March 9, 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Melanie Guerin, and I am a Connecticut teacher with some serious concerns about the effectiveness of the new state teacher evaluation plan. Specifically, I would like to address two facets of the growth model, which requires teachers to track and prove student growth through testing. At first glance, this seems an obvious way to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness: students should show improvement in their skills and understandings over the course of attending a teacher's class. However, there are some frustrating ironies inherent in the practical application of this idea.

I consider myself a highly effective teacher. Over the course of my nine-year career, I have consistently received positive feedback from my administrators for my rapport with students, my engaging and structured lessons, my effective assessments, and my contributions to the school as a whole. In 2012 I was recognized as my school's Teacher of the Year, despite working only part-time. I also received positive feedback from my students, who often tell me that they learn more in my class than in any other class they take. I attribute my success to several factors: an intense work ethic, a passion for teaching, and a commitment to reaching every single student in my classroom.

It is this last point that makes the new teacher evaluation plan difficult for me. As a music teacher in an arts magnet school, I teach a wide variety of classes, but the one commonality among all my classes is that my goal is 100% mastery for every student. Of course, I know that this result is not likely, no matter how hard I work and how much my students may want to succeed, but it seems to me that to set my standards lower would be to do my students a disservice. Unfortunately, the new evaluation system in fact encourages me to aim much lower if I want to prove that I am the excellent teacher that I believe myself to be. If I were to set my goal at 100% mastery, then there is no way I could possibly be considered "exemplary" within the new system because by definition an "exemplary" educator exceeds her goals. This may sound like semantics, and of course, I could set my goal at an "exceedable" 99%, but in the real world of teaching a diverse group of students with varying strengths, weaknesses, socioeconomic status, previous learning, physical and emotional well-being, and attendance records, it is unlikely that I will ever reach or exceed that goal either. So, I am left with two ironic choices: I can lower my standards to guarantee that all my students will reach the goals I have set for them, or I can set a goal that assumes from the beginning that certain students will not reach it. Both of these choices seem counterintuitive to the purported goal of the new evaluation system—that is, high standards for all students.

My second frustration with the growth model is that in order to prove that my students increase their skills or understandings, I must first prove them

incapable. This means administering a test that I expect them to fail. I cannot imagine what it must feel like at the beginning of the school year for students to take countless tests at which they are intended to do poorly for the purpose of their teachers being able to show growth at the end of the school year. Aside from taking up valuable class time that could be spent actually teaching, these pre-tests can discourage students just at the time of year when they are establishing their attitudes toward learning and developing relationships with teachers.

I am certain that lowering standards, setting easily attainable goals, and giving students tests that we expect them to fail are NOT intended to be elements of the new evaluation system, but this is what it looks like at ground level. I admit that I do not have a solution to these ironic problems other than to suggest, as many before me have, that successful teaching and learning cannot be quantified into bits of data. Making a prediction about where your students will be eighth months from today is not a simple task, and teachers should not be penalized or rewarded for their predictive skills. When I talk about why I love my job, it is the unpredictability that I cite most often. Every day is different and exciting, and because my job is about people—not materials, not money, not data—I never know what will happen. I might show up to work tomorrow and find that the student who had been struggling to read rhythms was able to use the tutorial video I made for her and suddenly found success. The next day, that same student might tell me her grandfather has died, and I will know that the most important thing I can do for her is to provide comfort and a sense of security. By the end of the year I will have a thousand success stories, some big and some small (Drew brought his binder to school every day this week!), and I will have some stories of frustration and failure. Few of these stories will be predictable, but it is the sum of these stories—the ones that show how I respond to challenges, how I motivate weak students even though I know they will not help my evaluation, how I challenge students who are already proficient—that will show me that I am an exemplary educator. Until we have a system that acknowledges all these intangibles that define great teaching, we will simply discourage teachers from having high standards for themselves and their students.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts.

Sincerely,

Melanie Guerin

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