

May 5, 2015

To: Parties

From: Bill Hawley

Re: The Use of Student Surveys in Teacher Evaluation

Perhaps the most contentious issue confronting the teacher education evaluation process in TUSD is what weight should be given to the student survey. The Tucson Education Association would like the weight to be zero; the joint TUSD-DEA committee has agreed to a weight of 3%.

Today, I had a useful (for me) discussion with Frances Banales, the Executive Director of the TEA about this issue. I want to share what I took away from that conversation.

Why should student surveys be used at all? There is a considerable body of literature indicating what common sense tells us-- teachers affect student learning not only by how well they know their subject and their effective use of a repertoire of instructional strategies but by how well they know their students, care for them, motivate them, and provide support--both cognitive and emotional. This reality is matched by growing evidence from research on how people learn about the interrelationship between cognitive development and social and emotional capacities to learn. For example, when students of color experience stereotype threat and underperform, relatively simple actions by *trusted* teachers who provide encouragement and boost students' academic self-confidence can mitigate this impediment to achievement.

So how can we measure what some people call the "affective" dimensions of teaching? As with most measures of human behavior, multiple measures are desirable. But, let us compare the observation of teacher behavior and evidence from a student survey. Among the teacher behaviors that almost all studies of effective teaching identify are:

1. Teachers have high expectations for students.
2. Teachers provide focused support for struggling students.

Observational instruments typically describe these behaviors as I have stated them above. In the Districts teacher evaluation plan, these behaviors of teachers in a middle school would be measured by a school principal (or assistant principal) who visits the classrooms of each of 20-30 teachers a few times a year for perhaps an hour in which she is to rate these teachers on many dozens of teacher behaviors. During these evaluation sessions, the principal has no idea which students need extra support and the lessons being taught deal with a range of topics. The principal will have had significantly less training on effective instruction than the teachers themselves and is likely to have taught subjects different from those being taught in the classroom during the observation.

The student survey addresses the two teacher behaviors of interest by asking the student to rate the teacher with respect to statements such as these:

1. My teacher pushes me to achieve at high levels.
2. My teacher provides me the support I need when I am having difficulty with a problem I'm being asked to solve.

It seems reasonable to include that the students assessment of whether teachers hold high expectations and provide them support to achieve at high levels will be the more accurate measure of this critically important set of teacher behaviors. The TUSD-DEA committee wants principals' evaluation to count 20 times more than the assessment by students.

There little research on what the right weight should be among the different elements of the teacher evaluation process. Experts I have talked vary with the highest estimate being 40 percent. I have said that I believe that the weight for student survey should be 17%. The TEA says that it has information that no district weighs student surveys more than 10% of the total.

So, I am prepared to propose that we start with the 10% number and that at the end of the year we can examine how the student survey data compares to other sources of information including, those not now used in the evaluation process, such as student absenteeism. We can also examine the coherence of student response and whether this varies significantly by the characteristics of schools.

The TEA is apparently willing to undertake such an analysis of student survey results but wants the initial weight to be set at no more than 3% and preferably zero.

Why not set the initial weight at 3%? First, once 3% is set it will be difficult to move it upward. Second, this sends a disturbing message about whether the experiences of TUSD students should be taken seriously. Third, student surveys are the best ways to assess some kinds of teacher behaviors.

Let me note that culturally responsive pedagogy is a central component of the USP. Among its fundamental premises is that effective teaching requires that teachers use their knowledge of students' prior learning and lived experiences to shape their instruction and their other interactions with students. Students are in the best position to know whether teachers are practicing culturally responsive pedagogy. For example, who is in a better position to know whether teachers are responsive to and respectful of students' race, ethnicity, culture and language facility?

Finally, because the entire evaluation process is new and professional development has not been tied directly to the teacher evaluation instrument, I believe that, if possible, the purposes of evaluation should be formative. This would mean that teachers would not lose their jobs because of low ratings on any of the measures used in the coming year. Teachers who appear to be performing below acceptable levels would be referred to the processes established by the USP for struggling teachers.