

# **NEW YORK POST**

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## *Poor measures? choice is the answer*

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A lot of teeth are gnashing right now over the release of performance evaluations for roughly 18,000 city public-school teachers. And there should be: While it's absolutely necessary to assess the people to whom we entrust our children, no single metric can capture nearly all that goes into education. But, then, this is what you get when you put government in charge.

The No. 1 tooth-gnasher is surely United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew, who says, "The Department of Education should be ashamed of itself. It has combined bad tests, a flawed formula and incorrect data to mislead tens of thousands of parents about their children's teachers."

And Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott? He's warning that the information "is old data and . . . just one piece of information."

But if everyone is so dissatisfied, why is the data being put out there? Yes, because a court said it must be, after a freedom-of-information battle waged by The Post and other media groups. But it goes deeper than that.

Because of the "public" in "public schools," what goes on with every teacher is of public concern. Moreover, the public pays the bills, so it owns the data. So, though it might make little sense to apply these results to decisions about any teacher, the public has every right to *see* them.

Unfortunately, performance assessments in government-run systems are doomed to be blunt instruments. Until recently, they were blunt in a way highly favorable to school employees: Basically, everyone was judged "satisfactory." Given the poor performance of many students in city schools, that was pretty hard to accept. But efforts to move away from that haven't been much sharper.

On a national basis, No Child Left Behind has been judging schools simply on how many kids are “proficient” in reading and mathematics. This largely ignores the hugely varying challenges faced by individual children and communities, and the progress they’ve made.

To escape that, the move has been toward “value-added assessment” in which schools, districts and teachers are judged on how much progress students under their tutelage make. The city’s evaluations are such measures, with added efforts to account for such factors as poverty — an improvement over NCLB.

Yet the system is still much more sledgehammer than scalpel. It can’t, for instance, account for the influence of non-math or reading teachers on math and reading scores.

It also suffers from two ills that lie at the heart of test-based accountability: 1) Far more than what can be easily tested goes into education — critical thinking, social skills, inculcation of values, etc. And 2) a test can be very limited even on the subject it’s meant to measure — you could write a math test without long-division, or an English exam without Shakespeare.

So any top-down evaluation system will be a sledgehammer, and a government can have only one. Yet there is no single answer for how best to educate all children.

What’s the solution? Educational freedom, in which parents control funding and educators are free to establish schools in which they teach as they see fit.

Rather than students being judged on a single test, schools would choose their own assessments. Rather than one curriculum for all, educators would control content themselves. Rather than one evaluation metric being forced on all teachers, schools would try different methods. And rather than being held accountable to bureaucracies, educators would be held accountable by having to attract and satisfy the parents and diverse children they’re supposed to serve.

Unfortunately, here’s where it becomes tough to sympathize with union officials. Though they rightly decry the failings of top-down evaluations, they even more vociferously fight any form of school choice. Apparently, it’s more important to maintain their monopoly than go to the system that makes the most educational sense.

As long as they do that, they’ll keep getting crummy evaluation systems — and the gnashing of teeth will continue.

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