

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM



Photo by Andrea Gabor

Just a few years ago, while teaching at a middle school in the Bronx, David Baiz was given an unsatisfactory rating and targeted for elimination.

So when New York City [published its Teacher Data Reports](#) last week, Baiz, who now teaches at a middle school in Harlem, had reason to be, at the very least, relieved. He was ranked in the 91st percentile, or above average.

But Baiz, 29, knows that neither rating was accurate or useful. The TDRs violate basic rules of statistics because they assume that students are assigned to class rooms on a random basis, which is not the case. They also are riddled with data errors: In the case of Baiz's ratings—he has received two TDRs in his teaching career—while both pegged him as “above average”, they both included likely errors in the value-added portion of his rating, the wrong number of students in his classes and a high likelihood that some of the students included in his assessment may never have been in his class.

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

Baiz's unsatisfactory evaluation, on the other hand, captured his inexperience as a first-year teacher, as well as the effects of a family crisis that impaired his performance; however, the rating did nothing to assess—or foster-- his considerable potential.

Evolution

These days no one who knows Baiz, a math teacher at Global Technology Preparatory in Harlem, would dispute that when education reformers talk about wanting to put a high-quality teacher in every classroom, they are talking about teachers like him. In the three years since he “escaped” the Bronx and joined Global Tech, Baiz has emerged as something of a model teacher. Visitors from around the country have flocked to his classroom to see his innovative approach to mixing online tools and old-fashioned instruction. He has helped win the school thousands of dollars in grants. He won a prestigious Math for America fellowship that comes with a \$15,000-per-year stipend. He also was selected as one of six New York City teachers to be part of the Digital Teacher Corps, a Ford Foundation-funded collaboration among educators, technologists, and designers to develop interactive digital learning tools aimed at improving student engagement and achievement. And his colleagues have voted him as their union representative.

“David is skilled; he’s always moving forward,” says Chrystina Russell, Global Tech’s principal. Virtually every day “he gives 125 percent.”

But Baiz would be the first to admit that his story isn’t about star power. Indeed, Baiz’s experience is a case study in the importance of collaboration and team work in achieving constant improvement both in teaching and in the overall results for kids. It is also an object lesson in how both TDRs and traditional teacher evaluations can serve to undermine those goals.

Collaboration

Indeed, a [recent study](#) by Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, *Collaborating on School Reform*, shows that contrary to popular practice and the dictates of many corporate education reformers, the secret to long-term improvement for teachers, schools and students is “substantive collaboration” at all levels—from the classroom to administration to unions. Developing quality teachers, says Saul Rubinstein, an associate professor at Rutgers and one of the authors of the study is about “mentoring, sharing instructional practice, collaborating.” The problem with

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

traditional accountability measures, such as TDRs and punitive performance appraisals, is that they “de-professionalize teaching,” says Rubinstein. The best systems are those that “help teachers succeed.”

Or, as W. Edwards Deming, the quality guru once said, putting the blame for poor performance squarely at the feet of management: There are only two reasons for having deadwood—either you hired deadwood or you hired live wood and you killed it.

Baiz’s story begins at MS 004 in the Bronx—a school from which Global Tech recruited several teachers. Baiz, then-23, was assigned to teach both seventh- and eighth-grade math—an overwhelming assignment for a first-year teacher because it required getting to know two different cohorts of students and to develop two different lesson plans. Weeks into the start of his job, Baiz’s 16-year-old sister was in a catastrophic car accident. Baiz, feeling that “his family needed him,” began making trips back home to Ohio. He was deeply depressed both by what had happened to his sister--she continues to suffer from severe brain injury--and what he and colleagues have describe as a hostile atmosphere at MS 004.

Baiz admits that he was frequently absent that year for which he may have deserved to get a “U” rating.

