

Empowering Effective Teachers

Teachers are at the heart of education. Evidence shows that teachers matter more to student learning than anything else inside a school, and that individual teachers vary widely in their contributions to student learning.

Yet we have not designed our school systems to value and support effective teaching, to improve teacher effectiveness overall, or to recognize and reward those who take on and excel at our most difficult teaching assignments.

The costs of the failure to understand and act on what we know about teacher effectiveness are staggering, and they are felt by the entire education system. Poor and minority students get less than their fair share of strong and effective teachers, exacerbating achievement gaps and stunting education performance. Teachers themselves bear the brunt of our inaction: the most effective teachers are hardly ever recognized for their contributions, so we do little to study and share their practices, and these teachers don't get the benefit of their success. Weak teachers cast a pall on the profession and dampen the ambitions of others who realize there are few avenues to have their excellence in the classroom rewarded. Too many school districts routinely grant tenure to teachers without a rigorous and meaningful review of teaching performance, and they have little capacity to understand how teacher assignments contribute to school outcomes. And school districts spend billions of dollars every year on training and professional development for teachers without reliable evidence on which programs are the most effective.

Partly as a result of our collective failure to understand and properly use information on teacher effectiveness, we have made only modest gains in educational achievement as a country over the last decade—gains that are essential to a stronger and more cohesive democracy, to grow our economy and sustain our standard of living, and to maintain our position of leadership in the world.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, working with our partners, believes that without a central focus on teacher effectiveness, we will never reach the foundation's goal: 80 percent of students graduating high school ready for college, with a focus on low-income and minority young people reaching this target.

Today, we are far from that goal. Too many American high school students do not graduate, and nearly half of those who do are not ready for college. Only one in three ninth graders will graduate high school prepared for college—a figure that drops to only one in five for African American and Hispanic young people.

We believe that dramatically improving these results depends on what happens in classrooms between teachers and their students, while recognizing that teachers sit within schools and school systems that must also assume greater responsibility for student success. That's why a core focus of the foundation is to empower effective teachers and ensure that low-income and minority students have consistent access to effective teachers.

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As part of that effort, the foundation is developing significant partnerships with a few, selected districts and charter management organizations who share the goal of transforming outcomes for students by fundamentally altering the current approaches to recruiting, supporting, evaluating, and rewarding effective teachers. The foundation will work with these partners to develop better tools and measures of teacher effectiveness in order to identify those who are effective, learn how to help more teachers improve, and provide targeted incentives to keep effective teachers in the classroom. We also believe that teachers who remain ineffective even after being given the opportunity to improve should not remain in teaching—in fairness to their colleagues and to their students. Effective teachers are a school system’s largest asset. School districts that act on that knowledge can achieve unprecedented gains in student achievement and in college-ready graduation rates.

Furthermore, school systems that help develop and use teacher-effectiveness measures to support student achievement can provide examples, lessons, tools, and resources from which the whole country can learn. This intensive, strategic work with a set of intensive partnership sites has great potential to finally break the cycle of half-baked pilots and failed experiments that have characterized many prior efforts to make teacher effectiveness matter in improving education. In undertaking this work, we recognize that each school system faces a unique set of circumstances, needs, and opportunities that will affect how it designs a plan to refine and use measures of teacher effectiveness to make decisions that will improve student achievement.

Partner sites will need to innovate and tailor their strategies to fit their own conditions. But the foundation believes there are a set of strategic priorities that figure prominently across all school systems and that need to be part of a comprehensive plan to achieve dramatic gains in student outcomes.

Ensuring a highly effective teacher every year in every classroom will require bold and aggressive efforts to address these priorities:

Developing meaningful measures of teacher effectiveness

An important first step toward supporting teachers and ensuring all students have access to high quality instruction is to develop fairer, more accurate, and more useful measures of teacher effectiveness that can be agreed to by teachers, school system leaders, and researchers. Teachers often talk about the variation they see in the instructional skills of their colleagues. Some teachers can get their students to do amazing things and meet goals that other teachers cannot. But as a nation, we have not made the necessary investments to identify effective teachers and understand what they do that makes them effective so that others can learn.

Instead, there is widespread agreement that current teacher-evaluation systems need to change. As a rule, they are too superficial, too lax, and more focused on documenting incompetence than on supporting teacher growth and development. Teachers need to know how they are doing all the time, and get clear feedback, not just when it’s time to consider whether or not to dismiss them. In fact, in most districts, a satisfactory evaluation gets teachers nothing except the right to keep their jobs and often doesn’t reflect whether they have impacted student learning. Recent studies conducted by The New Teacher Project of

several urban school systems indicate that while many schools have been identified as failing for three or more consecutive years, almost all teachers within these schools have received top evaluation ratings.

