



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2012

Number 27 *Challenging the Politics of the
Teacher Accountability Movement*

Article 4

May 2012

The Teacher Accountability Debate

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Recommended Citation

Ravitch, D. (2012). The Teacher Accountability Debate. *Occasional Paper Series, 2012 (27)*. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2012/iss27/4>

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The Teacher Accountability Debate

Diane Ravitch

In January 2012, the debate about value-added assessment broke through to the general public with the release of a new study by Chetty-Friedman-Rockoff. Although not yet peer reviewed, the study received page one coverage in the *The New York Times*, where it was presented as clear evidence that “Students with top teachers are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers, more likely to enroll in college, and more likely to earn more money as adults.” The authors of the paper were quick to draw the policy implications of their work. As one of them said, “The message is to fire people sooner rather than later” (Lowrey, 2012). Bloggers were quick to reply, providing spontaneous, if unauthorized, peer review (Ferland, 2012).

The CFR study reinforced the message of the film *Waiting for “Superman”* and of the corporate-style reformers who have commanded the national media in recent years: Teachers are to blame for the ills of American society. Bad teachers are the ones whose students don’t get higher test scores year after year. If we fire bad teachers, they will be replaced by average or better teachers. If we fire bad teachers, our economy will gain trillions of dollars in productivity. If we fire bad teachers, our schools will rise to the top of international rankings. If we fire bad teachers, all students will be prepared for college or careers. If we fire bad teachers, we can eliminate poverty.

What an alluring set of promises! What utopian dreams, all within our reach! Now editorialists and pundits who have been looking for easy answers have the easiest of answers: Use test scores to identify bad teachers and fire them. Why waste billions on anti-poverty programs, on early childhood education, on health clinics, or anything else? Now we know who the culprits are and we can solve our problems by firing them.

The CFR study supports the claims of Eric Hanushek (quoted in *The New York Times* story about CFR), who has advocated “deselection” of teachers for several years. Hanushek has argued that by firing the bottom 5-10 percent, our nation would rise to the top of international testing. He assumes that these “bad teachers” would be replaced by average teachers, thus improving test scores.

This narrative has powerful bipartisan support. Not only is it embraced by Republicans, but by the Obama administration. No one has been more outspoken in advocacy for teacher accountability than Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who hailed the mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island (without any evaluations) and who applauded the public release of value-added ratings of thousands of teachers (and their names) by the Los Angeles Times in 2010. The Obama administration’s Race to the Top encouraged dozens of states to pass legislation decreeing that student test scores would count for a significant part of teachers’ evaluations, determining their tenure, promotion, and job security. Buoyed by the efforts of the Obama administration to hold teachers accountable, conservative

governors took the narrative to the next level and promoted legislation to eliminate tenure, seniority, and collective bargaining, even to cut teachers' benefits.

The teacher accountability narrative is part of a larger effort to restructure the teaching profession by turning it into a market-based activity. The teachers whose students get higher scores will get big bonuses as those who falter are fired. Over time, the theory goes, the profession will change as it attracts new people who want to earn big bonuses. Currently, people become teachers out of a sense of idealism and purpose; the goal of the corporate reformers is to change the motivation to the desire to earn a large salary, making teaching more like business.

There are so many assumptions embedded in this narrative that it is hard to know where to begin to deconstruct them.

First is the assumption that there is a long line of people eager to replace those teachers who were fired. It seems equally reasonable to assume that test-based accountability will reduce the status of teaching and diminish teacher professionalism. Teachers will be testing technicians, honing their skills by teaching students to pass a test, rather than teaching students to think for themselves and ask questions.

Second is the assumption that these policies will make teaching more attractive to ambitious young people. But as public derision and scorn are directed towards teachers, they become the public scapegoats (like Leon Goldstein in 1984), the ones we can all blame for whatever is wrong. Why would anyone with ambition and brains enter a job with so little social prestige, a very difficult job with few perks, where only a small number can expect to win the big bonuses for higher scores?

Third is the assumption that the tests are scientific instruments that measure what matters most in education. Very few testing experts would agree. They would be quick to point out not only that standardized tests are subject to statistical error, but should be used for the purpose for which they were designed. A test of fifth grade reading measures student performance, not teacher performance. What is more, standardized tests are designed and normed so that there is always a bottom 50 percent.

Fourth is the assumption that teachers alone can right the ills of a deeply unequal society. This is simply ludicrous. It is obvious why this narrative appeals to those who are tax-averse, to those who see personal advantage in blaming teachers for our increasingly unequal society.

Fifth is the assumption that raising test scores is the same as improving education. By now, everyone should realize that scores can be raised by intensive test preparation, by cheating, by excluding or avoiding low-performing students and by other clever strategies for gaming the system. Once upon a time, educators frowned upon test prep, realizing that it led to short-term gains but sacrificed larger goals, such as critical thinking, creativity, originality, and conceptual understanding. But today, after a decade of No Child Left Behind, the nation spends billions of dollars on testing and test prep activities and considers it a good investment of money and time.

Decisions have consequences, not all of them intended. As its assumptions became embedded in federal and state policies, we can expect to see a narrowing of the curriculum only to what is tested. We can expect to see some districts and states develop tests for every subject, pumping billions more into assessment, since most teachers do not teach subjects that are tested. We can expect to see increased demoralization of teachers, as they lose the last vestiges of professional autonomy.

And we can see politicians using the teacher accountability narrative as their justification for doing little or nothing to reduce poverty or to increase taxes on the wealthiest and on corporations.

These outcomes will not improve the quality of education or the prospects for our society.

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