

Public Education Reform

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Introduction

Across the board, students in the United States are performing below the standards other countries are setting and below the standards Americans want for their children. Education in this country needs to improve, so our group came up with three comprehensive ways to improve teaching and student learning across the country.

Approach one is based generally around what we focused on in our debate: to eliminate tenure for teachers, though this time on a national level. Instead, teachers' salary, probation, and removal from their position would be based on merit rather than years of service. Teachers would be evaluated just like employees in other businesses and those who perform poorly would be weeded out if necessary to be replaced by the best teachers available to take their positions.

Approach two is to have teachers and administrators review teachers and their performance in the classroom. By having the teachers interact with their peers, they may be able to improve their teaching skills, find out where they're struggling, and provide a better learning environment to students. Teachers would be required to sit in on other teachers' classes at certain times throughout the year to watch how their peers perform, and additionally learn new techniques for themselves.

Approach three is to have students in the K-12 range give teacher reviews, similar to those given in colleges such as Colorado State University. With this approach, students would be given specific questions, altered depending on their age range that can provide feedback about how

engaging the teacher is and how much the students are learning. This would give more information to teachers and administrators about how teachers are struggling than test results and provide insight into what's happening in the classroom.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive; all of them could be tested and even implemented side by side. Approaches two and three may result in a teacher's salary changing or a removal from their position, which would then be more easily implemented if tenure was removed through approach one. All three approaches, of course, have the same intent: to improve the final product, the education of students, which could then give way to a better and brighter future for the nation.

Approach 1: Removal of Tenure and Increase in Teacher Pay

This approach to our plan will eliminate teacher tenure at a national level, and encourage pay-for-performance plans that will encourage teachers to help their students succeed.

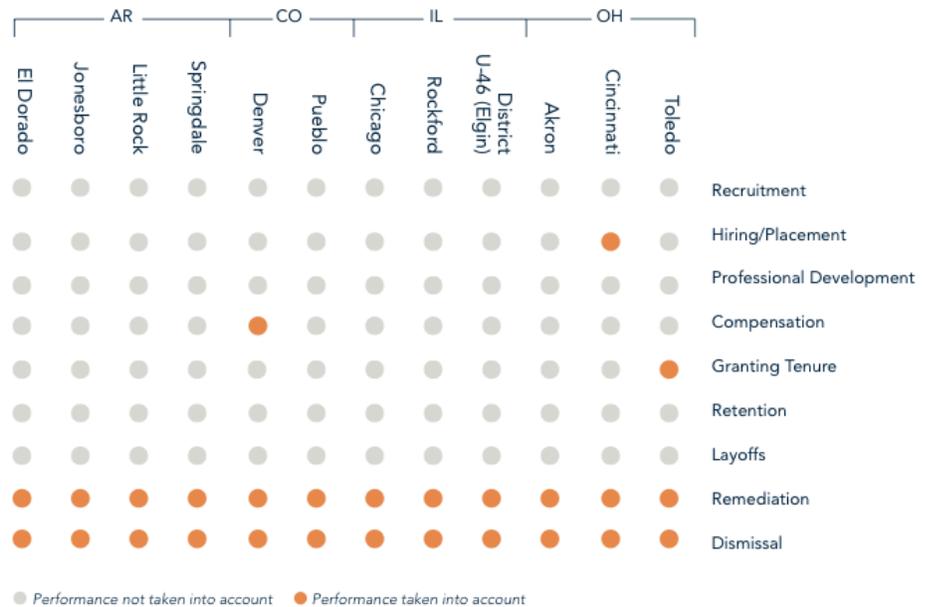
Introduction

There is a substantial problem in the United States when it comes to education. The U.S. is ranked only 29th out of 41 developing countries when it comes to education. As a world superpower, and leader for other nations, this number should be exponentially higher if we want to continue to lead the world. But in order to lead the world, we must be able to produce the future leaders. The quickest way to fix this problem is to implement a better teaching system. A system that does not stand for mediocrity from teachers, but instead exceptional work. Because of the nations belief in “teacher tenure,” and its current existence, we are only requiring teachers to do the bare minimum to get by.

Teacher tenure is defined as a career status that many teachers earn after completing a “probationary period.” This period is only a certain amount of years teaching (depending on the state). After these years have passed with only an “average” performance ranking, the teacher then receives tenure. Once tenure is obtained, the school district must then grant the teacher their job from year to year regardless of productivity or effectiveness.

