

## **Grounds for Dismissal: Eric Hanushek and Marty West discuss two new studies that look at teacher dismissals**

Transcript of *Education Next* Interview with Eric Hanushek, Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, conducted by Marty West

Interview available as a podcast at <http://educationnext.org/grounds-for-dismissal/>

- Marty: I'm Marty West, Executive Editor at Education Next, and I'm joined today by Rick Hanushek, an economist at Stanford University, a member of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 education, and perhaps the nation's leading academic authority on the issue of teacher quality. Rick, thanks very much for taking the time for this conversation.
- Rick: Thanks for having me, I think this is an important set of articles that's in Education Next so I'm thrilled to talk about them.
- Marty: What we were hoping to do today is get your insight on two research articles in the current issue of the journal up on the web site now, both of which look at the implications of policies concerning teacher dismissals. So, in the first [["Managing the Teacher Workforce"](#)], for people who haven't seen the articles yet, Dan Goldhaber and Roddy Theobald study which teachers in Washington State are laid off when budget problems force districts to reduce their staff numbers, and they also look at who would be laid off instead under policies based on effectiveness rather than experience. And in the second article [["Principled Principals"](#)], Brian Jacob looks at the decisions Chicago principals make when they were allowed to dismiss untenured

teachers with minimal hassle and without really providing any supporting evidence.

Rick, both of these articles begin by noting that there are almost no previous studies that look systemically at the issue of teacher dismissals. Why has this issue received so little attention?

Rick: Well, I think it's very simple --there have been very few evaluations that are meaningful and there have been very few related dismissals that lead to a higher quality teaching force. It's very common right now for everybody to say, 'well teacher quality is the most important thing' but that hasn't filtered down into the personnel operations of school districts.

Marty: Right, you don't see evaluations in the school districts being done seriously and so there's no real basis on which dismissal decisions could be made other than what's written into policy already?

Rick: I think that's a big part of it Marty, because up until now evaluations have been perfunctory things that everybody knows you should do but they have no impact, but that's radically changed in just the last couple of years. One, the Los Angeles Times published value-added scores of teachers, which led to a huge firestorm of course, but out of that people said 'we have to have a more serious evaluation system or else we'll be left with this.'

And that's helped to push this along, and then we have the actions in the eight or nine states where the state legislatures all of a sudden are looking at personnel policies in schools, the union restrictions, the other restrictions that affect schools, and all this has come together.

Marty: What's the most important finding from the Goldhaber and Theobald study of layoffs in Washington State? What did you take away from that piece?

Rick: The most important finding is that compared to just laying people off by seniority, you have to lay off fewer people if you base it on quality and you can improve the overall quality of achievement in these districts.

Marty: Why is the case they have to lay off fewer people?

Rick: The seniority system lays off the least expensive teachers, the newest teachers, and in order to meet any budget shortfall you have to lay off more. They estimate in Washington State that it's about a 10% difference, so you have larger class sizes and you have essentially no impact on achievement or quality if you lay off by seniority as opposed to by quality.

Marty: So just to take a step back here, they look at who actually has been receiving reduction in force [RIF] notices in Washington State, and they find, predictably, given what's written into collective bargaining agreements, that experience seems to be the primary determinant of who's getting laid off. And they find that that results in them laying off more teachers than they would have to do otherwise, but also it results in them laying off a different set of teachers, so despite the fact that we know that more experienced teachers tend to be a bit more effective, at least early in their careers, that that edge doesn't translate into big differences in effectiveness right?

Rick: That is absolutely the case.

Marty: So what's the policy implication that we should take away from this?

Rick: I think it's what we mentioned at the very beginning. We have to have an effective evaluation system that pays attention to how good people

are in the classroom and then we have to use that information when we have to make personnel decisions. I mean, it's particularly important in the last year or two, and maybe into the future, when school budgets have actually gone down for the first time in a century. And this means that we're really going to lay off some people, as opposed to just sending out pink slips and then retracting them later on.

Marty:

Which to be clear, is actually what was going on in the context of the study in Washington State, not all of these teachers were actually being laid off. It's looking at what would happen if you actually had to follow through on what you're telling people might happen.

So what about the study in Chicago, how does this relate to the issues that are being looked at in Washington State? Obviously this is not looking at teacher lay-offs directly, it's looking at which teachers principals decided to dismiss among their untenured teachers in the very early years in their career, when they were allowed to do so, I believe by just clicking a box on a computer interface, so really streamlining the dismissal policy. What can we take away from Brian Jacobs' work in Chicago?

Rick:

Well, this comes and relates to the Goldhaber and Theobald piece in two ways. One is that whenever we talk about teacher policies we really have to talk about principal policies too and make sure that the management is up to the task that we want them to deal with.

Secondly, what this says is that principals seem to have a good sense in terms of things we care about, student achievement, of who's doing well and who isn't; and, when given the opportunity, they tend to make decisions that are good for kids.

Marty: So Brian finds, for example, that Chicago principals tend to lay off those teachers who are absent more often, and who had received lower evaluations, even in the context of an evaluation system that doesn't really distinguish very much in terms of teacher effectiveness, and that for those teachers for whom value-added data is available, they also tend to lay off those who are less effective.

I mean, if that's the case now, even given the absence of a rigorous evaluation system, why do we need to invest all this effort into these formal evaluation systems that you started our conversation with today? If principals already know who is effective in the school, if other researchers have shown that parents tend to be able to distinguish among their more effective and least effective teachers, where does the evaluation system fit in?

Rick: Well, I think that not all principals are really up to this, frankly, and what you saw in Chicago was that there were some large variations, where some principals didn't lay off anybody and others were much clearer about whom they wanted to keep and whom they didn't. At the same time, you also have to develop a system that everybody who works in schools thinks is fair. One aspect of a good evaluation system is that it is transparent, it puts the information on the table and allows everybody to see that people are doing this in an objective manner that really counts.

Marty: So in five years, do you think we'll see a very different set of policies related to teacher dismissals in place across American school districts?

Rick: I'm hopeful that we will. Partly this relates to the recent flurry of activity in state legislatures, from Wisconsin that's got all the publicity, but also

Ohio and Pennsylvania, Indiana, and other places where they have started to pay attention to all of these issues.

Marty: They haven't directly focused on these issues in particular as much yet, but you're saying that just by limiting collective bargaining to certain issues, that might provide a way to move forward on this one?

Rick: I think it's two-fold, yes I think that that will help to set the stage for moving forward on evaluations. But more than that, the unions are all of a sudden under huge pressure. Historically they have said 'oh well, we don't want to keep bad teachers in the classroom. We have to have an evaluation system.' And then they put in place a ten-year plan to develop an evaluation system.

Now they see that they have to participate, and I think that is a very healthy thing because I think that they should participate, and given a little pressure on them, I think they can be very useful.

Marty: All right. Well that's all the time we have for today but Rick, thanks again for taking the time to speak with Education Next.

Rick: Well, thanks and thanks for having such good articles.

Marty: All right. Readers can find both the articles we discussed on the web site EducationNext.org. Thanks for your time.

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Both articles appear in the Fall 2011 issue of Education Next.