Having It Both Ways: Building the Capacity of Individual Teachers and Their Schools

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In this article, Susan Moore Johnson calls for a balanced approach to improving teaching and learning, one that focuses on both teachers and the contexts in which they work. Drawing on over a decade of research on the experiences of new teachers, Johnson argues that focusing on the effectiveness of individuals while ignoring how their schools are organized limits our capacity to support teachers' work and, thus, to improve the outcomes for our nation's neediest students.

Teachers are the single most important school-level factor in students' learning (McCaffrey, Koretz, Lockwood, & Hamilton, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). On that, there is wide agreement among educational researchers and school reformers. Recognizing that students from low-income families seem to be especially dependent on their teachers for academic success (Downey, von Hippel, & Becket, 2004), policy makers have increased their determination to improve the quality of teachers and teaching, especially in the nation's lowest-performing schools (Jambulapati, 2001).

However, agreement tends to stop there, as advocates for change promote very different approaches to improving instruction. Some, such as those in the Education Equality Project, recommend directing new resources and rule making to recruiting strong teachers and assessing their qualifications, performance in the classroom, and demonstrated success in raising students' test scores. Others, such as those aligned with the principles of the Broader Bolder Approach to Education, call for expanding attention beyond the individual teacher to address the school context in which teachers work. This might include ensuring that teachers have better access to expert colleagues and instructional coaching, more time to work with grade-level or subject teams, meaningful supervision by principals or peer coaches who understand instruc-

tion, and support from a school culture that encourages effective teaching and learning.[1]

Current policy initiatives focus primarily on the former approach while seeming to disregard school context and its effects on teachers' work. Such "no excuses" reforms assume that a teacher can do it all, that an individual who succeeds in one school can succeed in any school, and, conversely, that a teacher who falters in one classroom will fail in all others. Research documents that high-income schools routinely get "better" teachers—"better" by almost any measure, whether it be years of experience, degrees earned, selectivity of undergraduate institution, or current salary level (Carey, 2004; Quay, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In response, proponents of increasing equity in staffing low-income schools often call for swapping out more effective for less effective teachers, as if changing the individuals will make all the difference. For example, many districts offer financial incentives to encourage effective teachers to transfer to low-performing schools. A policy in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina, calls for reassigning teachers across the district to ensure that all schools have some effective teachers (Johnson, 2011). Others rely on the discretion given administrators of so-called "turnaround" schools to replace teachers judged to be weak with others who look more promising. In a widely publicized 2010 incident, administrators in Central Falls, Rhode Island, fired all teachers in the district's sole high school, with the intention of rehiring some and replacing others with recruits from a national search. However, one year later, it was clear that these personnel changes failed to improve student learning (Sanchez, 2011). Changing the people without changing the context in which they work is not likely to substantially improve the school. However, research suggests that even an ineffective teacher's chances for success would be enhanced by a supportive school context (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009; Kapadia, Coca, & Easton, 2007).

Here, I make a case for pursuing a more balanced strategy for improving the quality of teachers and teaching than that currently proposed by most policy makers and scholars. I urge investing in individual teachers and assessing their effectiveness while also improving the organizations in which those teachers work. This dual approach would greatly increase the likelihood that all teachers can be effective and, therefore, that all students will be well served.

Who Teachers Are

Any effort to improve the quality of teachers should begin with an understanding of who those teachers are. At the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, we have been studying the large cohort of new teachers—over two million in ten years—who entered the classroom beginning in the late 1990s, replacing a cohort of veteran teachers who were hired in the late 1960s and 1970s. Our studies, which have included interviews and surveys with teachers in more

than a dozen states, explore a range of topics about these new teachers, such as their career preferences, preparation for teaching, attitudes toward pay, views of unions, and experiences with hiring and induction.[2] Beginning in 1998, a team of doctoral students and I selected a purposive sample of fifty first-year and second-year Massachusetts teachers and followed them for four years (Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). We wanted to understand why they had chosen to teach, what they expected from their work, how they experienced their early years, and what career decisions they subsequently made. Although the new teachers we interviewed had chosen to teach for the same reasons as their veteran counterparts—to work with youth, to contribute to the social good, and to share their love of a subject—they differed as a cohort from the teachers they replaced.