43 percent of teachers across all districts believe that there is a tenured teacher in their school who should be *dismissed* for poor instructional performance but has not been. The best way to fix the problem of mediocre teachers is to remove tenure on a

Where Is Performance a Factor in Important Decisions About Teachers?*



national level, and promote programs that pay teachers based on effectiveness.

Another element to this approach is the support of compensation plans that reward teacher based on effectiveness. In every other career path, professionals are given bonuses, raises and incentive if

they do well at their jobs. The same should be applied for teachers.

Currently, the nation is paying teachers based on seniority. The number of years teaching is directly related to the amount of money you obtain. While it is often thought that teachers with more experience are better, this is not always the case. A teacher that is new at the job could be more effective and innovative than one that has been teaching for years. By implementing programs such as the Harrison Pay-For-Performance programs, we encourage school districts to help out their teachers.

President Obama spoke in bold terms about improving teacher effectiveness by saying, "If a teacher is given a chance or two chances or three chances but still does not improve, there is no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences. The stakes are too high. We can afford nothing but the best when it comes to our children's teachers and the schools where they teach."

Our plan to remove tenure and change the pay for teachers does just this. It rewards teachers for their hard work, and it eliminates bad teachers from the system.

Pros

- Removing tenure on a national level, teachers are then forced to work to maintain high standards for their jobs. They must strive to do well and create a better atmosphere for learning.
- The teacher's profession also increases its creditability because it is now a job that they must consistently work for.

- It deters lazy teachers from wanting to be a part of the profession. Many people think that being a teacher is an easy job, and in the inconsistent job market they look for a job with security based on the fact that they are lazy. These people will be deterred away from the school system.
- By implementing this on a national level, the teachers are then forced to keep their jobs within their state. This means that no teacher can go to a different school and obtain tenure. Therefore, education and teacher standards on a state-by-state level will remain the same.
- Teacher unions also have less power over the state legislation. Many teacher unions have controlled government policy, but with the ability to have their jobs removed, they can no longer have such a huge control over government policy.
- By implementing the pay for performance plans, teachers that work hard and create change within their schools can finally be rewarded. Their effectiveness goes up, and ultimately our nation's education standards go up as a whole.

Cons

- Teachers are known notoriously for having a very hard job and being very underappreciated. By eliminating tenure, teachers

- lose a privilege that is part of their job.
- As a result of eliminating tenure, teacher unions and school districts may be very angry and protest.
 - Loss of tenure could also mean corruption within the public school system. Teachers may lose the ability to make policy and question administration within their district for fear of losing their job.
 - Teachers will also have to work harder to obtain better standardized test results.
 - By supporting programs that pay teachers for effectiveness, we are supporting plans that increase education taxes for states.
 - Because teachers are forced to work based on standardized test scores, creativity and arts classes are put to the back burner.
- Is there a better way to increase professionalism for teachers?
 - Is this an effective way to increase education in our country?
 - Would implementing this on a national level be an effective way to create a better public school system all over?

Deliberative Questions

- Would the overwhelming opposition from teacher unions be an issue when implementing this legislation?
- Would the elimination of tenure really create more effective teachers and environment?
- How will these programs effectively work with standardized tests to compensate teachers?

Approach 2: Implementing a Peer Evaluation System

This approach is to implement the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program to all districts in the state of Colorado.

Overview

Most school districts in our country fail to properly evaluate teachers on how well they are performing in the classroom. This is central to the way our youth develops throughout their schooling experience. In an attempt to improve the way public school systems

Realizing the Potential of Peer Assistance and Review



evaluate the performance of teachers, we feel that a more effective system that consists of peer reviews will be necessary.

This approach is to implement the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program to all districts in the state of Colorado. The PAR program consists of two main components, the PAR Panel, which is a board made up of a mixture of teachers and administrators, and the second component, the “consulting

teachers”. The PAR Panel decides what teachers can qualify to become a consulting teacher through a rigorous application process. The consulting teacher then acts as an evaluator that also works with new and underperforming teachers in improving basic teaching skills. The PAR Panel will be responsible for figuring out the details of how the program will work. For example, a low-income school can implement the PAR Program using few consulting teachers who only do evaluations part time. Whereas schools with more income can implement the program with more consulting teachers who work full time. These consulting teachers will be the best teachers in the school or district and must meet very high standards in order to be considered.

Implementing this program throughout all districts in Colorado could be a solution to decrease the amount of teachers that continuously underperform and also help introduce new teachers to good teaching habits.

Pros

- This program is very flexible which allows any school, no matter the economic circumstances, to implement the program.
- This program will benefit teacher performance throughout the entire district because these consulting teachers will spend a significant amount of time with new and underperforming teachers. We feel that this time spent will allow the consulting teachers to get a good understanding of each teacher’s strengths and weaknesses.

