

Statement of Timothy Daly, The New Teacher Project

Testimony Submitted to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

April 15, 2010

Thank you Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi, and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about how the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can focus our schools on giving all students excellent teachers and a world-class education.

As president of The New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization founded by teachers, I am reminded daily of the incredible impact that great teachers have on their students, and how important it is that we find, develop and keep the very best.

The New Teacher Project's mission is to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. Since 1997, we have recruited or trained approximately 37,000 teachers for over two dozen high-need urban and rural districts across the country using rigorous selection and training methods, and published a series of studies on the policy barriers that keep our public schools from building a thriving teacher workforce. In the past four years, we have surveyed more than 30,000 teachers across almost 25 districts on matters ranging from hiring timelines to evaluation systems; their opinions are the basis for many of our research findings and policy recommendations.

In our organization's work with high-poverty school systems across the country, we face stark reminders of the urgency of this effort. America's public schools should function as equalizers, giving poor and minority students a chance to overcome disadvantages and prepare for the future. Yet in districts across the country, our schools have often done little more than systematize failure.

Our education system offers universal access, but falls far short of universal quality – especially when it comes to providing our young people with access to the one resource that makes all the difference: effective teachers. Decades of research prove beyond any doubt that teachers have a greater impact on student academic outcomes than any other school factor. Yet students in urban and high-poverty schools are less likely to have highly effective teachers than their more affluent peers. As a result, extraordinary numbers of students are effectively denied a quality education.

The ramifications are dire. By the end of high school, African-American and Hispanic students read and do math at virtually the same level as 8th grade White students. In the nation's largest cities, where poor and minority students are most concentrated, the chance of graduating high school amounts to little more than a coin toss. And make no mistake – as the recession warps communities and shifts demographic patterns across America, the challenges our cities and rural areas face today will confront our inner-ring suburbs tomorrow.

This shameful achievement gap is, we believe, the greatest civil rights issue of our generation. But, in addition to the tragic moral dimension to this problem, there is an equally compelling economic dimension: a recent study by the leading consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that the economic impact of our failure to properly educate millions of our students is akin to the economic value lost to our nation during the Great Depression.

Yes, it is true that students living in poverty face unique challenges, and it is foolish to ignore the broader needs of all children and their families. But we should not fall prey to the comforting fallacy that we are holding up our end of the bargain when it comes to providing good classroom instruction. We can do far

more. We can get dramatically better results despite the obstacles we confront. How can I be so sure of this? Because there are literally thousands of schools and teachers helping their students achieve at high levels year after year in spite of the challenges of poverty. Failing to demand these results for *all* of our children is an insult to the dignity of poor and working families.

It has become increasingly clear that effective teachers are the best and most practical solution to this quiet crisis. Nothing our schools can do for students matters more than giving them great teachers – not reducing class sizes, not improving curricula, not modernizing classrooms. Nothing. Give the same group of students three excellent teachers in a row instead of three low-performing teachers in a row, and you will put them on a wildly different path – one that leads to the doors of college or a career rather than the hard road of a dropout.

* * * *

Our Challenge: The Widget Effect

Tragically, while we all recognize that different teachers achieve very different results, we treat teachers as if they were all the same – as if one teacher were interchangeable with any other. Our 2009 study, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, documents this widespread problem and its grave implications for teachers and students.

The study examines 12 school districts across four states – districts as diverse as Chicago, Illinois and El Dorado, Arkansas -- and incorporates feedback from over 15,000 teachers and 1,300 principals. It describes how teacher evaluation systems fail to recognize either outstanding or poor teaching, instead lumping all teachers into the same category. Collectively, in the districts studied, less than 1 percent of teachers were officially identified as “unsatisfactory,” even in schools that have been failing students for years.

As the study shows, ignoring the differences between teachers has real consequences. If we don’t know which teachers are doing a great job moving their students ahead academically, which teachers are doing a good job, and which are only doing a fair or poor job, then we have no way of holding on to our best teachers, giving all our teachers the feedback they need to improve, or addressing those few teachers who are actually pulling their students backwards with every class.

And in fact, our study revealed that districts do not use teacher evaluations for decisions about pay, tenure, promotion or development and support. Instead, they tend to use evaluations only to determine whether a teacher is incompetent and should be fired – and they do a poor job even of that. At least half of the 12 districts studied have not dismissed a single tenured teacher for poor performance in the past five years.