Members of the retiring generation of teachers began their careers in a labor market that differed markedly from that of today. At the time, many other professional careers—law, business, medicine—were closed, or at least unwelcoming, to women and to men of color, which led many of them to choose teaching by default. This created what widely has been called the "hidden subsidy" of public education: a rich source of well-educated individuals who had few professional options and, therefore, were committed to teaching at pay levels far below those of professionals in other fields. This large cohort of teachers remained in the classroom over the entirety of their career (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004)—the first, and possibly the last, to do so in U.S. history.

Because the veteran teachers who retired had made a lifetime career in the classroom, most school officials expected that their successors would as well, that once recruited and hired, new teachers would remain in teaching, whatever the conditions of their work. Therefore, beginning in 2000, administrators were surprised by high attrition rates, especially in the nation's urban schools (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). Ingersoll and Smith (2003) analyzed national data and found turnover rates of 30 percent after three years in teaching and nearly 50 percent after five years. Compared with their veteran colleagues three decades earlier, these new teachers had far more employment opportunities. In fact, the very fields that had been closed to prospective teachers in the late 1960s were recruiting women and men of color by 2000. As they considered whether to enter the classroom (and, later, whether to remain there), recruits to teaching compared a career in the classroom with their other options, many of which offered higher pay, better equipped workplaces, and opportunities for rapid career advancement (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). School officials were surprised to realize that they had to compete for talent and that they could no longer count on new teachers to remain in their job for thirty years (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010).

Whereas most veteran teachers had completed traditional teacher education programs, including a sustained student teaching experience, the new

generation of teachers varied widely in their preservice experience: some had extensive preparation, others had fast-track preparation in summer or weekend programs, and some had no preparation at all.

Thirty years ago, careers were more stable in all fields. However, by 2000, young people widely anticipated having multiple careers over a lifetime. In the seven states where we surveyed random samples of new teachers about their experiences with hiring, colleagues, and curriculum, between 28 percent (Michigan) and 47 percent (California) of first- and second-year teachers were midcareer entrants, sometimes called "career switchers" (Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). Unlike traditional first-career teachers, who enter teaching directly after college or a master's degree program, these midcareer entrants had spent a substantial period of time in another field before deciding to teach, often choosing classroom teaching because they believed it would offer more "meaningful" work. They were, on average, older than other new teachers, had worked in different types of organizations, and brought a wider array of skills and more life experience to their schools (Johnson, Birkeland, & Peske, 2005; Marinell, 2008). Subsequent analysis of national data showed that the proportion of midcareer entrants among new teachers grew from 20 percent to 39 percent between 1987 and 2003 (Marinell, 2009).

Although many teachers in our study planned to remain in education long-term, few expected to do so as classroom teachers. Many said that they hoped to have roles that would allow them to extend their expertise and influence beyond the classroom, possibly as instructional coaches. As undergraduates, younger teachers often had been expected to work on group projects and share responsibilities with fellow students. In their prior work experience, midcareer entrants not only had participated on teams but often had led them. Across the subgroups of first-career and midcareer entrances, teachers expressed concern about being isolated in their classrooms and hoped that they would work closely with their more experienced and expert colleagues (Kardos & Johnson, 2007).

These new teachers realized from the start that their salaries as teachers would not match those of their friends working in law, consulting, business, or banking. Although they often said that they did not expect to be well paid as teachers, they were troubled by a salary scale that did not encourage individual initiative, recognize extra hours worked, or reward them for success in raising students' test scores. As teachers, their only options for increasing their pay were to take additional courses or to become a club adviser for a modest annual stipend. They complained when they realized that they were earning far less than an experienced teacher in a neighboring classroom, whose class was out of control or whose students learned little—failings that they said their administrators ignored.

