



The State of Teacher Evaluation Reform

State Education Agency Capacity and the Implementation of New Teacher-Evaluation Systems

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Introduction and summary

The Obama administration's Race to the Top competitive grant program initiated an unprecedented wave of state teacher-evaluation reform across the country.¹ To date, most of the scholarly analysis of this activity has focused on the design of the evaluation instruments² or the implementation of the new evaluations by districts and schools.³ But little research has explored how *states* are managing and supporting the implementation of these reforms. As U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan has remarked: "...because teacher evaluation systems are still a work in progress, it is vital that school leaders and administrators continue to solicit feedback, learn from their mistakes, and make improvements."⁴ It has become increasingly clear that the role of state education agencies will be critical as school districts enter what for most will be uncharted territory. As Edward Crowe argued in his recent Center for American Progress report on teacher preparation, "The capacity and commitment of states to implement these Race to the Top activities will determine success or failure."⁵ And as highlighted in recent news reports, many states are struggling to implement their new teacher-evaluation systems and most of the Race to the Top winners have asked to extend their timetables for completing this work.⁶

This paper offers an assessment of how early adopter states' departments of education have undertaken the preparation and implementation of new evaluation systems. It also identifies challenges and lessons that can be used to guide future reform efforts in this area. Developing new teacher-evaluation systems has been identified by scholars and policymakers alike as a crucial part of improving teacher quality and raising student academic performance across the country.⁷ It is imperative that we learn more about the most effective way for state education agencies to support districts in this difficult work.

This assessment of the activities of state departments of education is based on comparative case studies of six states: Colorado, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. These particular states were selected because they are "early adopters" in the area of teacher-evaluation reform and

because their states and/or education agencies have undertaken different approaches to implementing the reforms. Two of the states—Tennessee and Delaware—were initial Race to the Top winners, while the other states won smaller grants in later rounds. Research consisted of a review of the scholarly and think tank research on state education agency capacity and teacher-evaluation systems; analysis of reports and data from the state education departments’ websites and from organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers; a study of media coverage of the reform efforts in the six states; and 15 interviews with national experts on teacher-evaluation reforms and state education agency and local education agency staff in each state.

The central questions probed and answered in this report include:

- How are state education departments adjusting to their new, more ambitious roles and responsibilities in the wake of Race to the Top?
- What steps are state education agencies taking to restructure themselves for these new responsibilities?
- What kinds of capacity—financial, personnel, technical—have state education agencies added to support the implementation of new teacher-evaluation systems, and what kinds of capacity are still lacking?
- To what extent and in what ways are state education agencies relying on external capacity by contracting outside consultants to provide technical assistance with this work?
- What is the role of philanthropic organizations in supporting state education agencies in this work?
- How rapidly and effectively are states implementing their new teacher-evaluation systems?
- How are states approaching this work differently from one another—do some approaches appear to be more or less effective than others?
- What challenges are emerging and how are states addressing them?
- What lessons can be learned from these early-adopter states that can inform teacher-evaluation reform in the rest of the country?

It is clear that state education agencies are working hard to realign their organizations with the many new responsibilities that have been thrust upon them in the wake of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top programs.⁸ State efforts to implement new teacher-evaluation reforms offer excellent examples of the ways that state education agencies are adapting to their new role as well as the ways in which ongoing capacity gaps continue to impede their work.

Improving teacher quality has become the centerpiece of the Obama administration's education agenda and of the contemporary school-reform movement. The many challenges that have already emerged, however, also highlight how difficult this work is and how it is complicated by short timelines and limited state education agency staffing and funding. A number of key challenges to implementing new teacher-evaluation systems have emerged from the work of the early-adopter states. Some of these challenges, which can inform the efforts of other states going forward, include:

- **The philosophical/statutory/constitutional debate over the proper role of state education agencies.** It is important to recognize that all state education agencies are not the same—each agency has a unique history and operates in a different fiscal, political, statutory, and constitutional context. In particular, states vary significantly in their attachment to local control of schools and the proper role of the state in education. This has a major impact on how state education agencies approach teacher-evaluation reform. A related issue revolves around the traditional focus of state education agencies on compliance and accountability activities, which has made local education agencies wary of being candid about whether and how they might be struggling to implement reform and made them reluctant to seek out assistance.
- **The amount of flexibility in state evaluation systems varies greatly.** States vary widely in the amount of centralization and standardization they have mandated—through statute or regulation—in the new teacher-evaluation systems. This variance has a major impact on the state education agency's approach to supporting implementation. A clear tension is emerging between a state's desire to give districts flexibility to select or adapt evaluation instruments that are best suited to their particular circumstances, and the state education agency's limited capacity to provide implementation support for a wide array of instruments.
- **State education agency restructuring and the human capital demands.** State education agencies in many states are undergoing a radical restructuring and re-staffing as they embrace a shift from being compliance monitors to service delivery/school-improvement organizations. This restructuring is difficult and time-consuming work and, while necessary to carry out new responsibilities over the long term, creates a number of short-term challenges. It will take some time for this organizational shake out to be completed and for new structures and staff to acclimate to their new roles. Many state education agencies have created new teacher-effectiveness units, but the degree to which these units have been well-integrated with other units appears to vary and longstanding concerns about agency siloing persist.