- There are some districts that are currently implementing this program and show signs of success. We found that the program will be most beneficial if implemented at the most basic level to begin, and if signs of improvement then move to a more detailed plan. Traditional evaluation systems provide little to no help for teachers who are underperforming.
- We feel that these underperforming teachers just need some guidance on how to improve the most basic teaching skills and the PAR System could be the best way to go provide this.

Cons

- The Par Program could be potentially problematic for schools or districts to implement that are not willing to release their best performing teachers, in the case of full time consultation.
- There is the possibility of teachers who may slack off when there is no consulting teacher around to monitor class sessions. For this scenario we considered using videotape recording on a daily basis to eliminate teachers from intentionally underperforming.

Discussion Questions

- How would you feel about your child having a first year teacher in a school that does implement

the PAR Program? Would you feel a little bit more confident knowing that this teacher is receiving help from a consulting teacher?

- Do you think it could be problematic for a teacher to evaluate another teacher? Some teachers might argue that it isn't fair.
- As a taxpayer, would you feel comfortable knowing that money is being cut from other programs to implement the PAR Program?
- If you had a son or daughter that had a teacher who has been in the PAR Program for two consecutive years working on improvement due to underperformance, would you feel comfortable knowing that? Or would it make you want to try and get another teacher? Even though they will be working quite often with a consulting teacher.
- Are there any factors that would make you or a parent not want implement or support this program?
- Could the flexibility of this program be a bad thing?
- Could videotaping be a way to evaluate these new and underperforming teachers?

Approach 3: Student Evaluations of Teachers

This last approach is to implement a nationwide system in which students evaluate their teachers in the K-12 age range

Overview

The last approach the group decided upon to improve education in the U.S. was to implement a nationwide system in which students evaluate their teachers in the K-12 age range. It would be organized similarly to how student evaluations are already done at Colorado State University: by having all of the students fill out a couple pages of questions and be allowed to make comments about their teacher's performance whenever the class is over (whether it be a semester or year-long class).

Under this plan, the data from the students would be collected and teachers would be evaluated based on their overall performance across all of the classes they are teaching at a given time. If the teacher performed well on a consistent basis, they would be able to receive benefits such as pay raises and, in the case of newer teachers,

earlier access to tenure. If the teacher performed poorly several consecutive semesters in a row, they could receive penalties such as losing tenure, not receiving a pay raise for the coming year, or, if they fail to improve, removal from their position in order to be replaced with a teacher better-suited to the job.

There have already been small-scale implementations of this plan, and they have proven successful. According to Amanda Ripley's article "Why Kids Should Grade Teachers" from The Atlantic, student evaluations have "remarkable consistency" in grading teachers, "even among kindergarten students." A test study given in Washington, D.C. had students voice their opinions on how much they were learning in school, and rather than the results varying based on race, gender, or economic background, it was abundantly clear that the students' opinions were dependent upon which teacher they had.

According to an article from the National Education Policy Center, there has even been research done into what questions students should be asked. Questions about mutual respect between the teacher and student, class behavior, how busy the class is, how much students learn, and how much students are corrected from their mistakes have been proven to correlate directly with test scores. However, as Ripley argued in her article, this is more valuable information than a standardized test can provide. Both can prove that



something is going wrong in class, but only student evaluations can say what that something is.

There are other cases of student evaluations being put into place; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has done surveys to find out what students think of their schools and their teachers. Some, like journalist Felix Salmon, argue that student evaluations may be helpful, but that they shouldn't be tied to teachers' benefits and punishments because the data then becomes "an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end."

However, implementation of student evaluations in every classroom in the U.S. would provide a much better understanding of how to improve our schools than small surveys, because students have been proven to be a better judge of their teachers than anyone else. As Ripley put it, "Kids stare at their teachers for hundreds of hours a year, which might explain their expertise."

My peers in the class discussion were more skeptical of the feedback K-12 students could provide about teachers; however, they agreed that given the right questions and, perhaps, a classroom facilitator for younger students, worthwhile information could be gathered from this sort of classroom input.

Pros:

- Students are always in the classroom and therefore have a better understanding of the teacher.
- Teachers are less likely to be scored better or worse than they deserve because they were "having a good/bad day."

- Teachers can receive feedback from a larger number of sources than from school administrators or teachers.
- Students have been proven to have consistent responses to questions in regard to their teachers.

