

Committee on Education and Labor:
Teacher Equity: Effective Teachers for All Children
Comments by L. Avila

- Good morning. My name is Layla Avila. I am Vice President of The New Teacher Project, a national nonprofit dedicated to ending the injustice of educational inequality by ensuring that poor and minority students get outstanding teachers. The New Teacher Project was founded by teachers in 1997 to help school districts and states solve their teacher quality challenges.
- Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee about how to ensure ALL children have highly effective teachers. As we all know from our own lives as well as a growing body of research, teachers have a greater impact on student learning than any other school factor.
- The New Teacher Project helps school districts with issues of teacher effectiveness by developing scalable solutions: we recruit and certify teachers and we design reforms for policies that prevent school districts from giving poor and minority children access to great teachers.
- Today, we work with some of the highest need districts across the country. We find and train great teachers for schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn; West Oakland, California; Englewood in Chicago; the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, and many other struggling communities.
- In the last 12 years, we have recruited or trained more than 33,000 teachers, who have touched the lives of an estimated 4.2 million students.
- But I also bring my own experience today: my experience as a daughter of immigrants who grew up poor and was raised by a single, disabled mother in East Los Angeles.
- Growing up, I remember hearing that not much should be expected of me as I didn't have a father, and I was a girl.
- And if you look at outcomes in the local schools, the odds were stacked against me; in my neighborhood anywhere from 1 in 3 to 1 in 2 students dropped out of high school

- Despite very challenging circumstances, I was able to attend both Columbia and Harvard. And I have absolutely no doubt that I owe my success to a succession of highly-effective teachers. They include Ms. Simmers, who taught me Algebra in the 6th grade and to Mr. Mitchell, who told me at age 13 that I would attend a prep school and have my pick of colleges.
- My teachers put me on a different path in life. They inspired me to become a teacher myself, in Compton, CA, and then to dedicate my career to education.
- The problem is that my story is an exception. I was one of the lucky ones.
- In a system where we treat teachers like interchangeable parts, millions of kids do not get teachers who can give them a fair shot at a better future. And it shouldn't be that way. There should be tens of thousands of students like me.
- We all know how much teachers matter. They lift kids like me out of poverty. They change lives every day. They are the subject of tributes and speeches, and testimony like this.
- But as our recent report, *The Widget Effect*, showed, our actions do not match our words. In school systems across the country, we are largely indifferent to teacher effectiveness.
- With *The Widget Effect*, we asked this question: If we believe teachers are so important, why don't we act like it?
- The underlying reason is because teachers are treated like widgets, as though one teacher is just as good as another – even though all the research tells us just the opposite.
- The methodology for this project was unlike almost any other educational report. We created an advisory panel of almost 80 stakeholders across four states, including 25 union leaders. We surveyed over 15,000 teachers and looked at 40,000 evaluation records in 12 school districts.
- The results were astounding:
 - **All teachers were rated as good or great:** less than 1% of teachers were rated as unsatisfactory even when, year after year, students failed to meet basic academic standards and schools entered into program improvement.

- **Excellence goes unrecognized:** By rating all teachers “good” or “great,” we fail to recognize our truly outstanding teachers; in fact, we treat them no differently than we treat the most ineffective teachers.
- **Professional development is inadequate:** Almost 3 out of 4 teachers didn’t receive any meaningful feedback to improve their performance.
- **Novice teachers are neglected,** and tenure becomes a meaningless achievement.
- **Poor performance goes unaddressed:** Half of the districts studied did not dismiss a single tenured teacher for poor performance in FIVE years, even though a majority of teachers say there is a poorly performing tenured teacher in their school RIGHT NOW.
- When our report was released, it was praised by an extraordinary range of voices, from the Secretary of Education to the National Education Association to the *New York Times* Editorial board to a number of sitting governors. We believe that for such groups to agree, the report must be saying something relevant.
- I owe my success to a small group of excellent teachers. I’m proof of how much teachers matter. So I find it shameful that we treat them like they don’t matter, like widgets. If we care about the success of our students, we have to start caring about the success of their teachers. And that means acknowledging the real differences between teachers in their effectiveness, and taking action to ensure that all children get the same kinds of teachers that I did.
- We know what it takes to change a child’s chances. Let’s:
 - Create evaluations that differentiate great teaching from good, good from fair, and fair from poor. And use student growth as a critical component.
 - Ensure evaluations are done fairly and with accuracy and rigor
 - Make teacher effectiveness matter; the data should drive decisions that affect the quality of the teacher workforce,

from how teachers are trained to how they are developed, paid and retained.

- Address poor performance, because the stakes are too high to allow ineffective teaching to hold back class after class of students.
- In closing, we cannot provide effective teachers to each student if we cannot determine who our most effective teachers are. As long as the widget effect persists, poor and minority children will continue to get the short end of the stick in terms of access to excellent instruction, and kids like me will be celebrated as rare exceptions, not the norm. It doesn't have to be that way. I urge the committee to move aggressively to ensure that the recommendations in our report are implemented as widely as possible in the shortest timeframe possible.