

Opinion

Quality Teaching & “Waiting for Superman”

by Ralph J Massey

The Tribune described the recent visit of Geoffrey Canada, the star of the documentary “Waiting for Superman” and the founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a monumental accomplishment in urban America.

The article covered the broad outline of his message; but...understandably...did not include the views of Dr. Eric A Hanushek on the economic value of quality teaching and his simple policy recommendation that were in the film.

Knowns and Unknowns

Although, an incredible amount of research has been done on learning, much has been false or misleading. Eric Hanushek contends that teachers are important; and, in fact, no other element in the education equation rivals it in importance.

But...teachers vary greatly in their ability to impart knowledge and skills to students. “The magnitude of differences is truly large, with some teachers producing one and a half years of gain in achievement in an academic year while others with equivalent students produce only a one-half year gain.” Briefly stated...with the same students some teachers are three times more productive.

However, at this point in time he contends that we don’t know what type of person will be a highly productive teacher in the classroom. Even after hundreds of studies, social scientists like Hanushek, have not identified a statistically valid causal relationship between “specific teacher characteristics” and the likely gains teachers will “produce” in student achievement.

Specifically...

- Class size reduction does not affect student achievement except for the very earliest grades, “and then the expected results are small”.
- Masters degrees “bear no consistent relationship with student achievement” as does experience in the classroom after the first few years on the job.

- “Conventional teacher certification requirements, source of teaching, or salary level are not systematically related to the amount of learning that goes on in the classroom.”
- “Even very intensive professional development to help teachers become more effective after they are already in the classroom has shown little impact on student achievement.”

The above policies are the ones traditionally employed.

The social scientist in this case concentrates on what he knows...namely, that poor teachers can inflict a near permanent learning impairment on their students and this impairment will persist throughout their lifetime. This adversely affects their likely earnings, their economic contribution to the nation and the welfare of the nation itself.

The author then did a “what if” exercise, a bit of “economic modeling”. He started with -

- What is known about the relationship between cognitive skills and earnings; and then asked -
- “What if a series of outstanding teachers had a class of students through the primary and secondary school years?” ...and... “What would be the aggregate lifetime earnings of this lucky group relative to a similar class that had uniformly poor teachers?”
- The difference is enormous...approximately \$1.4 million in today’s dollars for a class of 30 students (approximately \$467,000 of extra income per student) and significantly less for much smaller classes. Hanushek contends that these future economic gains should be considered as the economic value of quality teachers.

Many will be skeptical of the Doctor’s mathematical correlations and prefer anecdotal evidence, “gut feel” and traditional solutions. However, this at best provides a false comfort to a country like the Bahamas in today’s global economy.

Eric Hanushek’s bottom line in *Waiting for Superman* is -

- **Substantial economic gains can be realized by identifying the most ineffective teachers and moving them out of the classroom.**

Elsewhere he further states that -

- **The more effective teachers should be assigned larger classes and the less effective smaller ones.**
- **If teacher salaries reflected teacher effectiveness more closely, then much higher salaries would be economically justified.**
- **“Without that linkage, we should expect our schools to underperform, and we might also expect teacher salaries to lag those in the general labor market.”**

A Courageous Strategy

The Bahamas is not starting from scratch. It does have good teachers; and it has a student testing and evaluation system with decades of experience. It must be put that system on

steroids...changes have to be made so that it will track student achievement year by year and appropriately relate good student performance to specific teachers. The results must have consequences; and **“moving the less effective teachers out of the classroom”** is a courageous strategy that needs to be implemented.

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Word Count: 730