing the Opportunity Provided by 'Race to the Top'

By Theodore Hershberg and Claire Robertson-Kraft, University of Pennsylvania

Background and Context

Education policy makers have long searched for a system that will recognize and reward outstanding practice, support educators to improve their performance, and, most importantly, increase student achievement. But we are now at a watershed moment in public education where a Democratic president has challenged the educational status quo. For states and school districts to secure grants from the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund, President Barack Obama is requiring them to “use data effectively to reward effective teachers, to support teachers who are struggling, and when necessary, to replace teachers who aren’t up to the job” (White House, 2009). The scale of the federal investment in RTTT is unprecedented, and the four core education reform assurances – rigorous standards and internationally benchmarked assessments, data systems tracing individual students and teachers, great teachers and leaders, and turning around struggling schools – send a strong message about the federal government’s commitment to systemic change (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

But the most important among these assurances, according to the published weights assigned in the decision-making process, is the development of effective teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), a clear indicator that the quality of instruction is now understood as the single most important influence on student progress. Research has demonstrated that if low-performing students in low-income communities are assigned a highly effective teacher for five years in a row, this alone could eliminate the achievement gap between high-income and low-income youth. Unfortunately, there is considerable

variation in teacher effectiveness, and students from low-income families are less likely to have access to high quality instruction than their peers in higher-income communities (Walsh, 2007).

Like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, RTTT emphasizes the importance of improving teacher quality as a vehicle for accelerating student progress and closing achievement gaps. However, the new policy redefines the indicators used to measure student outcomes – and in turn, teacher effectiveness – by focusing on the growth that individual students make over the course of the year, rather than on their achievement level at a particular point in time. To receive funds, states’ RTTT proposals have to include student growth as one of the multiple measures in an enhanced teacher evaluation system and propose plans to use this information in decisions related to compensation, career advancement, and tenure. In fact, states barring the use of student data in teacher evaluation are not even eligible to apply (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Critics of the administration’s approach contend that because teachers’ impact on student learning cannot be measured without error, it is impossible to create fair and accurate systems for evaluating and rewarding performance. By this standard, however, current practice fails on both counts. Research has demonstrated that the factors driving the existing compensation system – academic credentials and years of experience – have a limited impact on student learning (Walsh & Tracy, 2004; Goe & Stickler, 2008; Hanushek, Kain, O’Brien, & Rivkin, 2005). Moreover, evaluation and compensation systems are not designed to effectively identify, reward, or develop high-quality instruction. In a recent

report that investigated teacher evaluation and dismissal practices in 12 diverse districts in four states, Weisberg et al. (2009) discovered that personnel evaluation systems rate virtually all teachers as good or great; fail to recognize excellence or address poor performance; and neglect to provide sufficient professional development, particularly for novice teachers. New proposals for evaluation and compensation systems may not be perfect, but they will be more effective than what school districts having been using for decades.

Though these reforms may be gaining momentum, policies designed to measure and reward teacher effectiveness are neither new nor untried solutions. The challenge for current policy makers will be to overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts by employing metrics that take into account the multiple dimensions of teachers’ work, producing results teachers view as accurate, and providing sufficient training to help them interpret and utilize the data to improve their instructional practice. This essay will discuss various positions on current efforts and outline a series of recommendations for reformers to keep in mind as they design new initiatives. To maximize the potential of these new policies to make good on their promised goals, states will have to build both the capacity and the will to sustain reform.

Current Efforts

The availability of federal funds has led to a flurry of activity at the state level. Over the course of the past year, several states have rewritten their education laws to make their applications more competitive. For example, California passed a law eliminating its firewall between student test scores and teacher evaluation (Maxwell, 2009),

New York went further by reaching an agreement that would include student performance data in teacher evaluation and accelerate the dismissal process for ineffective teachers (Medina, 2010), while other states, such as Michigan, used legislative measures to remove caps on charter schools (Bouffard, 2009). Additionally, many unions who were once reticent to participate in RTTT, such as the Pennsylvania State Education Association, have agreed to endorse their states' proposal (Hardy & Graham, 2010). However, many critics remain skeptical, contending that we have yet to see the potential impact of RTTT; they question whether states are truly committed to sustaining the proposed reforms or merely interested in securing much needed funds in dismal fiscal times (Smarik, 2010). Fostering political will may ensure short-term implementation of the proposed regulations, but the long-term policy goal of catalyzing systemic reform will require building statewide capacity. Even if states have every intention of implementing the policy provisions, because of limited enforcement capacity, RTTT's effectiveness in changing actual outcomes will depend on how the policy makes its way through the inter-governmental system to influence district, school, and ultimately, classroom practice (Cohen & Spillane, 1993).

Recommendations

Perhaps most disconcerting to critics in the academic community is the fact that RTTT requires states to move forward with reforms for which the evidence base is underdeveloped – e.g., the validity of measuring teacher effectiveness based on student growth and the use of pay for performance as a mechanism for improving teacher quality. Despite limitations in the research, current practice suggests some important considerations for states to keep in mind that will maximize the opportunity presented by RTTT. The recommendations below are primarily drawn from the recently published book, *A Grand Bargain for Education Reform: New Rewards and Supports for New Accountability* (Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2009), which we ed-

ited in collaboration with some of the nation's leading reformers. We also extract lessons from the experiences of several long-standing initiatives designed to improve teacher quality and the two states, Delaware and Tennessee, who received funds in the first round of the RTTT competition.