The Schools Where Teachers Work

The clearest and most important finding from this four-year study of new teachers was that their satisfaction and "sense of success" depended on the school where they worked (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Some schools were well-organized, purposeful, and supportive places for teaching and learning. Teachers in such schools described how they had been hired in a thorough and informative process that allowed for a rich exchange of information between the candidates and their prospective colleagues and administrators. As candidates, they not only interviewed with the principal but also observed classes, talked with prospective colleagues, and sometimes were asked to teach sample lessons. These schools also ensured that new teachers' assignments matched their subject knowledge and preparation. They were not expected to teach in two subjects, mixed-grade classes, or to split their time between school buildings. Induction included regular opportunities to observe and work with experienced colleagues. For example, one induction program at Brookline High School in Massachusetts arranged for all new teachers to have mentors who taught at least one section of the same course they did. They also were granted periodic release from administrative assignments, such as cafeteria duty, to observe their colleagues teaching. They received regular feedback about their instruction not only from their mentors and supervisors but also from the coordinators of their induction program.

Other new teachers, however, entered schools that were isolating and dysfunctional. Often those teachers were assigned to schools or programs that served large proportions of low-income and minority students, many of whom were also English language learners. All too often, these teachers were hired just before, or even after, school started, leaving no time to prepare for their new responsibilities in a particular subject or grade. Sometimes they were expected to teach outside their field or to take on the most difficult students, courses, or schedules. If they were fortunate enough to have a formal mentor whose assigned subject or grade-level matched their own, time was rarely provided for classroom observations or meaningful exchange during a nonstop day. Few such schools provided an approach to discipline that would promote schoolwide order and a focus on learning, leaving individual teachers to manage student behavior one classroom at a time.

Many new teachers today are committed to working with students of color in high-poverty communities. However, the schools these students attend often are poorly organized and administered, receiving less than their fair share of resources and attention. As researchers have shown, teachers tend to leave such dysfunctional contexts for schools where they can achieve what they set out to do in their career, such as inspire students, convey knowledge, and serve society. Often these more functional schools serve a wealthier, frequently whiter, student population (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). This repeated turnover as teachers seek more supportive environments for

teaching and learning takes a high toll on students who attend underperforming, high-minority, high-need schools.

After four years, seventeen of our new teachers remained in their original schools, sixteen had transferred to new schools, and seventeen had left public school teaching. Although our sample was purposefully rather than randomly chosen, these teachers' career choices were roughly comparable to those of teachers nationally at the time (Leukens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler, 2004). The details of individuals' stories differed, but the themes were the same. They said that they had chosen teaching rather than some other (often higher paying) line of work because they expected to make a difference in students' lives. When their schools made that success not only possible but likely, they chose to stay. When their schools were dysfunctional, making successful teaching difficult or impossible, they transferred to another school or left teaching altogether.

Current Research: An Individual Orientation

Since the late 1990s, research about teachers has focused largely on individual teachers and relied on quantitative datasets, increasingly available as a result of federal, state, and local accountability policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Using approaches that yield value-added estimates, researchers have sought to identify the contributions that individual teachers make to their students' learning, as measured by their students' performance on standardized tests. Using these estimates, an individual's effectiveness can be compared with that of others who teach similar students in comparable schools. Policy makers and school officials across the country have been quick to adopt these approaches in awarding merit pay (Johnson & Papay, 2009) or evaluating teachers for tenure or dismissal. Many states now require student achievement to be a "substantial" component of teachers' evaluations, calculated using value-added approaches (National Center on Teacher Quality, 2011).

There are well-documented problems with using these statistical methods to make important decisions about individuals. They are too unstable and too vulnerable to sources of error to be used in something as important as a teacher's evaluation (Baker et al., 2010; Braun et al., 2010).[3] However, even if the methods were altered to produce more accurate, stable estimates of the value that each teacher adds to her students' learning, they could not identify or explain the role that a teacher's qualifications or the school context plays in any single teacher's success or failure. No further information about an individual's background or teaching circumstances is currently taken into account—not the teacher's prior preparation, years of experience, or type of assignment. Nor are these figures interpreted with attention to the teacher's school—whether it provides an orderly, purposeful environment for learning; whether its principal is well organized, knowledgeable, and fair; whether it maintains positive relationships with parents; whether it provides sufficient

instructional resources; or whether teachers have opportunities to work closely with and learn from their colleagues. Although the methods for assessing individual teachers' value-added accomplishments are statistically sophisticated, they are organizationally agnostic and, therefore, insufficient.