- **Internal versus external capacity.** In the short term, state education agencies are dealing with their internal capacity gaps by relying on two different kinds of external capacity: outside consultants and foundations. There is some concern, however, that reliance on outside grants and consultants may preclude or delay the development of the fiscal self-sufficiency and internal capacity that can support these systems over the long term.
- **Funding streams and the “fiscal cliff.”** There is a great deal of concern about state education agencies’ lack of capacity to implement these reforms, particularly for states that did not win a Race to the Top grant or secure foundation support (which is the majority of states). Given the current tight fiscal climate, most states have been unable or unwilling to allocate new money to support the implementation of these reforms. State education agencies appear to vary widely in the way that they have spent external funds, the degree to which they are dependent on them, and the extent to which they have begun to bring these expenses on budget. As a result the eventual end of federal and foundation grants—part of the upcoming “fiscal cliff”—is likely to affect states in different ways.
- **Evaluating the evaluators.** One of the primary activities of state education agencies in supporting their local education agencies with teacher-evaluation reform has been providing training to the administrators that will be conducting the new observations. States vary widely in their approach here, however, for both philosophical and capacity reasons with some state education agencies (such as Tennessee) directly training all evaluators, some (such as Colorado and Pennsylvania) adopting a train-the-trainer model, and others (such as New Jersey) leaving the training entirely up to districts.
- **Implementation timetables and sequencing.** Most state reform statutes have established rapid timetables for the installation of new teacher-evaluation systems. While all states are struggling to meet these timetables, it is becoming clear that some states are struggling more than others due to the fact that states vary in terms of their experience with statewide evaluation systems. A related challenge centers on the extent to which evaluation reforms are—or are not—being connected to the implementation of other reforms such as new principal evaluations and new common core standards and assessments.
- **Value-added/growth scores for teachers in nontested subjects.** Perhaps the single biggest challenge in implementing new evaluation systems that has emerged from the field is the fact that the majority of teachers do not teach in tested subjects

or grades and as a consequence standardized student achievement data is not available to be used in their ratings. Districts are working independently to develop their own student-learning objectives, but the quality of the results appears to be mixed and messy both within and across states. This is an enormous problem and it is clear that many state education agencies are struggling to address it.

- **Networks, policy learning, and politics.** Policy learning and continuous improvement requires that local education agencies, state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education be transparent and forthcoming about what is working and what is not and that lessons learned be regularly shared within and between states. But on the ground the reality appears to be that not enough communication and sharing of information about effective measures is happening yet. Balancing their support and compliance monitoring functions will continue to require a delicate balancing act for state education agencies and the Department of Education, but getting the balance—and the communication—right will be crucial to the evaluation reform effort going forward.

The lessons derived from these challenges form the basis for the following recommendations:

- Individual states need to think carefully about the work that needs to be done to implement a new teacher-evaluation system, assess the existing capacity at the local and state education agency levels, and define an appropriate role for the state education agency that is commensurate with state constitutional and statutory provisions.
- Given their limited resources, state education agency leaders have to think carefully about how best to reallocate existing staff and budgets to focus on new responsibilities, build capacity, and eventually bring work that is funded by external grants on budget. Federal regulations and state budgeting and civil service requirements that constrain the ability of state education agencies to do so should be revised with an eye toward permitting greater managerial flexibility.
- State education agencies need to think about comparative advantage and economies of scale—where the state can provide something districts cannot. Providing technical assistance and policy interpretation, creating communication networks for information sharing, expanding assessment portfolios, and establishing online training modules are several areas where state education agencies could add real value.

- State legislatures and state education agencies should tailor their implementation timelines to the unique needs and resources of their particular state. They should also determine how the evaluation work ought to be sequenced with and connected to the roll out of other related education reforms, particularly those reforms around teacher preparation, professional development, principal evaluation, and common standards and assessments.
- States need to think long term about how to produce a large and stable supply of administrators—state education agency staff as well as school principals and district superintendents—with the training, technical expertise, and field experience to address their current human-capital challenges around teacher-evaluation reform. Partnering with a state’s higher education system or with management consultants to devise new training and certification programs that reflect the different work and skill set required is crucial.
- The learning curve for local education agencies, state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education during the implementation of new teacher-evaluation systems will be steep and mistakes will inevitably be made, but it is crucial that the work be transparent and that information about effective methods be shared up and down the education delivery chain. State education agencies and the Department of Education need to create a safe space where practitioners within and across states can be candid about the mistakes they are making and the support they need without fear of triggering punitive oversight or interventions by a higher authority.

The remainder of the paper will provide a review of previous research on state education agency capacity and teacher-evaluation reform, analyze state education agency implementation efforts in the six case study states, and elaborate on the lessons and challenges that have emerged from the early-adopter states.

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