Use Multiple Measures to Evaluate Performance

Most of the current teacher evaluation systems rely on a single measure of performance, and as a result, do not reveal enough information about the quality of instruction. New evaluation systems should adopt a balanced approach, using multiple sources of data to gauge teacher effectiveness and recognize outstanding performance. In the system we envision, value-added assessment would provide the empirical component in teacher evaluation by identifying the most-effective and least-effective performers. Student learning outcomes would be accompanied by results from rigorous evaluation frameworks that rely on multiple observations over the course of the year to identify teachers of various levels of performance.

Used together, multiple measures offer a much more robust picture of teacher effectiveness. Denver's Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp), the most comprehensive effort to date to change the way a school district pays its educators, provides teachers with four components through which to build earnings – knowledge and skills, professional evaluation, market incentives, and student growth (Gratz, 2005). Additionally, both Tennessee and Delaware's applications evaluate teachers based on multiple measures, though Delaware mandates that educators cannot be rated as effective until they have demonstrated satisfactory levels of student growth (State of Delaware, 2010; State of Tennessee, 2010). To ensure that the results are as accurate as possible, states including student growth as a component in teacher evaluation systems should use rigorous value-added models that base estimates on multiple years of data.¹

Align Evaluation with Rewards and Consequences

New methods of evaluation should then be used to inform new rewards and consequences. Pay-for-performance and the dismissal of ineffective educators play a central role in the RTTT guidelines because they align new system goals with rewards. Compensation systems should be designed to attract top talent, establish a clear link between pay and improved performance, and offer highly effective teachers higher salaries and additional opportunities for career advancement. Conversely, though educators who do not meet agreed upon standards of performance should be provided extensive support, there needs to be a mechanism in place for dismissing the ones who fail to make adequate progress through a fair process.² Both Tennessee and Delaware's applications call for these provisions; for example, Tennessee will provide \$12 million in competitive funding for districts who commit to making the transition to new compensation models, and in Delaware, educators can be removed if they demonstrate a pattern of ineffective performance over a two or three year period (State of Delaware, 2010; State of Tennessee, 2010).

Build Capacity

While some teachers may work harder because of new incentives, rewards and consequences alone will not help teachers enhance their performance unless they also have the capacity to implement necessary changes in their instruction. Educating all students to high standards is challenging work, and because of this, states must ensure that RTTT money is used to provide teachers with ample resources to improve their practice. To be most effective, professional development should offer a system of supports that is job-embedded, focused on data, driven by teachers, and sustained over time. This additional assistance should be made available to *all* teachers: multiyear mentoring for new teachers, consultants for struggling teachers, and coaches for all other teachers wishing to improve their craft. Developed

by the Milken Family Foundation, the TAP program offers a concrete example of how to balance new rewards with additional supports. It offers teachers additional compensation based on improved performance, opportunities for career advancement, and an expanded range of job-embedded professional development (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2008).

Empower Teachers as Equal Partners in Reform

The RTTT fund provides an unprecedented opportunity for states and districts to embrace system-wide change. Yet, whether or not districts can successfully sustain such types of initiatives has been shown to depend in large measure on teacher buy-in and union support (Hannaway & Rotherham, 2008). The fear among critics of RTTT is that making high stakes decisions based on students' test results will lead to narrow curricula, increased rates of competition among educators, and a demoralized teaching force (Smarik, 2010). To address these concerns, new systems should use multiple measures to gauge teacher effectiveness, provide group incentives and opportunities for increased col-

laboration, and ensure that teachers compete only against themselves – and not with each other – to reach a set of agreed upon performance standards. But most importantly, comprehensive reform must be done *with* teachers and not *to* them, and policy makers should seek to ensure that teachers play an active role in the implementation and evaluation of RTTT initiatives.

The “grand bargain” we propose offers a simple but powerful quid pro quo: carefully targeted investment in return for fundamental reform. At the core of this approach, teachers are held responsible, as individuals, for student-learning gains, but in return, they are given a greatly expanded role in schools: e.g., through reforms such as peer review, where they play a key role in helping to support and evaluate their struggling colleagues and through shared-decision making, where they have an equal say in the major issues that affect their classroom. Rather than imposing change through top-down mandates, the best chances for success lie with progressive educators and union leaders who will willingly collaborate to improve public schools.

Theodore Hershberg is a professor of public policy and history and the director of the Center for Greater Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania, where he has taught since 1967. He is founding director of Operation Public Education (OPE) and holds MA and PhD degrees in American history from Stanford University. He was acting dean of Penn's School of Public and Urban Policy and served as assistant to the mayor of Philadelphia for strategic planning and policy development. He has written and lectured extensively in the fields of urban-industrial development, regional cooperation, and education policy.

Claire Robertson-Kraft is currently pursuing her doctorate in education policy at Penn's Graduate School of Education. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2004 with a double major in urban studies and philosophy. Prior to enrolling in GSE, Ms. Robertson-Kraft was the Associate Director of the Center for Greater Philadelphia and Operation Public Education and worked with Teach For America in Houston, first as a third grade teacher and then as a supervisor for corps members teaching in elementary and special education placements.

ENDNOTES

¹Sanders and Rivers discuss the characteristics of robust value-added models in “Choosing a Value-Added Model,” in *A Grand Bargain for Education Reform: New Rewards and Supports for New Accountability* (Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2009).

²Additional information on how to design these systems can be found in Wallace, “Compensation,” and Grossman and Robertson-Kraft, “Peer Assistance and Review,” in *A Grand Bargain for Education Reform: New Rewards and Supports for New Accountability* (Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2009).

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