Current Policies

Based on their findings about the variation in teachers' performance, as reflected in their value-added scores, these quantitative researchers have suggested prescriptions for improvement, such as firing the bottom 5–10 percent of teachers or increasing teachers' effort with the promise of pay bonuses or setting high salaries to retain the most effective with high salaries (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Hanushek, 2009; Podgursky & Springer, 2007). Legislators and the public find such proposals very attractive, both because they seem to make sense and because they introduce the precision usually associated with quantitative analysis. Here I consider two of these proposals.

Swap-Out Strategies

The calculus for improving schools by replacing teachers is straightforward: substitute a low-scoring, failing teacher with a high-scoring, successful teacher and schools will improve. The strategy gains credence not only because it affirms beliefs about the power of an individual teacher to transform students' lives, but also because research shows that having a series of effective or ineffective teachers has long-term positive or negative consequences for students' learning (Sanders & Rivers, 1998). Economist Eric Hanushek (2011) recommends replacing 5–10 percent of the least effective teachers with average or excellent teachers in order to dramatically improve school success. This approach is attractive, although policy makers who promote it take no account of individual teachers' professional experience or school-based working conditions.

A strategy for improving schools by assessing and acting on the effectiveness of individual teachers has gained rapid acceptance in the context of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) competition, which offered substantial financial rewards to states that proposed policies and practices to evaluate each teacher and principal annually and to use evidence of student growth as part of each individual's assessment. These evaluations were to be used "at a minimum" to inform decisions about "compensating, promoting, and retaining" teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). In response, eager states have adopted laws requiring not only that teachers should be evaluated each year but also that a large share of the teacher's evaluation—as much as 50 percent—be based on student achievement data.

RTTT guidelines also specified school turnaround models, one of which called for replacing at least 50 percent of the teachers in a failing school (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). Regulations provided no rationale for this

percentage, no guidelines for deciding which teachers to replace, and no explanation about how such wholesale replacement would improve a failing school. Notably, in practice, decisions about who should stay or go in turnaround schools usually were based not on teachers' value-added scores but, rather, on the judgment of administrators, some of whom had never met the teachers they let go (Vaznis, 2011). Nonetheless, this approach gained quick acceptance in many states and districts with chronically failing schools. Schools have a limited store of resources; unfortunately, what they do have is too often squandered on initiatives that are not proven to be effective.

Performance-Based Pay

Pay reform, which is designed to reward individuals and groups of teachers for increasing student achievement, is another popular strategy that relies on value-added scores and evaluations of teachers' instructional practice. Plans vary in how they define performance, identify top performers, and make awards to individuals or groups (Johnson & Papay, 2009), but nearly all such plans supplement, rather than supplant, the traditional salary scale. The implicit theory of change has two parts: first, current teachers will increase their efforts and improve their practice in the hope of winning a bonus; second, the overall quality of teachers will increase as highly effective teachers, who expect to win awards, enter and stay in their school, while those who are ineffective and realize that they will not receive rewards decide to leave.

Early experience with such pay plans has been mixed. Approaches that reward groups and teams of teachers show some positive effects, while those that reward individuals have encountered serious problems, some resulting from the limitations of value-added estimates and others because they do nothing to help motivated teachers solve the instructional challenges they face. In a recent five-year study (Springer et al., 2010), three hundred middle school mathematics teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, volunteered and were randomly assigned to either a treatment group, where they might earn $15,000 for improving student test scores, or to a control group, which offered no bonuses. Of the teachers in the first group, 33.6 percent received an average annual bonus of $10,000. Nonetheless, these teachers' students did not outperform those of teachers who were ineligible for bonuses. Overall, the study offers no hope for transforming schooling with individualized pay incentives and rewards as proponents had hoped.

