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## **Addressing the Teacher-Quality Gap before Making the Hiring Decision**

**Ebbie Parsons III, EdD**

*Managing Partner, Yardstick Learning*

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## **Addressing the Teacher-Quality Gap before Making the Hiring Decision**

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The landscape of K-12 education in the United States has faced tremendous scrutiny since the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation just a decade ago. While many have argued either in support of or against NCLB, it is fair to state that this was the first opportunity to publicly quantify how all American students perform on a somewhat standardized basis. The results of these findings may not have been a surprise to most educators, but it is still unnerving to see the educational disparities that exist in this country between the affluent and distressed, largely minority, communities.

Researchers and practitioners alike recognize the tremendous challenges that plague impoverished communities, but have focused their attention on improving areas that they believe are much more within their control, mainly teacher effectiveness. According to Amrein-Beardsley (2008) NCLB's implementation led to researchers' and statisticians' exploration of alternative analytical methods to incorporate more objective measures of student learning. This was done in order to document students' academic progress over time and to measure teacher effectiveness. Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have shown their ability to make tremendous strides when a highly-effective teacher teaches them. The influence that a single teacher has on the educational lifespan of a child can be insurmountable, should that teacher be ineffective, while a phenomenal teacher could catapult that same student to lasting success. Given the overwhelming agreement on the importance

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of ensuring that ALL children have access to an amazing teacher, why have we been unable to agree on a definition of what it means to be a highly effective teacher and how this should be measured?

I attempted to answer this very question in my doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania. As stated in the abstract:

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to investigate the relationships between teacher characteristics and value-added to student achievement as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). . . The results of the study identified several statistically significant correlations between several teacher characteristics and value-added to student achievement, including teacher attitudes and beliefs and teaching experience. The results of this study show that indicators of teacher preparation and qualifications do not predict value-added, but teacher experience and several teacher attitudes and beliefs are significant predictors of teacher value-added to student performance. (Parsons, 2011)

This mixed methods study has garnered tremendous interest from researchers interested in developing a Common Core (of sorts) definition of a highly effective teacher. The rationale for a universal definition of a strong teacher is directly aligned to the reasoning behind the development of the Common Core curriculum for K-12 students across the nation. The Common Core is the secret sauce that was missing in the first iteration of NCLB. When NCLB was implemented, states had the right to define success independently of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and therefore, proficient in one state could be significantly different than proficiency in others. This led to distrust, confusion, and staunch opposition to the entire NCLB

legislation. The Common Core curriculum is the first attempt to standardize curriculum across all states so that student standards are clearly defined regardless of where s/he took the assessment. To date, “forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards” (Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2013). The Mission of the Common Core is to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. The above may have been a long-winded, but necessary justification, for why we must clearly define teacher effectiveness considering that we are now implementing a national standard on student effectiveness.

Teachers are the backbone of our society. Children often spend more time in the classroom with their peers and their teachers than they do with their own families during the school year. In order for our nation’s greatest asset, our children, to successfully navigate an amorphous global society, we must ensure that the absolute best teachers adequately prepare them for life. The findings from my research leveraged a recognizable, nationally normed assessment, the ITBS, administered across multiple states and identified specific traits of highly effective teachers. These findings coupled with research on teaching experience (Decker, Glazerman and Mayer, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, O’Brien and Rivkin, 2005; Rogoff, 2006) and studies on teacher efficacy (Barnyark and McNelly’s, 2009) are the building blocks for the development of the Common Core for teacher effectiveness. This exercise may seem like a daunting and impossible task to complete but it is done informally by parents,

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principals, and school administrators every day. When a parent calls in every favor imaginable to ensure that her son is placed in Mrs. Smith's 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, or when another parent refuses to place his daughter in Mr. Ryan's 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, they are inherently making these decisions based on their perceptions of teacher effectiveness. Their rationale may not be rooted in quantitative research data, but parents are still utilizing their own research which clearly has significant validity. Why not arm these parents with an opportunity to choose a teacher that is statistically more likely to better serve her/his child based on their child's own specific needs rather than not provide parents with access to this information at all?

Big Data is the buzzword that has been fueling the business community for several years now. However, the data that businesses utilize to gain consumer insights pales in comparison to the data that schools have accessible to them about their own teachers and students. It's my firm opinion that we've consciously avoided the push to truly make data-driven decisions on teacher hiring and teacher effectiveness. If our educational system is serious about restoring our position in the global landscape, then we must leverage the data that we have available to us to push for a national definition on what it means to be a highly effective teacher.

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**Ebbie Parsons, III** currently serves as the Managing Partner of Yardstick Learning, a national Management Consulting firm operating in eleven states, which specializes in improving the organizational effectiveness of mission-driven organizations. Prior to Yardstick, Parsons served as the COO of the nation's third largest Charter Management Organization, Mosaica

Education, Inc. Parsons' professional experience also includes serving as the COO of Hartford Public Schools and in Operations Management roles at Medtronic, Intel, and American Express.

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