

# The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness

## Executive Summary

Suppose you are a parent determined to make sure your child gets the best possible education. You understand intuitively what an ample body of research proves: that your child's education depends to a large extent on the quality of her teachers. Consequently, as you begin considering local public schools, you focus on a basic question: who are the best teachers, and where do they teach?

The question is simple enough. There's just one problem- except for word of mouth from other parents, no one can tell you the answers.

In fact, you would be dismayed to discover that not only can no one tell you which teachers are most effective; they also cannot say which are the least effective or which fall in between. Were you to examine the district's teacher evaluation records yourself, you would find that, on paper, almost every teacher is a great teacher, even at schools where the chance of a student succeeding academically amount to a coin toss, at best.

In short, the school district would ask you to trust that it can provide your child a quality education, even though it cannot be honestly tell you whether it is providing her a quality teacher.

This is the reality for our public school districts nationwide. Put simply, they fail to distinguish great teaching from good, good from fair, and fair from poor. A teacher's effectiveness- the most important factor for schools in improving student achievement- is not measured, recorded, or used to inform decision-making in any meaningful way.

### **The Widget Effect**

This report examines our pervasive and longstanding failure to recognize and respond to variations in the effectiveness of our teachers. At the heart of the matter are teacher evaluation systems, which in theory should serve as the primary mechanism for assessing such variations, but in practice tell us little about how one teacher differs from any other, except teachers whose performance is so egregiously poor as to warrant dismal.

The failure of evaluation systems to provide accurate and credible information about individual teachers' instructional performance sustains and reinforces a phenomenon that we have come to call the Widget Effect. The Widget Effect describes the tendency of school districts to assume classroom effectiveness is the same from teacher to teacher. This decades-old fallacy fosters an environment in which teachers cease to be understood as individual professionals, but rather as interchangeable parts. In its denial of individual strengths and weaknesses, it is deeply

disrespectful to teachers; in its indifference to instructional effectiveness, it gambles with the lives of students.

The fact that information on teacher performance is almost exclusively used for decisions related to teacher remediation and dismissal paints a start picture: In general, our schools are indifferent to instructional effectiveness- except when it comes time to remove a teacher.

## **Study Overview**

This report is the product of an extensive research effort spanning 12 districts and four states. It reflects survey responses from approximately 15,000 teachers and 1,300 administrators, and it has benefited from the insight of more than 80 local and state education officials, teachers union leaders, policymakers and advocates who participated in advisory panels in each state, shaping the study design, data collection instruments, and findings and recommendations.

The four states included in the study, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois and Ohio, employ diverse teacher performance management policies. The 12 districts studied range in size, geographic location, evaluation policies and practices and overall approach to teacher performance management. Jonesboro Public Schools, the smallest district studied serves approximately 4,450 students; Chicago Public Schools, the largest, serves 413,000. All 12 districts employ some formal evaluation process for teachers, but the methods and frequency of evaluation differ. The outcomes, however, are strikingly similar.

## **Characteristics of the Widget Effect in Teacher Evaluation**

The Widget Effect is characterized by institutional indifference to variations in teacher performance. Teacher evaluation systems reflect and reinforce this indifference in several ways.

*All teachers are rated good or great.* In districts that use binary evaluation ratings (generally “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”), more than 99 percent of teachers receive the satisfactory rating. Districts that use a broader range of rating options do little better; in these districts, 94 percent of teachers receive one of the top two ratings and less than 1 percent are rated unsatisfactory.

*Excellence goes unrecognized.* When all teachers are rated good or great, those who are truly exceptional cannot be formally identified. Fifty-nine percent of teachers and 63 percent of administrators say their district is not doing enough to identify, compensate, promote and retain the most effective teachers.

*Inadequate professional development.* The failure to assess variations in the instructional effectiveness also precludes districts from identifying specific development needs in their teachers. In fact, 73 percent of teachers surveyed said their most recent evaluation did not identify any development areas, and only 45 percent of teachers who did have development areas identified said they received useful support to improve.

*No special attention to novices.* Inattention to teacher performance and development begins from a teacher's first days in the classroom. Though it is widely recognized that teachers are least effective in their beginning years, 66 percent of novice teachers in districts with multiple ratings received a rating greater than "satisfactory" on their most recent performance evaluation. Low expectations characterize the tenure process as well, with 41 percent of administrators reporting that they have never "non-renewed" a probationary teacher for performance concerns in his or her final probationary year.

