

## How to Ruin Public Education

The Indiana state government has mandated evaluation of public school teachers on the basis of their students' standardized achievement test scores. Each school corporation is required by state law to conduct an annual evaluation of its teaching staff. "A plan must include ... objective measures of student achievement and growth to significantly inform the evaluation. The objective measures must include student assessment results from statewide assessments" (Indiana Code 20-28-11.5-4). Teachers rated as ineffective could be denied salary increases and potentially lose their jobs.

As an analogy, if medical doctors were evaluated on objective measures of improvement in their patients' health, physicians who specialize in oncology, cardiology and geriatric care would be rated as ineffective due to higher mortality rates of their patients. Over time, we would face a shortage of oncologists, cardiologists and other specialists who treat patients with serious health problems. After all, who would want to go to a doctor rated as ineffective?

To use a different metaphor, this would be similar to evaluating chefs in a restaurant as ineffective because the restaurant is losing money. We could have excellent chefs who prepare delicious meals, but customers might not return to the restaurant because they are dissatisfied with high price of meals, uncomfortable seats, unsanitary restrooms, or poor waiter service. So does it make sense to fault the chefs, call them ineffective, and fire them? What makes more sense is to look at the larger picture.

Research shows that student poverty is correlated with low student achievement as measured by standardized tests. This was true in the 1960s when sociologist James Coleman conducted a large study on equality of educational opportunity in the U.S. It is still true today.

Rating teachers as ineffective and labeling schools as failures whose students do not meet achievement standards does not address the underlying problem of poverty. To turn the tables, we citizens should hold our state legislators accountable for poverty. Many of our politicians would be evaluated as ineffective because there are too many poor people in their districts. Unfair, they might plead, being held accountable for matters out of their control! But wait—that's exactly what state legislators are doing to Indiana's public school teachers.

To improve education is a complex matter. Of course, we need good teachers. But like a restaurant, having good chefs is only part of the picture. Elementary and secondary schools have been largely using a standardized curriculum that has remained substantively unchanged in decades. In fact, public school teachers have little real control over current curriculum, which is further reinforced by textbooks and other instructional supplies that cost our Indiana public schools over \$159 million annually (\$13.2 billion nationwide) in 2010-11.

How good are those learning materials? Ethan Yazzie-Mintz reported results from a 2006 survey of 81,499 students in 110 high schools across 26 U.S. states. Approximately 2 out of 3 students said that they were bored in class or school every day. When asked why they were bored, the top reasons were that *learning materials* were uninteresting, irrelevant and not challenging enough. For students who consider dropping out of school, 60 percent

indicated that “I didn’t see the value in the work I am being asked to do” (p. 5). For those who stay in school despite their boredom, nearly 3 out of 4 say that the primary reason is to graduate, so that they can go on to college.

To hold public school teachers accountable for conditions not under their control is wrong. It is a travesty for public education. We need to look more carefully at the curriculum—what we are expecting students to learn, what we are asking them to do, and the subjects they are required to study. We need to look at the learning materials students are expected to use. Learning materials that students perceive as uninteresting and irrelevant. Learning materials that our schools are annually spending billions of dollars on nationwide. What if teachers had real control over funds to spend on better learning materials for their students? We need to look at the larger picture.

For more on how learning activities can be more motivating and meaningful to students, see <http://educology.indiana.edu/Frick/TIEtheory.pdf>.

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## References

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