



Teachers' Perspectives on Evaluation Reform

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Introduction and summary

Of all school factors—from extended learning opportunities to family and community engagement to smaller class sizes—teachers exert the largest impact on student achievement.¹ What was once fervently believed by practitioners and parents but questioned by researchers is now a well-established fact: Teachers make a crucial difference in students’ academic performance. Despite this reality, efforts to improve teacher quality through performance evaluation have made little ground. The consequences of evaluation have generally been negligible in terms of teachers’ instructional improvement or continued employment. There is scant evidence that evaluation has improved the quality of teachers’ classroom instruction or led to the dismissal of underperforming teachers.²

Despite its less than stellar track record, teacher evaluation has taken center stage in recent efforts to reform public schools in the United States. In the Obama administration’s 2009 Race to the Top competitive grant program, for example, the federal government favored states that permitted the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations. In short order, 17 states changed their laws to permit or require the inclusion of such data in 2009 or 2010, with eight more following suit in 2011.³ In addition to trying to increase teacher accountability within teacher evaluation, policymakers have tried to bolster the instructional improvement aspect of teacher evaluation. It is clear that many districts and states will incorporate not only student achievement but also increased coaching in teacher evaluation in the coming years.

Despite growing momentum to reform teacher evaluation in order to increase its impact on teachers’ practice and persistence in the profession, very little research examines how current reforms influence teachers’ attitudes or reported instructional practices. Do the new evaluation systems lead to enhancements in teachers’ instruction overall? And are there real consequences—penalties—for persistently underperforming teachers? Are there rewards for those whose instruction is consistently outstanding?

To answer these and other questions related to teacher evaluation, we conducted a small-scale study that sought to provide evidence to inform the debate among policymakers on how teacher evaluation should be changed to yield the greatest impact.

This report provides findings based on a study conducted in one northeastern, urban, and medium-sized school district, which we will call Studyville to maintain confidentiality. A leader in teacher-evaluation reform, Studyville⁴ implemented a new system in 2010—the Teacher Evaluation Program, or TEP, which evaluates teachers based on their students’ growth on academic performance measures and more conventional observation-based data. This report presents the views of teachers on the district’s evaluation reform and the extent to which it has affected their instructional practice. It is based on interviews conducted with 92 educators, including teachers and school leaders during the 2011–2012 school year, which was the evaluation program’s second year of existence. This report focuses on how the experiences and views of teachers differed according to their evaluation rating—ratings which ranged from a low of 1 (needs improvement) to a high of 5 (exemplary).

In general the teachers in this study viewed the district’s new teacher-evaluation program more positively than negatively, although a substantial minority of teachers said that they would not recommend the evaluation program to other school districts, citing concerns ranging from fairness to feedback. The main findings from this study include the following:

- Teachers were most positive about the opportunity to set their own goals and work toward them
- Teachers asserted that evaluation reform was necessary
- Teachers preferred creating their own evaluation system rather than having one imposed on them
- Teachers expressed mixed views about whether the district’s teacher evaluation program is fair
- Teachers expressed mixed views about whether the evaluation program is objective
- Teachers with the highest performance rating based on the new evaluation system tended to express positive or neutral opinions about the program

- Teachers with the lowest performance rating were more likely to express negative opinions about the teacher evaluation program

The study also found that a large majority of teachers said the teacher-evaluation program did not generally affect their pedagogy but that many said it did affect their planning and overall approach to teaching. The most consistently reported impacts of the evaluation program were related to its goal-setting component and, in particular, the use of student performance data in the goals.

There is much less reported impact related to feedback on instructional practice. Teachers did not report changing their instructional practices as a result of evaluations. In general teachers noted that they did not receive targeted feedback, more observations, or suggestions on how to teach differently through the program.

Teachers with lower performance ratings were more likely to say that the evaluation program affected their instruction. They were also more likely to say that it affected their approach to planning and preparation.

These findings point to the following policy and practice recommendations:⁵

Hold teachers accountable for student performance. Holding teachers accountable for growth in student performance, with real consequences for achieving or failing to achieve their student performance goals, seemed to produce demonstrable changes in teacher behavior. Policymakers have in many cases made student performance a central aspect of teacher evaluation. This study suggests that weighting student performance heavily in teacher evaluation and specifying real consequences tied to how students achieve on performance measures focuses teachers' attention on these outcomes.

Include goal setting in teacher evaluation. The teacher-evaluation program's reported impact on teacher practice was achieved almost entirely through the goal-setting portion of this reform. Teachers said that setting goals generally made their teaching more coherent and forced them to be more organized and mindful of how they used time. Policymakers should consider goal setting as a promising strategy to focus teachers on key outcomes, thus shaping their work inside and outside the classroom.

Include teachers as partners in teacher evaluation. The generally positive view of this reform held by teachers stemmed in large measure from their ongoing

involvement with the program. This suggests that policymakers should consider ways in which to craft teacher-evaluation policy to enable teachers to join as partners in their own assessment and improvement. This seems particularly important to higher-performing teachers.

Invest in building the capacity of administrators as instructional leaders. The teacher-evaluation program seemed to be much more successful in its effort to increase teacher accountability than it was in its effort to increase the instructional capabilities of all its teachers. Bolstering the professional learning aspect of a teacher-evaluation program requires increased attention to developing the skill and willingness of school leaders to go into classrooms and offer high-quality, ongoing feedback. It also requires that schools structure opportunities for leaders to offer such feedback. To increase the probability that teacher-evaluation reform will improve teachers' instruction, policymakers should consider ways to increase the capacity of administrators to act as instructional leaders and provide administrators with opportunities to exercise these skills. This includes having administrators offer more targeted professional development on identifying effective instruction and having them coach teachers on how to develop skills in line with this vision. It includes putting in place structures that allow school leaders to get into classrooms and work with teachers on instructional matters more frequently.

Provide opportunities for qualified teachers to exercise instructional leadership. To dramatically intensify the consequences of teacher-evaluation programs, states and districts may need to enlist expert teachers. Policymakers should consider permitting individuals other than school leaders to evaluate teachers. Given the demands on administrators' time and the fact that some teachers possess a deep knowledge of instruction, broadening the term "evaluator" to include these teachers makes sense.

Devote more consideration to how teacher evaluation can benefit high-performing teachers. In recent years policymakers have focused on reforming teacher evaluation to sharpen the consequences for persistently low-performing teachers. It is now time to start thinking more broadly about how teacher evaluation can enhance the practice of teachers across the performance spectrum. Maximizing the effects of teacher-evaluation reform by considering the supports and rewards that allow middle- to high-performing teachers to improve their practice is imperative.

This paper briefly reviews what is known about teacher evaluation and pays particular attention to findings that inform current reforms. The paper describes in detail the setting in which this study took place and the specific teacher-evaluation reform that was the subject of this inquiry. It also describes the methods used to collect and analyze data. Finally, it details the findings, concluding with a number of specific recommendations for policymakers.

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