



Meeting Bill Gates at the ECS Policy Forum

It was fascinating to hear from Bill Gates at the ECS Education Policy conference held in Atlanta this summer. His foundation, which he runs with his wife Melinda, is, of course, well known for its work with numerous national educational projects. Mr. Gates addressed the entire conference to deliver a keynote address entitled "Stakes in the Ground: Some Guiding Principles for High-Quality Teacher Support."

He also requested to meet privately with the state Teachers of the Year later in the day during a breakout session; his main interest was to get our feedback of current evaluation practices being implemented and to ask teachers what we felt were the best professional development resources.

Here are some of the main points made which I recorded in notes taken during the keynote and smaller group meeting for your consideration:

Mr. Gates suggested that teacher evaluations must be based on multiple measures. Test scores alone are never sufficient for evaluation. "Student achievement has to be part of evaluation" but using test scores as a sole measure has huge drawbacks. He went on to assert that test results come out too late for teachers to do much about it. From his work, he has discovered that standardized tests are not very diagnostic about what teachers do well and that we cannot assume gaps are caused by teacher failure.

Mr. Gates suggests that there are three main measures of a good teacher evaluation system. These are: Classroom Observations, Student Surveys, and Testing Data.

We need to have a strong connection between evaluations and professional learning opportunities offered. Peer review can help with this and can get a stronger result. Sometimes peers are tougher, more accurate assessors of other teachers' performance because we know the content and pedagogy well.

Having teachers review video of their teaching to identify strengths and weaknesses, like athletes who review tape to figure out how to improve, is a very smart strategy.

Connected to his interest in ensuring a quality educator in every class room across the United States, Mr. Gates is "very excited about the CCSS." He suggests that the standards in ELA are looking back and identifying how kids cannot go back to text and identify key elements of meaning- "substantial step forward towards what should be taught."

Moving to CCSS is not about creating a national curriculum but rather about having great goals. CCSS will create advantage where all the innovators will be able to apply tools to entire country- IE game software to teach key concepts based on Common Core.

With CCSS and assessment data, teachers will get additional feedback on students' progress. Fragmented standards that differ state to state have made this opportunity impossible.

"We are on the verge of a new era"- the next five years will be pivotal in America's public schools. Getting the peer response meaningfully embedded in the process is a big investment of money and resources but can pay dividends in student achievement.