Teaching is a complex task. It's multi-dimensional and needs to be viewed through multiple lenses. So the foundation believes that to inform decision making and improve practice, teacher-effectiveness measures must also be multi-dimensional, incorporating various data that reflect teacher performance. We also believe that the task of constructing better measures of effective teaching is best done in collaboration with teachers in actual classrooms. The foundation will work with teachers and school system leaders in partnership sites on a linked set of measures that include student learning over time, as well as video observations of teaching practice, tests of teachers' knowledge and skills, and feedback from students.

To do this work will require high-quality data systems, generous and confidential access to classrooms to observe the work of teachers and students, student assessments that are tightly aligned with curriculum goals, and the ability to use the best research designs, including, in some cases, randomly assigning teachers who teach the same grade or course to classrooms within a school. We believe that it is up to partners in each district to determine how they use such tools and measures, based on their unique circumstances, but that they should be used to make such key decisions as how effective teachers are recruited, assigned, evaluated, supported, compensated, and promoted.

Increasing the overall numbers of effective teachers

Ensuring effective teachers for the students who need them most will require increasing the supply of effective teachers in the workforce and improving the performance of those already there. The goal can be addressed, in part, by decreasing the number of effective teachers who leave a school system. It also can be addressed by ensuring only those teachers who meet a higher threshold of effectiveness, aligned with a school system's student-achievement goals, earn tenure. Finally, better measures of teacher effectiveness can help describe with greater precision and detail the help individual teachers need to improve and, if they cannot improve, help transition them out of teaching.

Providing increased pay and greater roles and responsibilities for effective teachers

Teachers who meet more rigorous standards of performance for tenure should be awarded the prestige they deserve for their contributions to student achievement and success. As in other professions, performance should be rewarded with increased compensation and opportunities for career advancement within teaching so that effective teachers remain working with students and mentoring other teachers. These strategies should complement efforts to retain effective teachers and improve the quality of supports available to all teachers through the development of effective teacher leaders, mentors, and instructional coaches.

Concentrating effective teachers where they are needed most

The above priorities should increase the number of effective teachers in a school system, but they may not address the pressing necessity to increase the concentration of effective teachers serving low-income and

minority students. Additional incentives, as well as changes in policy or collective-bargaining agreements, likely will be needed to ensure low-income and minority students have consistent access to effective teaching every year in every classroom.

Finally, we recognize that while our emphasis is on empowering and lifting up effective teachers, teachers sit within a larger school system that must take greater responsibility and accountability for ensuring student success. It is unfair to hold teachers to a higher standard without holding school system leaders to high standards as well.

Therefore, we expect partnership districts and charter management organizations to consider complementary efforts to ensure high-quality teaching and learning is supported system wide:

- High-quality supports for teachers, such as improved data reporting, curriculum and assessment resources aligned with the school system’s priorities, and time to collaborate
- Increased training, support, and accountability for school principals, including the knowledge and skills to support instruction, conduct meaningful teacher evaluations, and manage resources within their building, as well as strengthened principal evaluations and processes
- Better and more frequent teacher evaluations, aligned with the school system’s basket of effective teaching measures, including, for example, peer assistance and review
- Performance management systems that include the collection and presentation of timely and meaningful data across classrooms, schools, and the central office; performance scorecards, new models of accountability, and processes for continuous improvement
- Redesigned human resource policies and practices around effective recruiting, hiring, assigning, and transferring teachers
- Opportunities for effective teachers to have a greater say in school and district decision making and for all teachers to work in safe, orderly, and well-maintained environments

In setting such an ambitious agenda, we recognize that we are asking school districts and charter management organizations to be aggressive and courageous. That is why we are committed to a multi-year, multi-million dollar effort to help them succeed. We believe nothing less than the future of our children depends on it. The foundation believes that every life has equal value. Our mission is to ensure that all young people have the chance to reach their full potential no matter where they live.

It also goes without saying that the greatest skill needed to begin and successfully accomplish this work is trust. By its very nature, trust can’t be governed, regulated, or negotiated. But it must be the underpinning of our endeavor to ensure all students have access to effective teaching. It is no different than creating the learning environment for our youth. We assume all students can and will learn at high levels, then set about the task of teaching them. Let us model nothing short of that for adults, assuming that together we can all learn how to measure effective teaching, how to help teachers improve, and how to give all students, particularly low-income and minority students, persistent and consistent access to good teaching and a supportive learning environment.