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BEYOND RATINGS

Re-envisioning State Teacher Evaluation
Systems as Tools for Professional Growth

Executive Summary

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BEYOND RATINGS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The spotlight on the American public school teacher has never been brighter. To ensure that all students have access to quality instruction, most states have adopted new, more rigorous teacher evaluation systems over the past five years based on multiple measures of teacher performance, such as evidence of student growth and observations of teacher practice. At the same time, most states have also adopted more rigorous academic standards in order to better prepare students for college, career, and civic life. These two efforts fit together: students will meet the new academic expectations only insofar as their teachers can successfully deliver on them in the classroom.

Given the critical need to improve student learning and the substantial influence that teachers have in this area, both efforts are imperative.¹ But evaluation systems put teachers under heightened scrutiny at the same time that they are revisiting how and what they teach. To help teachers meet this challenge, states, local education agencies (LEAs), and schools must work together to ensure that teachers receive frequent, targeted feedback and suggestions for how to grow their practice.² Fortunately, teacher evaluation systems hold much potential for delivering the kind of constructive feedback and aligned learning opportunities that can promote professional improvement.

However, to date, most of the public narrative, and teacher pushback, about evaluation has centered on its use for high-stakes personnel decisions such as pay, promotion, and dismissal. Given this, some might be puzzled, or even bristle, at the suggestion that data from evaluation systems could be used to drive instructional improvement. But the federal policies that encouraged states to adopt new evaluation systems always intended for these systems to raise the quality of teaching through not just accountability but also support. And many states followed through with policies that reflect that intent: in a 2015 review, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) found that 30 states and the District of Columbia require teachers' evaluations to inform their professional development.³

If this is the case, why is teacher development still missing from the public narrative on—and most teachers' experience of—evaluation? It is because while policy can provide a necessary foundation, it is insufficient without follow-through by states and LEAs. Given this, we decided to examine the policies and practices that those 31 states* first identified by NCTQ have in place to assist LEAs in making the connection between teacher evaluation and support.

By conducting in-depth interviews with state education agency leaders in nearly all of those states, we found that, to date, the majority have not yet helped LEAs make good on these policies. For the most part, states have prioritized getting evaluation systems up and running and are only just beginning to think about using them to promote ongoing teacher learning and growth.

But a few states that are further along in implementing their evaluation systems are beginning to use the information gleaned to go beyond performance ratings for accountability to include a focus on development. While these efforts have taken different shapes depending on the state context, all are focused on some combination of communication, support, and monitoring of these systems as a tool to support teacher growth. This paper highlights what we learned from talking with state education agencies, and digs deeper into the work of four—Colorado, Delaware, Louisiana, and Tennessee—to share promising practices and lessons learned.

Even for these states, more work can be done to connect evaluation with support. While states' spheres of influence and capacity will vary, they can select and tailor high-impact actions for their specific context.

Following is a list of recommendations for states to consider in taking on this work:

Policy Actions

- Ensure that teachers receive accurate and meaningful observation feedback:
 - Require high-quality observer training and certification assessments;
 - Incorporate other content-area observers into the evaluation process; and/or
 - Encourage the use of student surveys.
- Ensure teachers receive frequent, timely feedback on their practice:
 - Require multiple annual observations for all teachers; and
 - Expand leadership opportunities to encourage more informal observations.
- Leverage formal evaluation system structures to drive a focus on development:
 - Require professional growth processes based on evaluation data for all teachers; and
 - Ensure teachers have an opportunity to debrief on observations shortly after they occur.
- Balance objectivity and fairness in system design.
- Enshrine in policy the vision of teacher evaluation as a development tool.

Communication Actions

- Clearly communicate evaluation as a tool for improvement.
- Engage in two-way dialogue with key stakeholders throughout implementation.
- Coordinate messaging about evaluation across agency departments to ensure consistency.

* We use "31 states" when referencing the 30 states and the District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent identified by NCTQ as having policies requiring that teacher evaluation inform professional development.

Support Actions

- Integrate teacher evaluation with other teaching and learning priorities, and support LEAs and schools in doing the same:
 - Prioritize collaboration across all divisions related to teaching; and
 - Help LEAs and schools understand how evaluation fits into the larger goal of improving teaching and learning.
- Prioritize ongoing in-person support for observers.
- Use data from evaluation systems to inform professional development, and help LEAs do the same.
- Leverage technology to better integrate evaluation and development systems.
- Ensure any development opportunities aligned to desired teaching practices are high-quality.
- Create structures and supports for team-based collaboration based on evaluation results.
- Where possible, leverage external organizations and regional centers to maximize capacity and resources.

Monitoring Actions

- Institute processes to gauge whether evaluation systems are being used for development:
 - Solicit feedback from teachers and school leaders on evaluation and its connection to development; and
 - Create tools or mechanisms to track or selectively audit observation data and feedback quality.
- Ensure school leaders are held accountable for teacher evaluation and development.
- Use evaluation systems to assess quality and impact of specific professional development activities.

While the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) ended the strongest federal incentives around teacher evaluation, the law explicitly permits states to invest in evaluation systems for the purpose of teacher improvement. States should embrace this opportunity to retool their evaluation systems to include a clear focus on teacher development, in addition to accountability. To do so, state education agencies will need the support of their legislatures and governors, philanthropic organizations, technical assistance providers, and others. By moving forward in this area, states can help generate a new narrative and culture around teacher evaluation, beyond ratings for personnel decisions and toward meaningful feedback for ongoing teacher—and student—growth.

Notes

¹ Kati Haycock, *Good Teaching Matters a Lot: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap* (Washington, DC: Education Trust, June 1998), <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED457260>; Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, and Jonah E. Rockoff, “The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood,” Working Paper No. 17699 (National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2011), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17699>; Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain, “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement,” *Econometrica* 73, no. 2 (March 2005): 417–458, <http://www.econ.ucsb.edu/~jon/Econ230C/HanushekRivkin.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Kathryn M. Doherty and Sandi Jacobs, *2015 State of the States: Evaluating Teaching, Leading, and Learning* (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, November 2015), <http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/StateofStates2015>.