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The Need for Balanced Methods of Measuring Performance

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A lot gets measured in education today as we try to determine whether our students are meeting our expectations. Grading is probably the measurement we are most familiar with. Everyone has seen a school report card and understands the difference between an “A” and an “F.” But we also measure student success through state and national tests, classroom assessments, SATs, and by tracking graduation and college-going rates.

Collecting this information is critical. I believe strongly in data-driven decision-making and think there’s a lot of wisdom behind that old axiom, “what gets measured gets done.” We simply have to measure success, progress, and outcomes to know how we’re doing and where we have to go.

But I do see shortcomings in how all this information is shared and how it’s used.

Stakeholders, especially parents, often complain that administrators and policymakers don’t do enough to share all this data with them in a transparent way and don’t do enough to explain what it means and why it matters. And while the information we’re collecting provides valuable insight into our education system, we don’t always use that insight to rethink our policies, make better decisions or guide teachers in their instructional practice.

What we know from the measuring we’ve done is that, without a doubt, our schools need improving. Yet, in too many places in America, schools, districts and states are sticking with outdated approaches and a status quo that’s failing kids.

Consider the evidence:

- Only about a third of 4th- and 8th-grade students across the country are proficient readers, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation’s Report Card.¹
- There’s been an achievement gap in reading between wealthy and poor students of at least 20 exam points since 1998.²
- More than a quarter of American high school students don’t graduate on time, and that percentage is much higher for low-income and minority students.³
- U.S. students aren’t measuring up well against their global peers. Of the 34 industrialized countries whose students took the international PISA assessment in 2009, US students ranked 25th in math, 17th in science, and 14th in reading.⁴

If it’s true that measuring things brings focus and attention to problems, we have to ask ourselves why we are still seeing such poor results and equity

gaps in our schools. Perhaps the answer lies not in what we are measuring, but in what we're still failing to track or monitor.

When you consider the measurements I mentioned earlier, you can see they all look at student performance. We don't do a similarly thorough job tracking the performance of other pieces of our education system. Here are a few suggestions regarding other information we should be collecting in our schools:

Teacher impact on student learning. No in-school factor is more important than the quality of the teacher in the classroom, yet the vast majority of our schools do not evaluate educators in a meaningful and objective way. We have to measure the effectiveness of our teachers by looking at whether their students are making expected academic gains. Of course, teachers also should be evaluated based on other methods, such as classroom observations by peers and principals, and contributions to a school community. But now that we're measuring student progress in detailed ways, it only makes sense to use that data to assess the effectiveness of our educators.

School and district performance as it relates to student progress. Parents need to be empowered with real, meaningful data about the degree to which their kids are learning in school. This shouldn't be limited to one test at one point in the school year, but should include rich information about how much kids are growing over time. Schools should give parents this information in a clear and useful way, so they can make better choices about when to seek interventions, when to push for more rigor, and when to consider new school options.

Return on investment. We talk about the need for cuts, and we talk about the need for more spending. But too often, these conversations don't include a discussion about whether the money we're spending is being used wisely and effectively and in ways that help students learn. We must do a far better job tracking which resources and investments raise student-learning levels, so we can target our funds in smart ways.

Quality of our schools of education based on the performance of the teachers they graduate. If we want to build the strongest teaching force possible, we need to give incoming teachers better preparation before they enter the classroom. One way to help schools of education get the data they need to assess whether their programs are working well is to measure the job performance of their graduates once they've become teachers. As a country, we should learn from education schools that are turning out top performers. Schools of education that graduate a large percentage of struggling teachers must re-examine their programs.

All in all, our schools have been doing a better job over the past decade measuring student progress, but we still need to improve how that information is used and shared.

In addition, we must as a nation take a hard look at the educational problems our country is facing and come up with new solutions for addressing them. Part of doing that should involve measuring school success in new ways, including doing more to assess the quality of teaching and leadership in our schools, the effectiveness of management and spending decisions, and the value of our teacher training programs.

Measuring success is clearly not the same as providing instruction to kids, and the two should never be confused, but both are needed if we want to give our children the quality education system they need to succeed in school and beyond.

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