

**TESTIMONY PREPARED FOR THE NYS EDUCATION REFORM  
COMMISSION**

The Yankees starting catcher, Russell Martin, has had a sub-par season and many fans and sports commentators are wondering whether he should be reassigned. These critics have a point: Martin's batting average is at the bottom of the major league. So why does, Joe Girardi, the Yankees manager, continue to start Martin? When you look at *another* statistic, "pitchers' earned run average (ERA) for starting catchers", Russell Martin is the major league *leader*. Additionally, Martin provides intangible value in his role – he is known for counseling other players and having great judgment and strategic skills. By examining Martin's individual statistics, he might be rated as "ineffective," but taking into account all factors, Martin is certainly "proficient" and perhaps even "distinguished." This may be the reason why Girardi keeps Martin as a starting catcher.

Current measures of teacher and principal effectiveness and quality are inadequate. Although student exam performance is important, these scores alone should not be the determinant factor of teacher effectiveness. The current teacher evaluation system has various categories, each ostensibly important. However, if a teacher is ranked ineffective in the student test score category, *no other aspect* of the evaluation, including principal evaluation, truly matters, since the teacher will be rated ineffective. This is what teachers and principals mean when they say that 40% = 100%.

Imagine a class with a high non-English speaking population taking the English Regents. Students are not likely to perform well the first time they take the Regents. Does this necessarily mean that the teacher is ineffective? Conversely, are student test scores an accurate measure of teacher ability in an *affluent* school district, where parents routinely hire tutors for their children? Looking at teaching through a one-dimensional lens leads to erroneous conclusions about teacher quality.

As a 25-year veteran who has taught the K-12 spectrum as a teacher, department chairperson, assistant principal, and principal, I would like to suggest alternative [measures] of teacher quality and effectiveness.

- Student performance on the PISA assessment is frequently mentioned by the Commissioner, Dr. John King, and the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, as a factor for reforming education in the U.S. When looking at student performance on this international assessment, the U.S. consistently ranks in the middle, while other nations, such as Finland and Japan consistently rank higher. So what do other nations do differently?
  - 1) The teaching profession is more selective in those countries. Usually, teachers are selected from the highest performing students in colleges and universities. Frequently, this means the top third. In the U.S., conversely, teachers encompass the bottom third of college graduates. The reason for this is very simple and one that is in accordance with the principles of the free labor market. Teachers in high performing nations earn some of the highest salaries in those nations. In Finland, for example, teachers are the highest paid professionals. I checked the Forbes magazine list of 25-top paying jobs in the U.S. Teachers are not on this list. If teacher quality is truly a goal, then teachers need to be on the top 25 list the way they are in other high performing nations.

- 2) Other nations do not emphasize testing as much as we do. In Finland, the only standardized test that exists is an entrance examination to a university. In Japan, tests are administered at certain grade levels (5, 8, and 10). The scores are used to develop improvement plans, not to grade teachers, principals, and students. The teachers, principals, and researchers I spoke with in these nations recognize that tests are a diagnostic tool, not an evaluative tool. Hopefully, we can learn from these nations that testing should have the same purpose.
  - 3) Teachers at the high school level are content area specialists. They majored in U.S. History or Political Science, for example. They earned a specific content area degree before they earned a teaching degree. In the U.S., teachers are generalists teaching specific classes.
  - 4) Principals in other nations teach for many years before they become administrators. Additionally, they have proved themselves as “master teachers” in the classroom. Most principals in other nations also teach a class and are considered part of the teaching faculty. Thus, principals remain current on teaching methodologies. In Finland, Germany, or Japan, you will never find a principal who moved to school administration before becoming a classroom expert.
- Principals are middle managers in educational organizations, managing up to central office, vertically to parents and community members, and down to the classroom. In high-performing nations, principals are not in the middle of the organizational structure, but instead have autonomy in making decisions: personnel, financial, and management. In Finland, Japan, and Germany, there are no school boards and central office administration is minimal at best. The organizational concept is more akin to a sports team. The principal is the coach making every field decision, and the general manager provides the necessary funding and material for the team’s success. Using this model, I would suggest the following changes:
    - 1) Increase the amount of autonomy afforded to principals. Principals should not be handcuffed by a state bureaucracy that tells them how to rate a teacher. Principals have been evaluating teachers for years. Principals have also been hiring, dismissing, and, unfortunately in some cases, disciplining teachers. If principals are to be evaluated by test scores, then they need the necessary authority to manage and evaluate teachers.
  - Multiple studies conducted both in the U.S. and abroad conclusively and universally indicate that up to 80% of a student’s score on an exam is directly related to the student’s socio-economic background. Thus, in nations with less income inequality and less child poverty, students perform better. Unfortunately, the U.S. is the world’s leader in child poverty and income disparity. It is not surprising that this would have a negative effect on student performance. Thus, in order to assess teacher and principal effectiveness, I offer the following suggestions:
    - 1) A consideration of a student’s socio-economic status must be taken into account. When evaluating teachers and principals, student test scores must be controlled for the following factors: socio-economic status, students’ learning disabilities, and the percentage of non-English speaking students.

- 2) If schools are asked to improve student scores, then policymakers need to plan and actualize policies and laws that allow for a more equitable distribution of income, wealth, and services. Not doing so indicates that the talk to increase student performance in schools is just that—all talk and no action. Educators need to assume responsibility, but so do other institutions, including the policymakers that have allowed our children to live in poverty for so long.

One need not be a professional educator to have valid ideas for increasing teacher and principal quality as well as student performance, but not having any educational practitioners on the Education Reform Commission is unnecessarily dismissive and adversarial and does not show a good faith effort to improve education in our state. Accordingly, I respectfully ask that trained professionals be asked to comprise up to fifty percent of the commission; this will be a positive step toward improving education for our students.

Respectfully submitted,

Harry Leonardatos  
Principal, Clarkstown High School North  
(845) 639-6504  
hleonardatos@ccsd.edu