

Why not teacher evaluations by students?

By: Nat Hentoff – April 17, 2013

As clashes continue between teachers' unions and local and state legislatures concerning evaluations of teachers to determine if they are to stay employed, I don't hear either side reacting to what students feel about how they are being taught. This includes the students themselves.

Such evaluations could and should ask students what they think being in school is going to mean for their futures. Teachers have their missions. But what are these students' missions beyond college degrees?

Accordingly, to get teacher evaluations, students ought to reveal more about their own real-life, real-time selves in a preparatory dialogue with the people recording their judgments. These people should ask the students such questions as:

- What do you most want to learn about, and why?
- Have any of your teachers gotten you interested, even excited about subjects or issues you hadn't previously thought about? If any did, how did they do that?
- How well do your teachers know each of you outside of class?
- What do you care about and do outside of this school?
- What was your life like before you ever came to school?

I would urge the people talking to the students to ask them to read the teacher-challenging advice Education Week Teacher's teaching coach David Ginsburg offers ("Assess All Students Before Assisting Any Students," Ginsburg, June 4, 2011).

He evaluates teachers at work by "when you can see sooner rather than later what students are struggling with and why they're struggling with it. It's only then that you can provide timely, differentiated feedback and remediation."

What happens in many schools, Ginsburg points out, is that "teachers often miss the chance to do this because they're assisting a few students at the expense of assessing all students. At the end of typical math lessons, for example, teachers assign practice problems for students to try on their own ... They then promptly help the first student whose hand shoots up. After two, three and sometimes five or more minutes, they finally move on to another student.

"Many students, meanwhile, sit idly as they wait their turn for the teacher's help. Some call out until the teacher signals or says, 'One minute.' Others raise their hands for

several minutes, switching arms every so often to avoid fatigue. But eventually the bell rings or kids give up — and often act up.

“And because they never get the help they need with class work, they’re unable to successfully complete homework.”

I ask you, the readers, how many times did you experience this unavailability of teachers when you were students?

Douglas Ginsburg continues: “Teachers prematurely conclude what the class as a whole does or doesn’t understand (and why they don’t understand something) based on what they’ve seen or heard from just a few students.”

Ginsburg is focusing on actual human teachers who interact with human students in the classroom — not the rapidly increasing “online” teaching and learning, where a human teacher may not be in a classroom and where students can be home interacting online with a robotlike digital teacher.

Returning to the in-person situations of many schools, Ginsburg has excellent advice that may seem revolutionary to some “advanced” digital education reformers:

“Assign students to mixed-ability groups, where they work at their own pace but can ask each other for help as necessary. Think of this as ‘Independent and Interdependent Practice’ rather than ‘Independent Practice.’”

What is badly and urgently needed in so many schools is for students to learn critical thinking like Ginsburg’s — something that will be necessary for the rest of their lives.

Meanwhile, there is still an insistence in far too many cities, states and, to some extent, the Department of Education that collective standardized testing of students’ abilities is THE way to evaluate teachers as well as students.

See the following critical thinking of Education Week Teacher’s Susan Graham, in which she describes collective, standardized testing evaluations:

“I understand the necessity, but it is a strange sort of pantomime game where we say: ‘I want to know what you know, but you have to tell me without speaking. No questions from you, no answers from me, no comments from either of us ...’

“What bothers me even more is that we’ve predetermined what the answers should be. It seems we insist that they answer in silence because the only answers we are interested in are the ones we’ve provided. We really don’t seem to be very interested in what they think. Or how they think” (“The Sound of Silence,” edweek.org, Graham, May 30, 2011).

Already, there is much bristlingly discordant interest in the 2016 elections around the nation. Who in the White House and Congress will shape our future health care, availability of jobs and security against increasingly diverse murderous enemies?

The citizenry should realize that these are the elected officials responsible for assuring students a meaningful, productive public school education. But we must keep in mind

that so many teachers do not explain how to deepen our students' independent critical thinking, nor do they learn who each student actually is.