Educators and policymakers across the United States want to place effective teachers into all classrooms and effective principals into all schools. But only recently have those efforts become strategic.

UW–Madison education professor Allan Odden and colleagues collaborate with administrators and policymakers across the nation to make talent management more effective.

Odden explains that a “strategic” approach means a district or school manages all its human resource programs based on a set of effectiveness metrics that capture instructional practice and student-learning growth. This approach covers teacher and principal recruitment, selection, placement, development, evaluation, tenure, promotion, dismissal, and compensation. Strategic systems aim to ensure that only effective teachers and principals are recruited, tenured, retained, and well-compensated. This is particularly important in urban and poor rural communities.

Odden says this holistic view of strategic talent management results in part from recent, ambitious federal and state policies and rapidly changing local practices.

As recently as a dozen years ago it was rare for a teacher or principal evaluation to seriously address what teachers or principals should know and be able to perform, let alone assess evidence of impact on student learning.

Teacher and principal promotion into positions of leadership or practice depended primarily on years of experience. Pay scales did not necessarily align with effectiveness.

No state law specified the evidence on which tenure should be based. Few, if any, local school districts had rigorous guidelines for awarding or denying tenure. As a result, most teachers received tenure after 2 to 4 years on the job, however effective or ineffective they were.

Without evaluation systems that could gauge the quality or effectiveness of teachers and principals, there was little evidence on which to deny tenure or to dismiss staff. The dismissal process was usually costly and rarely successful.

There was wide acknowledgement of poor teacher quality in many urban school systems. The common view was that schools and districts with high concentrations of students from poor and ethnic minority backgrounds simply could not attract the best and brightest teachers and administrators.

(continued on page 3...)
For nine years, I have been privileged to write to you as WCER director. My term is ending on August 31 and I will be moving to a new position as president of the William T. Grant Foundation.

Much has transpired over the past nine years, for research at WCER and for education policy throughout the nation. On the national scene, we have witnessed the rise and decline of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and yet test-based accountability is still with us, as state waivers have relaxed key NCLB provisions. NCLB had the virtue of focusing attention on achievement inequalities and of driving educators to seek new approaches to boost student learning. It also had many flaws, some of which are addressed by the state waivers and other federal programs; perhaps most important, new policies require states to hold schools accountable for how much students learn over time instead of for achievement at a single point in time. The emergence of the Common Core State Standards in reading and mathematics and the Next Generation Science Standards is another major development that may set the foundation for more meaningful assessments of student performance.

Assessment is an area in which federal policy and WCER research are closely intertwined. The Value-Added Research Center, based at WCER, has made pioneering contributions to the statistical methodology and application of value-added achievement models to identifying the contributions of schools and teachers to student learning. WCER is also home to the WIDA Consortium, which provides standards based assessments of the English language proficiency of English language learners — as well as other services that support classroom learning — to its 32 member states. Thanks to a recent $10 million Enhanced Assessment grant, WIDA will soon offer a new, 21st century assessment tied to the Common Core State Standards.

As federal agencies began to demand stronger evidence to back up causal claims in studies of education programs, WCER responded by developing greater capacity to undertake such research. Many of our largest projects now involve randomized field trials, including cluster-randomized studies that implement educational interventions at the district, school, or classroom level. To prepare a new generation of researchers able to identify “what works” in education, WCER operates a graduate training program funded by the Institute of Education Sciences called the Interdisciplinary Training Program in Education Sciences. At the same time, WCER researchers have continued to pursue research using mixed methods and interpretive approaches, ensuring that WCER embraces a diverse range of methodological tools.

Although most of WCER’s research portfolio covers K-12 education, the last decade has seen increasing attention to postsecondary education at WCER. Prominent current studies include research on enhancing postsecondary access and success for low-income students; creating equitable learning environments in higher education; and improving the quality of undergraduate STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education by preparing graduate students to be effective teachers when they move into faculty positions. (The latter theme has been the focus of our NSF-funded Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL), and I am delighted that CIRTL director and professor of astronomy Robert Mathieu will take the helm of WCER as my successor.)

STEM education has long been a prominent theme in WCER research. While we have a particularly rich history of research on mathematics education, and that will continue, the School of Education has recently hired a young cadre of science education scholars, and this will be an area to watch in the future. Also keep an eye out for changes at our Center on Education and Work, which is revitalizing with a new emphasis on STEM education and the workforce. Other exciting new developments at WCER are likely to emerge in areas such as education and technology, educational equity and the achievement gap, and researcher-practitioner partnerships.

