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Op Ed: Evaluation of teachers must improve

By Terry Ryan

Effective teachers are the most valuable education asset that Ohio (or any state) has. Statistics don't lie when it comes to their impact on children's learning. Stanford economist Eric Hanushek, who recently testified before a joint hearing of the Ohio House and Senate education committees, reports that "having a high-quality teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of low socio-economic background." Similarly, a weak teacher can blight a child's prospects.

Given how powerfully teachers can alter students' life trajectories, it is not only prudent but imperative to push reforms that enable education leaders to distinguish effective teachers from ineffective ones. With a fair and rigorous system that measures gradations of teacher effectiveness - not just binary ratings such as "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" - school systems can reward their ablest instructors and put them in the classrooms where they are most needed, target support to teachers who need it and weed out those who are not a good fit for the profession. For Ohio, where low-income and minority children reach proficiency at far lower rates than their wealthier peers, the stakes are enormous.

But the evaluation system isn't working nearly as well as it needs to. As U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has noted: "Everyone agrees that teacher evaluation is broken. Ninety-nine percent of teachers are rated satisfactory and most evaluations ignore the most important measure of a teacher's success - which is how much their students have learned."

In Ohio, districts pay long-serving but mediocre teachers more than they pay less senior high-fliers. They reward teachers for credentials and advanced degrees, as well as years on the job, yet they offer the same pay for teachers whether their pupils thrive or languish. Layoffs are based on seniority. This may once have been acceptable, if only because there were few valid alternatives. But many states and districts have begun to craft evaluation systems that move the profession forward. It's Ohio's turn to do the same.

Gov. John Kasich's budget and the recently enacted Senate Bill 5 seek to move the state toward evaluations that identify the impact of individual instructors on student learning, in order to inform decisions around retention, pay, hiring and dismissal. This is a huge opportunity to raise the needle on student achievement. But Ohio has to get the details right. Systems that measure and reward performance are still at the pilot stage, and no jurisdiction has yet developed a perfect system.

The good news is that Ohio is better positioned than most places to build a modern and fair system for gauging teacher effectiveness because it has a relatively sophisticated system of value-added analysis of student achievement in reading and math in grades four through eight, and has accumulated these data since 2007. Value-added data - how much a child learns during a given school year - should be an important component for measuring teacher effectiveness.

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