

Remarks at the Education Learning Forum

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The Learning Line

Earlier this year, I welcomed an honored guest to my office—a man named Lyon Terry, who teaches 4th grade at Lawton Elementary in Seattle.

Lyon is the 2015 Washington state teacher of the year. He is here with us today, and I'd like to ask him to stand up so we can honor his accomplishment.

When I met Lyon, he told me a few of his secrets. Here's one: at the beginning of every school year, he draws an arrow on a big piece of paper, pointing up and to the right. He labels it: the Learning Line.

He puts a dot at the bottom and labels it "Birth." He puts another dot a little higher up, where a 4th grader would be, and then another dot higher still, where a high school graduate would be.

What Lyon said next really struck me. He said, "I put a dot for myself, which is a little farther up the line but not at the top." And then he tells his class: "This is your life trajectory. You'll be traveling up the learning line every day of your life."

I love a lot of things about Lyon's approach. What stands out the most for me is that he doesn't put himself at the top of the learning line. He knows he'll never be done learning.

Most teachers I've met feel the same way. They know they can always do a better job of engaging that student who's bored, or explaining fractions to a kid who doesn't get it. Teachers want to keep moving up the learning line—so they can help their students move up the learning line.

Here's the problem: Too often, teachers have to move up on their own. They don't get the feedback or tools they need to improve their practice. So they move up slowly. That's not only a loss for their students; it's frustrating for the teachers.

The work we are doing with all of you is intended to help every teacher move up the learning line, faster and in concert with their colleagues, so that no one gets stuck trying to fight their way up alone.

We set out on this path seven years ago. If I had to place our foundation somewhere on our own learning line today—where the starting point is absolute ignorance and the end point is knowing everything about great teaching and how to spread it—I would say we're not even halfway to our goal.

But I believe we are on the right track. For today, and for the coming years, this is our vision: Every student deserves high standards. Every student deserves an effective teacher. Every teacher deserves the tools and support to be phenomenal. And all students deserve the opportunity to learn in a way that is tailored to their needs, skills, and interests.

This is the combination of advances we are backing that we believe will transform America's schools—and at the center of it all is an effective teacher.

How We Got Here

This is where we are today, but it's not where we started. So let me tell you a little bit about how we got here and what we have learned on the way.

Early on, we thought smaller schools were the way to drive up college-ready rates. We set out to build the model of a successful school by breaking large high schools into new, smaller ones. Those efforts did raise graduation rates.

But only some of the smaller schools also raised college-readiness rates—and the ones that did put a huge focus on training skilled teachers. So we weren't going to reach our goals simply by changing the size of the school. We needed to look much closer at what happens inside the classroom—at the work that teachers and students do together.

A growing body of evidence told us that teacher effectiveness is the single most important in-school factor in student achievement. If you take two classrooms from the same school, both starting out at the 50th percentile, and assign one to a teacher in the top quartile and another to a teacher in the bottom quartile, there will be a 10 percentile difference in achievement at the end of the year.

Ten points is a big difference for a single year—it's nearly a third of the achievement gap between white students and African-American students. The data showed us the enormous potential for helping teachers improve their practice. We believed that if we could identify the most effective teachers, figure out what they do so well, and spread that to all teachers, it would have a decisive impact on student achievement.

But there was a catch. At the time, the field did not have a clear view on the characteristics of great teaching. Is it all about how a teacher manages the classroom? Is it all about how a teacher asks questions or leads a discussion? We didn't know, and neither did anyone else. That made it almost impossible to create a great system for giving feedback to teachers that helps them improve. So we set out to learn.

What We've Learned

I'd like to tell you what we've found so far.

First: Everything we have seen in the past seven years tells us that the strategy we settled on in 2008 remains the best lever for raising student achievement. Effective teachers raise student achievement, and strong teacher feedback and improvement systems help create and support effective teachers.

Here's where we see evidence that backs this approach. Although on a national scale, achievement on the SAT, ACT, and National Assessment of Educational Progress has been staying flat or declining for years, those national numbers conceal some important success stories.

In Kentucky, ACT scores have been going up in both low-income and high-income schools since 2011. The graduation rate has risen from 80 percent to 86 percent since 2010, and is well above the national average of 81 percent.

In Denver, the percentage of students who scored 21 or higher on the ACT has gone up by half in the past five years, from 16 percent to 24 percent. In Los Angeles, the Green Dot charter schools have college readiness rates that are almost four times higher than district-run schools with similar students.

And in Washington, D.C. public schools, students taking the 4th grade and 8th grade NAEP in math outgained their peers in every single state between 2007 and 2013.

Of course, none of these places are satisfied with their results. But their progress is promising. So we studied what they all have in common. It turns out that they excel at supporting teachers. They use multiple measures of effectiveness that are backed by evidence. They train and certify classroom observers. They provide teachers with instructional tools aligned to the Common Core standards. And—this is crucial—they focus their feedback and evaluations on activities that help the teacher get better in the classroom.

