



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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## The Great Distraction of Teacher Evaluation

By UCLA IDEA

This week, the 3.2 million-member National Education Association voted to accept, in principle, the inclusion of test scores in teacher evaluations. The NEA cautioned that currently available tests are too flawed to use for evaluation purposes and the union pledged to help create better student assessments.

The NEA decision likely reflects an effort to remain relevant in the national discussion about school reform and not fall victim to powerful campaigns that accuse teachers of being opposed to reform. An Illinois chapter president called the vote a chance to “get off of defense and start playing offense.” He added: “It is time for us to talk about what makes for effective teaching and teacher evaluation.”

This new position on teacher evaluations is controversial among teachers. Although some do believe that student tests give leverage to inform and motivate teachers while ridding the profession of “bad apples,” there is little evidence that using student tests to evaluate teachers is an effective strategy for building a robust and highly effective teacher workforce.

Furthermore, the concentration of political and policy attention lavished on teacher evaluation comprises a substantial “opportunity cost”; that is, other proven ways to strengthen the current teacher pool and future profession are neglected while national debate is focused on sorting teachers through high-stakes testing.

If not by student testing, what else can assure accountability and drive large-scale, sustainable upgrades to the teacher workforce? In a recent report, Frank Adamson and Linda Darling-Hammond outline and elaborate basic steps—many of which begin by addressing the huge inequalities in resources available across U.S. schools. Policy recommendations supported by a large body of research include:

- Increase and equalize salaries;
- Improve teacher preparation, licensing standards, evaluation for teachers and school leaders, and professional development;
- Develop high-quality mentoring and performance-based induction systems to improve beginning-teacher retention rates and raise effectiveness.

These and other neglected approaches are *not* experimental. They are at the core of other high-achieving countries' schooling systems that produce student outcomes the U.S. envies. Let's get beyond distractions and work on what really matters.

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