What happened next is what made the difference not only to keeping Baiz in the teaching profession and helping him excel, but also in building a collaborative school that has fostered a culture of improvement for both teachers and kids. A handful of his more experienced colleagues who had observed Baiz, both in the class room and giving math presentations to the faculty, saw his potential and made a case for keeping him at the school; but Baiz was convinced that his days were numbered. For one thing, the assistant principal who remained determined to get rid of him, was promoted to principal. “He had a hostile administration looking to get rid of him,” says Jackie Pryce-Harvey, a veteran special-education teacher who also worked at MS 004 at the time. “He didn’t stand a chance.”

A Fresh Start

At about the same time, Pryce-Harvey was in the process of persuading her friend, Chrystina Russell, to start a new school, which would eventually become Global Tech. Pryce-Harvey, now Global Tech’s assistant-principal-in-training, recruited Baiz to start working on the planning process. Soon a team of teachers was gathering at Pryce-Harvey’s Harlem brownstone for regular Sunday brunches and, without pay or even the certainty that they would be hired, laying

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

the groundwork for the new school. Russell and her kitchen cabinet poured over budgets and resumes; they developed curricula and a technology strategy for Global Tech, which is a one-to-one laptop school; and they fine-tuned criteria for recruiting teachers.

At Global Tech, which is about to graduate its first eighth-grade class, team-work and collaboration is at the crux of Russell's efforts to create a holistic system intended to provide support, in ways large and small, for its students, the majority of whom are poor — Global Tech is a universal [Title I](#) school — and almost all of whom are black or Latino. Baiz teamed up with Valerie Miller, the language teacher who is experimenting with the best ways to use online foreign-language tools, and got a \$10,000 grant to develop digital portfolios for the kids. To conserve funds at the school, Russell's team decided not to hire a dedicated technologist; instead, for the first two years, Baiz agreed to serve as unofficial tech guru working with several teachers to hone their technology skills. Global Tech teachers mentor the teachers-in-training who work for Citizens Schools, the after-school program that Russell sponsors at Global Tech to make sure that kids are off the street until at least 6 p.m. and get homework help and some enrichment. Teachers also collaborate to support the 28 percent of Global Tech students certified as needing special education; Global Tech has moved almost all of them into so-called CTT (Collaborative Team Teaching) classes, where teams of teachers work on everything from students' special educational needs to helping them with organization skills. The clear expectation is that by the time students graduate eighth grade, most would be able to function in a regular class.

And the teachers routinely work together on initiatives aimed at helping the kids beyond core academics. These include the Saturday test-prep classes the school holds in the weeks before standardized tests, as well as taking the eighth graders to high-school open houses on the weekends, because many of their parents are unable—due to language problems or other issues—to help their children with the high-school application process.

Making the Grade

The results have been impressive. In math, the school ranks in the 84th percentile among all city middle schools. Close to 60 percent of Global Tech students achieved a 3 or 4 in math, the two top levels. And Global Tech, received an A on its latest annual progress report and ranks in the 95 percentile of New York City middle schools. Moreover, virtually everyone loves the school; on its most recent Learning Environment Survey, Global Tech scored well over 90 percent on almost every measure of parent, teacher and student satisfaction. In addition, all Global Tech students who completed the high-school application process have been accepted to a high school, many to their first-choice school.

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

By contrast, MS 004, Baiz's alma mater, did far worse on its most recent report card. In math, it ranked in the 58th percentile among city middle schools. Only 44 percent of students achieved a 3 or 4 in math. And the school got a C on its report card. While parent satisfaction at the school was high—over 90 percent in all categories, teacher satisfaction ranged from 46 percent to 83 percent; in response to the statement, "School leaders invite teachers to play a meaningful role in setting goals and making important decisions", only 64 percent of MS 004 teachers agreed.

Start at the Top

How did the difference in management culture between the two schools impact Baiz? "It's so much easier to meet the needs of my students," says Baiz of his experience at Global Tech. The school, he says "is more open to experimentation—it's more willing to bring in technology and new ideas. I don't have to worry about watching my back. I don't have to worry about documenting every little thing. I feel less stress on the job. I don't have a pit in my stomach every morning. It's a collaborative relationship."

