Teacher Pay and Test Scores

A paper by Dr. John L. Tenny, developer of the Data-Based Observation Method and the eCOVE Classroom Observation Software, January 2010

Awhile ago I read an article in Ed Week about the Houston and Denver districts' efforts in teacher pay for performance. Both programs are broad implementations of the pay-for-performance system and are struggling with enrollment and acceptance. The most interesting quotes were by Gayle Fallon, President of the Houston Federation of Teachers. Both quotes, "It's better than last year. Still, they are handing out money and getting nothing in return." and "What we hear from teachers consistently is that they have no clue what they did to get the money", point to the black-box nature of using student test scores as a primary determiner in awarding pay or other rewards. While student learning is the primary goal, the connection between the teacher's direct influence on student scores (as they indicate learning) is very difficult to determine. I can understand the teachers not 'having a clue' when the results of their efforts (the test scores) are calculated and revealed sometime in the future and those results also include the influence of a large number of other variables.

A medium sized school district in Oregon has recently received a large grant from the Chalkboard Foundation to improve student learning. Part of their efforts include a bonus pay system based on a teacher portfolio of evidence, which can include student scores as well as other strong evidence of exemplary teaching and professional conduct. They contacted me to discuss the use of data-based observation data on best practices as a part of that process.

There is credible research about teaching practices that result in increased student learning. eCOVE Software will that will track the implementation of those practices in an individual classroom. Now we have the opportunity to reward teachers who are implementing those researched best practices. The process is not difficult to manage - identify the behaviors that everyone is confident in as directly influencing student learning (Class Learning Time, Time on Task, Wait Time, Level of Questions {as answered by students, not just asked by the teacher}, etc, etc), train observers (teachers, aides, paid data gatherers, administrators) to competently use the data collection tools, and determine the appropriate data collection procedures (number of data points, length of individual data collection events, etc).

The result of this, I predict, will be interesting and engaging. Not only will teachers know immediately that they are using the researched best practices in their classroom, but they will have a running record of that. It is that running record that is the greatest benefit - it can provide feedback in a timely and useful manner to the teacher who has a goal of becoming an exemplary teacher. They can immediately see if they are moving toward a higher level of proficiency instead of waiting for months to find out if they 'won'. As I have said before, teachers are deeply dedicated to effectively teaching their students in the best manner possible. Bringing the objective feedback to the classroom level in real time will build more effective teachers; then we'll know why those scores went up as well have the 'clues' we need.

As a side note, I'm a bit concerned that the student performance/more money is a strong extrinsic motivator and will shift the focus on why one

becomes/continues to be a teacher. I think the immediate, objective, and over time feedback that eCOVE provides will not only reinforce the skills of teaching but will also reinforce the teacher's perception of their skills. Since we love doing what we do well, the data and teacher reflection become the intrinsic motivator. As teachers become/continue to be successful in their craft, *and are clearly aware of their successes*, they will keeping doing what they love - helping kids.