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**WHITE PAPER:**  
**Expanding Effective Classroom**  
**Instruction to Improve Student**  
**Learning**

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## Motivation is not the problem

In the wake of the announcement by Mark Zuckerberg, Chief Executive and Founder of Facebook, that he will donate \$100 million to one of the nation's worst performing school districts—Newark, NJ—questions have arisen about the use of such a noteworthy donation. The problems that plague Newark parallel issues afflicting America's school system as a whole: low high school graduation rates, a high need for remedial classes for students attending college, and lack of clarity on what defines and how to scale-up effective teaching practices.

Merit pay and teacher evaluations, increasingly at the center of the state and national dialogue on school reform, have surfaced within Newark as the district explores changes it will implement with a donation one-eighth the size of its total district education budget.

The assumption behind merit pay is that most teachers already know how to teach effectively, but are simply choosing not to. A conversation with virtually any school teacher quickly dispels the hypothesis that motivation is the problem. The reality is that not all teachers teach effectively because not all know how.

Thus merit pay alone lacks the substance to fundamentally improve student outcomes. Similar to many common reforms including one-to-one technology, reducing class sizes, and increasing testing, merit pay fails to directly address teaching practice – the manner in which teachers engage students in meaningful lessons centered on the content they are expected to master. The degree to which any of these trendy education reforms will impact student outcomes is likely directly related to the extent to which the new efforts impact teaching in the classroom.

## Our greatest opportunity

A focus on improving teacher effectiveness remains the greatest opportunity to profoundly impact student learning in every classroom across the country. The past two decades of education research have established the impact of the “teacher effect,” which demonstrates that several contiguous years of effective teachers in the early grades can bring most students to grade level, even those who started far behind their peers. This and related research confirms that effective school reform efforts must be laser-focused on improving instruction.

Despite a clearly identified objective, the path to increasing teacher effectiveness is not simple; it requires structural changes to the ways in which districts, schools, and classrooms function. As currently conceived, teaching is a largely solitary endeavor that offers few opportunities for peer observation or focused collaboration, particularly on the topic of effective instruction.

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Feedback is infrequent and more focused on affirmation than improvement. In short, teachers spend most of their time in their individual classrooms and rarely have the opportunity to assess their effectiveness, explore best practices, or collaborate on areas of improvement. Effective reforms require a cultural shift that redefines how teachers work together and allows for best practices to be more readily shared within and across schools. Leveraging the effective teachers that already exist in every district is the logical starting point for this endeavor.

### Allocating resources

To support this reform, resources should be reallocated to share and model best instructional strategies in staff meetings instead of disseminating information, and to open up classrooms so peer observation becomes a mainstay and fundamental piece of every teacher’s professional development. Resources focused on teacher collaboration can be better leveraged to ensure that conversations are moving the needle on effective instruction, rather than simply adding prep or grading time. Additionally, college education departments have a largely unmet responsibility for providing preparation that places emphasis on best practices and the use of data (including student work and classroom observation) to inform instruction so that beginning teachers immediately utilize effective methods and know how to improve on those methods throughout their careers.

The energy of the debate, a testament to the passion stakeholders have for our children and their education, can be more fruitful if we use it as an opportunity to focus our attention on the desired outcome: improving student learning through more effective instruction. While merit pay has many positive attributes and may prove helpful in reaching that ultimate goal, it in and of itself is insufficient to facilitate wide-scale improvements in instruction. Rethinking teacher preparation programs to this end, systematically addressing the “closed classroom,” and improving the quantity and quality of collaboration that exists in the profession is required to profoundly improve instructional practices. A failure to do so shortchanges the professionalism of teaching and the education of our children.

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#### About Education Direction:

Education Direction is a school reform consultation firm that specializes in data-informed school improvement ([www.EdDirection.com](http://www.EdDirection.com)).

Education Direction partners with over 50 LEAs in the U.S. and abroad on strategic planning, professional development, and school turnaround.