Meanwhile, Russell focuses on constantly improving the performance of her teachers. She embraces the Kim Marshall-method of mini-observations, visiting classrooms frequently and giving teachers quick feedback on what they are doing well and where they need to improve. The number-one to-do for Baiz: Improve the pacing of his classes so he doesn't have to rush at the end, which is hardest on the special education students. As part of the formal teacher-evaluation process, she has teachers observe and critique each other; at periodic meetings, teachers present lesson plans and teaching strategies and discuss ways to improve their practice.

Nor does Global Tech's approach go easy on teachers who don't perform up to par. A year ago Russell gave one of her teachers an "Unsatisfactory" because she was habitually tardy, often raised her voice with the kids and didn't seem comfortable teaching social studies. But Russell didn't write her off; as she has done with a few other teachers who have struggled, Russell helped the teacher improve her performance. For one thing, when one of the kids told Russell that after attending a Saturday test-prep class with the u-rated teacher, he finally understood what a thesis statement was, Russell sat in on her next test-prep session. Russell was so impressed by what she saw that, for the following year, Russell scheduled the teacher to teach ELA, the subject in which she is certified.

The results, says Russell, have been transformational. She has discovered that the once u-rated teacher had a gift for teaching ELA. "She blows me away; she is doing a phenomenal job," says Russell who lauds the teacher both for masterful teaching techniques that have helped her students grasp the subject, and for "building great relationships" with the kids.

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

Russell also views her job as one of protecting her teachers from the constantly shifting mandates of the education bureaucracy. "So you get your central mandates of whatever stuff you have to do for the year, plus the principal is going to decide whatever thing they're going to do. So teachers just never are shielded from the newest thing is."

While Global Tech has had the luxury of hand-picking its teachers, evidence suggests that a collaborative and consistent approach to management can achieve similar results in larger long-standing schools and school-districts. Collaboration and consistency are the key themes of the Rutgers study.

Success Story

Similarly, one of the most impressive turnarounds in the country was [accomplished at Brockton High](#), the largest high school in MA, which, like Global Tech, teaches students who are poor, African-American or Latino.

Significantly, the transformation was accomplished by the very same teachers who worked at the school when it was failing

. Under the leadership of a veteran Brockton history teacher, who became the school's principal almost a decade ago, Brockton has developed an inclusive teacher-driven approach to improvement and an obsessive focus on literacy that is now over 12-years old. In 1998—75 percent of Brockton's students

failed

the state tests in math and 44 percent failed English. On the most recent tests, in 2011, 87 percent of students

passed

math and 94 percent passed English. Today close to 90 percent of Brockton's graduates are college bound, estimates Susan Szachowicz, the principal. And, for seven years, Brockton High has been designated a "model school" by the

[International Center for Leadership in Education](#)

.
At Global Tech, where the faculty is much younger, Russell has instituted a long-term career planning process in which she encourages teachers to set out their long-term goals. "If I expect them to move the kids forward," says Russell. "I have to be willing to move them forward."

Today, several Global Tech teachers, including Baiz and Jhonary Bridgemohan, an ELA

When Making a Great Teacher is a Team Effort

by Andrea Gabor

Monday, March 05, 2012 12:00 AM

teacher and another MS 004 alum, have enrolled in principal training programs. As Russell sees it, she is helping teachers reach their potential and making sure they stay in the system. She is also helping to train her own successor, in case she ever leaves or is fired (the pressures on principals, these days, are akin to those of teachers); Russell says Baiz, whom she “pegged as a potential principal” from the start, is at the top of that list.

As for those TDRs: Bridgemohan, Baiz’s long-time colleague who sometimes rubs parents the wrong way because of her no-nonsense approach to discipline and academics, wonders why the TDRs were released just before parent-teacher conferences. But for her and Baiz—Bridgemohan was also rated “above average”—she says: “It sure made those conferences easier.” Bridgemohan adds, wryly, that she couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to meet with the parents if the numbers hadn’t looked good.