



Why Teachers Must Have an Effective Evaluation System

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Teacher evaluation has a bad name among teachers, and deservedly so. Far too many teachers tell of annual “drive-by” reviews by principals. Their contract may call for a careful process of observation and evaluation, but few teachers report that the process is followed. Many say they are asked to sign their evaluation form in a rush, even when their principal has never observed them teaching.

Research about evaluation confirms these teachers’ accounts. Few are systematically observed or receive meaningful feedback. Not many principals have the time or expertise to conduct the evaluations they are supposed to conduct. The evaluation forms themselves are too often simple checklists with two summary ratings options—satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Almost all teachers are rated satisfactory, even when both teachers and principals report that there are teachers who do not deserve it. This sorry state of teacher evaluation can no longer be ignored because it threatens the future of the teaching profession and, thus, the future of public education.

For the past 10 years, teachers and administrators in a small number of districts have been partners in creating new approaches to evaluation that better serve the needs of students and teachers. These standards-based assessments, which are far more complex and informative than the checklists they replace, engage evaluators and teachers in detailed reviews of their teaching practice. They focus on specific elements of teaching, such as lesson planning, student engagement and differentiated instruction, and they provide a rating scale for each element

along with a rubric describing teaching practice at each performance level. Not only do these rubrics guide the evaluator in making informed assessments, they help teachers understand the basis for those judgments and the kinds of performance that would warrant a higher rating.

Why should teachers make a determined commitment to improve evaluations? As policymakers increasingly mandate school districts to improve their evaluation systems, many teachers wonder what to expect and how to respond. It’s not the time, however, for teachers to wait to see what others decide. For if teachers themselves do not participate in the development of first-rate evaluations, they will become the targets, rather than the agents, of reform. Rather than taking their rightful positions as professionals, they will be treated like hired hands.

Teachers need expert observation and feedback in order to improve.

Teaching is incredibly complex work. Although many people actually believe that anyone can teach, educators who argue that teaching *is* rocket science have a point. No teacher education program or professional development workshop can convey what it really takes to effectively diagnose the strengths and needs of 25-30 students in one class, interpret state curriculum frameworks, plan lessons and units that effectively convey difficult subject matter, differentiate instruction for various subgroups and individuals, skillfully manage an intense social environment, encourage creativity and critical thinking, and prepare students for formal assess-

ments. All teachers who are serious about their work want to improve and to see their students learn more, yet often they're not sure how to do so. A good evaluation system can give them the direction and support they need.

As an enormous cohort of new teachers enters schools to replace the retiring cohort of veterans, the need for a meaningful evaluation system increases. Expertise in teaching is gained over time, yet most teachers are largely left on their own to figure out what works. Good evaluations conducted by master teachers and principals can provide valuable insights about a teacher's work and offer expert guidance about how to improve.

Decisions about a teacher's career should be based on more than test scores.

Most agree that decisions about teachers' reappointment and tenure should be made carefully, and policymakers have begun to make this a priority. Too many teachers receive tenure by default. Yet how will decisions be made when districts lack systematic evaluations?

Standardized tests and sophisticated methods to estimate each teacher's contribution to students' learning are rapidly gaining prominence in state and federal policies. The value-added methods currently being used to assess each teacher's success have serious limitations, and expert statisticians caution that, until they are more accurate, these methods should not be used to make high-stakes decisions about individuals. Nevertheless, policymakers increasingly propose to use these approaches to decide who deserves tenure. Recently, several states have passed laws requiring districts to base a large component of teachers' evaluations—40 to 50 percent—on student achievement. In part, reliance on test scores has increased because so few districts use their evaluation systems to identify and dismiss ineffective teachers. If local districts do not develop and support meaningful systems for evaluating teachers' instructional performance, value-added scores will play an ever greater role in determining who stays and who goes.

Teachers won't get the respect they deserve until weak teachers are dismissed.

Remarkably few teachers—whether probationary or tenured—are dismissed. This is true

despite clear evidence that some teachers' students fail to learn. Moreover, both teachers and administrators report that some teachers in their school should not be teaching. These are the ones who read the newspaper during class, insult children, do not know their subject, or can't manage their class. They annoy and embarrass their colleagues, shortchange their students, and infuriate parents. They give teachers a bad name.

