

Putting Emphasis on Teacher Quality

By Laura Goe on April 23, 2013 10:25 AM

A Nation at Risk served an important role in pointing out deficiencies in student performance and described how such deficiencies would ultimately limit our success as a nation; its vision of a "learning society" offered hope for a future where education would promote our national interests and ensure success.



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One of several aspects of education that the report's authors identified for improvement was teaching. In particular, the commission expressed concern about the quality of teaching candidates overall, a lack of content in teacher-preparation programs, unattractive salaries in the field, educator shortages in some subjects (particularly math and science), and unqualified teachers in core subjects.

The legacy of *A Nation at Risk* lives on in legislation aimed at improving the teaching force, such as recommendations for ensuring professional learning opportunities for teachers included in 1994's Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which mandated **sub-grants to districts** intended to "support continuing, sustained professional development activities for educators and school administrators or related services personnel working with educators which will increase student learning in accordance with the state improvement plan" and the more recent **No Child Left Behind Act**.

Number 10 of the 12 mechanisms identified to achieve the goals of NCLB was: "Significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development." Adding some teeth to the professional-development mechanism was the requirement that districts set aside a significant proportion of funds to providing high quality professional development.

NCLB further emphasized that teachers, including those with tenure, should be "highly qualified" (a term used in *A Nation at Risk*) and demonstrate their competence through appropriate certification in the subjects they teach. Most recently, the Obama administration used Race to the Top awards and waivers from some requirements to emphasize accountability for student learning in its definition of "teacher effectiveness." Thus, while *A Nation at Risk* opened the conversation around teaching quality, subsequent federal legislation has added both funding and sanctions to promote improvements. Federal stimulus funding in particular attracted many state applications for Race to the Top, but had another crucial effect: leading many more states to enact legislation focused on more rigorous requirements for teacher evaluation.

Since 1983, there are areas where substantial progress has been made, and others that still need attention. For example, *A Nation at Risk* focused on the quality of teaching candidates—a perennial problem—and systemic shortages in some subjects, due in part to more lucrative professional opportunities available to qualified candidates. Today, however, teaching salaries overall are not competitive with other employment opportunities for college graduates.

But there are also areas where substantial progress is under way: ensuring that teachers are qualified in their subjects, measuring teaching effectiveness, and improving the design and use of professional development to improve teaching and student achievement. Recent federal and state policies now focus on ensuring qualifications and measure teaching effectiveness with "multiple measures," including observations, student achievement growth, and student perceptions. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching study and other research point the way toward balanced but rigorous combinations of measures.

Teacher observations have also become more thorough and meaningful in most states than they used to be. In previous years, observations in many states and districts were left up to the discretion of school administrators, causing wide variation across schools and districts in what was considered successful teaching. If states had teaching standards, the checklists often used for observations were not aligned with them, and principals used their own judgment when determining whether a teacher was successful.

Consider this: Now, nearly all states have their own teaching standards or have adopted national ones such as CCSSO's [InTASC Teaching Standards](#). Observation instruments are now being aligned with teaching standards; observers are being trained to score reliably; performance levels reflect beliefs about teachers' competencies; and poor performance leads to focused support—and consequences.

Much remains to be done, however, particularly in identifying valid measures of all educators' contributions to student learning.

In the future, more sophisticated performance data will enable better identification of teachers' strengths and weaknesses, making it possible to align professional learning opportunities with specific teacher needs and interests as they continually refine their practice. Such targeted efforts to improve teaching practice should contribute to higher levels of student achievement. In addition, research is helping us better understand what effective teaching practices look like, making it possible to better prepare teachers to help students succeed.

As a nation, we have much still to do, but we are well on our way to improving teaching and learning.

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