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What makes a teacher 'effective'?

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By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

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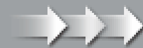

WASHINGTON — Even at a glance, Zakia Sims seems like a good teacher: Her classroom at William Lloyd Garrison Elementary School is quiet, orderly and inviting, with students' work on the walls and a cardboard display case groaning with books.

She leads her first-graders quickly through their morning drill. Most come along happily, listening intently and raising their hands as they sit on the rug.

PHOTO GALLERY: Teachers look to make the grade

Afterward, Sims jokes about cultivating the routine that, to an outsider, looks so smooth. "That took a long time," she says. "A *very* long time."

With a master's degree from nearby Howard University and a highly coveted National Board certificate, Sims, 31, arguably is one of the city's most highly qualified teachers: Only 16 of the city's 5,000 teachers are board-certified. But in a few years, her credentials might not help her keep her job.

It might come down to this: How well do her 6- and 7-year-olds do on standardized tests?

When Congress reauthorizes President Bush's No Child Left Behind education law in the next year or two, lawmakers almost certainly will add provisions that allow administrators to tie many teachers' jobs to student achievement.

Among recommendations issued Tuesday by the Commission on No Child Left Behind, a blue-ribbon panel assembled by the Aspen Institute, a non-partisan think tank, is a call to assess teachers "by their effectiveness in raising student achievement" rather than just their qualifications. It also proposes using evaluations by principals and fellow teachers. Under the proposal, student achievement would count for no less than half of a teacher's score.

Other experts have proposed similar ideas to replace the law's teacher ratings, widely criticized as weak. The current ratings take into account only teachers' credentials: their college major or professional training and subject matter knowledge, asking, for instance, if a French teacher knows French. And even when teachers don't meet such standards, states can call them qualified anyway if teachers have taught for long enough and consistently get satisfactory evaluations.

So what makes ateacher effective? And should teachers' jobs — their careers, really — be pinned on a couple of pages' worth of bubble answer sheets their students fill in each spring?

To be sure, the push to rate teachers not by "inputs" (How did they get to the classroom?) but by "outputs" (What are they doing for kids?) is revolutionary and welcomed by many. The panel's co-chairman, former Georgia Gov. Roy Barnes, says as part of an overall analysis, "it's entirely appropriate." He also chairs the board that oversees National Board Certification.

The idea already is challenging schools in several states to find a better way to pay teachers. Even now, several big cities are experimenting with higher salaries based on student scores and looking at ways to tempt good teachers into troubled inner-city schools where they're needed most.

Drastic response

But experts say if tying effectiveness to test scores is broadly applied to schools nationwide, it risks unfairly putting down or dismissing thousands of good teachers.

"In the abstract, which is why it has gained so much currency, it sounds like a fantastic idea," says Kate Walsh of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington research and advocacy group.

But Walsh is "very skeptical about whether it's practical," because it's so difficult to judge teachers objectively by students' work. Such "value-added" measures are still being developed and aren't completely reliable, Walsh says.

In a worst-case scenario, the system could sow such distrust that teachers and principals simply cheat to raise scores.

That happened in 2003 in Chicago, where researchers estimated as many as 5% of elementary school teachers cheated, typically by erasing wrong test answers and substituting correct ones.

Last year, Texas officials investigated nearly 700 schools for cheating, and similar probes have found cheating in California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and elsewhere. In one Texas case in 2005, 22 teachers lost their jobs.

"If you don't think the system's fair, you're more likely to approach it dishonestly," Walsh says.

The Aspen proposal represents only a tentative first step that, for now, could make it fairly easy for teachers to keep their jobs, commission materials suggest.

It averages three years of test data and applies only to teachers who teach three core subjects: English, math and science. (That would apply to most elementary school teachers, who tend to teach all three.) Teachers would only have to stay out of the bottom 25% of teachers in their state to remain in good standing, and they would have seven years to climb out of the bottom quarter. After two years, they'd have to get training, and after three, their principal would have to write a letter notifying parents that their child's teacher is struggling to meet "highly qualified and effective" criteria. After seven years, they'd be barred from teaching in a school receiving federal Title I funds for low-income students.

Tests, states may not jibe

The criteria could make the proposal a hard sell with teachers, who already complain the tests mandated by No Child Left Behind are unfairly labeling thousands of schools as needing improvement.

Antonia Cortese of the American Federation of Teachers says that, in many cases, state standards, which dictate what is taught day to day, do not synchronize with what is on the tests. A recent study by the group found only 11 states had standards aligned with tests required by the law.

Rather than tying jobs to test scores, Cortese says, Congress should work to make the current system "more trustworthy" by simplifying it and by tying tests more closely to state standards.

But what about the teachers who already are experimenting with pay-for-performance plans? Cortese holds out hope for those experiments because teachers chose them, and they weren't thrust upon them by Congress.

"The difference is that teachers agreed through collective bargaining that they'd walk down this route and really explore it," she says. "When they run into a wrinkle, it's an easier thing to adjust than some federal law."

Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, says the notion of a principal sending home a letter telling parents of a teacher's inadequacy is insulting. "What kind of crap is that?"

Weaver says the "effective" teachers' proposal in general would violate local collective bargaining agreements, which in most cases explicitly detail the working conditions and evaluation processes. "The federal government should stay away from determining what goes into a local contract," he says.

'It can't just be teachers'

Like all good first-grade classrooms, nearly everything in Zakia Sims' room is labeled.

At recess, the girls line up on the linoleum behind a worn sticker that reads Queens. The boys stand behind Kings.

The overhead projector boasts a foot-long placard that reads, "Our Overhead Projector." Behind Sims' desk is a tall steel cabinet covered in red contact paper and labeled, "My Professional Corner!"

Many schools encourage teachers to set up these displays to get students interested in going to college, but Sims' is impressive. It's plastered top-to-bottom with laminated copies of her credentials: a bachelor's degree from the University of California-Davis, a master's from Howard and teaching licenses from California and the District of Columbia. There's a D.C. Public Schools "Distinguished Educator" award, and on and on. Just last December, she climbed teaching's Everest, earning the coveted certificate from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

One recent morning, Sims gathers her first-graders in a circle, points to a colorful calendar on the wall and turns to the business at hand: deconstructing February.

"Who can tell me the date for the third Saturday in February?" she asks.

It's a Tuesday morning, and her students have been in school for an hour. But several seem unfocused. "All eyes on the calendar," she exhorts. "I need a date."

The daughter of educators, Sims grew up in San Jose, Calif., and attended private schools. She double-majored in sociology and history at UC-Davis and studied educational supervision and administration at Howard. She went to work at Garrison in 2000.

Most mornings, her students show up early to get the free breakfast offered in the cafeteria, but this morning two boys didn't arrive on time. When a visitor shows up, a volunteer aide is watching the class. After a few moments Sims arrives, a breakfast tray in either hand.

Sims actually welcomes the Aspen idea to judge her by her kids' work — with a caveat: The school board and superintendent had better come up with the money to get her all the supplies and help she needs. And parents had better get their kids to school on time, rested, well dressed and well fed. "All the stakeholders need to be involved," she says. "It can't just be teachers."

Last November, budget cuts forced Garrison to cut one teacher's job. Overnight, Sims' class grew by nearly 50%, from 16 students to 23 — big for first grade.

How did she deal with it?

"You just open your arms up a little bit more," she says.

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