Charlotte Danielson on Rethinking Teacher Evaluation

By Charlotte Danielson

The idea of tracking teacher accountability started with the best of intentions and a well-accepted understanding about the critical role teachers play in promoting student learning. The focus on teacher accountability has been rooted in the belief that every child deserves no less than good teaching to realize his or her potential.

But as clear, compelling, and noncontroversial as these fundamental ideas were, the assurance of great teaching for every student has proved exceedingly difficult to capture in either policy or practice.

The immediate challenge is that those with the responsibility to ensure good teaching in schools—primarily building administrators—don't always have the skill to differentiate great teaching from that which is merely good, or perhaps even mediocre. This idea was highlighted in "The Widget Effect," a 2009 report from the organization TNTP that had enormous influence on the design of Race to the Top, the federal initiative that required states to implement rigorous systems of teacher evaluation to qualify for billions of dollars in federal grant money.

There is also little consensus on how the profession should define "good teaching." Many state systems require districts to evaluate teachers on the learning gains of their students. These policies have been implemented despite the objections from many in the measurement community regarding the limitations of available tests and the challenge of accurately attributing student learning to individual teachers.

Even when personnel policies define good teaching as the teaching practices that promote student learning and are validated by independent research, few jurisdictions require their evaluators to actually demonstrate skill in making accurate judgments. But since evaluators must assign a score, teaching is distilled to numbers, ratings, and rankings, conveying a reductive nature to educators' professional worth and undermining their overall confidence in the system.

I'm deeply troubled by the transformation of teaching from a complex profession requiring nuanced
judgment to the performance of certain behaviors that can be ticked off on a checklist. In fact, I
(and many others in the academic and policy communities) believe it's time for a major rethinking
of how we structure teacher evaluation to ensure that teachers, as professionals, can benefit from
numerous opportunities to continually refine their craft.

Simultaneously, it's essential to acknowledge the fundamental policy imperative: Schools must be
able to ensure good teaching. Public schools are, after all, public institutions, operating with public
funds. The public has a right to expect good teaching. Every superintendent, or state
commissioner, must be able to say, with confidence: "Everyone who teaches here is good. Here's
how we know: We have a system."

There is professional consensus that the number of teachers whose practice is below standard is
very small, probably no more than 6 percent of the total, according to the Measures of Effective
Teaching study and others. It's essential, therefore, that school districts ensure that every teacher
who receives a continuing contract demonstrates adequate knowledge and skill to promote student
learning. In most districts, this is the purpose of the tenure decision, although in some cases that
decision falls to the state, thus ensuring a consistent standard of teaching across the state for all
career educators. Ohio has done this with its Resident Educator Support and Assessment Program.

Given this landscape, it makes sense to design personnel policies for the
vast majority of teachers who are not in need of remediation. And, given
the complexity of teaching, a reasonable policy would be one that aims to
strengthen these educators' practice. Personnel policies for the teachers not
practicing below standard—approximately 94 percent of them—would have,
at their core, a focus on professional development, replacing the emphasis
on ratings with one on learning.

So what do we know about professional learning?

First, professional learning requires active intellectual engagement. In the
context of an evaluation process, this means using observation and
evaluation processes that promote active engagement: self-assessment,
reflection on practice, and professional conversation.

Second, learning can only occur in an atmosphere of trust. Fear shuts people down. Learning, after
all, entails vulnerability. The culture of the school and of the district must be one that encourages
risk-taking.

Third, a culture of professional inquiry requires challenge as well as support. The culture must
include an expectation that every teacher will engage in a career-long process of learning, one that
is never "finished." Teaching is simply too complex for anyone to believe that there is no more to
learn.

And fourth, policymakers must acknowledge that professional learning is rarely the consequence of
teachers attending workshops or being directed by a supervisor to read a certain book or take a
particular course. Overwhelmingly, most teachers report that they learn more from their colleagues
than from an "expert" in a workshop. When teachers work together to solve problems of practice,
they have the benefit of their colleagues' knowledge and experience to address a particular issue
they're facing in their classroom.

In practical terms, a comprehensive personnel policy must not only ensure good teaching on the
part of every teacher, it must also ensure opportunities for ongoing professional learning by all
teachers, principally through collaborative planning, analysis of student work, and the like.

I look forward to being part of a dialogue among policy leaders and practitioners on what such a
comprehensive personnel policy might look like and how it could be implemented. Here are my
preliminary thoughts:

• Any system must be able to identify seriously underperforming teachers and be designed to
promote professional learning.

• An essential step in the system should be the movement from probationary to continuing status.
This is the most important contribution of evaluation to the quality of teaching. Beyond that, the
emphasis should be on professional learning, within a culture of trust and inquiry.

• An evaluation policy must be differentiated according to whether teachers are new to the
profession or the district, or teach under a continuing contract.

• Novice teachers should be evaluated each year on an
instructional framework, supported by a mentor using
the same framework. After roughly three years, a
decision can be made regarding continuing contract
status. Once teachers acquire this status, they are full
members of the professional community, and their
principal professional work consists of ongoing
professional learning.

• Experienced teachers in good standing should be
eligible to apply for teacher-leadership positions, such as
mentor, instructional coach, or team leader. These positions may carry enhanced compensation or
have released time during the regular school day.

• Teachers who serve in leadership roles must receive training in the skills specific to those roles,
such as facilitating group work and conducting professional conversations with colleagues.

• Career teachers should be assessed periodically to ensure they are still in good standing.

Such a comprehensive approach to personnel policy would also impose demands on site
administrators, central-office personnel, and union leaders. They must construct a differentiated
system, including designing and supporting a mentoring program; selecting teacher leaders and
determining their compensation, support, and supervision; and designing collaborative evaluation
procedures for novice and experienced teachers and training for evaluators.

Most important, it's essential that site administrators be able to establish a culture within the
school conducive to professional learning, one that's supportive as well as challenging. Only then
will schools truly be learning organizations.

Charlotte Danielson is the author of a number of books, including Framework for Teaching, first
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Follow the Education Week Commentary section on Facebook and Twitter.
Leading Professional Conversations [Charlotte F. Danielson] on Amazon.com. *FREE* shipping on qualifying offers. Improve teaching practice through powerful professional conversations! Move beyond isolated teaching. Charlotte Danielson, a former economist, is an internationally-recognized expert in the area of teacher effectiveness, specializing in the design of teacher evaluation systems that, while ensuring teacher quality, also promote professional learning. She advises State Education Departments and National Ministries and Departments of Education, both in the United States and overseas. Another crucial point that Charlotte Danielson makes in her Education Week article is that experienced teachers should not be evaluated via the same method as teachers new to the field: An evaluation policy must be differentiated according to whether teachers are new to the profession or the district, or teach under a continuing contract. Once teachers acquire this status [i.e. tenure], they are full members of the professional community, and their principal professional work consists of ongoing professional learning. In other words, experienced teachers, with advanced degrees in their Charlotte Danielson/ Teacher Evaluation. What others are saying. Saturday Morning Coffee and Common Core: A Teacher's First Close Reading Lesson and What She Learned. A Teacher's First Close Reading Lesson and What She Learned. See more. Teachers Pay Teachers. Teacher Evaluations. Are you thinking about that teacher evaluation coming up? Not to worry. Link back to some wonderful and amazing tools. See more. Cone Of Learning Learning Process Learning Pyramid Mobile Learning Instructional Strategies Instructional Coaching Instructional Design Teaching Strategies Teaching Tools. Cone of learning, how are we involving our students? Cathe McCoy. Charlotte Danielson/ Teacher Evaluation.