For example, Denver uses a measure that combines teacher observations, student perception surveys, and evidence of how much students are learning. This isn't a system for sorting teachers into groups; it's a framework for moving up the learning line together. The principal can visit the class, discuss it with the teacher, and decide together where the teacher stands. If they're not satisfied, they can settle on a plan for getting better, including coaching from fellow teachers. It's a clear path to growth.

The approach in Denver is fairly advanced, compared with what teachers get in most other places around the United States. But other places around the world, from China to the Netherlands, have been doing this kind of thing for years. Consider where the U.S. ranks internationally on reading proficiency: We're in fourteenth place. Of the thirteen countries ranked above us, ten have formal systems for helping teachers improve.

This is why our foundation is every bit as optimistic now as we were back in 2008 about creating strong feedback and improvement systems. It is a defining feature of better achievement, and we're focused heavily on spreading it.

Our work is grounded in the findings of our Measures of Effective Teaching project, which we launched in 2009. To help us identify the elements of great teaching, three thousand teachers in six school districts opened their classrooms to visitors, video cameras, assessments, and discussions. Research teams analyzed more than 13,000 videos of classes.

Shared Definitions of Excellent Teaching

Today, many states are using this research to develop a shared definition of excellent teaching and help spread it.

For example, some states now use peer reviewers and coaches in the classroom. Some teachers welcome this step. Others are reluctant to have outsiders assess their work. But we've found that when they see the point is to help them improve their practice, most teachers crave the feedback. One of Colorado's top coaches said it doesn't matter if teachers have taught for two years or 25 years—they always say: "This is the most meaningful professional development I've ever had."

In addition, more than 30 states now allow student surveys to be used in their feedback systems. Students can rate the teacher on statements such as: "If I don't understand something, my teacher tries to explain it another way." Or "My teacher doesn't move on to the next lesson until we understand the first lesson."

It's not a perfect measure, of course—what if half your students are grumpy because they didn't eat breakfast that morning? What about the ones who struggle with reading? But when asked the right questions, students can give precise and helpful feedback. They are the customers, after all. They see the teacher every day, and they know what helps them learn.

The Measures of Effective Teaching project looked at another factor in teacher evaluations, and that is the growth in students' test scores. The study found that growth in test scores tells you something about a teacher's effectiveness—but far from everything. It has to be balanced by other factors, like classroom observations and student surveys.

This subject causes concern among teachers, and I can see why. Test scores are a useful way to measure what students know, but they are not a diagnostic for teachers. They tell you very little about what skills you need to improve—and they don't tell you anything at all about how to improve. I've never heard a teacher say, "I got those test scores and now I know what I need to change."

Unfortunately, listening to the debate over this subject, you might think that we're forced to choose between two extremes: either using test scores exclusively to determine a teacher's evaluation, or not using them at all. That's a false choice. In fact, states are trying to figure out how to balance test scores with observations, student feedback, and other factors. No state uses them for more than 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation. Eight don't require test scores at all, and everyone else is somewhere in the middle.

In my view, test scores should be one part of the mix. But we also need to make sure that every evaluation system is transparent, makes sense to teachers, and is embraced by teachers.

Another area we have learned a lot about is how to make classroom observations more valuable for teachers. In a recent study, researchers at Harvard University gave teachers video cameras and allowed them to record as many lessons as they wanted, and choose the ones to send to the principal to discuss. The study found that when you put teachers in charge of deciding which lessons to seek feedback on, it redefines the power dynamic between them and their principals. The teachers are leading the discussion, and they focus it on what they want to improve.

In most districts, a teacher will get just two or three classroom observations during the year. But in this study, teachers recorded and watched 13 lessons in one year. That's what happens when the system is driven by teachers' desire to excel.

There's one other pivotal step in the movement for strong feedback and improvement systems, and that is the adoption of high, consistent academic standards throughout the country. Today 42 states and the District of Columbia are using the Common Core State Standards.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the Common Core, the attacks have drowned out the facts—and the fact is, the standards are starting to work for students and teachers.

If we want to achieve excellence, we have to define excellence. And you can't define it based on politics or individual preferences. You have to define excellence by anchoring it in something real—like getting a good job, or getting a higher ed degree that means something in the workplace. That's what these standards do: They ensure that students are gaining the skills and knowledge they need to get a good job or succeed in college.

If students leave high school without that, their next stop is probably a dead-end job or a course in remedial math. And that's just inexcusable. Every kid in America deserves high standards.

Most everyone would agree. I believe much of the difficulty with the Common Core standards came because the advocates—and I include our foundation in this category—didn't do enough to explain them early and clearly. Once states adopted the standards, parents needed to hear from principals and teachers and superintendents about the reason for the changes, how they would help their kids, and how things would be bumpy for a number of years as teachers adjusted to the new standards. But I also understand why this step was missed. Principals and teachers and their supporters were busy working urgently to figure out how to make the standards real in classrooms.

