



REVIEW OF *AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE FOR ALL*

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Summary of Review

This report from a think tank called Public Impact begins with two unsupported premises: that only one in four teachers is good enough to help close achievement gaps, and that current efforts to recruit and retain excellent teachers are inadequate. To allow existing excellent teachers to reach more students and to develop excellence in their colleagues, it proposes a model for restructuring teaching. Hierarchically arranged teaching teams would rely on fewer teachers but more paraprofessionals, more digital instruction, longer work hours, and some larger classes. Teacher salaries would increase. However, while the report targets teacher excellence, it offers no specific means of identifying and assessing that quality. In addition, the report does not take into account relevant research literature in key areas, including teacher assessment, multiple influences on student achievement, digital instruction, teacher burnout, and teacher attrition. Overall, the proposal is based on unsupported assumptions, assertions and projections—wishes and beliefs that if the approach were put into practice, it would somehow play out to the benefit of students. Lacking an empirical base, the report is not a useful guide for policy.

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REVIEW OF AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE FOR ALL

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I. Introduction

Public Impact, a North Carolina consulting firm that promotes school turnarounds, charter schools, and market-based education reforms, has issued several publications promoting restructuring of the teaching profession as a way to provide excellent teachers for all students.¹ As part of this advocacy, Public Impact’s co-directors, Emily Ayscue Hassel and Bryan C. Hassel, have called on the federal government to redirect Title I and Title II funds to support the expanded use of technology that is key to their proposals. They also call for new legislation designating access to “excellent teachers” as a “civil right” in order to force schools’ compliance.²

Given calls for such large-scale legislative intervention, and given growing national attention,³ a close look at the rationale for the plan and evidence for its claims is timely. This review examines the recently updated foundational document for the model, *An Opportunity Culture for All*, authored by the Hassels.⁴

The report suggests that within existing budgets, excellent teachers might reach more students through new types of team-based teaching positions, increased use of paraprofessionals, and increased reliance on technology. It also suggests that teacher salaries might rise as high as six figures through savings from restructured staffing and other reallocations. In addition, because the report implicitly defines excellent teachers as those producing greater gains on value-added models of test results than their less-able peers, it asserts that the new structure will close achievement gaps.

As discussed below, this model assumes that placing a single excellent teacher in charge of a team provides excellent teaching to the many individual students whom the team serves. It does not, however, acknowledge that even excellent teachers have limited capacity, and it does not acknowledge who (or what technology) primarily provides instruction to students.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report suggests that a current shortage of excellent teachers can be remedied through “making teaching a highly paid, high-impact profession,” a condition referred to as “an

opportunity culture” (p. 1). Three important features of such a culture are: high selectivity about who may enter and stay in teaching, career advancement possibilities in a team-teaching environment, and much higher pay (p. 1).

At the heart of the model are multi-classroom, hierarchical teaching teams. In this configuration, a lead teacher assumes responsibility for the achievement of all students taught by the team. The lead teacher has the authority to assign roles to paraprofessionals and other teachers on the team and has responsibility for the professional development of

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less-skilled teachers. Paraprofessionals and digital instruction routinely replace a portion of traditional teacher activity, with the intention of freeing time for teachers to instruct greater numbers of students and engage in team activities, all while improving the quality of instruction. The report also includes the option of teachers continuing to teach in traditional classes, but with “small” class-size increases, “within limits suggested by class sizes in high-performing nations” (p. 4). However, that option seems least favored, since “it maintains the one-teacher-one-classroom mode” (p. 4).

In the report’s ideal, tiered system, “teachers advance by reaching more students and leading peers, for more pay” (p. 6). Having excellent teachers reach more students through the use of teams will, the argument goes, close the achievement gap, concurrently promoting economic security and even national security.

It should be noted that the report’s Opportunity Culture approach expressly rejects the idea that it is primarily calling for larger class sizes. And this is technically true. A teacher might have 10 groups of 25 students and still not have increased class size—at least not what the authors call “effective class size,” or “the number of students actually with a teacher at one time.” While the teachers’ student load is much higher and the teachers are responsible for far more students, the wording and approach allows them the claim of leaving “effective class sizes on par or smaller.”⁵

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

No formal rationale or theory is presented. There is, however, a line of argument:

There are not enough teachers in the current public school system who can “achieve the high-growth, higher-order learning our modern economy demands,” and current efforts to attract and retain outstanding teachers and to dismiss ineffective teachers are inadequate (p. 1). Therefore, a new way must be found to attract and retain high-quality teachers who can close achievement gaps and enhance life prospects for students who otherwise would

suffer from relatively ineffective teachers. The authors assert that their model of hierarchical teacher teams—led by excellent teacher leaders, employing fewer teachers overall, and grounded in greater use of relatively cheap paraprofessionals and technology—will remedy the problem.