This is not to suggest that teachers are satisfied with either the level of their pay or its structure. Compared with other highly skilled workers, teachers have seen their relative pay decline steadily over the past fifty years (Hanushek, 2011). Although teachers report that they choose teaching for its intrinsic rewards, the extrinsic rewards of pay remain important, particularly if the conditions of teaching are poor. Teaching can no longer attract sufficient numbers of well-educated, hard-working individuals in a labor market that offers many better-paying alternatives. Also, new teachers today express increasing

dissatisfaction with the structure of their pay and the standardized pay scale that credits only years of experience and college course work for advancement.

An Organizational Perspective

Analyses and strategies that are based on individuals rather than organizations offer little guidance about how to improve schools, even though we know that those organizations substantially affect teachers' work experience and chances for success with their students. Surveys and qualitative case studies by various researchers document the ways in which differences among schools influence teachers' opportunities and motivation for success (Chenoweth, 2009; Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010; Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Allensworth et al., 2009) studied one hundred Chicago schools with chronically high rates of teacher turnover and found that organizational characteristics, not student demographics, explained the mobility. Specifically, teachers stayed in schools where teachers collaborated, school administrators were supportive, parents were engaged, and the learning climate for students was safe and orderly. They left schools where teachers remained isolated in their classrooms and resisted schoolwide initiatives. We reached similar conclusions in a recent analysis of Massachusetts teachers' responses to a statewide survey of working conditions (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, in press). The working conditions that mattered most to teachers were those that shaped the social context of teaching and learning in their school—the school culture, the principal's leadership, and the teachers' relationships with their colleagues. Teachers who worked in more favorable work environments reported 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. Notably, across all communities, schools with better work environments for teachers also achieved greater growth in student learning.

One thing is clear: the expectations of this new generation of teachers cannot be realized within the traditional school organization, which isolates teachers and assesses them only as independent contributors to a school's success. The characterization of the school as an "egg crate" is decades old, yet it is no less apt today. Teachers continue to work with their assigned students in separate classrooms, seldom having meaningful interaction with other teachers, and doing little to adjust to their colleagues' efforts. Scholars such as Elsbree (1939), Tyack (1974), and Lortie (1975) tell us that this compartmentalized structure took hold because it was convenient and efficient. When enrollments grew, the school could grow, one classroom at a time. When enrollments shrank, school officials could close classrooms and dismiss teachers with little of the disruption that would occur in a more interdependent organization. However, schools that change students' lives are more than a collec-

tion of independent units, each of which may have a good, mediocre, or poor teacher. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that successful efforts to improve failing schools are deliberately school based. They recognize that, because students move through many classrooms from grade to grade and subject to subject, the curriculum and teachers' efforts must be coordinated. If a student's education is to be coherent, then her teachers must work in concert. Teams of teachers, rather than collections of teachers, build instructional capacity within a school over time.

Within any school, there will always be a range of effectiveness among teachers as a result of differences in their teaching experience, subject-matter knowledge, or specialized expertise. A strategy for school improvement that focuses primarily on identifying, assigning, and rewarding (or penalizing) individuals based on their effectiveness in raising students' test scores fails to capitalize on the potential of some teachers to improve the performance of other teachers and, therefore, will always be limited, since the benefits of greater expertise will be concentrated in individual classrooms rather than extended throughout the school. Instead, the goal of school improvement should be to ensure that all students have access to excellent teaching each year, rather than being subject to the luck of the draw in teacher assignment.

Building Instructional Capacity

Any serious effort to improve the instructional capacity of a school should invest in teachers' potential for growth. Specific strategies for doing so include selecting and assigning teachers carefully, promoting their work as members of teams, creating differentiated roles for expert teachers to assist and lead colleagues, and developing a career-based pay system that aligns the interests of teachers with the needs of schools.

