

# Grading the Teachers

By **BILL AND MELINDA GATES**



*Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

English teacher Angela Haskell, above, in Tampa, Fla., has agreed to have her classroom performance evaluated. Most teachers say they would do the same.

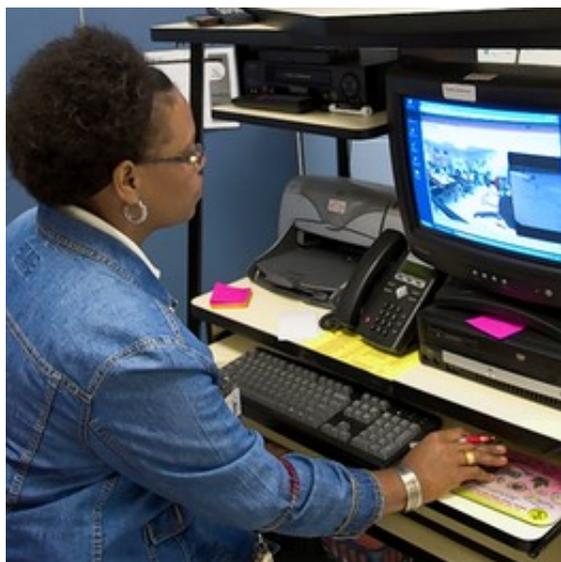
America's schoolteachers are some of the most brilliant, driven and highly skilled people working today—exactly the kind of people we want shaping young minds. But they are stuck in a system that doesn't treat them like professionals.

In most workplaces, there is an implicit bargain: Employees get the support they need to excel at their jobs, and employers build a system to evaluate their performance. The evaluations yield information that employees use to improve—and that employers use to hold employees accountable for results.

At Microsoft, we believed in giving our employees the best chance to succeed, and then we insisted on success. We measured excellence, rewarded those who achieved it and were candid with those who did not. Teachers don't work in anything like this kind of environment, and they want a new bargain.

We know this because they told us so in a recent survey that our foundation undertook

with Scholastic. It turns out that teachers don't like their no-support/low-expectations working conditions any better than we do.



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Studying up: Cleopatra Thomas watches a video of herself teaching.

The teachers who took the survey were given a list of 15 things that might help to retain the best teachers. Higher salaries ranked 11th on the list, behind benefits like more time for preparation and opportunities for professional development.

Another key finding was that teachers are open to being evaluated in a comprehensive way. Eighty-five percent said that "student growth over the course of the academic year" should be a factor in how their performance is measured. Eighty percent said that teacher tenure should be re-evaluated regularly, and as a group they believe that tenure is granted too early in teachers' careers.

The research shows, in short, that teachers want to be treated as professionals. They want to be put in a position to succeed, and they're open to having their performance measured, as long as the measurement system is fair.

It may surprise you—it was certainly surprising to us—but the field of education doesn't know very much at all about effective teaching. We have all known terrific teachers. You watch them at work for 10 minutes and you can tell how thoroughly they've mastered the craft. But nobody has been able to identify what, precisely, makes them so outstanding.

This ignorance has serious ramifications. We can't give teachers the right kind of support because there's no way to distinguish the right kind from the wrong kind. We can't evaluate teaching because we are not consistent in what we're looking for. We can't spread best practices because we can't capture them in the first place.

For the last several years, our foundation has been working with more than 3,000 teachers on a large research project called Measures of Effective Teaching, or MET. These teachers

volunteered to have their classes videotaped and their lessons scored by experts, to have their students evaluate their teaching, to fill out surveys about the support they receive and to be assessed on their content knowledge.

The intermediate goal of MET is to discover what we are able to measure that is predictive of student success. The end goal is to have a better sense of what makes teaching work so that school districts can start to hire, train and promote based on meaningful standards.

In developing MET, we have worked closely with Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and we have seen both the AFT and the National Education Association show a willingness to rethink evaluation systems. Given the scale and scope of the problem, there must be dialogue about solutions among unions, teachers and administrators.

Some people think that teachers should be like commissioned salespeople, receiving pay based on end-of-year test scores. We don't believe that. When we think about the kinds of teachers we hope our children have, we realize that it's impossible to capture everything in a single metric. We believe you need multiple measures to make evaluations accurate and fair.

There are others who say that teaching is so nuanced that it is simply impossible to measure. We can't accept that either, because we know that just throwing up our hands is bad for students and for teachers.

Because we have been unable to define effective teaching, we now reward teachers for easy-to-measure proxies like master's degrees and seniority, even though there is no evidence that these things help students learn. As a result, a tenured teacher with a master's degree whose students aren't learning much will always earn more than a recent college graduate whose students are sweeping the academic decathlon.

The 3,000 teachers who are helping us with the MET project are already getting feedback on their teaching. Last year, we visited Ridgeway Middle School in Memphis and sat down with Mahalia Davis while she watched a videotape of herself teaching. Ms. Davis had many years of experience, and it was obvious to us that she was a standout. She watched her video because she wanted to get even better at something she already did well.

We were impressed by how much Ms. Davis enjoyed taking apart the craft of her own teaching. She leaned forward in her chair and said, "Look, I just lost that student." Then she said, "The class wasn't with me on that point. I need to teach that concept in a new way."

Like all people who are proud of the work they do, teachers want to improve, but they need the tools to do it. We are now compiling libraries of tens of thousands of videos, and we plan to use these videos to advance professional development for teachers.

Once the MET research is completed, we hope that school districts will work with teachers and their unions to create fair and reliable evaluations that reward teachers who are effective and identify and help those who need to improve. When that happens, we believe that districts will be on the cusp of providing every student with an effective teacher, in every class, every year.

We can't say that now. In fact, 98% of our school teachers are rated "satisfactory." Clearly, rating systems that pass pretty much everybody are a fraud. Worse, such pass/fail evaluations don't give teachers enough feedback for improvement. So why would we ever expect them to get better? Why would anyone who's called to teach want to work under these conditions?

In our society, you pay somebody a compliment when you say they're "a pro." But the truth is that professionalism is a dynamic relationship, not one person's responsibility. We have to hold up our end of the bargain, too.

*—Mr. and Mrs. Gates are co-chairs of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.*