Teacher Quality Accountability Systems: The View from Pennsylvania

Eugene W. Hickok

Dr. Eugene W. Hickok is one of the nation's leading authorities on teacher-quality accountability systems. As Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education for six years in the administration of Governor Tom Ridge, he was responsible for implementing an ambitious agenda aimed at providing more choice and flexibility for children enrolled in failing school districts. He has also led the way in strengthening teacher preparation and professional development programs by emphasizing accountability and the impact on student performance. His speech focused on the lessons he has learned in Pennsylvania and how they are applicable elsewhere.

"How do we find good teachers?" is a broad question. Not only must we find good teachers, but we must also prepare them to be effective in the classroom. We must retain good teachers as well and ensure they perform at high levels, and when they do not, we must deal with incompetents.

Professor Eric Hanushek has done extensive research on that silver bullet of all education reforms, smaller class sizes. And what have we found? Well, as he noted, class-size reduction is not all it's cracked up to be. Indeed, the quality of the teaching a child receives is a far greater determinant of student performance, whereas class size may or may not be a factor. Indeed, the experience with class size suggests a fundamental

This chapter presents edited excerpts from his conference speech.

problem we encounter in the education world: the conflict between implementing what we know works while running up against what we know we can accomplish in the real world.

With that in mind, let me give you some insight into what type of environment we have in Pennsylvania. One of the great things about our country is that each state has its own educational geography and territory. Pennsylvania is a large state and locally controlled; we have 501 school districts. In 1999, we spent $16 billion on K–12 education—that's 44 percent of the state's total appropriations. It is also important to note that we are a strong union state. We have some of the top compensation packages for teachers in the entire country.

In that context, Governor Tom Ridge has made teacher preparation and accountability a centerpiece of his education agenda. But that is on the microlevel. On the macrolevel, what we have attempted to do is this: to get, in a system that is and always has been downright resistant to it, accurate and reliable indicators of performance and accountability. How do you achieve an educational bottom line, as I like to call it, not only for the practitioners of education, the teachers and the education establishment, but also for the clients of education?

The clients are the parents, the taxpayers, and the school board members. Our job is to pass on information to them that is accessible so that they can know how the schools are performing, indeed, so they can reclaim ownership of them. How do we judge how schools are performing? Well, it's exactly what you have been talking about this morning—we must measure student performance.

Let me take this opportunity to discuss with you a bill that our legislature recently passed and that Governor Ridge signed into law in May 2000. It's called the Educational Empowerment Act. Twenty-two other states have similar laws under which the state can go in and take over low-performing school districts. But our program is a little bit different. Under the Educational Empowerment Act, there are currently eleven

districts across Pennsylvania that qualify for state help. These eleven districts, including Philadelphia, the nation's fifth-largest district, all have 50 percent or more of their students flunking the state's assessment tests. Indeed, in some of these districts, 75 percent of fifth-graders are not passing state tests.

The help we have for these low-performing districts is twofold. First, we provide them with added flexibility. Districts can elect to contract out certain services to private firms, create more choice, reconstitute schools, or charter the entire district. Second, low-performing districts are eligible for additional resources, but it's very important to remember that most low-performing districts already spend well above state averages. This more flexible approach helps get at performance and results. If the district continues to falter, then the state will take over. The message is clear: districts are held accountable for student performance, they are given more flexibility to boost achievement, and they must suffer the consequences if they fall short.

Such an approach has also garnered support from across the aisle. Not only has the Ridge administration signed on to the plan, but several African-American, Democratic legislators from urban communities like Philadelphia also support the bill. The problems of urban education offer us the opportunity to build bipartisan coalitions to ensure that poor children in bad schools are given a chance at success. Nevertheless, the education establishment has been less than enthusiastic. The teacher unions opposed us, and when we confronted them they explained that although they, too, wanted to improve student performance, ultimately they were opposed to the proposal because it threatened job security for their members and allowed the districts too much control over hiring and firing teachers.

Another important development in Pennsylvania includes some of the recent action taken by the state board of education. In our state, the governor selects some members of the board, while others are appointed by the legislature. In a unanimous vote, the board recently approved a set of

new teacher-preparation standards for Pennsylvania's more than ninety teacher-preparation programs.

The new standards focus on five main reforms. First, teachers must now take the same courses that are required for a major in the subject they plan to teach. Previously, prospective math teachers did not need to take the same courses as math majors; instead, they could major in education, math education, or some similar discipline. Now, new teachers must gain expertise in the rigors of their subject. Second, to enter a teacher-preparation program, students must have a B average in all of their college work up to the end of the first semester of their sophomore year. Third, while in the program, all students must maintain at least a B average to graduate. These are blunt instruments. From my career as a professor, I can tell you grades were not always a perfect indicator, but they are the best measure we have, and they're what we use.

Fourth, the board raised cut-off scores for certification examinations while also trying to improve the quality of the exams. When we first came to office, it was possible for teachers to score in the bottom deciles of these tests and still receive their certificates. For example, one question on the General Knowledge Test asked teachers to put in chronological order the New Deal, the Great Society, the Korean War, and World War II. People missed this question and still qualified to teach. We've tried to shore up the standards here.

Fifth, while Pennsylvania has an oversupply of certified teachers, the board recognized that we do not have an oversupply of qualified teachers. As such, the board has approved more alternative certification programs, which allow qualified professionals from other fields to transfer into teaching and avoid the hassles of going through the time-consuming traditional process. Also, Pennsylvania teachers obtain tenure after just three years and many stay in one school for their entire career, spanning twenty to thirty years. Before the board's action, there was no requirement for ongoing, rigorous professional development and teachers

did not have to prove their skills on an ongoing basis. The board now requires teachers to be recertified every five years, which means all teachers periodically must go through professional development and be evaluated by their peers.