Administrators and teachers explain this incredibly low dismissal rate in various ways: Principals have too many responsibilities. Evaluation procedures are too detailed and daunting. Administrators are reluctant to confront poor teachers. The effort is wasted since unions will protect teachers facing dismissal with costly arbitrations or court cases. Such explanations, often untested, become weak excuses for not taking action. Inevitably, however, underlying this low dismissal rate is a poor—or poorly used—evaluation system. Teachers who repeatedly fail to do a good job should be given detailed feedback and advice about how to improve. If they don't make rapid and steady progress, they should be dismissed. This can only be done in an even-handed way when there is a system for observing and assessing their practice.

Comprehensive evaluations are a central component for selecting teacher leaders.

Teaching is an unusually "flat" occupation, in which most teachers have essentially the same responsibilities on the first and last days of their career. Today, however, schools are creating differentiated roles for expert teachers to serve as instructional coaches, staff developers, lead mentors, peer reviewers, or specialists in using data or technology to improve teaching. Through these roles, teacher leaders extend their expertise and influence beyond a single classroom. Done right, they have the potential to increase the capacity and effectiveness of the school and to advance the career of teaching.

When teacher leaders are appointed by the principal without a systematic selection process, their colleagues tend to resent them and resist their efforts. However, when teacher leaders are carefully selected and, thus, are seen to deserve the position, they are likely to win support from their colleagues. All such roles require a high level of demonstrated instructional expertise. Yet districts that lack an effective evaluation system cannot document that expertise and use the information in a systematic selection process. As a

result, they shortchange aspiring teacher leaders and the schools they could have served.

A thorough evaluation system can be used to recognize and reward excellent teaching.

Recognition for effective teaching is scarce, even though everyone—the public, teachers, principals, parents and especially students—knows that some teachers are better than others. A strong professional norm of egalitarianism among teachers leads many to reject programs that single out individuals for recognition. In part, this makes sense because an effective school functions as an integrated organization where teachers work in concert. Collaboration among professionals must take precedence over individual accomplishment. However, the teaching profession benefits when excellence is recognized and rewarded. And early-career teachers, whose peers in other fields often enjoy rapid promotions and regular bonuses, report that having access to such opportunities would sustain their commitment to teaching as a career.

What role should teachers play in developing and using an enhanced evaluation system?

Teachers and their unions can voice their views and play an active role in redesigning their evaluation system. Many contracts have long set forth procedures for evaluation, such as how many times teachers must be observed, how long observations should last, whether pre- and post-observation conferences are required, how many summative ratings the instruments permit, and whether a teacher can add comments to the evaluation. Until recently, though, teachers seldom had much say in setting the standards

for their evaluations. In more and more districts today, however, joint committees of teachers and administrators are redesigning their evaluation instruments and processes. Teachers should not stand by as this work takes place, waiting to see what will happen. Only by engaging in this work can they ensure that their evaluations will be meaningful and useful, both to them as individual teachers and to their schools.

A few districts have begun to appoint master teachers to assess teachers' performance. Having an evaluator who is an expert in a subject or grade level can substantially enhance the value and validity of the evaluation. Other local districts sponsor peer assistance and review (PAR) programs, where expert consulting teachers mentor and then evaluate all new teachers, as well as tenured teachers who are identified as struggling. When either a novice or experienced teacher in PAR fails to meet the district's standards despite having expert assistance, that teacher can be recommended for dismissal by a joint PAR panel. Because due process is carefully monitored by the union and administration in PAR, dismissals occur in an evenhanded, timely way, without costly arbitrations.

Teaching will not become a true profession until teachers themselves take a key role in deciding who deserves to teach. They can work jointly with administrators to develop comprehensive evaluations that include multiple forms of evidence about instructional practice, students' progress and achievement, and teachers' contributions to their schools. They can use their specialized expertise in a subject or grade level to serve as full-time evaluators. Or they can become consulting teachers in PAR programs, where they combine mentoring with evaluation. This is a time of many opportunities. If teachers do not seize them, others will.

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