In 2004, WCER’s annual expenditures had just exceeded $25 million. In 2013, we will spend close to $50 million. This expansion reflects new opportunities and discoveries that enhance our understanding of education in our state, nation, and increasingly world-wide. Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of directing WCER has been the chance to support young scholars whose innovative research has led them to become leaders in their fields. The names of these scholars are familiar to readers of this newsletter, as reports of their research regularly grace its pages. Thanks to its new leaders and strong resource base, WCER is well positioned to continue its success long into the future.

Adam Gamoran
WCER Director
Professor, Sociology and Educational Policy Studies
RESEARCH highlights

In a few instances school systems began “reconstituting” low-performing schools by changing the people in them. But reconstitution largely ignored the system that had allowed the school to have such ineffective educator talent in the first place.

Odden points to the success of Teach For America and The New Teacher Project in recruiting top talent into the nation’s school systems, particularly in urban and rural districts. These programs recruit and select bright people with high potential, even though they lack traditional teacher preparation.

About a dozen years ago Odden and staff at the UW–Madison branch of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) began hosting conferences and seminars to share knowledge about designing new approaches to teacher compensation. Teachers had to buy in to these approaches, and so they were vetted by the two national teacher unions.

Odden and CPRE staff showed how metrics could shape new teacher salary structures that would provide major pay increases when a teacher’s instructional practice met the standards of a higher level of performance.

With colleague Jim Kelley, Odden created the Strategic Management of Human Capital Task Force, which included elected officials and educators from several states.

Odden says strategic initiatives will succeed if they:

- make the new evaluation systems affordable;
- ensure that teacher evaluation scores are set at rigorous levels to accurately identify the most effective and most ineffective teachers;
- establish tough requirements for entering the teaching profession; and
- embed the system in an effective school-improvement strategy linked to the new Common Core State Standards Initiative.

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS:

Ten to 20 percent of teachers have extraordinary impacts on student achievement; another 10 to 20 percent produce anemic impacts; most have modest impacts.

EFFECTIVE PRINCIPALS:

The manage schools in ways that facilitate teachers’ acquiring the instructional expertise they need to make them, and the school, more effective in boosting student learning.

(Kelley is the founding president of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.) With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Ford, Gates, and Joyce Foundations, the Task Force worked to place on the nation’s education agenda a strategic approach to education talent management.

Today about 40 states and the District of Columbia are designing, piloting, or implementing new teacher and principal evaluation systems. The two national teachers unions are working to move these reforms forward. The National Education Association now encourages districts and states to design new systems that use student test scores in teacher evaluation. The American Federation of Teachers works with many local districts to design talent-management reforms. These include using student achievement data to inform teacher placement, promotion, tenure, and compensation.

This approach seeks to transform traditional back-office “personnel administration” activities into strategic human-capital-management systems, aligned around metrics that assess instructional effectiveness and student-learning growth, the twin goals of today’s education system. The latter is the prime goal; the former is the means to that goal.

Odden emphasizes, however, that the improvement process, not the evaluation system, should drive education actions. Evaluation must determine whether the improvement process works.

Allan Odden
Innovation Might Save Higher Education

Colleges and universities risk becoming obsolete. They risk becoming indistinguishable from for-profit certificate programs. They risk becoming adjuncts of private R&D labs unless they recommit to the goals of cultivating the mind, preparing young adults for citizenship and critical thinking, and insisting on the importance of basic research, independent of marketplace pressures.

UW–Madison education professor Clifton Conrad laments what is too often the “default” purpose of a college education: stuffing students with knowledge to prepare them for their first job, thus creating “workplace commodities.”

Higher education increasingly is shaped by two powerful market forces: one demands graduates who are prepared for the current workforce, the other pressures university researchers to create products and services for sale in the global economy.

An education that focuses primarily on the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant to the current workplace does not prepare students to adapt to the constant change and global influences in the new century, Conrad says.

He notes that market forces have already transformed four institutions, arguably to their detriment: health care, news media, farming, and the mortgage industry. He would hate to see higher education go down the same path.

In the last several years, Conrad has turned his attention to exploring models of success and innovation in minority-serving institutions. With funding from the Lumina Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and USA Funds, Conrad and colleague Mary Beth Gasman (University of Pennsylvania) are studying programs and practices that are cultivating student success at minority-serving institutions, focusing on student retention, learning, and degree attainment.

The institutions they are studying include 3 historically black colleges and universities, 3 Hispanic-serving institutions, 3 tribal colleges and universities, and 3 institutions serving Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Conrad and Gasman have conducted field visits to all 12 institutions. They are writing a book about what the nation’s colleges and universities can learn from them about advancing the learning and graduation of traditionally underserved students—including minority, low-income, and first-generation students.