Money saved by employing fewer teachers, each of whom would serve greater numbers of students, could sustain higher salaries for teachers who remain. Because all teachers are to be “accountable,” excellence is assured.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report does not provide empirical evidence to support key assumptions, it relies on unsupported claims found in cross-references to their own works, and it fails to acknowledge disconfirming research. In short, it starts with the reasonable premise that the current system includes some teachers who are much more effective than other teachers. But every step beyond that premise is grounded in little more than wishes and beliefs that the line of argument will work—that if put into practice, the authors’ approach would somehow play out to the benefit of students.

For example, the report provides no empirical support for the claim that “only about 25 percent of today’s teachers” teach well enough to help close achievement gaps and that current efforts to develop and retain a highly skilled corps of teachers are inadequate (p. 1). The work cited to support the 25% estimate is a publication by the same authors—in this case, the 2010 document titled *Opportunity at the Top*. However, that document indicates that the estimate is based on an assumption:

All projections...are based on a model that begins with a starting distribution of 25 percent of teachers in each of today’s quartiles of effectiveness.... Like any projection model, the results are intended to be illustrative rather than definitive predictions of the future.⁶

The estimate of 25% comes from an assumption of equal distribution among four levels of quality, which are neither defined nor documented. The authors first assume that 25% teach well enough to help close achievement gaps, then cite that assumption as evidence the assumption is true. Lacking a foundation in a specific and credible assessment of the quality of the existing teaching force, the claim that only one in four teachers is effective (or, using the report’s wording, “excellent”) is nothing more than speculation. Projections about the quality of future staffing are also speculative. Despite the report’s claims of a steady drain of talent from the profession, some empirical evidence in fact suggests that more effective teachers are *more* likely to remain in the classroom than less effective teachers.⁷

A related problematic assumption is that teacher performance can be, and is being, reliably measured. A sidebar notes that “there is a healthy debate about [assessment]

measures,” but the report does not engage in it (p. 3). It offers no specific plan for measuring teacher quality; instead, by default, schools are to determine their own measures. At one level, this is a reasonable approach. But it’s also a punt, asking readers to trust that the resulting set of unique school-driven assessment systems will somehow be valid, will somehow drive good decision-making, and will somehow produce the desired uniformly excellent teaching force.

While the report therefore sidesteps the intense debate about how to assess teacher quality, it also implicitly endorses growth models based on students’ test scores, in that it consistently links teacher quality to measurements of student achievement. If the report

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had genuinely engaged these issues of measuring achievement and student growth, it would have helped readers understand that identifying the purported 25% of excellent teachers is highly problematic. Teachers ranked excellent by one value-added formula may be ranked inept by another, or they may be rated excellent one year and inept the next.⁸ In criticizing similar claims about the quality of the current teaching force, Stanford professor Edward Haertel refers to “the myth of the top quintile teachers” and notes: “[It] is not certain who those top quintile teachers really are. Teacher value-added scores are unreliable.”⁹ The report’s framing is also problematic in that it perpetuates a current myth about teacher quality. While achievement gaps can likely be narrowed by improving teacher quality, truly closing those gaps will require attention to many other sources of the opportunity gaps that drive those outcomes.¹⁰ The report ignores research indicating that while teachers are likely the most important *school factor* affecting achievement, out-of-school factors (primarily those dealing with individual student and family characteristics) outweigh the influence of teachers.¹¹ Indeed, research suggests that factors related to individual student and family characteristics account for some 60% of student achievement.¹²

The beneficial potential of the heavy reliance on technology as an appropriate substitute for teacher time is also a matter of conjecture. It is promoted without reference to any confirming or disconfirming literature. A sidebar expounds the theoretical benefits of digital instruction, which is predicted to “eventually replace much of the diagnosis of learning levels and the provision of matching instruction, particularly in core knowledge and skills” (p. 5). A book chapter by the same authors is cited as support for the claim,¹³ but the potential of digital education remains speculative.¹⁴

