

Creating a New Teaching Profession

- Edited by Dan Goldhaber and Jane Hannaway
- The Urban Institute Press (ISBN 978-0-87766-762-9) 2009
- Summary by Douglas W. Green, EdD - dgreen@stny.rr.com
- This book is about the human capital systems that help determine the quality of the teaching workforce in the nation's K-12 schools and about how to improve them.

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Overview and Goals

- The many systems that determine the quality of teachers are too often disconnected, incoherent, and out of step with the market mechanisms that govern the broader labor market. The structure, compensation, and entry requirements are a product of another era, in many ways incompatible with the modern labor market for skilled professionals. The goals of this book are to generate new notions and angles on issues associated with human capital in schools and stimulate thought about innovative ways to improve these systems. A diverse set of authors have crafted essays on topics related to human capital, which is defined as the knowledge and skills required for students to succeed in college or the workplace.

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The 3rd Industrial Revolution

- Alan Blinder (Economics, Princeton) leads off as he makes the case for revolutionary changes in education. Our schools still resemble the factories that marked the first industrial revolution when labor migrated from farms to factories. They also have agricultural schedules. The second revolution featured the shift from factory to service jobs. The third revolution features computers taking over some jobs while others go offshore to skilled, low paid foreigners. Education must respond to this reality. We now need to emphasize things like creativity, inventiveness, spontaneity, flexibility, and interpersonal relations - not memorization. The fetish with standardization is a vestige of the first revolution. It needs to go, as the thrust of NCLB is pushing in the wrong direction. We need more open ended projects, group work, and epistemic computer games. Think learning by doing. More vocational education is in order. Carpenters are likely to out earn computer programmers as their work can't be off shored, for example.

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Teacher Quality - Important & Elusive

- Sean Corcoran (NYU, education economics) believes that teacher quality is the most valuable input schools contribute to the academic success of students. Unfortunately, the structure, compensation, and entry requirements of the teaching profession are a product of another era, in many ways incompatible with the modern labor market for skilled professionals. For most of the 20th century, schools relied on a steady supply of well-educated women who had few opportunities outside teaching or who found the shorter work year compatible with raising children. Schools could staff with high-quality teachers for low annual salaries. Greater recognition of talent is needed in the teacher pay structure. The challenge is to determine how as educational production is so complex, involving many inputs outside of the school's control. To date, individual value-added estimates to teacher productivity do not provide a clear picture.

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Teacher Development Chaos

- Dan Goldhaber (University of Washington, education productivity) looks at our decentralized teacher development system and compares it to other developed countries. He promotes the notion of a national teaching credential, which might attract better talent and increase prestige. He supports non traditional paths to the profession and more extensive experimentation with incentives. He recognizes that there are many barriers to improvement, which includes the lack of incentive for education schools to improve the rigor of their programs that are often cash cows. It is also unlikely that the US will increase teacher salaries to match those of countries like South Korea, Japan, and Germany. We could, however if we sacrificed class size and cut specialist teachers who tend to pull kids out.

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Seven Anachronistic Assumptions

- Frederick Hess (American Enterprise Institute, education policy) discusses habits of mind, culture, and institutional inertia that slow reform efforts. In his chapter he pushes for allowing alternate career paths, providing more staff development after teachers are hired, more differentiation of teacher's roles to better leverage their individual skills, and compensation models that reward teachers for raising student achievement or taking on more challenging assignments. He also pushes for more use of online resources as a source of instructional options for students and staff. Although he would prefer some big changes, he understands that incremental advances are likely the best we can hope for and that this should not obscure our goals.

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Human Resources and Instructional Technology

- Paul Hill (University of Washington, reinventing public education) points out that many children learn with technology prior entering school. Home schoolers are also heavy IT users. Most schools use IT in a supplementary manner, keeping it on the margin. Intrenched interests would not want IT to reduce head count. Existing cyber schools use IT to deliver instruction and assess, and teachers to supplement. This is a mirror image of custodial schools. Some argue cyber schools are a disruptive technology that will force custodial schools to adopt more uses of IT. Hill isn't so sure. Parents could demand access to online courses. More flexible government funding is needed. For profit firms know what human resources they need and can pay to find and train it. Colleges will meet unmet demand for training. Utah seems to be ahead of the curve due to its rural students.