That’s why he and colleague Laura Dunek wrote the recent book *Cultivating Inquiry-Driven Learners: A College Education for the Twenty-First Century*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

Conrad and Dunek write that colleges and universities ought to prepare students to creatively engage real world-challenges, such as poverty, population growth, inequitable class structures, environmental challenges, mercurial changes in technology, and dynamically changing political, social, economic, and personal relationships.

In other words, higher education ought to cultivate inquiry-driven learners—graduates who can pursue ideas for successfully navigating the world of the 21st century and flourish in the public and private domains of their lives.

Having examined a range of institutions and initiatives across the United States, Conrad and Dunek identified practices for educating inquiry-driven learners at research universities and in small liberal arts colleges. These innovations reflect a range of disciplines, programmatic areas, and transferable practices for developing inquiry-driven learners across the curriculum and across the nation’s colleges and universities.

**Inquiry-driven learners possess four signature qualities:**

1. critical thinking skills,
2. expertise in divergent modes of inquiry,
3. effective communication skills, and
4. core qualities of mind, including the ability to explore ideas with enthusiasm, meet challenges with resilience, embrace ownership in the pursuit of ideas, question one’s extant knowledge and authorities, engage in spirited dialogue and collaboration, and commit to inquiry on behalf of self, society, and humanity.

[Innovation Might Save Higher Education]
Social Capital Influences Student Success

Test scores of Hispanic students lag far behind those of non-Hispanic Whites. The gap has shown little sign of narrowing since the 1980s.

Hispanic families often feel isolated from their local schools. Several studies have noted that this isolation creates a barrier to Hispanic children’s school success.

Although Hispanic families tend to have strong kinship networks, their social ties often do not encompass the school and other authority systems. As a result, Hispanic families may have less access to social capital, that is, the relations of trust and shared expectations that foster the flow of relevant information and support social norms that contribute to children’s academic and social development.

To study the role of social capital in child development, UW–Madison professor Adam Gamoran and colleagues studied schools in two cities with large Hispanic populations: San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona.

The study measured the effects of changes in social capital using a program called Families and Schools Together (FAST). FAST was developed at UW–Madison by Dr. Lynn McDonald, a professor of social work. The multifamily afterschool program enhances relations among families, between parents and schools, and between parents and children, through a sequence of structured activities over 8 weekly sessions. Its effectiveness has been scientifically tested and documented, and, over the years, FAST has grown into a national and international network of local sites.

The FAST program is typically implemented in three stages: (1) active outreach to engage parents, (2) eight successive weeks of multifamily group meetings, and (3) two years of monthly parent-led meetings. Weekly meetings involve a sequence of research-based activities that help parents develop an active social network, get to know and trust one another, and be more likely to return to the school for other events.

In the first year of their study, Gamoran and colleagues recruited 24 schools, assigning 12 to participate in FAST and 12 to serve as control, or comparison, schools. San Antonio and Phoenix were selected because both have social service agencies experienced in implementing FAST and because they have high

The salience of inequality between Hispanic and White families will increase in the years to come, not only because Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnic minority group in the United States but also because their population is significantly younger. Constituting approximately 15% of the total U.S. population, the Hispanic population grew by about 57% between 1990 and 2000, whereas the total U.S. population increased by only 13% during that time. If current levels of educational disadvantage remain as the Hispanic population expands, then an increasing fraction of the U.S. population will be insufficiently prepared for work and civic life. The problem is not one for the Hispanic community alone, but for society as a whole. Without effective intervention, many of these children will grow up to reproduce the disadvantages of their parents.
proportions of Hispanic families. San Antonio and Phoenix are the nation’s fastest-growing cities with populations of one million or more, and about 60% of students in both cities are Hispanic.

The study found a number of substantial differences in child outcomes for children who participated in FAST, relative to those in the comparison schools.

1. From the parents’ perspective, mean differences in child behavior between treatment and control schools were small. Some teacher-reported differences, however, were noticeably larger. In particular, teachers reported that peer problems were greater in control schools than in treatment schools.

2. The study found notably stronger FAST effects in Phoenix than in San Antonio, for both teacher and parent reports of child behavior. In general, positive social skills showed few differences based on the number of FAST sessions attended, but behavioral difficulties were lower among the children of families that attended more sessions. One possible explanation for differences between cities is that program impacts are greater in a less-settled community, and Phoenix’s Hispanic population includes a large proportion of recent immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, while San Antonio’s Hispanic population has fewer recent immigrants. It is also possible that implementation occurred with a higher quality of fidelity in Phoenix than in San Antonio.

3. At the start of the study, Hispanics in a Spanish-speaking subgroup had stronger parent networks than did Whites and English-speaking Hispanics. FAST’s ability to boost parent network strength pertained largely to Whites, which seems to indicate that FAST helps the group that starts out behind to catch up to other groups.

