



GUY: Let's motivate - not threaten - teachers

John Guy January 15, 2011



VIEWPOINT

John Guy

Evaluating teachers cannot improve results. Human nature does not allow it.

The obstacle is the 80-20 rule, which is inferred from the work of Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who, in 1906, found that 20 percent of the people own 80 percent of the wealth. In the 1930s and 1940s, Joseph M. Juran expanded Pareto's thesis to create a new idea, "the vital few and trivial many," which could be interpreted to mean that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work, or, in any group of 100 teachers, 20 are terrific, others average, and a few are downright unproductive.

An extreme example illustrates the impossibility. This example assumes that weak teachers should be identified and dismissed. The *Los Angeles Times* appears to have endorsed this view by publishing names and rankings of teachers, based on standardized student test scores for math and English language arts. A similar release might take place in New York City.

Based on rankings, if the bottom 20 out of 100 teachers are fired, demoted or reassigned, who will replace them? The answer is 20 other teachers, themselves subject to the 80-20 rule, which suggests that four of the new 20 will be highly productive, most of the rest average, and a few no improvement at all. Bottom line: Nothing of importance is accomplished by firing and replacing the 20, but their self-esteem and effectiveness is damaged by the process.

A different approach is advocated in Indiana. This approach is to reward the best teachers, through higher compensation and public recognition, and, presumably, to ignore all other teachers. Unfortunately, the best teachers are only 20 percent of all teachers. They teach only 20 percent of the students. Teachers in this category are likely to win recognition, year in and year out, with little effect on the 80 percent.

Also, the potential for resentment among those not recognized could, in theory, lead to progressively poorer performance among them. A more serious result took place in Los Angeles. A teacher ranked "average" committed suicide.

Some argue that all parents have an unequivocal right to know the effectiveness of their children's teachers. Perhaps, but if a child is taught by a bottom-ranked teacher, what are parents to do? Change schools, where they will find other weak teachers? Request a class reassignment? Reassignment to whom? Reassignment is a problem, especially in small schools, with a limited number of alternative teachers. What if every parent asks for reassignment of their children? What about all the teachers not

subject to quantitative evaluation, such as history, physical education, music and social-science teachers? Or are we going to evaluate only math and English teachers? How do we know the evaluation technique is correct and truly representative of performance? How can we be so confident in our data that we publish results?

If evaluating teachers has no practical effect, how do we improve educational productivity? The answer is obvious. Instead of criticizing selected teachers, or rewarding only the so-called best, we should motivate all teachers, by spreading praise, providing first-class facilities and support, raising compensation, giving more personal and job security, more freedom of expression and less criticism and control from above, for nothing stifles creativity like the weight of bureaucracy.

We should respect the individuality of teachers, their status as valuable human beings. We should find ways to motivate all teachers, to communicate pride and gratitude, as parents and taxpayers, for the work they do. Perhaps we should concentrate our expressions of confidence on teachers who work in disadvantaged schools, where teachers have unusual challenges from students and families who live in poverty and in neighborhoods with high crime rates. In these, education is not a priority, and teachers have little community or parental support.

The 80-20 rule has this corollary: Helping the good to improve is a better use of time and resources than helping the best become terrific; this principle applies to management of any group. In business, and in education, the best managers motivate. They do not slash and cut. •

John Guy, a certified financial planner, is author of "Middle Man, A Broker's Tale," and president of Indianapolis-based Wealth Planning & Management LLC.