

What Matters Most

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Valuing Teachers

The *Los Angeles Times* recently set off a firestorm by publishing data purportedly showing the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of 6,000 teachers it identified by name. The newspaper drew upon a methodology that has been used for more than a decade to assess teacher and school performance. But it used the data incorrectly, ignoring the cautions of leading researchers about the limitations of citing the data out of context. The *L.A. Times* splashed its flawed revelations across multiple front-page news stories and editorials. The misuse of such data is hardly unprecedented; publicly rating teachers as “effective” or “ineffective” is an ignominious first.

The *Los Angeles Times* based its ratings on a methodology known as “value-added,” which uses standardized test scores to predict how much a student may learn in a particular year. If the student makes that gain or more, systems that use this methodology may credit it to a teacher’s effectiveness, or “value.” If the student does not progress as predicted, the teacher may be deemed to be less effective.

Leading researchers, including those at the Educational Testing Service, RAND Corp., the U.S. Department of Education and the Economic Policy Institute, have concluded that value-added models are un dependable and imprecise. All have concluded that such models should not be used in isolation—without other relevant factors—to judge a teacher’s performance. All have cautioned against giving disproportionate weight to value-added data in high-stakes decisions about individual teachers, students and schools.

One thing is certain: Every child should be taught by a well-prepared and engaged teacher. But how do we accurately determine teacher quality? Is it the teacher’s knowledge of the subject matter or pedagogical skills? Is it a knack for helping students who are struggling, or for nurturing the intellectual gifts of even the most advanced learners in a group? Or is it the ability to raise student achievement, as determined by a number of measures, including standardized test scores? Teaching is an incredibly complex undertaking, and good teachers do all these things.

The *L.A. Times* ignored the serious efforts under way to develop systems that identify teachers’ strengths and weaknesses and improve teachers’ skills. The AFT has worked with many of America’s top teacher evaluation experts to create a teacher development and evaluation framework that helps promising teachers improve, enables good teachers to become great, and identifies those teachers who shouldn’t be in the classroom at all. Since we unveiled this model last January, more than 50 school systems have begun working with the AFT to adopt this approach.

The AFT’s teacher development and evaluation system includes classroom observations, appraisal of lesson plans, student work and, yes, student test scores—knowing that these and other factors are necessary to accurately determine teacher effectiveness. Conversely, the *Times* refers to the practices of highly effective teachers as “invisible,” and “largely a mystery.”

That doesn’t offer much guidance to teachers seeking to improve their practice.

If the *Los Angeles Times* had done its own due diligence, it would have found districts—such as several in Ohio—that have used value-added data with the primary goal of informing and im-

proving instruction. Indeed, Ohio has won a federal Race to the Top grant, based in part on the work those districts are doing with value-added data, with the full support of AFT affiliates and teachers.

The *Los Angeles Times* portrayed its series as a public service—“doing something” about teacher quality. But the choice is not between the *Times*’ blame-and-shame approach and the status quo. In fact, the leaders of the Los Angeles Unified School District and the teachers union are working to create a teacher development and evaluation system that will use data as it should be used—to help teachers and students succeed.

Shortcuts and simplistic solutions won’t get us where we need to go. If we’re really serious about improving education for all children, we’ll choose approaches that offer accurate measures of teacher effectiveness, improve teacher practice and provide true accountability. Our students deserve nothing less.



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