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Teacher Deselection

- Eric Hanushek (Stanford, economics of education) Using his own calculations, Eric concludes that if you “deselect” 5% of the least effective teachers, student performance would increase about 0.35 standard deviations. This increase grows as the percentage approaches 10%. (Doug: This reminds me of Jack Welch, the successful CEO of General Electric CEO 1981 to 2004, who fired the bottom 10% of his managers every year.) It is clear to Eric that allowing the most-ineffective teachers to remain in the classroom harms students and drags down our nation. Policy makers should work to make sure that we can make relatively modest changes in the bottom end of the distribution as they will have enormous implications for the nation.

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Estimating Teacher Value Added

- Steven Riven (Amherst, economics) addresses the difficulties associated with estimating teacher added value for the purpose of determining performance pay. Even with multiple years of data on students, important family influences and determinants of school quality are difficult to quantify. Inaccurate or inadequate quality measures and poorly designed pay-for-performance programs will introduce adverse incentives to teach narrowly to test content and concentrate on a fraction of the students. Random assignments are ideal and difficult to accomplish. Small schools also present statistical and comparison issues. Should teachers be compared to all others in the district or just to those in the same school? Should school average value added or teacher value added determine the amount of performance pay? Should multiple years of data be averaged for each teacher? Individual rewards may also discourage collaboration and teamwork. (Doug: These concerns and other unintended consequences tell me that pay-for-performance will be difficult to implement at this time.)

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Professional Development Issues

- Jennifer Rice (University of Maryland, education policy) looks at professional development issues. She finds that in spite of the significant expense, there is little research to suggest which approach to take and current practices appear to be inefficient. Even master's degrees appear to be a poor use of resources. Incentive structures that reward seat time rather than improved performance are a problem. Pay for performance models, however, require a better understanding of teacher effectiveness. Additional resources should also be focussed at low-performing schools. Coaching and feedback seem to be important as does the assignment of mentors. Teachers prefer activities that are subject-specific, hands-on, and apply directly to their teaching.

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In Conclusion

- In their concluding chapter, the editors remind us that the idea that teacher quality is the most important factor affecting student learning is relatively new. Unfortunately, we tend to treat teachers all the same in terms of compensation and professional development. Teacher evaluation lacks rigor as political and institutional constraints discourage honest assessments. On day one, first year teachers assume the same responsibilities as twenty-year veterans and effective teachers are treated the same as poor performers. The field has not substituted technology for labor unlike others. Current tenure laws allow less effective teachers to be employed for life. The bottom line is that we can't know what works without trying various alternatives. If we were to create a teacher human capital system from scratch, we don't think we would end up with the outmoded system we have.

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Cool Quotes

- “We will not build the creative, flexible, people-oriented workforce we will need in the future by drilling kids incessantly for standardized test in the vain hope that they will out-memorize a memory chip.” Alan Blinder
- “Our choice is between trusting the authorities to fix aged and troubled bureaucracies in deliberate and incremental steps or trusting in the ability of a rising generation to seize new tools, new opportunities, and human ingenuity to answer new challenges in unforeseen ways... This is relay not choice at all.”
Frederick Hess
- “Teacher effectiveness matters more to student learning than any other within-school factors. Yet despite this, American public education is still organized, at least implicitly, around the idea that teachers do not matter all that much.”
Andrew Rotherham

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What I left out

- To promote sales of this outstanding book, I left out summaries of things I hope you will want to know more about. At the very least, your organization should make this book available for those who want to dig deeper into this vital subject.
- Chapter 4 deals with the fact that schools need to examine and improve individual human resource management practices. HR people will want to read this.
- Chapter 10 explains how teacher retirement benefits systems work and some of their shortcomings. It ends with recommendations for improvement.
- The last section features reactions to the rest of the book from an education school dean, an urban superintendent, a union leader, and a policy wonk. It is interesting to see how the four different perspectives compare and contrast.

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