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Finding the Best Teachers for Post-Pandemic Schools

With a Covid learning gap looming, reforms that promote and reward the most effective educators are crucial to getting students back on track.



Kindergartners visit the library at an elementary school in Washington, D.C.,

By Eric Hanushek

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By far the largest economic costs of the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S. will come from shortfalls in student learning from school closures, inferior hybrid and remote instruction, and the general disruption of normal schooling. The best estimates place learning losses at the equivalent of a year or more of schooling, resulting in 6% to 9% lower lifetime earnings for the average student and much more for disadvantaged students. The country as a whole will face a less well-prepared workforce, with enormous cumulative losses to GDP over the coming decades.

Primary and secondary schools are now struggling to return as much as possible to where they were in March 2020. But the learning losses will be permanent if we just restore the pre-existing schools. The biggest problem of education during the pandemic has been depriving students of the full abilities of their most effective teachers, and recovery from the damage of these years can only come from an expanded role for these teachers.

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Over the years, researchers have found extraordinarily consistent results about the relationship between teacher effectiveness and student achievement. A study that I conducted in the public schools of Gary, Ind., in the early 1990s considered reading and vocabulary tests for a sample of low-income Black students in grades 2-6. The best teachers provided a year and a half of academic growth for students each school year, while the least effective only provided half a year's learning. A 2014 study of instruction in New York City found a clear link between the effectiveness of grade 3-8 teachers and students' future incomes. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions in Los Angeles, Tennessee, Texas and elsewhere.

It should be emphasized that teacher effectiveness is not just an issue for inner-city schools or minority students. Researchers have adjusted for student backgrounds and for what each child knows at the beginning of the year, and their findings have held for suburban and rural schools as well.



Parents protest school closures at New York's City Hall, November 2020. PHOTO: KENA BETANCUR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The pandemic has undoubtedly made the job of teaching more difficult and stressful. Beyond potential health risks, teachers face more challenging classrooms. At each grade level, students are arriving with widely varying degrees of preparedness, often amounting to a difference of several years in terms of achievement. This makes effective instruction more complicated but all the more important.

How, then, to deal with the profound learning losses that have occurred during the pandemic? Unfortunately, we do not yet have very good ways to improve the general effectiveness of teachers. A more compelling solution lies in keeping and rewarding the most effective teachers while getting rid of the least effective ones.

This prescription is energetically resisted by the teachers' unions, who argue that such policies promote favoritism, drive out teachers even as we face shortages and distract from the need to improve salaries and benefits across the board. But reforms focused on teacher effectiveness have been implemented in several places, and the results show a clear path to improving the schools.

In 2009, Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty, then the schools chancellor and mayor in Washington, D.C., were able to implement a sophisticated, multidimensional system called IMPACT for

evaluating the school district's teachers. Based on these assessments, and over the fierce objections of the teachers union, the most effective teachers were highly rewarded with annual bonuses and increases in base salaries of up to \$25,000, and the least effective were asked to leave.

In the first three years of IMPACT, almost 4% of teachers were dismissed for poor performance and an even larger percentage, under threat of dismissal, voluntarily left. At the same time, the retention rates for the most effective teachers increased significantly. Since the introduction of IMPACT more than a decade ago, the test scores of Washington students on the National Assessment of Education Progress have risen faster and more consistently than those in any other large city district with significant disadvantaged populations.



Washington, D.C.'s then-Mayor Adrian Fenty and Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, 2007. PHOTO: ANDREA BRUCE/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

Another instructive case is the Dallas Independent School District, where former superintendent Mike Miles was able to persuade the school board to implement a new evaluation and pay system for teachers (and principals) starting in 2014. Teachers are rated by a combination of structured supervisor evaluations, student scores on assessments and student surveys.

A key part of the Dallas system is to send the best teachers where they're most needed. In 2016, teachers at the top three rating levels got bonuses of \$12,000, \$10,000 and \$8,000, respectively,

to move to schools with the lowest student performance and stay there. Within three years, these schools moved close to the Dallas average, and student performance in Dallas as a whole has improved relative to other large Texas districts.

The Texas legislature has now provided financial support to encourage other districts to evaluate teacher effectiveness more closely and to induce highly rated teachers to work in disadvantaged schools where they are most needed. A number of districts in Florida, Tennessee and elsewhere have made similar changes, but most of the country's over 13,000 school systems still use rigid salary schedules unrelated to teacher effectiveness and do nothing to distribute teaching talent more equitably.

Such reforms may stand a better chance today than before the pandemic. Educators and public officials understand the urgency of improvement if we are not going to abandon the Covid cohort of students. The past few years also have given parents a closer look at the instruction that their children receive, and many have come away disappointed and determined to push for change.

Public schools may be uniquely open to new approaches over the next few years. Many need to work to retain students whose parents, frustrated with closures and poor instruction during the pandemic, are considering other options. And schools have significant extra resources, at least for now, thanks to unexpectedly large emergency federal grants that have been provided by three separate Covid relief acts.

To rescue today's Covid cohort of students, there's no need to wait for further retirements, a new crop of entry-level teachers or radically changed personnel systems. A focus on more effective teachers could be implemented quickly by providing salary incentives to effective teachers to take on more students. Buying out the contracts of ineffective teachers would move schools in the same direction. In the longer run, providing incentives for effective teachers will attract and retain more of them.

What remains to be seen is whether teacher unions will continue to resist any effort to assess the work of their members and reward them accordingly. We know from surveys and the experience in Dallas and elsewhere that teachers will respond to financial incentives. What will not work is the solution touted by the unions of simply increasing all teacher salaries, because the incentive to stay then applies to all teachers, regardless of talent. It would also lead to fiscal problems in the future, particularly as temporary federal funding for Covid relief runs out.

The window for addressing the profound learning deficit created by the pandemic will close before long, leaving millions of students at a lifelong disadvantage. There is no other solution except to ensure that, as they work to catch up, they are helped by the best teachers we can find.

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