Selection and Assignment

Schools arguably make their most important decisions when they select and assign new teachers. Yet, often those decisions are late, poorly informed, and haphazard, especially in large urban districts. Our surveys of new teachers in four states found that approximately one-third of new teachers are hired more than a month before school starts; one-third are hired in the month before school begins; and one-third are hired after school is in session (Liu & Johnson, 2006). Often a school that intends to hire staff in a timely way is hampered by delayed budget approval, seniority-based transfer rules, or faulty information systems within the district. However, if teachers were hired early, they could meet with colleagues and prepare for their classes. Less than half of the teachers we surveyed (46.5%) reported meeting with a future colleague and even fewer (7.5%) were observed teaching before being hired. If job offers were more thoroughly informed, far fewer new teachers would fail from the start or be granted tenure inadvertently.

Delayed hiring compounds the challenges of appropriately assigning new teachers, who are usually appointed to fill positions that are left vacant once current teachers have been assigned. Our study of fifty teachers revealed that, although their first assignments were technically comparable in number of students or courses to those of their more experienced colleagues, many had far more challenging responsibilities than their peers, including a large number of low-level classes, out-of-field assignments, split grades, or part-time positions in two or more schools. All of these conditions compromise new teachers' chances of success.

Relying on Teams

One of the No Child Left Behind Act's real accomplishments has been to force schools to be accountable for all their students. It has required schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) not only for the student population as a whole but also for certain demographic subgroups. By regularly analyzing student achievement data, teams of teachers began to identify gaps in their curriculum, topics that were not adequately taught in certain grades or classes, and groups of students whose needs were not being met. Rather than thinking about the students being seated in separate classrooms, they had to think about those students as they moved through their school from grade to grade and subject to subject. Where were their needs met and where were they not? A school that successfully addressed the demands of accountability for every subgroup of students enrolled had to monitor their experience schoolwide. In doing so, teachers and administrators began to commit extra resources to achieve success for all students across the school, rather than simply those who were lucky enough to have a good teacher in a given year. The demands of NCLB and statewide accountability programs fundamentally shifted attention from the individual to the school, though schools did not necessarily respond with organizational solutions.

In any school, there are always more and less able teachers, variation that results from teachers' having different kinds of knowledge or levels of expertise. For example, elementary teachers are required to know a wide range of subjects, but some are more successful teaching math while others excel at teaching reading. Ideally, teachers work in ways that capitalize on these individual strengths, sharing what they do best and contributing to their colleagues' development. More and more schools are providing common planning time for teams of teachers and experimenting with ways to encourage them to use that time for analyzing student data, reviewing student work, and coplanning lessons (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Recent research by Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) documents the positive effects of teacher peer influence. Analyzing a large, longitudinal dataset from North Carolina, which included assignment data for elementary school teachers and performance data for their students, these researchers found that students had larger achievement gains in math and reading, both initially and

over time, when their teacher worked with more effective colleagues at the same grade level. Such "peer-induced learning" was especially strong for less experienced teachers. The authors had no information about the practices of these teachers. However, their findings suggest that it would be a worthwhile investment to provide time and structures that counteract classroom isolation. Conversely, assessing or rewarding teachers for their individual success may lead them to withdraw from their colleagues and concentrate exclusively on their assigned students, thus undermining, rather than promoting, productive collaboration.

Differentiated Roles for Teachers

Another ancillary benefit of NCLB has been that many schools, facing demands for schoolwide improvement, created roles for instructional coaches in the otherwise flat and undifferentiated ranks of teachers. When they are skilled and carefully chosen, these coaches have the capacity to knit together the separate units and classrooms of the school. When they move professional development into teachers' classrooms by providing immediate feedback or teaching model lessons, they reduce isolation and respond directly to teachers' individual needs. Instructional coaches often have a schoolwide perspective on the curriculum and how it is being implemented, which can inform both administrators and teachers as they try to improve their school. Instructional coaches were just beginning to be established nationwide in 2008, when schools encountered budget cuts due to a failing economy (McNeil, 2009). Since then, these roles gradually have shrunk in size and number, although administrators often strive to save them by asking teachers to volunteer their time or trade small amounts of release time for their efforts. In the short run, this may work. However, without formal titles, structures, or compensation, these promising roles are likely to disappear and schools are very likely to revert to their efficient, though ineffective, egg-crate structure.