These challenges and their repercussions extend to cities and school districts in many of the states represented by members of this committee. For example:

- In **Colorado**, 99 percent of Denver teachers earned a “Satisfactory” rating on their most recent evaluation and areas of improvement were identified for only 40 percent of teachers. The feedback given to the few teachers who have areas of performance identified as in need of improvement is so vague that the most common response when asked which area they were asked to improve was “don’t know.”
- In **Minnesota**, the absence of credible information about teacher performance and the inability to use it in critical decisions means that 98 percent of Minneapolis principals reported having lost a teacher to layoff whom they wanted to keep, almost double the rate in other urban school districts.

- In **Ohio**, not a single teacher in Cincinnati has been rated unsatisfactory in the “Teaching and Learning” category of the district’s evaluation system over the past 5 years. In Akron, where over 90 percent of continuing contract teachers received one of the top two evaluation ratings during the last three years, only 38 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals believe the evaluation process helps teachers improve their instructional performance. Even in Toledo, home to one of the most heralded teacher evaluation and support systems, the Peer Assistance and Review program, just 3 out of 1,105 teachers received an "Unsatisfactory" evaluation rating over a five-year period.
- In **Oregon**, staffing policies that ignore the differences between teachers in Portland Public Schools until recently caused widespread forced-placement and bumping of teachers into and out of their positions. This in turn led to sky-high attrition, with almost 2 in 5 new teachers leaving the district within 2 years – not because they did not like their jobs, but because they had more control over their school placement by leaving Portland than by staying.
- In **Washington**, less than half of the more than 100 administrators surveyed across three school districts are satisfied with the quality of math and science instruction in their schools; in high-poverty schools, that number drops to less than a quarter. Meanwhile, less than a third of the more than 1,000 teachers surveyed in the same districts agree or strongly agree that the evaluation process accurately differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness.

How can this be happening in 2010? And what would lead us to believe that we can improve educational outcomes without changing these unacceptable trends?

The education community is unanimous that the “widget effect” – this tendency to view and treat teachers as interchangeable parts – must become a thing of the past. It disrespects teachers and gambles with the lives of students. Upon the release of our report, both Dennis Van Roekel, President of the National Education Association, and Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, joined Secretary Duncan, governors Bredesen and Ritter, Congressman George Miller, and many others calling for more rigorous evaluation systems that recognize the differences between teachers.

* * * * *

The Role of Federal Policy in Reversing the Widget Effect

Discussions about school reform are filled with talk about delivering on the promise of public education. But treating teachers as interchangeable parts not only demeans the teaching profession; it fulfills the wrong promise. The job of school districts is not simply to put teachers in every classroom, regardless of their effectiveness. It is to deliver an education. What matters is that students learn.

Over the last several years, it has become clear that federal policy plays a huge role in helping districts focus on the right promise. Regardless of its shortcomings, No Child Left Behind changed what it means to be a successful school. For years, a “successful school” in the eyes of state and federal governments was one that complied with the right regulations and checked the right boxes on the right forms. Today, it is almost universally accepted that a successful school is one that actually helps its students learn. The focus now is on educational outcomes, not inputs.

This was a huge conceptual shift. Unfortunately, while it is now a matter of federal policy to define a good school as one that helps children learn, it is not yet a matter of federal policy to define a good teacher in the same way. When it comes to teachers, NCLB continued the focus on qualifications instead of effectiveness – inputs instead of outputs.

For that reason, another conceptual shift is underway. To build a top teaching force, we believe that it is imperative that districts actively manage teacher effectiveness, and make it a focus of policies on recruitment, development, compensation, promotion, and dismissal. To be truly effective, these reforms cannot be incremental and tentative. They must be comprehensive and seismic. They must be transformative. We need to make a dramatic shift from essentially ignoring a teacher's impact on student academic growth to making accurate assessments of that impact the driving factor in every decision that affects the teacher workforce.

Above all, success in the teaching profession must be defined largely in terms of student performance. Student achievement data, though imperfect, can provide strong objective evidence of teachers' abilities to help their students learn. Great teaching means more than a test score, yet even the most inspiring teacher cannot be deemed effective if his or her students show no measurable evidence of growth. So how do we realize this shift, and stop treating teachers like widgets?