*Poor performance goes unaddressed.* Despite uniformly positive evaluation ratings, teachers and administrators both recognize ineffective teaching in their schools. In fact, 81 percent of administrators and 57 percent of teachers say there is a tenured teacher in their school who is performing poorly, and 43 percent of teachers say there is a tenured teacher who should be dismissed for poor performance. Troublingly, the percentages are higher in high-poverty schools. But district records confirm the scarcity of formal dismissals; at least half of the districts studied did not dismiss a single non-probationary teacher for poor performance in the time period studied (ranging from two to five years in each district).

### **Flaws in Evaluation Practice and Implementation**

The characteristics above are exacerbated and amplified by cursory evaluation practices and poor implementation. Evaluations are short and infrequent (most are based on two or fewer classroom observations, each 60 minutes or less), conducted by administrators without extensive training, and influenced by powerful cultural forces- in particular, an expectation among teachers that they will be among the vast majority rated as top performers.

While it is impossible to know whether the system drives the culture or the culture the system, the result is clear- evaluation systems fail to differentiate performance among teachers. As a result, teacher effectiveness is largely ignored. Excellent teachers cannot be recognized or rewarded, chronically low-performing teachers languish, and the wide majority of teachers performing at moderate levels do not get the differentiated support and development they need to improve as professionals.

### **Reversing the Widget Effect**

The Widget Effect is deeply ingrained in the fundamental systems and policies that govern the teachers in our public schools. Better evaluation systems may offer a partial solution, but they will not overcome a culture of indifference to classroom effectiveness. Reversing the Widget Effect depends on better information about instructional quality that can be used to inform other important decisions that dictate who teaches in our schools.

1. *Adopt a comprehensive performance evaluation system that fairly, accurately and credibly differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness in promoting student achievement.* Teachers should be evaluated based on their ability to fulfill their core

responsibility as professionals- delivering instruction that helps students learn and succeed. This demands clear performance standards, multiple rating options, regular monitoring of administrator judgments, and frequent feedback to teachers. Furthermore, it requires professional development that is tightly linked to performance standards and differentiated based on individual teacher needs. The core purpose of evaluation must be maximizing teacher growth and effectiveness, not just documenting poor performance as a prelude to dismissal.

2. *Train administrators and other evaluations in the teacher performance evaluation system and hold them accountable for using it effectively.* The differentiation of teacher effectiveness should be a priority for school administrators and one for which they are held accountable. Administrators must receive rigorous training and ongoing support so that they can make fair and consistent assessments of performance against established standards and provide constructive feedback and differentiated support to teachers.
3. *Integrate the performance evaluation system with critical human capital policies and functions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention and dismissal.* Even the best evaluation system will fail if the information it produces is of no consequence. An effective evaluation system must be fully integrated with other district systems and policies and a primary factor in decisions such as which teachers receive tenure, how teachers are assigned and retained, and when and how teachers are dismissed. Only by attaching stakes to evaluation outcomes will teachers and administrators invest in the hard work of creating a truly rigorous and credible evaluation system.
4. *Adopt dismissal policies that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to exit the district and a system of due process that is fair but efficient.* If the evaluation system is implemented effectively, unsatisfactory ratings will not be anomalous, surprising or without clear justification. Likewise, the identification of development areas and the provision of support will be continual. As in other professions, teachers who see significant, credible evidence of their own failure to meet standards are likely to exit voluntarily. Districts can facilitate this process by providing low-stakes options that enable teachers to leave their positions without being exiled. For teachers who must be officially dismissed, an expedited, one-day hearing should be sufficient for an arbitrator to determine if the evaluation and development process was followed and judgments made in good faith.

Our recommendations outline a comprehensive approach to improving teacher effectiveness and maximizing student learning. If implemented thoroughly and faithfully, we believe they will enable districts to understand and manage instructional quality with far greater sophistication. Improved evaluation will not only benefit students by driving the systematic improvement and

growth of their teachers, but teachers themselves, by at last treating them as professionals, not parts.

Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., Keeling, D., Schunk, J., Palcisco, A., & Morgan, K. (2009). *The widget effect: Our national failure to acknowledge and act on differences in teacher effectiveness* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). The New Teacher Project.