

# The Times

## Educators must take lead in defining school reform

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### SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Linking the achievements of schoolchildren to the evaluation and compensation of the adults who work with them is an important undertaking. It is so important that the federal government has selected 13 states and the District of Columbia to receive \$4 billion in Race to the Top grants to develop education reforms. A primary area for research is the recruitment, development, reward and retention of effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.

The Bill and Linda Gates Foundation is also funding experiments in teacher evaluation and performance pay. The Pittsburgh school district obtained \$40 million; Los Angeles charter schools, \$60 million; and Memphis schools, \$90 million. The Hillsborough County district in Florida, which includes Tampa, won the biggest grant: \$100 million. This, the nation's eighth-largest school system, is looking to reshape its 15,000-member teaching corps by rewarding according to student achievement instead of teacher seniority.

New Jersey, which notoriously did not obtain Race to the Top funding, is headed in the same direction, but on a different path. Gov. Christie has charged nine New Jersey residents by executive order with the task of presenting recommendations by March 1, 2011, regarding how best to measure the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. What is the task force's budget? None, other than unspecified support from the state's Department of Education.

The task force has been handed a daunting challenge at a time when new research from Vanderbilt University points to the failure of merit pay for teachers to improve student performance. A well-crafted research study in Nashville, Tenn., concluded that bonuses up to \$15,000 to mathematics teachers made no difference in the achievement of middle school students.

The public is also voicing doubt about the use of merit pay. Recently, the Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics released the results of a survey in which 63 percent of New Jersey voters polled oppose basing teacher pay on pupil results. Similar national sentiment is reflected in a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll in which 60 percent of respondents said the primary purpose for teacher evaluations should be to help them improve their teaching rather than to set their salaries or to document ineffectiveness that could lead to firing.

As talented and dedicated as the members of the New Jersey task force may be, we must ask: What can we reasonably expect from their investigation, given few resources and a March 2011 deadline for their recommendations?

This work is important. We need to pursue knowledge that informs educational practice and provides opportunities for educators to modify their work based on solid data about student performance. True accountability provides student and teacher with feedback about performance throughout the year, allowing each to modify the learning program to achieve success. And yes, teacher performance evaluations should reflect how students are progressing, but within a system designed for success, not embarrassment.

The work of roughly 20 percent of school professionals can be linked to statewide math and language tests. Reformers must be wary not to choose this easily accessible data as the primary measure for staff evaluation, as such action will ensure a narrowing of the curriculum and ultimately leave us further behind the nations whose students have already surpassed our students. Educational reformers in those countries understand the broader context of learning and the preparation needs of their young citizens, which will ensure that they will be competitive in the global economy. They choose to achieve outcomes that are not measured quite as easily and provide support to their educators to develop their students' higher-order skills -- producing students who excel at higher rates, evidenced by the results of international assessments.

What should we do in New Jersey? First, we should understand that meaningful improvement won't be made by adopting shortsighted goals and accountability systems. Second, we should have the patience and



prudence to learn from the emerging experience of those states and systems that have secured significantly greater resources to accomplish the same goals as New Jersey's task force. Third, we should look to the experience of the countries that demonstrate significant student achievement gains on international assessments and evaluate their methods for use in New Jersey. Fourth, we should support New Jersey's task force in its work, provide the members with input that assists their work, and develop an understanding that its report will be a beginning, not the conclusion of this critical work.

Educators must take the lead in defining reform for New Jersey students and speak forcefully about what experience and research define as effective practice in recruiting, developing, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and school leaders. If we don't, our students will be left with a system guided by political sound-bite reform and misguided expectations.

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