

**Malpractice or Just Bad Policy?**

The Connecticut Legislature's Abandon of Sound Educational Practice

"There is no correlation between test scores and teachers' performance . . . We think it is outrageous."

Hartford Federation of Teachers lawyer James Ferguson (1996)

Exactly 20 years ago, the state of Connecticut was fighting an effort to tie modest bonuses to teacher success. The issue at hand was a bonus that would reward teachers based on how much their students achieved while under their tutelage. The unions opposed it, saying that teaching and learning are not connected. Really?

This week the General Assembly is poised to enact a bill that would disconnect all objective assessments from teacher evaluations, and by extension would remove the transparency that otherwise allows schools, leaders and the public to understand whether and how students are learning. In the state with the largest achievement gap between more affluent and poor students, and in a nation that has more than 60 percent of all students failing to meet proficiency—including the affluent—it's hard to believe that any state would entertain such a law. We can all agree that teachers believe their jobs are to reach and teach their students, and removing any accountability to this is malpractice.

Connecticut fourth graders' performance declined in the national math assessment in 2015 and just 41 percent of its students—fewer than half!—are proficient in math while eighth graders remained at a measly 36 percent proficient. These results are only marginally better than 2 decades ago, when the teachers union challenged evaluating teachers. And yet, this wrongheaded thinking is seeing the light of day again in Connecticut, this time as a bill simply titled:

AN ACT CONCERNING THE EXCLUSION OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE RESULTS ON THE MASTERY EXAMINATION FROM TEACHER EVALUATIONS.

In his 1988 book *Winning the Brain Race: A Bold Plan to Make Our Schools Competitive*, the late David Kearns, Connecticut citizen and CEO of Xerox, argued that improving America's schools was the vital link to our international competitiveness. Nearly 40 years, 5 presidents, 10 commissions, 5 major national summits, thousands of reports, hundreds of "reforms" and billions of dollars spent on schooling later, the nation's education outcomes have improved only modestly. And these improvements have only emanated from widespread systemic changes that give teachers more control and parents more power.

Regardless of these individual reforms, reports, and meetings, numerous and definitive research findings continue to confirm that teacher effectiveness has more impact on student achievement than any other factor controlled by schools.

The Proof That Teacher Evaluations Help Student Achieve

Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby has studied the impact of teachers on student learning for decades.

"Because teachers are potentially so influential, managing them well must be a key factor in any school's reaching its maximum achievable productivity. Teachers need to be hired, promoted, and paid so that people who will be successful become teachers and stay teachers and so that people who will be unsuccessful do not teach. The longitudinal data we have can be used to identify a teacher's effect on almost any student outcome, we can identify a teacher with the systematic effect that she has on students, given the performance of her students in other classes and grades," (Hoxby, 2004.)

The question remains: *why wouldn't we do it?*

Both Hoxby and political scientist Eric Hanushek argue that a teacher cannot and should not be evaluated based on factors they cannot control. Their work isolates the effects of a teacher only to the factors within their control.

“By removing school fixed effects we guard against attributing a variety of school factors to teacher quality, including principal and administrator quality, school-based curriculum, neighborhood influences, and the like...For example, the additional gain in test scores resulting from a substantial improvement in the quality of instruction may be quite sizeable for a student who begins at the lower end of the skill distribution and for whom the test covers much of the knowledge gained by virtue of any higher teacher quality. On the other hand, a student higher up the initial skill distribution may answer most of the questions correctly even if taught by a quite low quality teacher,” (Hanushek, 2005).

The impact on student achievement with an effective teacher is nothing short of extraordinary. According to Hanushek, “A student with an effective teacher can expect to learn more than 50 percent more than a student who has a teacher whose evaluation puts them in the median range.” Since these quality variations relate to single years of achievement gains for students, they underscore the fact that the particular draw of teachers for an individual student can accumulate to huge gains.

Finally, University of Chicago economists Pedro Carneiro and James Heckman have measured the impact of teachers on schools and on future productivity of students. Carneiro and Heckman show that,

“Individual teachers matter in the sense of raising the test scores of students. Conventional measures of teacher quality do not, however, predict who are the good teachers. Giving principals more discretion in rewarding and punishing teachers would be an effective way to use local knowledge,” (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003.)

The teacher evaluation law already in place in Connecticut, which SB 380 seeks to abolish, has nothing to do with accountability and everything to do with sunshine. Because of strict union contracts, teachers cannot be fired for failing to educate students. They can, however, be evaluated, coached, rewarded, retained and, if not performing well over time, given a path to another more productive career for all concerned. These evaluations help, not hurt, teachers. In fact, according to Economist Thomas Kane and his colleagues who **analyzed** the impact of teacher on student achievement for the American Economic Review, “teachers are more productive in post-evaluation years, with the largest improvements among teachers performing relatively poorly ex-ante. The results suggest teachers can gain information from evaluation and subsequently develop new skills, increase long-run effort, or both.”

To ignore teaching as if it has no correlation with learning outcomes, and to abolish effective evaluations that make a path for improvement clear, is to shirk responsibility. The Connecticut legislature must ignore misinformation and pressure to support SB 380 and allow students to rise from poor educational attainment to success.

According to the state advocacy and research group **ConnCAN**,

“Senate Bill 380 would ban the use of student achievement growth in evaluations, unnecessarily tie the hands of school districts that are ready to move forward and undermine a democratic process that the General Assembly itself created. The General Assembly convened a Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) to ensure that practitioners -- superintendents, school boards, principals and teacher unions -- collaborate to design and refine a statewide educator evaluation system. The PEAC designed and unanimously agreed on an educator evaluation system in 2012, but it has not yet been fully implemented. Passage of SB 380 would permanently outlaw the use of student performance in teacher evaluation, erasing years of collaborative work by the PEAC, and halting progress in Connecticut. “

State Senator Art Linares says, “this effort undermines the hard work done across the state to equalize education for all students, particularly Latinos and African-American students whose lives are compromised by bad education.”

Thirty years ago *The Hartford Courant* reported that labor unions were vehemently opposed to rewarding exceptional teaching saying there is “no correlation between teacher performance and student test scores.” In that same coverage, then Board of Education president Stephanie Lightfoot put it best,

“If [teachers and principals] believe they have no impact, they ought not to be in the schools.” For more information about SB 380 and its detrimental effects on education in Connecticut, go to: