

# Delivering on the Promise of Public Schooling

Susan Moore Johnson

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*Those seeking to improve teaching effectiveness must recognize that the components of effective teaching are complex and depend on school environment as well as individual teacher characteristics.*

Evidence abounds that public education in the United States has not yet become the great equalizer many had hoped it would be. The Black-White achievement gap persists within districts and schools. Students in high-poverty districts lag behind their peers in affluent districts. And results from the international PISA examinations (OECD 2010) show that the United States has a far lower proportion of “resilient” students – those who succeed at school despite a disadvantaged background – than most other developed countries. In part, these inequities result from forces beyond the control of the public schools, such as racially segregated housing or school funding based on the local property tax. Still, public schools in the United States can and should do much more to ensure success for all students.

For many years, those intent on equalizing the opportunities and success of underserved students focused on the inequitable distribution of resources, such as libraries, textbooks, or science equipment, to communities and to individual schools. They introduced federally and state-funded programs, such as Title I, to provide specialized instructional opportunities for low-income students. Although such initia-

tives all depended on teachers for their delivery, reformers did little to distinguish among those teachers. Anyone with the right license was assumed capable of doing the job.

Within the past decade, however, policymakers and practitioners increasingly have focused on individual teachers as resources, recognizing that some are more effective than others in equalizing both opportunity and success for disadvantaged students (e.g., Boyd et al. 2008). At the recent Warren Institute Civil Rights Research Roundtable on Education, in which I participated along with others writing in this issue of *VUE*, Andy Baxter of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools posed a question that reflected this new perspective: “How is measuring the distribution of effective teachers to schools different from measuring the distribution of computers to schools?”

Parents and teachers have long known that some teachers are more effective than others – not simply by a bit, but by a lot. Within any school, savvy parents use their personal influence to see that their children are assigned to certain teachers, but not others. Teachers, themselves, are well aware that many of their colleagues serve students effectively, while others

*Susan Moore Johnson is the Jerome T. Murphy Professor in Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and director of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers.*

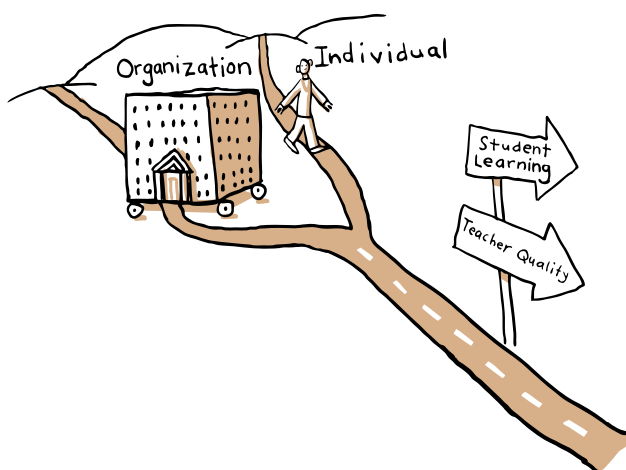
contribute little to students' learning and a few may even cause harm. Yet it was not until about 2000 that scholars clearly established that teachers are the single most important school-level factor in students' achievement, as measured by standardized tests and that within schools, there is wide variation from classroom to classroom in teachers' effectiveness (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2005; Rowan, Correnti & Miller 2002; McCaffrey et al. 2003).

Jane Hannaway and her colleagues at the Urban Institute (Sass et al. 2010) found this variation to be especially great within schools serving the students with greatest need. She reported at the Roundtable that although the most effective teachers in high-poverty schools compare favorably with the most effective teachers in low-poverty schools, there is a wider range of effectiveness in high-poverty schools. Similarly, Tim Daly of The New Teacher Project reported on research by the Tennessee Department of Education (2007) showing that poor and minority students are less likely to get the most effective teachers and more likely to get the least effective teachers.

In our work at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers,<sup>1</sup> we have found that many teachers choose schools that serve minority and high-poverty student populations and that they stay in those schools when they function effectively. In discussing teacher mobility and effectiveness at the Roundtable, Marty West of the Harvard Graduate School of Education noted the importance of improving teacher retention at high-poverty/minority schools, not as an end in itself, but as a strategy to improve teacher effectiveness. It makes no sense to assign successful teachers to dysfunc-

tional schools – poorly led, unsafe, isolating environments for teachers and students alike – in the hope that skilled individuals will overcome serious organizational limitations. Students and teachers alike deserve to have schools that encourage and support focused teaching and learning.

Although it is now well established that teachers differ in their effectiveness, it is not yet clear what explains those differences. Until that is well understood, efforts to equalize opportunity and ensure success for all students will depend on policymakers' best guesses about what works rather than on solid evidence. The answer may lie in what teachers, themselves, bring to their teaching – prior coursework and degrees, special certification, or years of experience. Alternatively, differences in pedagogy may distinguish between successful and unsuccessful teachers. Or the context of the school may increase or diminish teachers' effectiveness. The presentations and discussion at the Roundtable suggest that all three play a role and that progress in achieving equity will depend on understanding how each works and how they interact.



<sup>1</sup> See <[www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt)>.

## ***Teachers' Qualifications***

Efforts to identify what, if any, role certain teachers' qualifications – their teacher preparation (or lack of it), holding a master's degree, or years of experience teaching – play in their success have, as yet, yielded mixed findings. This has led some reformers to conclude that there are no important differences in the effects of pedagogical training or prior experience for teachers – that anyone with subject-specific coursework and personal commitment can succeed. However, it seems clear that the final word on this line of research is not yet in. At the Roundtable, Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University reported on research showing that various preparation programs have differential effects on teachers' success. Also, Helen Ladd of Duke University reported on analyses of North Carolina data (Clotfelter, Ladd & Vigdor 2006) showing that, in fact, differences in certain qualifications – licensure test scores, graduation from a competitive college, years of experience, and certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards – actually do matter and that their effects are relatively large. Notably, Ladd and her colleagues found that “poor and minority students tend to have teachers with weaker qualifications than White or more affluent students.”

## ***Pedagogy***

The research showing that disadvantaged students are disproportionately assigned to ineffective teachers is convincing, but it tells us nothing about the kind of instructional practices students experience with either effective or ineffective teachers. We do not yet know what some teachers do to achieve greater success than others. At the Roundtable, Steve Cantrell reported

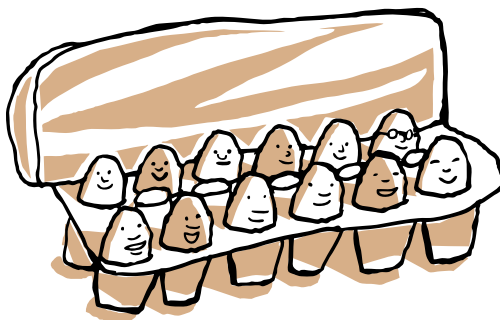
on the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in which researchers are examining videos of teachers' math and literacy classes to identify and describe the instructional practices of teachers whose students make large achievement gains and those whose students do not.

These and similar studies eventually will inform and guide a wide range of policies, programs, and practices. However, lacking clear evidence about what pedagogies are most effective, some local districts are relying on value-added scores – statistical estimates of individual teachers' contributions to student achievement – as proxies for measures of teaching quality. With such estimates, they can redistribute teachers evenhandedly within and across schools. For example, Andy Baxter reported that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has adopted policies designed to ensure that every school has some highly effective teachers and that within schools, every student has access to those teachers. Elementary principals in the district now are required to assign students who have been taught by a less-effective teacher one year to the classroom of a more-effective teacher the next. However, in his presentation, Baxter raised an important question: “Are top teachers ‘top’ for all students?” Although there is no clear research to answer this question, routine school practice would suggest that the answer is “probably not.” In current and future research, it will be important to learn whether particular pedagogies are more or less effective with certain sub-groups of students. If districts and schools decide to reassign teachers in order to achieve equity, they must ensure that the students who are meant to benefit from such trades actually do.

## Context

Even if researchers agree about the combination of characteristics and practices that make some teachers more effective than others, it is increasingly clear that teachers who succeed in one setting may not succeed in another. All schools are not equal in the context they provide for teaching and learning. Jane Hannaway reported that North Carolina and Florida students in high-poverty schools achieve far less than students in low-poverty schools. However, she and her colleagues also found that the differences were not sufficiently explained by teacher characteristics or value-added scores. There were small differences in the average teacher value-added scores between high- and low-poverty schools, although variation was larger within high-poverty schools, which overall had the weakest teachers. The researchers conjectured that high-poverty schools might be less successful in attracting and retaining more-effective teachers. However, high rates of mobility among teachers in high-poverty schools did not sufficiently explain their students' lower levels of success, leaving Hannaway to observe that equalizing teachers' experience across schools "may not do much" to ensure that students in high-poverty schools are effectively taught. This work suggests that school context matters and that, therefore, reformers who seek to increase opportunity and resilience among disadvantaged students would do well to think beyond the individual teacher and address the differences in schools as places for teaching and learning.

