Teacher Effectiveness in Classroom Unrelated to the College Teacher Attended

Harvard study also finds that increases in teacher effectiveness often peak after ten years of experience

CAMBRIDGE, MA – A new study finds that a teacher’s effectiveness at lifting student performance in reading and math is unrelated to the preparation teachers have received, whether it is the college they attended, or whether they received a major in education, or earned a master’s degree. For example, teachers that attended the elite University of Florida were no more effective at raising their students’ academic performance than graduates of Florida’s less selective institutions of higher learning.

Teachers do become more effective with a few years of teaching experience, but in elementary math and middle school reading and math no gains—and some declines—in effectiveness appear in the second decade after a teacher has begun teaching. Gains in effectiveness in elementary reading are detected after ten years, however. Teachers are currently paid based on their years of experience. For example, a Miami teacher with a bachelor’s degree and 21 years of experience earns 77 percent more than a beginning teacher and 62 percent more than a teacher with ten years of experience.

Teachers receive extra compensation if they have a master’s diploma, but the study found that those with that diploma were no more effective in the classroom than those who did not have the diploma.

The study, which will be presented at the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) conference “Merit Pay: Will It Work? Is It Politically Viable?” was conducted by Matthew M. Chingos, a research fellow at PEPG, and PEPG Director Paul E. Peterson. The authors analyzed student-level data provided by the Florida Department of Education covering students in grades four through eight who took the state reading and math tests between 2002 and 2007. Teacher effectiveness was measured by their impact on their students’ test scores, taking into account a wide variety of student, classroom, school, and, where appropriate, teacher characteristics.

“These findings cast doubt on the wisdom of teacher selection policies, which emphasize coursework in a school of education,” Chingos said, “as we found that not a single public university in the state of Florida produces noticeably better teachers, and non-education majors performed just as well in the classroom as education majors.”

The study also found that teachers who were certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards were more effective than other teachers. Florida provides an annual bonus for these teachers.

“Our results add to an emerging research consensus that current teacher compensation policies are sorely in need of revision,” added Peterson. Paper is available at:
www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/MeritPayPapers/Chingos_Peterson_10-08.pdf