

**Feb 11, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "For broken schools, no easy fix"**

In response to national report cards giving Wyoming's educational system "F" and "C+" ratings, a recent WTE editorial urges educational leaders to "stop excusing the failings of the state's public school system and take steps toward real reform." It offers eight actions that Wyoming school districts can and should undertake to bring the state closer to academic excellence. The top three, "Assess your teachers," "Oust the poor performers," and "Reward quality work," urges "Unscheduled, rigorous evaluations that are tied to student performance on standardized tests (the only objective measure)."

These are sensible steps. No doubt superintendents everywhere would love to implement them. They know quite well their district retains teachers who are performing poorly. The problem is, superintendents often cannot act on their own sober assessments. Advice alone won't fix the problem.

Take standardized testing. Everyone had high hopes for No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but in 2004, after four years of NCLB rule, such was the assessment by the authors of "Many Children Left Behind": The law's focus on testing and test preparation actually dumbs down classrooms; it punishes rather than helps poor and minority kids and their schools, and it furthers an agenda of privatization that relies on attacks on public schools.

NCLB mistakes measuring schools for fixing them, asserts "Many Children Left Behind." NCLB sets test score goals for every group, and for subgroups within schools. The scores are presumed to constitute Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools that do not meet the targets are declared in need of improvement—and, later, "Failing." The idea is that low-quality schools will be motivated to change if they are identified and shamed; the problem is, it labels as failing even schools that are actually succeeding with the very students the law wants to help. It creates incentives that reduce the quality of education: Parents are notified of the school's label, and this counterproductive measure results in good teachers going elsewhere.

Absurdly, under norm-referenced tests (when 50 percent of students by definition must score below any cut point selected) it's impossible to attain 100 percent proficiency. Yet norm-referenced tests are the kind of tests that have been adopted.

Under NCLB, "drawing from our experience in the field," the authors assert, the effects of reliance on one test are disproportionately felt in schools that serve the poor: these schools are the first to be reported in need of improvement.

NCLB's fatal flaw, comments Richard Whitmire in his 2011 "The Bee Eater" surfaced years later. "Nobody—not the U.S. Department of Education, not states, not superintendents, not principals—had even the slightest clue as to what to do about schools that kept missing test-score targets . . . . After five years of failure, schools were supposed to go into 'restructuring,' to turn themselves around. Yet nobody had a toolkit to achieve those turnarounds." It's "a notion that proved to be fanciful."

Adults were well served by NCLB, writes Diana Ravitch in her 2010 “The Death and Life of the Great American School System.” She points out that the law “generated huge revenues for tutoring and testing services, which became a sizable industry,” yet few advantages accrued to the nation’s students. Though standardized tests are not inherently unreliable, the use of testing is mostly for accountability purposes. Because “Teaching to the Test”—drilling rote facts—implements simplistic methods, a number of states have enacted legislation circumventing NCLB’s “wrecking ball.”

Now to the problem of inept teachers. The debate about teacher effectiveness is far from simple, writes Ms. Ravitch. It’s not easy to identify the “best” teachers. “Bill Gates proposes to concentrate on charter schools and teacher effectiveness,” and certain economists “believe, like Bill Gates, that the best teachers are those who produce the biggest test-score gains.” On the other side of the spectrum, scholars and sociologists question whether student test scores are reliable at all when used for high-stakes decisions.

Here, too, superintendents are often left stymied. Teachers should be judged after they have performed on the job, not before, but “Teachers, unlike most U.S. workers in the private sector, are rewarded not for effectiveness but for time served and graduate degrees earned,” notes Richard Whitmire. And teachers, also unlike most U.S. workers, “almost uniformly get top ratings regardless of their performance.”

To noneducators “peering in from the outside,” the nearly ironclad job security that teachers enjoy is striking, he comments. “Even for extreme offenses, such as sexually molesting children, teachers rarely get fired.” Instead, school districts devise systems of “offloading” such teachers from one school to the next. When Chancellor Klein began trying to fire bad teachers in New York City, between 2008 and 2010 he was able to fire only three teachers for incompetence.

Trying to fire just one teacher “takes an extra five to ten hours every week,” reported principals in Portland, Ore. Since 2000, Los Angeles school district officials have spent \$500,000 on trying to eliminate “just seven” for poor classroom performance—of the district’s 33,000 teachers. One of the seven was reinstated and two were paid large settlements.

“Oust the poor performers” is easier said than done. As for standardized testing, don’t bet the farm on it. NCLB does more harm than good; it fosters teaching that’s punitive, shaming and blaming. Yes, a good teacher—a compassionate teacher—can make a world of difference to a child. Regrettably, all too often the enthusiastic young teachers and the well-prepared newcomers get the axe under “last hired, first fired” while long-term teachers, though punitive and regressive in their methods, stay on.