Cons:

- Students haven't received training or qualifications to evaluate teachers.
- Teachers are likely to object to their pay being connected to what the students think of them.
- Younger children may not be able to contribute to teacher evaluations in a meaningful way.
- This plan would conflict with the current system of evaluation based on test scores and would require revision of the testing system across the country.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you think students can give useful feedback to teachers, particularly in the K-12 range?
- How would implementation of this plan differ for different age ranges?
- What questions should the students be asked about their teachers?
- Do you feel student evaluations are significant enough to get a teacher a raise or get them fired?

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, we believe it is imperative that as a country we immediately take whatever steps necessary to improving public school systems. School districts throughout the United States continuously fail to implement programs that show positive results on not just teachers, but more importantly, students. After extensive research and deliberation we acquired much knowledge on the subject of improving certain aspects of student performance, but have not taken a firm stance on one or approach or the other due to much controversy and debate. We discovered that when getting a good understanding of both the proponents and opponents of each approach, it becomes difficult to decide which is the most effective. Through the deliberation we also found that students think structural changes to public school systems would not be necessary and it becomes a matter of more funding.

One of the more difficult decisions the public would have to make pertaining to this topic is how much we value education as a whole. The decision of whether or not a tax increase, to allow for more funding, is necessary. It is important to point out that the general public wants children in the U.S. to have the best education possible. This could be a way for more people to understand the significance of funding that goes into public school systems and convince any doubters that a tax increase could be a major advancement toward improvements.

We feel that improving public school systems should be more heavily

pressed on the general public, which in turn will create immediate action to be taken among policy makers. This could be as simple as informing the public more about student performance, teacher performance, and ways to improve them.

These different approaches are small steps in providing relief for this continuous cycle of underperforming school systems. As a whole our country needs to take immediate action and unify in the development of preparing our youth for the workforce.

Analysts Guide

1. Reasons for overall structure? We decided to start with the tenure and pay-for-performance because that was the basis of our debate as well as a big issue in teacher reform. We then tried to think of new solutions to our problem of poor education. Approach two discusses the peer evaluation system, which was discovered as a key point when researching for this issue. Then we discussed the use of teacher evaluations, a much more controversial topic, but a point that we decided should be taken into consideration.
2. Other alternatives considered and why you didn't pick them? We discussed the reform of standardized testing in public schools, we discussed using teacher incentives in public schools, and we also looked at reforming education of teachers before they enter the classroom. We didn't pick these issues because there wasn't much interest and research behind these points. They also seemed to be closely related to the other topics chosen, and therefore easy to cover in our chosen approaches.
3. How have your opinions changed during the semester based on your research and the debate and deliberation? Our opinions have varied based on our research. Many of our opinions have changed on the topic of tenure and pay for performance plans. The generally consensus is that we all know a lot about the topic, but we haven't taken a complete stance on the issue because we have heard both sides to the argument.
4. What additional research did you do between the debate and the deliberation? How did that research impact the final project? Many of the research we did after the debate and before the deliberation was more specifically focused on our approach. We had to specifically look for research and plans relating to our topic, but we used our debate research as a back knowledge for our plans.
5. Key simplifications? People tend to think that the best solutions to educational problems involve spending more money rather than making structural changes and new legislation that wouldn't be particularly expensive. In regards to teachers being evaluated, people also seem to assume that teachers would be good evaluators for each other and students wouldn't be.
6. Key misconceptions? We found that the class had very clear opinions about each of the approaches that didn't necessarily agree with what studies have reported. Students tended to think that ending teacher tenure would be an easier solution to the problem than it may be, given how accustomed teachers are to it. They were also more accepting of peer evaluation of teachers than student evaluations, even though both have been proven to be highly effective in figuring out how teachers are performing, particularly when compared to test scores.
7. Key fact questions? We had some difficulty finding examples of how our plans are already being implemented to compare to status quo because education is pretty consistent on the state level.

8. What are the most important tough choices the public has to make on this issue? The public has to decide on whether or not they value teachers enough to give them raises through their taxes, they have to decide how they think teachers should be evaluated, and they have to decide how much they value education.
9. What are the key points of common ground that exist? Generally people agree that we want children in the U.S. to have the best education possible and that there are huge improvements to be made. This common ground could be used to help decide arguments about how much money to put toward education and how to figure out what exactly is going on in the classroom.
10. Based on all these factors, what is your best advice for moving forward and improving conversation about this issue? We feel that education in the U.S. needs to be a more pressing issue. People need to be informed about student performance, teacher performance, and the ways to improve them. This would lead to more legislative decision-making and more action.

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