Similarly, the projections that the proposed model will “allow paying teachers 20% to 40% more than the average in a one-teacher-one-classroom mode, and up to 130% more for teachers leading teams” appears to be conjecture (p. 7). The document supporting this

claim is another Public Impact report, again based on unsupported assumptions.¹⁵ The cited report is a “financial planning summary” that says money will be saved by “Paying less for teacher roles with lighter workloads—fewer students, less responsibility, or shorter hours, such as 40-hour weeks—than for teaching positions that typically require workweeks over 50 hours.”¹⁶ While it is true that many teachers currently work long hours, this plan designates a standard workweek of 40 hours as “shorter” than should be expected, and it links higher pay to workweeks of more than 50 hours. However, this plan risks exacerbating teacher burnout, a drain on the profession. One study of charter schools, where teachers often work long hours, found that “Teachers in schools where the work week is more than 60 hours are 61% more likely to leave the profession than stay in the same school.”¹⁷ Also, experience with charter schools suggests that such predictions of enormous pay increases should be carefully scrutinized, as money often migrates from instructional costs to administrative salaries.¹⁸ Charter school experiences also raise issues of burnout and turnover issues that continue to be obvious, yet unaddressed, threats to the beneficial outcomes this report predicts.

Although the report has a somewhat lengthy list of references, no empirical evidence is provided to support the promised improvements in teacher quality, the promised gains in student achievement, or the promised large increases in teacher pay.

V. The Report’s Methods

The report’s presentation is that of a thematic advocacy document. The proposal is replete with unfounded assumptions and illusory calculations. While a few schools have been recruited to adopt the proposed model, it is too early to draw conclusions. Well-researched pilot reforms are welcome and may prove promising. A convincing demonstration of success, however, will require more than anecdotal accounts, conjecture, and circular references to the authors’ own non-empirical documents. And it is unwise to advocate for large-scale policy change in the absence of solid evidence. Questions that policymakers and researchers should be asking, but that are largely or completely ignored in the report include:

- If put in place, what would this new model change in terms of incentives, school cultures, and actual workloads?
- How realistic are the assumptions about the potential of technology?
- What would change in terms of students’ experiences and opportunities to learn?
- Would a teacher who is successful with a 25-student class also be successful in a technology- and paraprofessional-aided 40-student class?
- Is this new approach something that would be changed in schools serving students from upper-middle class families, or is it a model that’s good enough for “other people’s children,” but not for the children of more politically powerful parents?

VI. Review of the Validity of Findings and Conclusions

Neither the assumptions about current teaching quality nor claims about the potential impact of the model are supported by credible research.¹⁹ Failure to acknowledge existing literature that contradicts many of its claims further undermines the report. While high-quality supervision is a self-evident asset, there is no reason to believe (nor is evidence presented) that this hierarchical model dependent on paraprofessionals and computers will yield the outcomes predicted.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This document and others in the Public Impact series serve as an illustration of why policymakers need to look beyond exuberant media reports and slick packaging when they consider proposed interventions in public education. The tone in this series of reports is confident; the documents frequently include impressive-looking charts, graphs and other illustrations. Sometimes they even include a list of references that appear to provide empirical evidence for claims. But none of that changes the fact that the model is based only on unsupported assumptions and projections. Nor does it eliminate or diminish the copious credible research undermining its assumptions, claims and strategies. Based on nothing more than speculation, the proposed Opportunity Culture has nothing to recommend it as a guide to sound policy.

Notes and References

1 See <http://opportunityculture.org/category/publications/>.

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ECS e-Connection. (2013, October 9). Paying teachers more, improving student outcomes. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from <http://www.ecs.org/html/newsMedia/e-ConnectionArchives.asp>.

See also a list of “recent appearances” on the Opportunity Culture website:
<http://publicimpact.com/?s=recent+appearances>.

4 Hassel, E. A. & Hassel, B. C. (2013). *An Opportunity Culture for All: Making teaching a highly paid, high-impact profession*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Public Impact. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from http://opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/An_Opportunity_Culture_for_All-Public_Impact.pdf.

For the original document, see:

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6 See endnote 8 in:

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10 Carter, P. L. & Welner, K. G. (Eds) (2013). *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give All Children an Even Chance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

11 Goldhaber, D. D., Brewer, D. J., & Anderson, D. J. (1999). A three-way error components analysis of educational productivity. *Education Economics*, 7(3), 199-208. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from ProQuest Database.

For a detailed overview of out-of-school factors known to affect achievement, see:

Berliner, David C. (2009). *Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/poverty-and-potential>.

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For a review of a similar Public Impact document by these same authors, see:

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14 For an example of how advocates of digital education are looking to see that potential realized, see

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19 These criticisms of Public Impact's work are not new. See, for example:

Huerta, L. A. (2012). Review of *Teachers in the Age of Digital Instruction*. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-teachers-digital-age> (this review both points to unsubstantiated claims and cites specific disconfirming empirical studies);

Baker, B. (2011). Public Impact's persistent pattern of shoddy analysis. *School Finance 101*. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from <http://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/publicincompetence/>;

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