

Good Teaching Matters

Teachers can make the difference between university acceptance and a lifetime at McDonald's.

By Kati Haycock

Parents have always known that it matters a lot which teachers their children get. But when parents ask for their children to be assigned to a particular teacher or to be moved out of the classroom of another, most principals counsel them not to worry. "Your child will learn what he or she needs to from any of our teachers."

Recent research from Tennessee, Texas, Massachusetts, and Alabama proves that parents have been right all along. They may not always know which teachers really are the best, but they are absolutely right in believing that their children will learn a lot from some teachers and only a little from others — even though the teachers may be in adjacent classrooms.

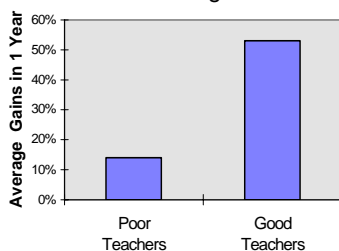
The difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year," says Eric Hanushek, the University of Rochester economist notorious for suggesting that virtually nothing seems to make a difference.

Tennessee

Tennessee is one of the few states with data systems that make it possible to tie teachers to achievement in their classrooms. Moreover, the state's value-added approach for assessing student achievement allows observers to look at the gains students make during a particular school year.

Teacher effectiveness has a dramatic effect on the achievement of low-achieving students. Even top students gain 23 fewer points a year when taught by poor teachers, and look what happens to weak students.

The Effect of Different Teachers on Low-Achieving Students



There is also considerable evidence that, at least in Tennessee, the effects of teachers are long-lived, whether they advance achievement or squash it. Indeed, even two years after the fact, the performance of grade 5 students is still affected by the quality of their grade 3 teacher.

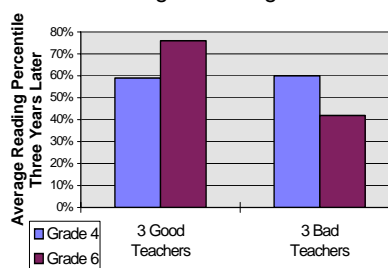
And if children get a series of good or bad teachers several years in a row, they are likely to be hugely affected. Grade 5 Tennessee students who had had three good teachers in a row achieved math scores that were 54 percentile points higher than comparable students who had been assigned three bad teachers in a row. Differences of this magnitude are stunning. As all of us know only too well, they can represent the difference between a remedial label and placement in the accelerated or even gifted track. And the difference between entry into a selective college and a lifetime at McDonald's.

Dallas

Recent studies in Texas show similar differences in achievement. The district's executive director of research says, "What surprised us the most was the size of the effect."

The next graph shows what happened to Dallas grade 4 students who all started out reading at around the 60th percentile.

The Effect of Teacher Sequence on Grade 6 Average Reading Percentiles



A gap of this size — almost 35 percentile points — is extremely significant. Amazingly, a similar study of math scores actually yielded a differential of 50 points after three years!

Boston

A third study, this one in Boston, found that the top third of Boston teachers are producing six times the learning seen in the bottom third.

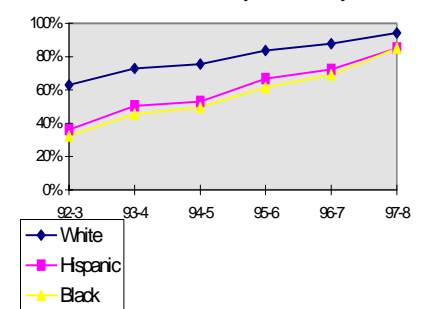
In reading, the students with the worst teachers showed virtually no growth over the school year, while the students with the bottom third of math teachers actually regressed!

El Paso

In 1992, leaders in three El Paso-area school districts came together in an effort to raise student achievement. Over the next five years, they focused hard on excellent teaching, while the local university made major changes in the way it was preparing teachers.

The results of their hard work are clear in the data below: improved achievement and a narrower gap between groups.

Percentage Passing State Math Tests in El Paso — by Ethnicity



Teacher effectiveness is not forever fixed. Through careful development, teachers can build their effectiveness over time.

Improvements in teachers' capabilities are not by themselves a silver bullet, but such changes are clearly more important to increasing student achievement — especially among poor and minority students — than any other measure. And they are within our power to modify.

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