However well-intentioned, swap-out strategies, which replace weak teachers with effective ones (whether directly by assignment or indirectly by



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incentives) are unlikely, in themselves, to equalize opportunity for students, largely because they reinforce the centuries-old "egg-crate" model of schooling, in which the school functions as an aggregate of units, rather than as an interdependent organization. Within any school, there are always some teachers who are more effective than others, whether as a result of preparation, subject knowledge, experience, or pedagogical skill. In an egg-crate school, students may or may not benefit from the excellent pedagogy of the school's best teachers, depending on who their assigned teacher is at any time. Although students move through the egg-crate school from grade to grade and classroom to classroom, their teachers may know little about what they experience in other grades and classes. Egg-crate schools are not designed to ensure that teachers learn from one another by sharing

their best practices. Nor are teachers in such schools likely to hold one another accountable for the quality of services to students.

Elaine Allensworth reported on her work with colleagues at the Chicago Consortium of School Research (2010) about the effect of school context on teachers' mobility. They found that, overall, schools with chronically high teacher turnover tend to serve more disadvantaged and African American students than schools with low teacher turnover. However, based on surveys of teachers, they also learned that schools with greater staffing stability are more interdependent organizations. These

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schools have strong leaders, and the teachers work together in professional communities. The schools also have high levels of parental involvement and are safe spaces, with few disciplinary problems.

Allensworth's conclusion that "teachers leave schools where they feel ineffective" is consistent with our earlier work at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, where we found that new teachers' career decisions – whether to stay in their school, transfer to another, or leave teaching altogether – were largely determined by whether they thought they could achieve a "sense of success" in their

work (Johnson & Birkeland 2003).

The school was the center of their experience, and whether they stayed or left depended on a set of related organizational factors – their relationships with colleagues, whether their teaching assignment was appropriate and manageable, whether the school provided a supportive environment for teaching and learning, and whether the principal managed the school fairly and effectively. This line of research suggests that if schools serving high-poverty students are to recruit and retain effective teachers, they must become places where excellent instruction is not only possible but likely. To reassign effective teachers to high-need schools will not succeed, unless the schools themselves function well. If effective teachers are not valued and supported in their work, they are unlikely to stay, creating persistent, problematic instability.

Ladd (2011) finds that North Carolina teachers' perceptions of their working conditions predict both their planned and actual movement away from their school; those who are dissatisfied report that they intend to leave, and they do. The character of their school strongly influences not only teachers' current performance but also their decisions about whether to stay or go. Thus, policies designed to make all schools places where teachers can be effective may well have greater payoff than any scheme to reassign them.

At the Roundtable, I reported on our recent research at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, exploring teachers' views of their school as a work environment. Using statewide survey data, we examined the relationship between Massachusetts teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions and students' academic growth (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, forthcoming).

## PERSPECTIVES: Teaching Effectiveness Strategies and Latino Children

*Joseph Bishop is director of education at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund.*

Equitable learning systems to support high-quality instruction cannot be haphazardly thrown together with the hope of improving student learning. Local, state, and federal efforts to improve teacher quality – a critical piece of learning systems – have been random and inconsistent at best. For example, state and federal investments in public education and the teaching profession in the 1960s and 1970s stopped in the 1980s, just as schools were starting to show progress in low-income communities (Darling-Hammond 2010). A general lack of patience and commitment to educational equity on a policy and political level has put us in this position.

### **What Is Teacher Effectiveness?**

We need to think of teaching effectiveness as a spectrum: recruiting a diverse pool of the most talented teachers to work in low-income communities, preparing teachers using rigorous standards in a residency setting, and providing support for teachers once they enter the classroom. Each component of the effectiveness spectrum matters; we can't focus on one piece without the others and expect student learning to take place.

Factors such as school

finance challenges and lack of incentives to teach in high-need communities can lead to an inequitable distribution of high-quality teachers. However, a highly qualified teacher does not necessarily ensure student learning without the proper positive conditions to promote student success, including clear alignment between higher education institutions and feeder K–12 systems, outstanding principals and administrators, parental and family engagement strategies, and healthy students.

