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Three First Steps Toward Effective Teaching

By Chris Braunlich

“The research shows that kids who have two, three, four strong teachers in a row will eventually excel, no matter what their background, while kids who have even two weak teachers in a row will never recover.”

■ Kati Hancock, President, The Education Trust

From President Obama to the conservative-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Institute, consensus is growing about the importance of quality teaching to student achievement. Perhaps more than any other factor, a strong teacher can make a difference in a child’s future. The challenge, of course, is to identify, train and retain effective teachers. That comes only by expanding the potential pool of teachers – while “counseling out” (a wonderful euphemism for “getting rid of”) ineffective teachers.

So how is Virginia doing?

According to the [latest report from the National Council on Teacher Quality](#) (NCTQ): Not so good.

The good news is that we’re doing “about the same as everyone else.” The bad news: “Everyone else” is doing miserably. Virginia rates a “D+,” putting the Commonwealth in the company of 40 other states ranked at the same level.

And while, judging from our results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, one can credibly argue that most Virginia teachers are doing quite well in the classroom, researchers at the University of Virginia examining teaching practices in more than 800 1st-grade classrooms have reported that lower-income and nonwhite students are much more likely than their counterparts to be in “lower overall quality classrooms.”

That makes the ongoing need to improve the quality of instruction even more imperative if we are going to reduce the continued achievement gap between children from low and higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

While there are multiple components to creating a uniformly quality teacher workforce, perhaps the most important factor is to be able to identify which teachers are effective, an area where the NCTQ gives Virginia a “D-.”

Identifying effective teachers can only be accomplished if the state and school divisions establish a data system for matching individual student achievement with individual teachers. But while Virginia has created individual student numbers to connect student data throughout a *9035 Golden Sunset Lane ■ Springfield, Virginia 22153 ■ 703/440-9447 ■ info@thomasjeffersoninst.org*

student's years as well as unique teacher identifiers, it cannot match teacher records with student records – which means it's impossible, over the long haul, to determine which teachers are instructionally effective and which are not.

And without being able to determine which teachers genuinely add value to a child's education (regardless of that child's socioeconomic background), we cannot establish a credible system to reward individual teachers and overall school performance.

That's step one. Step two, according to the NCTQ, is to establish a review system that requires "instructional effectiveness to be the *preponderant* criterion of any teacher evaluation." True, Virginia law does require student academic progress to be included but until it is the commanding element in teacher evaluations, ambiguous language muddles the message to school divisions – and throws academic growth in with a lot of other less important criteria.

Finally, the NCTQ yearbook notes that Virginia fails to offer annual evaluations, permits nearly automatic tenure decisions, and offers licensure without requiring evidence of teacher effectiveness.

Simple things like annual reviews based on accomplishments are pretty much standard procedure in most professional offices. Without them, it's hard to tell what needs to be done to improve lagging performance or to identify high performers. Annual Reviews are a hallmark of best practices in quality schools and contribute mightily to reducing student achievement gaps – but, in Virginia, non-probationary teachers are evaluated only every three years.

Interestingly, creating a system of annual evaluations using procedures that include taking into account data on student growth were all part of the Obama Administration's recent "Race to The Top" fund application – a recognition of the importance of effective teachers and a roadmap on how to find and retain them.

Virginia's educational and political leadership shouldn't hesitate to step forward and begin these vital reforms in building a 21st century educator workforce.

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