Career-Based Pay

The most challenging approach to increasing instructional capacity in schools is to remake pay structures for teachers so that they encourage and reward professional growth, both individually and within teams. Current pay levels serve as disincentives for prospective teachers, who have many career options today. Moreover, the current pay scale, which is used in virtually all public school districts, does nothing to promote collaboration and growth among teachers. Nor does it satisfy early-career teachers who may want to build a career in teaching and seek opportunities for expanded roles and increased compensation. If pay is to effectively support the development of instructional capacity in schools, rather than simply reward loyalty and longevity, it must change fundamentally.

At the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, we have proposed a pay-and-career structure that would replace the standard salary scale (Johnson &

Papay, 2009). Its four-tiered design is meant to attract strong candidates to teaching, support them in developing instructional skills quickly and steadily, and offer substantially higher pay to those who perform well and assume responsibility for improving instruction beyond their classroom. It would encourage and reward teachers for effective instruction, ongoing learning, successful leading, and continuous commitment—all behaviors that advance the interests of students. Other organizations and districts, for example the Teacher Advancement Program (Sawchuck, 2009) and the Baltimore City Schools (Baltimore Teachers Union & Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners, 2010), have adopted pay structures that align compensation with expanded roles for teachers. If widely adopted and adapted over time, pay structures such as these could redefine the teaching career and the learning opportunities for students nationwide.

Having It Both Ways

Neither individual teachers nor the schools in which they work can be ignored if students are to have the instruction they deserve. It is certainly important to attend to the qualifications and skills of teachers when they are hired, reviewing their readiness and assessing their potential contributions to the school. Hiring decisions should be deliberate, well informed, and mutual. Just as schools must review applicants thoroughly, prospective teachers deserve the chance to know who their future colleagues might be and to learn both what the school has to offer and what it will expect of them. Novices will require the ongoing support of their colleagues if they are to give their best to the school. This means going beyond a one-to-one mentoring program and engaging them deeply in the ongoing professional work of the school. Working closely with teams of teachers who offer the full range of experience and expertise will enable them to learn, grow, and contribute to the school. Their success in teaching, as evidenced in classroom observations and student achievement, should be tracked so that new teachers can receive assistance when they need it. If they don't measure up, despite support, they should be required to leave. If schools attend to new teachers' performance early, they will not be left with ineffective veteran teachers and a daunting, expensive dismissal process.

However, individuals cannot be supported or their talents sufficiently nurtured if the school itself does not change from a collection of independent classrooms to an interdependent organization in which individuals routinely contribute to others' improvement. Many factors will contribute to improved schooling—promoting and supporting collaboration among teams of teachers, reviewing the success of schoolwide interventions, creating differentiated roles for expert teachers to serve as instructional coaches, and redesigning pay systems so that they compensate teachers well and promote rewarding careers that align with the welfare of students. Needless to say, this is not easy work; nor is it work that can be done piecemeal.

Nearly three decades have passed since the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) declared the nation to be at risk and delivered its "Imperative for Educational Reform." Despite years of experiments with one-off initiatives meant to improve teachers and teaching—from teacher empowerment and teacher-proof curricula to merit pay and requirements for highly qualified teachers—U.S. students continue to be less successful than their peers in other nations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; OECD, 2010). No single approach has been effective; to say that there is no silver bullet is to state the patently obvious. What we have learned from countries with more successful school systems, such as Finland, Canada, and Singapore, is that achieving success is a complex enterprise that requires sustained effort and substantial investment. Until policy makers and practitioners recognize that complexity and respond to it meaningfully, students—especially those who most depend on public education for their future success—will continue to be unevenly and meagerly served.

Notes

1. See http://www.educationequalityproject.org/ and http://www.boldapproach.org
2. See www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt.
3. For a more a detailed analysis of the limitations of value-added measures, see John Papay's article, "Refocusing the Debate: Assessing the Purposes and Tools of Teacher Evaluation," in this issue.

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