



GOOD EDUCATION REQUIRES MORE THAN GOOD TEACHERS

Reforms focused solely on individual teachers fall short, research shows

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Among many school reformers it has become conventional wisdom that the way to improve education is to find talented teachers, assign them to classrooms, and hold them accountable for raising students' standardized test scores. The problem with this approach, as the experts who study the impact of these programs and policies are finding, is that the hoped-for results remain elusive.

[How Best to Add Value?](#), a briefing paper published today by the Economic Policy Institute sheds light on why the big promises of programs that are targeted on individuals have failed to materialize. As Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Susan Moore Johnson explains in this paper, these approaches overlook a critical factor in school improvement: the structure and culture of the schools themselves.

Johnson notes that a typical school has an “egg-crate” structure where each teacher operates more or less independently within his or her own classroom, isolated from peers and, thus, deprived of opportunities to share strengths with colleagues or to benefit from their expertise. New research – her own and that of others in the field – leads her to conclude that this isolation, coupled with incentives and rewards that are meant to motivate individuals rather than support their work together, actually undermines the potential of schools to achieve high-quality results.

“Education is, at its best, a complex social undertaking,” Johnson explained. “The best schools have a dynamic, interactive professional environment for teaching and learning. Teachers learn and strive for excellence together and hold each other accountable for the results. Whatever isolates teachers from one another, in the end, undermines efforts to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning.”

Johnson's paper discusses a variety of research studies and findings that have led her to this conclusion. Among her observations are these:

- “Proponents of the teacher-focused model assert that staffing high-need schools with smart, accomplished, and committed individuals can close the academic achievement gap, yet there is scant evidence that this actually occurs... it may well be that able and committed individuals cannot, on their own, overcome the challenges of weak and dysfunctional school organizations.”

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- “In study after study, researchers have concluded that schools do not become more effective unless teachers coordinate their work and contribute to school-wide improvement.”
- “Over two years, novice teachers who worked in a school with an ‘integrated professional culture’ and worked in an interdependent fashion with more experienced teachers had higher retention rates than those who did not.”
- “The recent line of qualitative and survey-based research about teachers’ work ... confirms the importance of the school organization in supporting teachers’ growth, developing professional capacity, and increasing student learning.”

The lesson for policymakers is not, Johnson emphasizes, that administrators should disregard the importance of the individual. They must continue to hire the most talented teachers and hold them accountable. “Rather,” she writes, “it means that we must come to better understand the experiences of individuals within the schools and the potential of those schools to support and enhance the work of the teachers who staff them. With better evidence and insight, we can design and adopt policies and practices that promote teacher quality and serve students as they should be served.”

About the Author:

Susan Moore Johnson is the Pforzheimer Professor of Teaching and Learning at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and director of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers.

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