First and foremost, we must demand better teacher evaluation systems. We need multi-dimensional teacher evaluation systems that fairly, accurately and credibly measure how well teachers increase student achievement, and we need to use this information as a core factor in decisions about hiring, compensating, developing and dismissing teachers.

It is a disgrace that more has not been done on this issue already. For decades, our teacher evaluation systems have relied on rote observations and checklists of teacher behaviors and other factors – such as classroom neatness – that have little or nothing to do with student outcomes. But what makes teachers great is not the orderliness of their bulletin boards, the impressiveness of their credentials, or even their years of experience; it is their consistent ability to advance student learning.

How we measure a teacher's impact on student academic growth will vary. For some teachers, value-added models based on standardized test scores will provide one useful source of information, particularly when multiple years of data show consistently outstanding or poor performance. For most teachers, however, we have to create other measures of their impact on academic growth, such as periodic examinations of student work according to standard rubrics and district- or school-designed assessment results.

But no matter which tools we use, we must move beyond the tired arguments about whether teachers need more accountability or more support. We know that they need both, and we can only provide what teachers need if we can genuinely assess their performance and put this information to use.

As a nation, we are poised at a unique moment of opportunity for real education reform. National policies that place a sharp focus on teacher effectiveness have the potential to reverse the "widget effect" crippling our school systems. We envision a future in which the institutions, policies and systems that are chiefly responsible for putting a quality teacher into every classroom are tightly aligned to just that objective.

Now more than ever, we have evidence that this evolution is possible. In fact, we have made more progress over the last year than we have in decades.

In the **Race to the Top** competition – arguably one of the most visionary education reform initiatives in our nation's history – we have a powerful example of how carefully leveraged funding can jumpstart the engines of change. Even before a single dollar was awarded, 16 states had enacted legislative or regulatory reforms to better align themselves with the administration's priorities. Top-scoring states, including the winners, did well in part because they successfully overhauled their outdated teacher evaluation policies, moving to new systems that allow schools to measure and respond to differences in

teacher effectiveness more accurately than ever. These states are reversing the widget effect before our very eyes. It is worth noting that though this program is relatively modest in size, the fact that it is a competitive grant program with rigorous criteria focused on teacher and school leader effectiveness is producing the kind of deep reform that an incremental increase in formula funding never will.

In the schools just beyond these chambers, we have another powerful example of the possibility of change. Last week, following more than two years of difficult negotiations, the **DC Public Schools** and the Washington Teachers Union signed what is arguably the most progressive collective bargaining agreement in the country. This contract would not only make DC teachers among the highest-paid in the nation, it would also empower schools to use evaluation data to assemble strong instructional teams, help all teachers do their best work, retain the best teachers, and remove persistently ineffective teachers. Chancellor Michelle Rhee, WTU President George Parker, and AFT President Randi Weingarten together demonstrated that bold reforms are possible, and that they can benefit both students and teachers. We commend them all for their vision and perseverance.

* * * *

Recommendations for ESEA Reauthorization

Today, we find ourselves at a tipping point. We have broad agreement that doing more of the same will not suffice. We have models and momentum in the form of real changes that affect real schools and students. And now, as we look ahead to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we have a rare opportunity to align federal policy and spending with the goal of providing every child with effective teachers.

Put simply, ESEA can have the greatest impact if it is focused sharply on supporting effective teaching. In the past, states and school districts have largely failed to acknowledge or act on differences in teacher effectiveness. Federal policy should spur them to develop policies that reflect the variation in teacher effectiveness and to use targeted strategies to recognize and reward outstanding teachers, provide useful support and development to all teachers, and take action when it becomes clear that a teacher is simply not up to the job. This is especially important for high-poverty schools, which historically have faced greater challenges in attracting and keeping excellent teachers for students who start out at a disadvantage.

More nuanced and accurate teacher evaluation systems will not only help teachers do their jobs better; they will also enable us to map the geographies of teacher effectiveness in our schools. These data will expose where our most and least effective teachers are working, so that we can redress inequities in teacher distribution. They will shine a light on districts and schools that are not doing anything about poor performance, or that are not doing enough to keep their best teachers. We will begin to see where our most effective teachers are coming from, so that we can build on best practices in teacher preparation, and what professional development seems to make good teachers better, so that districts stop wasting millions on one-size-fits-all support that teachers find irrelevant. This information is fundamentally empowering, and urgently needed.

