Narrowing the gap between teacher-student performance

By Kristen Wilcox and Janet Angelis

A great deal has been made recently about the gap between student achievement levels, as measured by the new Common Core-aligned state assessments, and teacher and principal ratings under the new Annual Professional Performance Review. How, Gov. Andrew Cuomo asks, can we have only 1 percent of teachers in the state rated as ineffective when two-thirds of students are rated as barely proficient?

He might find part of the answer if he were to look into the extent to which educators have been supported to learn and practice the new knowledge and skills they need to narrow that gap. The Common Core and new APPR system are just two years old, and they are only two in a package of three major innovations educators have been asked to learn and adopt simultaneously.

As part of its successful bid for a $7 million federal Race to the Top grant, New York also included a requirement that teachers employ something called data-driven instruction, or DDI. Just as the new APPR requires that teachers and principals be evaluated using performance indicators such as student test scores on Common Core-aligned assessments, DDI requires that educators monitor and measure student learning so that they can direct programs and practices, including instruction, to best meet individual student and classroom needs.

Together these three innovations — Common Core Standards, APPR and DDI — are intended to transform K-12 schools from a 19th-century, industrial-age model to an adaptive, evaluation-driven 21st-century learning organization. Sounds like a grand plan, but for most teachers, principals, parents and students, even one of these innovations, let alone all three, represents a major change. Asking them to undertake all three at once can result in an innovation overload, causing those experiencing it to lose what you might call their magnetic north — their sense of “This is where we are headed and we know why.”

Until that new direction is established and educators have the chance to develop the competencies to adapt to the required changes, and thus know how to get on the path toward what is considered a successful outcome for their work, fear, frustration, and anger are exactly what one would expect. One can also expect a lag — even a dip — in student performance levels as teachers and administrators master new knowledge and skills.

Although DDI has received relatively less attention than the Common Core or APPR, it sits at the center of the pathway forward. When educators become clear on their overall target — all students completing high school prepared for the workplace or postsecondary education without needing academic remediation — and receive the support they need to develop the competencies to undertake data-driven instruction, they are able to find and navigate the path forward, using both the Common Core Standards and APPR to structure their work.

Using a ship metaphor, DDI is the rudder and the keel that enable educators to stabilize and direct the ship toward successful adoption and implementation of other innovations. As we have learned in our research of odds-beating schools (those whose students outperform their peers) and our work with school leadership teams, DDI capacities and competencies function as an essential feature that marks the difference between schools that are sinking and those that are sailing through the tumultuous waters of the Race to the Top innovations. Only when educators have had enough time and support to master all three innovations can we expect major gains in student achievement and a narrowing of the apparent teacher-student performance gap.

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