

Proceed With Caution

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In the 1984 ASCD yearbook, *Using What We Know About Teaching*, David Berliner summarized results of a fruitful decade of research on teaching. Acknowledging that the well-established but necessarily incomplete findings could be viewed two ways, Berliner took an optimistic stance, calling his chapter "The Half-Full Glass." In an accompanying commentary, Jane Applegate responded that the questions were not whether the glass was half full or half empty, but rather what was in the glass, and who left it on the table.

The title we chose for this issue, "Progress in Evaluating Teaching," echoes Berliner's conviction that education is beginning to acquire the kind of shared knowledge that is the foundation of any profession. In that spirit, several articles explain how states and school systems are systematically incorporating research knowledge into their teacher evaluation programs.

For example, Richard Manatt (p. 8) describes the components of a model appraisal system that links teacher and administrator performance directly to student achievement by use of criteria derived from the effectiveness research. B. Othanel Smith (p. 16) and his co-authors provide a brief account of development of the Florida Performance Measurement System, which is mounted securely on a similar research base. And David Holdzkom (p. 40) writes that some 42,000 North Carolina teachers and administrators have been trained in that state's appraisal system, which assesses 28 specific practices drawn from the research literature.

These and other reports certainly give an impression of progress, but thoughtful educators, including even some of the advocates, are concerned about possible side effects. The problem is that the glass is still far from full, and the contents are biased in the direction of behaviors associated with higher standardized test scores. Tom McGreal (p. 20), who has helped design several research-based programs, worries that teachers "who stress higher-level thinking skills are put at a disadvantage" (p. 21) by some of the

commonly used criteria. His concerns are borne out by a small but suggestive study (Knight and Waxman 1987) that found an inverse relationship between students' gains on a test of rational thinking and their teachers' scores on an observation scale of "direct instruction" behaviors.

The issue is how best to bring about professional improvement. We would not have modern technology had not early scientists like Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia and members of the Royal Society in London conducted experiments with kites and vacuum jars that now seem primitive. Contemporary education scientists believe that the study of teaching must take a similar route. Smith, for example, concedes that "pedagogical research is still in its early stages of development," but argues that "it is what we have, and it is folly to ignore it" (p. 19). In our May issue, however, Tom Sergiovanni (in press) will argue that the real folly is in trying to mimic the physical sciences with techniques that are inappropriate for subjective enterprises like teaching and supervising. He rejects generic models that seem to equate explicit teaching with effectiveness and calls instead for an approach that recognizes the ambiguity of professional work.

Are we making progress then, or not? From a technical standpoint, we are. If evaluation systems with clear, research-based criteria help supervisors make fewer arbitrary judgments and give more informed, constructive feedback, they will aid student learning. But if such systems overemphasize traditional practices that fail to involve and motivate students (which need not be the case), they will be harmful. As McGreal observes, even the best of programs must be used with understanding—and, we might add, with humility. □

Reference

Knight, Stephanie L., and Hersholt C. Waxman. "Analyzing the Relationship Between Teachers' Classroom Behaviors and Students' Rational Thinking Skills." Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Thinking, Honolulu, Hawaii, 8 January 1987.

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