They had to be working on it. And that has generated a lot of exciting, path-breaking innovations.

For example, teachers have developed the Literacy and Math Design Collaboratives, two breakthrough curriculum tools that have helped more than a million teachers in all 50 states meet the Common Core standards. We're also seeing products like Newsela and ThinkCERCA that help teachers tailor instruction to each student's unique needs.

And these tools are unlocking even more innovation through the field of personalized learning, where schools are radically reorganizing classrooms with a focus on letting students learn in their own style and at their own pace. Personalized learning shows a lot of promise, and I'm glad you'll have a chance to discuss it in a session later today.

Cause for Concern

So I am excited by all the progress we're seeing. But I am also concerned.

Unfortunately, while some teachers are benefiting from great feedback systems, the vast majority are still working in systems that don't help them move up the learning line. The quantity of feedback that teachers get has gone way up—but in many cases the quality has not.

It's not hard to see why. States are asking principals and other evaluators to take on new roles that many of them don't have the training or the time for. They deserve both.

Even worse, for many teachers, feedback isn't even tied to helping them improve. When the only purpose of an evaluation system is to decide who gets hired and who gets fired, it makes teachers more guarded, and less likely to embrace new ideas.

That approach doesn't strengthen good teaching—it strangles it. Every teacher has the right to ask of every evaluation: "How will this help me get better?" That needs to be the first purpose of every effort to evaluate a teacher. When I hear about feedback and improvement systems like the one in Denver, and I compare them with what most teachers live with... I'm blown away by how far apart the two are on the learning line.

If we're going to reduce inequity by creating more effective teaching, we can't have inequity in the way we support teachers. We can't have a few schools and districts far up the learning line, while many more languish way back down the line.

When one group of teachers is doing very well, and another group is far behind... what we have is a failure to communicate.

We need to figure out how to get the practices that are gaining success in one school, district, or state to be adopted in many others.

This is an urgent task. Ultimately, I believe that success for America's schools means that at least 80 percent of low-income and minority students graduate from high school ready for college. Today, only 25 percent of Hispanic students and 10 percent of African-American students do. So we have a long way to go.

I am confident that we have the solution: effective teaching and our growing knowledge about what it is and how to spread it.

But I am less confident that we will put this knowledge to its best use.

The progress we have seen so far is fragile. In places where feedback and improvement systems are well designed, they're generating excitement, and teachers are embracing them. But in places where the systems hold teachers accountable without giving them the support they need to improve—those systems are provoking resentment and distrust. Teachers are rejecting them, and students are losing out on the opportunity to make big gains in achievement.

Will the districts and states with the most effective systems keep those systems in place? Will their best practices be adopted throughout the country? Or will we retreat from these reforms, and go back to a time when all teachers are forced to make their way up the learning line on their own?

The future of our students hangs on the answer. And the answer depends on all of us.

A Call to Action

There is no outside force that will automatically turn low-impact evaluation systems into high-impact systems. It is up to all of us who are passionate about this work.

It's fantastic to see donors supporting charter schools like Aspire, YES Prep, and Green Dot, where teacher feedback systems are driving big student gains. I hope these donors magnify their impact by helping move these approaches beyond charter schools and into district schools. Charters teach about 5 percent of all schoolchildren in the United States. To make a difference across the country, we need to reach the other 95 percent. Family foundations including Hyde, Kaiser, and Schusterman are funding important work in district schools, and I hope even more donors follow.

If you're a teacher, I hope you will demand systems that help you improve your practice. Nobody speaks with more authority about what you need than you do. If you insist on high-quality feedback and improvement systems, no one will be able to say no.

If you're a member of a state legislature or board of education, I urge you to stay the course on setting high academic standards and requiring excellent feedback and improvement systems.

If you're a governor or state chief, I urge you to take a hard look at whether your system is giving teachers the support they need. Here's a three-part test you can apply:

- **First: Is your system balanced? Are you using multiple measures that reflect the complexity of teaching?**
- **Second: Is it trustworthy? Are you using valid, accurate data that teachers will embrace?**
- **And third: Is your system focused on improvement? Are you using evaluation to help teachers learn—or simply as an exercise in compliance?**

For our part, our foundation will continue to make effective teaching our strategic focus, supporting the growth and spread of teacher improvement systems, and expanding efforts to get great new instructional tools to teachers.

Building effective teacher feedback and improvement systems everywhere is the most important movement in American education today.

As we've learned, it is a difficult task. We have years of hard work ahead of us before we reach our goal.

But I believe we have the right approach, we have powerful new tools to help us, and we have inspiring examples to guide us.

If we stay focused on our goal, we can help all teachers rise to the top, together, and change the lives of millions of students.

Thank you.