Teachers who are effective in one context may not be in another. Latino students, for instance, need instructors with the knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to ensure their success. For English language learners, teachers, administrators, and staff need to have the language development expertise to support students in their native language and assist students in the acquisition of both academic content and English in the process. Educators also need to have the training to meaningfully engage parents and families, including non-native-English-speaking parents. These strategies all need to be integrated as part of teacher preparation programs for all credentialed teachers and should be required as part of teacher performance assessments. The same requirements should be applied to educational leaders, as well, with regard to preparation and performance assessments.

### **What's Missing from the Current Debates on Teacher Effectiveness?**

Performance management and instructional capacity-building strategies will need to coexist as part of current discourse on teacher effectiveness and public education. Discussion on teacher effectiveness and improving public education will likely continue to focus heavily on performance management, a reflection of interest from policymakers and their constituents who want to know the impact of their investment in schools. However, instructional capacity building and developing human capital in schools is the only possible way to produce the type of student learning outcomes that performance management aims to achieve.

Current public debates on teacher effectiveness are disconnected from the global citizens we are hoping will graduate from our high schools and colleges. All students need to have not only core content knowledge, but also twenty-first-century skills and knowledge. This will determine their ability to think critically, defend arguments both orally and in writing, and interact with peers in a multilingual, multi-literate, multicultural, global society. Teachers need to have the preparation and multifaceted levels of expertise to support the development of students with all that is required of today's students

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## Teaching Effectiveness Strategies and Latino Children *(continued from page 25)*

in a global economy. Yet current conversations on teacher effectiveness are being restricted by an overemphasis on test scores, encouraging the isolation of students, teachers, and learning and making students with the greatest need a huge liability for schools.

Participants in the dialogue on teacher effectiveness need to remember who will be most directly impacted by their discussions. For the short term, it

may be teachers and their professional accomplishments. But for the long term, it will be the minds and lives of students who will be affected most. Students of color and low-income students are soon to represent the majority of the student population, and U.S. Census data suggest that is already the case in most communities. Discussions related to student success must acknowledge the realities of who the students are that

we serve and what role teacher effectiveness can play to support their achievement.

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We found that teachers who view their school organizations favorably report being more satisfied and less likely to plan to transfer or leave teaching than their peers in schools with less favorable conditions, even after controlling for student demographics and other school and teacher characteristics. We also found that schools with better work environments for teachers achieved greater growth in student learning. Teachers reported being affected by a range of working conditions. However, those that they said mattered most were the ones that shape the social context of teaching and learning: school culture, the principal's leadership, and the relationships with their colleagues. We are currently conducting case studies in order to understand how these social factors play out in six urban schools, all serving high-poverty, high-minority student populations.

### ***Moving Ahead***

There is much debate and rhetoric these days about the rights of students and the obligations of teachers. Proponents of the swap-out strategy for redistributing effective teachers suggest that teachers' preferences should matter little in their assignment. However, research about school context suggests that if schools serving high-poverty students are to improve substantially, teachers cannot be treated as if they are itinerant workers or replaceable parts. Instead, these schools must be organized so that the strengths of some serve the needs of others. Only in this way can efforts to improve the quality of teachers and teaching advance.

One approach to improving instruction and student learning is to create dense networks of information and exchange among teachers. Recently, researchers Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) found that students have larger achievement gains in math and reading, both initially and over time, when their teacher works with more effective colleagues at the same

grade level. Further, they found that these “positive peer learning effects” were especially strong for less-experienced teachers. Notably, Sass et al. (2010) found that new teachers in high-poverty schools improve over time more slowly than they do in low-poverty schools. Many factors may explain this, but one is likely to be the isolation of teachers in schools that experience repeated turnover. Therefore, it makes sense for policymakers to devote resources to structures that maximize positive peer effects through collaborative work structures, such as common planning time. Rather than seeking to improve a school classroom by classroom, reformers might better invest in strategies to improve the growth of teachers across the school.

Recognizing the importance of the school context means that districts also must assign their best principals to the most challenging schools, create opportunities and incentives for teamwork within schools, provide sufficient resources for teaching and learning, and ensure that schools serving students with the greatest needs are safe, orderly, and responsive to the concerns of parents. Instituting reform policies that would increase the proportion of effective teachers within schools, without attending to the overall quality of the school as a context for those teachers’ work, is shortsighted and likely will be ineffective. By implementing a comprehensive and coherent approach, U.S. schools can begin to deliver on their promise of equity, opportunity, and success for all students.

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