Teacher Accountability Not Standardized

We are marching toward a state of standardized testing that is used for what we think we know about our children and the nation's teachers. A solid regime of standardized testing used in isolation will result in children who do not know and teachers who do not know that the children do not know. When teaching to the test, is the driving fetish the old maxim "you pretend to learn, and I'll pretend to teach" institutionalized? The question that perplexes me, if our lawmakers, supported by wealthy donors, are sure that the only path is reductionist standardized testing, why do they send their children to private schools that do not rely on standardized testing? What causes those of us (I send my children to private schools) who send our children to private schools to trust the competence and accountability of teachers without standardized test results as a measurement of merit? The answers lie in three focus areas. One centers on a common body of core values. The second is founded on high levels of competence in teachers, and the third is grounded in profound governance and school sponsorship.

According to the data posted by the Council for American Private Education (http://www.capenet.org/facts.html), 10 percent of all students in the United States are attending private schools. About the same amount of families (12 percent) with incomes of $75,000 and over have their children in private schools. The imbalance comes in with lawmakers. According to the Heritage Foundation (http://www.heritage.org), 40 percent of the members of the House of Representatives and 49 percent of the Senate send or have sent at least one child to a private school. The numbers are even higher for those members of Congress who serve on committees with jurisdiction over education issues. A review of the literature reveals about the same numbers in the state houses. These numbers make me think that while lawmakers are passing a set of laws for public schools, they apply different strategies for the teachers and standards at the private schools with which they associate. What do they know that is not or cannot be reflected in laws, policies and regulations? What drives the teachers of their children to have the vision to consistently perform above standard?

Values

"Professor John Coons states that private schools don't make the pretense of being value free. To the contrary, the majority of private schools are voluntary communities whose members share a core body of highly visible values."
http://www.capso.org/resources/ccpsa.html

Values are the first ingredient of the ecological school structure. The overriding assumption in each private school is that each school must be treated as a unified and individual institution. Private schools tend to shy away from standardized testing because it often conflicts with core values, such as
promoting individuality and aiding multifaceted development (http://people.howstuffworks.com/private-schools5.htm). In general, public school students are much more likely to submit to annual testing than students who attend private schools not because reasonable adults believe it will reveal what the children know and how the teachers are performing, but because we have failed to create a unified and transparent set of values. The driving forces of most learning and intrinsic motivation goes underground absent the unification and transparency of the schools’ values. When communities and institutions trade individuality and multifaceted development for standardized testing, the school ecology goes fallow. Holding teachers accountable to the single measurement of the standardized test makes us all pretend to sleep better at night.

Competent teaching professional

So the question is how does the well-resourced family, sending their children to private school, know if the children are learning and if the teachers are performing? Many private schools reject traditional grading entirely and would not entertain assessing standardized test scores in order to understand teacher competence and performance (http://people.howstuffworks.com/private-schools5.htm). At a time when test scores are seen by some as the ultimate measure of attainment, the accountability of private schools for student achievement, teacher quality and school success cannot be addressed by standardized testing alone or any single scale of measurement (http://www.capenet.org/accountability.html). Current research identifies subject matter competence, a high degree of verbal skill and significant intellectual competence as stronger correlates of teacher quality (http://www.capso.org/resources/ccpsa.html). Engagement, continual study and teaching in an educational setting that nurtures mutuality in learning will assure teacher quality and demonstrate strong student outcomes. Engagement is the first and strongest of these three. Engagement with the children and the community as a whole builds deep competence. Mutuality is a critical component in the strategies of engagement.

Governance and school sponsors

Who serves on the school board and what they focus on are key factors of teacher performance. Another is how people in the community are engaged with the school. How are typical citizens called to vouch for and take responsibility for school ecology?

The performance of private schools is continually assessed in a Participatory Action process (http://epx.sagepub.com/content/25/3/488.abstract), which calls for engagement of the Board and the sponsoring publics. The two sectors, school board and citizen action groups, are overseers of each school and each teacher.
The combination of working with and for causes a pattern of continual improvement.

However, today’s school board members appear not to be as interested in the issues that many policy observers deem to be on the cutting edge of school reform (http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/02/03/20schoolboards.h30.html). School boards are often concerned first with budget and facilities and second with curriculum. Curriculum is many times thought of as the sole business of the administration. Each policy created, action taken, plan written and budget designed must be done through the lens of curriculum. An authentic collaboration between a continually learning board and an increasingly influential local citizenry brings decisions in line with curriculum and teachers known for their competencies.

Conclusion

The three pillars of values, professional competence and governance are the supports for teacher evaluation and accountability. Collaborative actions from school picnics to team teaching implement the three pillars in ways that strengthen relationships and what we know of each other. Building the collective ecology that is called for will result in times of celebration and times of struggle. The entire spectrum of struggle to celebration is required to institutionalize teacher accountability. A vision is generated that becomes the new and evolving community standard. Without this vision, the children and the future will surely perish. We are left then only with implementing rules and low-level regulatory guidelines such as judging teacher performance by standardized test results.

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