

Teacher testing

WHERE WE STAND



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Power Vs. Knowledge in St. Louis

Professionalism Under Fire

What should be the response of educators when one of their number does something that is foolish, unprofessional or outrageous? School superintendents have great power under state law, but they have this power not just because someone has to be in charge but because they are supposed to know more about what works in education and how to manage and organize schools in accordance with an accepted knowledge base. In St. Louis, Superintendent Jerome B. Jones last year announced that teachers in the district would be rated unsatisfactory and lose their jobs unless their students reached specific levels of achievement or improvement on standardized achievement tests. According to the experts, these tests cannot be used to measure whether teachers are competent or not or whether they should be retained or dismissed.

The issues involved are technical, but they can be compared to what happens in other professions. If a large percentage of patients do not improve after visiting a given doctor, or even take a turn for the worse, what does this tell us about the quality of the doctor? Not much. Before we could answer that question we would need a good deal of additional information. Did the patient suffer from a disease that a doctor could do something about or was the disease incurable? What course of action did the doctor prescribe? Was it the same that most others would prescribe on the basis of medical knowledge? Or was it unorthodox? Did the patient purchase and take the medicine? Did he rest, stop smoking and follow the special diet?

No one would want to deprive a doctor of the right to practice merely because his patients did not fare well. We would still have to answer the question: Was it the doctor's fault? Did he do everything a good doctor could be expected to do even though the patient was not cured? Similarly in law, there are cases where the lawyer on the losing side did a better job than the lawyer on the winning side. Should a lawyer who loses a certain number in a row or a given percentage be disbarred?

Such a proposal, if it were acted on, would be viewed as foolish, unprofessional or outrageous. In law, as in medicine, it is possible for a professional to do everything that can possibly be done and still lose the case for reasons beyond his control.

In St. Louis, Superintendent Jones just looks at the test scores of the students in a teacher's class. Either the numbers are good or out with the teacher. No one bothers to ask if the teacher did everything possible to help the students. Did the students fail in spite of what the teacher did because they didn't pay attention or do outside reading or homework? Or did a particular teacher just happen to get a group of students who always scored poorly and made very little progress no matter who the teacher or what the educational program was? And what about the home life of the students? Do they have the right kind of supervision by their parents or the appropriate environment for study and homework?

Unlike most leaders in the field of law and medicine, Mr. Jones is not only a professional educator, but, since he has to be elected by the school board to the superintendency, he is also a politician. He will undoubtedly get some cheers and votes for playing to the grandstand with his "Off with their heads!" approach and for pushing the simplistic notion that only results count.

But where is the rest of the profession? Why should the teachers and the teachers' union be left to fight this issue as though it were merely a labor-management dispute? Thousands of principals, superintendents, college professors, researchers, testing experts and their professional organizations should be out on the front line taking a stand and telling the world: "Maybe some of those teachers should be fired. But we need more information, particularly since on all other indices the teachers involved were rated satisfactory by their school principals. But the information that we do have raises grave doubts about the effectiveness of a school administrator who is either unaware of the relevant scholarly knowledge or for some reason chooses to ignore it. In either case, we publicly condemn the St. Louis teacher evaluation procedure as a violation of all accepted professional principles."

Such an action would do much to enhance the legitimacy of school management and also help to attract teachers into a profession in which knowledge counts as against the old-fashioned factory model school system in which all that matters is pure power.