4. Among parents in San Antonio, for the group of Hispanics with a Spanish language background, FAST boosted parent-school staff communication much higher than for parents from other groups. This result is especially noteworthy because, prior to FAST, Hispanic respondents generally had weaker relations with school staff than did Whites. This again appears to show FAST’s impact in helping groups lagging behind to catch up.

Effects Vary

When programs like FAST are implemented in different locations and different conditions, results will vary. Variance is acceptable, as long as the program accomplishes its major goals.

That was the case in this study. The overall benefits of FAST were larger in Phoenix, where the program led to higher levels of social capital and improved child outcomes. Effects were more pronounced for Whites than for either group of Hispanics, especially for parent relationships.

Gamoran says the possibility of differential effects by ethnic groups has important implications. On the one hand, an intervention that boosts social capital may benefit Hispanic children. On the other hand, if the benefits are greater for Whites, as may be the case for several outcomes, then this social-capital-building intervention may do little to reduce inequality between Hispanic and White children in the United States.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 68% of Hispanic adults have high school diplomas, compared to 94% for Whites. Hispanics are three times as likely as Whites to live in poverty. Mexican Americans, who make up 59% of the Hispanic population, are particularly disadvantaged economically.

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Adapted from “Differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic families in social capital and child development: First-year findings from an experimental study,” Adam Gamoran, Ruth N. López Turley, Alyn Turner, and Rachel Fish. Research in Social Stratification and Mobility; 30 (2012); 97–112. Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
Grade Inflation? Probably Not.

Grades are the fundamental currency of our education system. They signal academic achievement and student effort to parents, admissions officials, and prospective employers.

Over the years some educators and news stories have lamented “grade inflation.” They argue that grade point averages keep rising even while schools demand less from students than ever before. They conclude that grades no longer provide useful information to or about students because of a growing mismatch between student achievement and grades awarded.

WCER researcher Eric Grodsky cautions that this is a misperception. Grodsky’s research examines trends in grade averages over several decades at the high school and college levels. He says it’s important to think about grades in a more multifaceted way, by considering what he calls their “signaling power,” that is, a grade’s ability to provide information to and about students.

In recent research* Grodsky and colleagues Evangeleen Pattison and Chandra Muller (University of Texas) studied grades awarded at high schools and colleges from 1972 to 2004. Their analyses of these nationally representative samples showed that, in the decades following 1972, grades did rise at high schools but dropped at 4-year colleges, particularly at “selective” 4-year institutions, which are those that Barron’s ranked as “highly competitive” or “most competitive.”

But even an upward trend in mean grades awarded does not in itself imply devaluation, Grodsky says, and the signaling power of grades has weakened little, if at all.

Grodsky, Pattison and Muller reached that conclusion by examining the relations between shifts in mean grades, the distribution of grades, relation of grades to achievement test scores, and students’ occupational outcomes.

Their study constructed high school GPA by weighting core academic course grades (reading, math, science, and social studies) by the number of credits students earned in each course. The study constructed 4-year college GPA by weighting course grades by the number of credits students earned in each course. The GPAs were then compared with achievement test scores and to student reports of effort.

Students’ postsecondary outcomes were measured with attention to (a) attending a 4-year college within 2 years of expected high school graduation date, (b) attending a selective 4-year college, and (c) completing a baccalaureate degree within 8.5 years of expected high school graduation date. “Occupational outcomes” included the prestige of the respondent’s most recent occupation and his or her logged annual earnings. (For details about their methods see “Is the Sky Falling?” cited below.)

Grodsky and colleagues found that connections among student grades, test scores, and student effort remained consistently robust for the cohorts of high school seniors observed (1982, 1992, and 2004). If anything, the relation between test scores and high school grades may have become stronger over time, particularly between 1982 and 1992.

Although the study cannot say with certainty that the signaling power of grades has increased, the results fail to support the thesis that high school grades have lost signaling power in the decades following 1982.

The study found mixed evidence regarding the ability of grades at selective 4-year colleges to serve as accurate signals about students. The association between selective 4-year college GPA and occupational prestige declined slightly over the time period examined, whereas the association between selective 4-year college GPA and logged earnings remained relatively stable.

Grodsky sympathizes with the argument that educational institutions should perhaps award A’s less readily and should hold students to a higher standard. But he cautions that his study does not, and cannot, purport to identify an ideal relationship among grades, achievement test scores, and occupational outcomes; those are value judgments.

In any case, Grodsky does not see any reason to believe that grading standards are any different now than they were 40 years ago.


Eric Grodsky