Congress can help reverse the widget effect through the ESEA reauthorization process. Specifically, we recommend the following:

(1) Support competitive funding programs: The administration's blueprint for ESEA reauthorization funds bedrock formula programs such as Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) at healthy levels, but it also calls for new funding to support competitive grant programs such as Race to the Top and the Investing in Innovation fund. Competitive programs allow the Department of Education to leverage federal funding for maximum impact, to power innovation, and to focus federal

dollars on the highest-need schools and students. We believe that these initiatives are essential if we want to do more than stay on the same path we find ourselves on today.

As we have already discussed, the Race to the Top competition provides an excellent case study in how competitive funding can catalyze change for the benefit of students and teachers nationwide. In only about a year's time, the competition has sparked a national dialogue on education reform, provided the impetus for states to resolve contentious disputes and untangle legislative logjams, and unleashed a torrent of new ideas about how to improve our schools.

Moreover, it is undeniable that Race to the Top has already produced significant results, with many states having lifted charter school caps that have stifled innovation, or adopted teacher evaluation systems that align with student outcomes so we can begin to differentiate great teachers from good, good from fair, and fair from poor, and take action based on this critical information. The first-round winners, Delaware and Tennessee, will enter the coming school year with an improved policy infrastructure. So too will a number of other states vying for funding in the second round, among them Louisiana, Florida, Rhode Island, Illinois, Georgia, and California. The ramifications for students are vast.

Race to the Top is not perfect; just last week, our organization published an analysis criticizing elements of its scoring process. But it is well within the administration's power to correct the deficiencies we have identified before the second round of winners are selected and announced, and overall the competition is admirably focused, transparent and thoughtfully structured. It would be a great shame if this initiative, which has already achieved so much in so little time, were not sustained.

Likewise, it would be folly to require that all new funding be routed into formula programs, where its impact would inevitably be diluted. To accelerate change and put our students back on track to lead the world academically, we need an education policy with more than just one gear. It is essential that Race to the Top and competitive grant programs like it are continued as a supplement to robust Title I and IDEA funding so that districts have both the stability in formula funding and the encouragement and support for the dramatic reform efforts that we desperately need.

(2) Use strategic preconditions to advance reform: Existing formula programs allocate billions of dollars to school districts and states nationwide. By tying this funding to reasonable reform preconditions or eligibility requirements, Congress could ensure that it not only meets the needs of school districts that have come to count on it, but also drives change.

For example, states might be required to institute more rigorous and outcomes-based teacher evaluation systems in order to receive Title II funding, as the administration's budget proposes. Such a requirement would spur states to take action where they would not otherwise. A similar result could be achieved by requiring clear reporting of specific information as a precondition for funding; for instance, mandating that states and school districts report the number and percentage of teachers rated "highly effective," "effective," "developing" and "ineffective" each year, or the percentage of high-need students taught by highly effective and effective teachers, compared to other students.

In many cases, greater outcomes will result from mandating the public reporting of teacher effectiveness data rather than mandating specific strategies that states or districts must employ. Thoughtfully structured preconditions can bring this information to the surface.

(3) Focus on student academic outcomes: Taxpayer money goes to waste when it funds programs that have little or no impact on student learning. Especially in the current economic climate, it is crucial that federal funding is spent wisely. For this reason, Congress should hold states and school districts accountable for demonstrating the effectiveness of their strategies.

Funding through programs like Title II, which is explicitly intended to increase student achievement by improving teacher and principal quality, should not be spent on strategies that do not have a demonstrably positive impact on teacher effectiveness or student academic growth. For instance, more than a third of all Title II funding (39%) is spent on professional development for teachers – a massive outlay of this funding. However, there is no requirement that professional development provided through Title II funds be linked to any assessment of a teacher’s skills, or that districts show evidence of improvement after a teacher has received development.

