



Reforming Teacher Evaluation: One District's Story

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Introduction and summary

In recent years policymakers have seized on teacher evaluation as a primary lever for improving schools. Of all school factors—from expanded school calendars to smaller class sizes to community and family engagement programs—teachers contribute the most to student achievement.¹ Policymakers reason that evaluating teachers based on their students' performance will lead to the removal of underperforming educators and an improvement in the overall quality of the teacher workforce. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that effective evaluation systems may prompt all educators to improve.²

In the past few years, nearly all states have passed legislation revising teacher evaluation. Through Race to the Top, Teacher Incentive Fund grants, and No Child Left Behind waiver requirements, the federal government has pushed states to use student achievement as a major component in teacher evaluations. More than 40 states and Washington, D.C., have responded by changing their laws related to education policy.³ Teacher evaluation reforms and, in particular, efforts to assess teachers on the basis of student achievement have sometimes resulted in confrontations between teachers and school districts. Chicago's 2012 teachers' strike is only the most recent example of bitter standoffs related to teacher evaluation.⁴

Yet confrontation and conflict are not the dominant themes in all districts seeking to reform teacher evaluation. Some districts have prioritized a collaborative approach to developing new evaluation systems and can provide valuable lessons for others to follow. But what exactly can be learned from such places?

This report examines one district's efforts to develop and implement a new teacher evaluation system in a cooperative manner with its teachers. For reasons of confidentiality, we refer to this district as the Studyville School District, a medium-sized school system in a northeastern urban center with roughly 20,000 students and 1,600 teachers. It has been recognized at both the national and state level for the collaboration that has characterized the development and implementation of the district's new teacher evaluation program and for the use of student

achievement as a benchmark in its the evaluation system.⁵ Leaders from the teachers union and district have worked together to adopt a framework for the new evaluation system through the collective bargaining process. They've designed and implemented the new system through joint labor-management committees and are working collaboratively to oversee the program. Teachers and school-based administrators have been central to the reform's design and implementation throughout the process.

To date, Studyville's evaluation program has garnered support from key stakeholders, including teachers, school and district leaders, the teachers union, and the city school board. A key element of the reform is that it has real consequences: Some teachers have been recognized as exemplary while others have left the district because of poor performance. Furthermore, teachers report that the reform focuses their efforts more directly on student performance.⁶ While the evaluation program's direct effects on teachers' instruction and student achievement have not yet been examined, stakeholders' favorable views of the program thus far suggest that the reform may be gaining traction in the district and that it could improve these key outcomes.

In this paper we present an in-depth case study charting the evaluation program's progress—from concept to initial design to implementation to the program's current state. We examine aspects of policy and practice that have facilitated or impeded the program's success and pay particular attention to developments in labor-management relations at the school and district level affecting the reform's development.

Based on our interviews with key district and union leaders and with a cross-section of teachers and school leaders, we are able to make the following observations:

- **Economic, political, and policy factors have facilitated the teacher evaluation program's development and acceptance.** These factors help to explain the reform's favorable review among many stakeholders, including teachers, school-based administrators, and district and union leaders.
- **Collaboration has been at the heart of the teacher evaluation program's creation and development.** The program was conceived through the district's 2009 collective bargaining agreement with its teachers union. District leaders and union leaders worked together to create the evaluation program's framework and oversee its implementation. Teachers and school administrators also collaborated to develop many of the key components of the reform.

- **The teacher evaluation program represents both a process and a product.**

The collective bargaining agreement laid out a framework for the teacher evaluation program and articulated a process through which the district would formalize the program details. This process led to a product, the evaluation system, which satisfied at least some of the needs of all constituents. Both the process and the product of the reform are important factors in the reform's progress to date.

- **The teacher evaluation program's progress reflects strong leadership**

coupled with broad input. Leaders at the city and district level were willing to work to bring the program to fruition, but they didn't do it alone. They relied on teacher- and school-administrator working groups to develop many of the details of the program. The program therefore addressed the priorities of district and union leadership and reflected the needs of teachers and administrators.

Some of what we learned from Studyville's experience with its teacher evaluation program is summarized in the following recommendations:

- **Get out in front of a wave of reform, but be authentic to district needs.**

Our study district has made strides with its teacher evaluation program in part because it seized on momentum to improve teacher evaluation and staked out its ground with a collaborative approach to this area of reform. The school district's status as an early implementer led to recognition from prominent government and labor leaders, which likely reinforced the reform's value to key local stakeholders and encouraged them to continue to search for productive compromise. Moreover, by getting out in front of teacher evaluation reform, the district was able to set its own course for change and design its own system that responded to the district's context and needs.

- **Invest in collaboration, but understand its challenges.** Collaboration played a major role in the progress of this reform. While collaboration was important to the acceptance of the evaluation program, it is not the only ingredient driving reform progress. In the case of the Studyville School District, the context shaped collaboration among the various stakeholders, encouraging them to compromise and find mutually beneficial solutions. The lesson here is that investing in collaboration can lead to a better outcome for all, but this degree of collaboration is hard earned and depends on both the context and the people involved. Leaders of both management and labor should take stock of these factors when seeking to engage in collaborative reform.

- **Pay attention to process and product.** The evaluation program's progress to date is as much due to the process through which it was developed as it is to the structural elements that comprise the reform. As a process, the program was developed collaboratively and over time. While the framework for the evaluation program was laid out in the collective bargaining agreement, the details were developed through joint labor-management committees. This process cultivated trust and understanding among parties and has been critical to the teacher evaluation program gaining traction in the district. This is even more important given that the evaluation program seeks to advance a common vision of effective teaching. The more time teachers and school leaders spend discussing this vision in a structured way, the more likely it is to affect instruction both within and outside of the boundaries of the teacher evaluation program.

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