As I mentioned earlier, these are indeed blunt instruments, and they only get at the margins of what we discussed this morning, but at least we in Pennsylvania can now argue that we are making progress to improve the quality of teaching in our schools while also acknowledging that the teaching profession needs to be better. Let me also say that we are causing some anxiety in the teaching ranks.

The deans of the various schools of education in our state are not supportive of these reforms. The deans have consistently remained opposed to higher standards for the quality of their schools and the teachers who graduate from them. One dean said to me, "You know, grades don't matter, compassion matters." Although compassion is certainly an important attribute, can you imagine a dean saying that grades don't matter? Well, many in the education establishment feel that way. One of the members of our board of education who, to her credit, voted for our reform package once said to me, "I'll care what they know when I know that they care."

These statements highlight a very important divide in education. On the one hand, you have what the people—the parents and the taxpayers—want from their schools, and on the other, you have the teachers who think they already know what the people need. This is a huge disconnect that groups like Public Agenda have picked up on. The public wants teachers who can demonstrate knowledge, who can discipline a classroom, who can effectively manage a classroom. Indeed, the public consistently has wanted these things. But the schools of education want teachers who are able to show compassion, empathy, and caring. Again, these are worthy virtues, but citizens rightfully expect and demand accountability and performance. This is, after all, the backbone of the standards-based movement that has swept the

nation in recent years. These desires are up against an establishment that tells the public to get beyond grades. According to them, teachers are there to mentor and nurture.

We have also made progress on other fronts in Pennsylvania. One of the key aspects of formulating public policy is the role of incentives. They are vital in policy making because incentives get people to do things they otherwise would not. Unfortunately, incentives really haven't played much of a role in education. We're trying to change that. We created a reform package in Pennsylvania that tells districts if they design an incentive program that rewards teachers for improving student performance, the state will help pay for it. It's important to note that we don't tell the district how to devise these incentive plans. Instead, the package forces district bargaining units to sit down and come up with a suitable plan that in some way ties teacher pay to how well students are performing. We think this is pretty much common sense. If districts are willing to take these steps that haven't been taken before, we're willing to help them pay for it.

Another point that I touched on earlier is professional development. We've really tried to reform these programs dramatically. We spend $100 million annually on professional development, and we must learn what works and what does not and spend wisely. We now have Governor's Schools for teachers, just like for students, where they can receive graduate credit. To ensure content and quality, we control the curriculum and staffing of these institutes. Previously, professional development was carried out by teachers' organizations and there was no quality control. We think that should be a requirement, and we've taken steps to reach that goal.

We also pretest and posttest our teachers when they go through professional development programs to see where they start and finish and to assess which of our programs work and which do not, again so we can spend wisely. Teacher testing is admittedly very controversial, but I believe

it's a necessary step. I am in the process of developing more diagnostics for our professional development programs to ensure that they are getting the job done and that teachers are learning necessary skills.

Part of this also entails identifying best practices in teaching so that parents can know which philosophies are effective and which are not. Again, it is imperative that we make this information accessible to parents, the clients of education, so that they once again can have confidence in the schools. We have also gone to great lengths to expand the number of charter schools. These schools employ teachers who are open to reform and change and are willing to experiment with incentives and other reforms that have been resisted in traditional public schools. We are also implementing performance assessments for our teachers, based on their intellectual depth and accomplishments, not on years of service or pedagogy. This is yet another way of not just measuring inputs—we do a lot of that in education—but also assessing the impact teachers have on student performance and the results of their work.

That is also why we have hired Standard and Poors to assess every district's performance as a function of spending. As I mentioned earlier, in Pennsylvania, we spend a lot of money on our schools, and that's fine. But we have to know where our money is going and if it is being spent effectively. Standard and Poors will use a wide range of data and present reams of information to the public on just what their schools spend money on and what the impact is. Most important, they will establish objective, neutral benchmarks of performance. If student performance is better in one district than another, and at half the cost, then citizens and taxpayers need to know why.

Indeed, I'd like to return to what we've already discussed today. The impact teachers have on student performance is critical. As I said, it's one of the defining issues in education reform today. Yet traditionally we've ignored it and haven't valued it. The bottom line ought to be whether teaching improves

student performance, not whether it leaves teachers feeling better about themselves. That's one of my problems with national certification of teachers. With that program, there is no link to student performance. Teachers who have received national certification often comment that the program makes them appreciate the profession more or that it motivates and inspires them in some way to be better teachers. Yet where's the evidence, where's the bottom line? There doesn't appear to be one.

I'd like to close on why teachers occupy a unique place in our democracy. Teachers often like to compare themselves with doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Indeed, teaching requires a great deal of skill and education. Teachers have even developed their own mores, literature, and ethos, much of which is very difficult for the outside world to understand. Yet think about it: aren't teachers fundamentally different from these other professions?

We trust lawyers and doctors in specific areas because they have expertise we lack, because their expertise allows them to perform tasks we cannot. Their professional literature and practices are supposed to reflect this expertise and allow them to improve their skills.

Teachers are different. Their first and foremost obligation in a democracy is to effectively communicate with citizens, not just with themselves. We have confidence in teachers because the results of their labor are identified in our children, not because of their degrees or credentials. Citizens' confidence in a teacher's ability to improve student performance matters most. If we can move in that direction, the profession is better off.