In short, there is almost no way of showing that these investments of hundreds of millions of dollars have any positive outcomes for teachers or students. It should come as no surprise that the professional development that school districts are able to offer is notoriously unhelpful, and empirical evidence of its effectiveness improving student achievement is scant. This use of funding perpetuates the widget effect by treating teachers as interchangeable components whose individual professional needs are not relevant, not considered and not met. By establishing accountability structures that focus states and school districts on the results of their strategies on student achievement, Congress can facilitate the continuing shift from inputs to outcomes and encourage schools to seek out and redirect funding to proven programs and strategies.

* * * *

Doing the Right Thing at a Difficult Time

Now, some will claim that the changes I have urged you to consider today are too risky, too untimely, too fast.

You are sure to hear that now is not the time to dedicate funding to competitive grant programs, for example, when the nation’s economy is so fragile. Yet never has the need for innovation been greater. The recession that continues to send shockwaves throughout the country is only a harbinger of difficult times to come if we keep failing to prepare our students to be successful in the 21st century and the global economy.

Furthermore, your leadership and that of the Obama Administration has already resulted in an unprecedented infusion of resources for our school districts in the past fiscal year. The \$100 billion in stimulus funding provided to states and districts saved literally hundreds of thousands of jobs in education and cushioned the blow of the recession on our schools – and it was allocated to states primarily in formula grants. Title I funding received a \$10 billion boost. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act got \$12.2 billion, and \$3 billion went to school improvement grants. Fully \$39.8 billion came in the form of State Fiscal Stabilization Fund education dollars.

The reality is that federal funding will not and cannot replace state and local resources over the long term. But federal funding of Title I and IDEA can provide stability while Race to the Top and other competitive grant programs provide the impetus for change in states and districts that are willing to undertake reform. Events over the past six months tell us that, even in the midst of the worst fiscal crisis since the Great Depression, there are states and districts that are willing to undertake dramatic change even as they deal with painful budget reductions. Just look at the legislation passed on teacher evaluation in states like California, Washington, Michigan, Tennessee and Illinois, and the new policies on teacher layoffs in Indianapolis and Arizona. Now more than ever we have to ensure we spend smart and on high-impact strategies by supporting the important work going on at the state and local levels.

Let me be clear: we cannot expect different outcomes if we continue doing the same thing. Over the last 40 years, formula spending has nearly doubled in inflation-adjusted dollars, yet student achievement in reading, math and science has been flat. Competitive funding programs offer us a way to incentivize states and school districts to do things differently, and to get different results.

You are also sure to hear that focusing so intently on teacher effectiveness blames teachers for our schools' failures. But this is not about assigning blame; it is about finding a new way forward.

Decades of research tell us that teachers matter most. Encouraging states and school districts to align their policies and practices with the prime objective of maximizing teacher effectiveness is about restoring the primacy of teaching in our education system, and giving teachers the information and support they need to grow and improve as professionals. It's about holding teachers accountable, but also holding everyone around teachers accountable for giving them the support they need to do their jobs, from principals to Human Resources staff to superintendents. The administration's blueprint for ESEA reauthorization makes clear that all educators must be accountable for performance – not just teachers.

What we need are school systems that no longer take teachers for granted, but that recognize teachers' singularly important role in improving student achievement and do everything possible to ensure they can fulfill this role effectively. Our goal is not to blame teachers but to elevate them.

Finally, you are sure to hear that these strategies are unproven and should be undertaken only in cautious, limited ways, if at all. We believe, however, that our nation's shameful legacy of failure should shift the burden of proof. Supporters of the status quo should be asked to make the case that their approach should prevail over new ideas and strategies that promise better outcomes for our children. The most irresponsible gamble in education is not trying new and unproven strategies, but continuing to do more of what has resulted in our nation being leapfrogged by our international competitors in Asia and Europe, and suffering from the achievement gap that robs so many children of a fair shot at success in life.

* * * *

In closing, at this time of unprecedented challenges, we have an unprecedented opportunity and a moral obligation to finally make the difficult choices that will ensure that all of our children have great teachers. This is no time for incremental changes or half measures; it's time to make teacher effectiveness matter. We must come together to recognize that the key to providing all our children with the education they need is to provide them with the teachers they deserve. And we must commit ourselves to the hard work that this task requires.

Thank you very much for your attention to this extraordinarily important issue, and for your time today. I look forward to your questions.