

More from the Measures of Effective Teaching Study

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks says the latest data from the massive Gates-funded Measures of Effective Teaching Project “may give pause to districts working to develop teacher-effectiveness evaluations.” MET researchers are finding that assessments of teachers similar to those used in some district value-added systems “aren’t good at showing which differences are important between the most- and least-effective educators, and often misunderstand the ‘messy middle’ that most teachers occupy.”

“The middle is a lot messier than a lot of state policies would lead us to believe,” said MET director Steve Cantrell at a recent AERA conference in Vancouver, BC. “Based on the practice data, if I look at the quartiles, all that separates the 25th and 75th on a class [observation] instrument is .68 – less than 10 percent of the scale distribution. In a lot of systems, the 75th percentile teacher is considered a leader and the 25th percentile is considered a laggard.”

As for the idea of firing the lowest-performing quartile of teachers, Cantrell says that would have very little impact on the quality of instruction in a school. After observing and analyzing more than 24,000 lessons, MET researchers have concluded that the differences between effective and ineffective teachers lie mostly in the area of classroom management and behavior, not academic rigor and quality. Generally, classroom practice is “orderly but unambitious,” said Cantrell.

Another MET researcher at the AERA conference, Rutgers professor Drew Gitomer, says that the way teachers frame questions is critically important to uncovering and fixing students’ misconceptions. For example, it’s more helpful for a math teacher to give students *three cubed* rather than *two squared* an example of exponents: two squared would produce the same answer (4) if students erroneously multiplied the number by the exponent, whereas three cubed, if solved incorrectly, would reveal the misconception.

Gitomer conducted in-depth interviews with 60 teachers and found that the lower-performing teachers often had weak reasoning for instructional decisions – they lost track of the larger purpose behind a lesson and used personal preference rather than best practices to decide how to proceed. Stronger teachers, on the other hand, used questions to look at larger classes of problems and could describe how their approach improved student learning.

Another AERA presenter, Ronald Ferguson (Harvard University) presented evidence that students’ assessments of their teachers have a high correlation with student achievement.

Ferguson asks students detailed questions that get at “seven C’s” of teaching practice:

- Caring about students;
- Captivating them by showing learning is relevant;
- Conferring with students to show their ideas are welcome and respected;
- Clarifying lessons so knowledge seems feasible;
- Consolidating knowledge so lessons are connected and integrated;
- Controlling behavior so students stay on task;

- Challenging students to achieve.

Students taught by teachers who scored in the top quartile on the seven C's on anonymous student surveys achieved a full semester above students taught by teachers scoring in the bottom quartile.

“MET Studies Seek More Nuanced Look at Teaching Quality” by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Apr. 25, 2012 (Vol. 31, #29, p. 12),
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/04/25/29teach.h31.html>