

## Alabama Voices: State must focus on larger issue of teacher effectiveness

April 18, 2010

By Caroline Novak

Too many students leave our nation's public schools without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college or the workplace. A steadily growing body of research suggests teachers have a greater impact on student learning than any other school factor.

In other words, teachers are the solution, and the single most powerful action we can take to improve student achievement is to ensure that a great teacher stands at the front of every classroom.

These facts lead some people to focus too narrowly on a single issue. Instead, we should focus more broadly on teacher effectiveness.

In Alabama we are making progress toward great schools for every child. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (the gold standard in education), Alabama was one of only nine states to show gains for eighth-grade reading. And our fourth graders held strong to the historic gains made at that grade level just two years ago.

This hard-won progress is encouraging, especially when we still have such a long way to go. We know this because only 65 percent of Alabama's students graduate from high school on time, an unacceptable number in our knowledge-based economy.

Alabama has taken notice and adopted a series of

promising reforms including the Alabama Reading Initiative, the establishment of new teaching standards and revised leadership standards. But right now the state needs a cohesive approach that connects all of these reforms with the goals of dramatically improving student learning, significantly increasing graduation rates and ensuring all of our students are college- and/or career-ready when they earn a high school diploma.

To that end, improving the quality of education in Alabama requires a comprehensive strategy to ensure that every Alabama student is taught by an effective teacher. At every step along the way, decisions must be designed to give children the effective teachers they deserve. This starts with who goes into teaching and includes everything from how they are prepared, to how we evaluate job performance, to professional development that strengthens job performance to dismissal.

One recent study shows that students with three ineffective teachers in a row scored 50 percentile points lower on a standardized test than a similar group taught by three effective teachers in a row. Another study demonstrates that switching from an uncertified to a certified teacher had an average impact of 1 percent on student achievement, compared with a 10 percent impact achieved by switching from a bottom-quartile to a top-quartile teacher. Compounded over the years of a student's education, access to effective teachers has life-changing implications.

Our best opportunity for significant progress will be realized if the state, in collaboration with teachers, develops a clear definition of teacher effectiveness.

As a state, we are not alone with this challenge. A 2009 report from The New Teacher Project called

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"The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness" documents how teacher evaluation systems fail to recognize either excellent or poor teaching, instead lumping all teachers into the same category. As a result, schools cannot identify their most effective teachers, reward their best teachers, develop or support teachers as professionals or transition persistently ineffective teachers out of the classroom.

A clear definition of teacher effectiveness, a comprehensive and credible evaluation process, coupled with accurate measures of student learning, will unquestionably improve student learning outcomes in Alabama. This will help identify, based on objective data, which teachers are most effective. It will also force us to dig deeper on other important aspects of teacher effectiveness:

- Currently, we do not know which teacher preparation programs produce the best teachers by grade level or subject area, nor which programs best train teachers to succeed in rural versus urban environments.
- In Alabama, tenure is granted to a teacher who has taught for three consecutive years, with no consideration of the teacher's effectiveness; a teacher's effectiveness should be the determining factor for earning tenure.
- Because the current teacher evaluation system lacks objective measures of student learning, it is impossible to identify which instructional strategies produce the necessary learning outcomes. As a result of this and limited training for principals, the teacher evaluation system fails to provide teachers with the individualized professional development necessary for them to grow.
- An inability to distinguish great teachers from good, good from fair and fair from poor prevents the recognition and reward for outstanding performance and the removal of teachers whose performance is consistently unsatisfactory. These shortcomings suggest the need for transformative change. Such change will not be easy. It will require educators and policymakers to take risks. At the heart of the matter it means making a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom the

foundation for every decision that affects the teacher workforce. If done right, Alabama will do what is right for the 750,000 children enrolled in our public schools and the future of our state. *Caroline Novak is president of the A+ Education Partnership.*

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