

TEACH +PLUS

Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students

Guidelines for Observing Teacher Practice in Chicago

Our Goal: Improve Teacher Observation to Impact Student Learning

We believe all teachers should be held accountable by multiple, high-quality measures, including assessment of student growth and observation. Assessment results can show whether a teacher is having an impact, while observations demonstrate how and why a teacher is effective.

Improving observations for teachers in CPS is the single most important aspect of teacher evaluation in order to improve teacher practice and growth in student learning. A robust observation process:

- Defines, describes, and captures evidence of effective teaching, creating a shared language about quality practice.
- Includes pre- and post-observation conferences on the teacher's strengths and areas for improvement.
- Outlines areas of focus for coaching and self-improvement processes.
- Aligns with school- and district-provided professional development.
- Promotes improvements in student outcomes.

Our Recommendations for CPS' Teacher Observation System

This section outlines six recommendations to improve teacher observation in Chicago.

1. Adopt Charlotte Danielson's "Framework for

- Teaching" as the rubric for all teacher observations.
2. Distribute observation tasks among principals and other teachers or peer reviewers.
3. Use classroom observation to capture accurate evidence of a teacher's practice.
4. Use post-observation reflection conferences to promote further improvement.
5. Differentiate the number of classroom observations based on teachers' years of experience and level of practice
6. Build and continually refine the infrastructure to support an effective observation, including other performance management functions such as the professional development system.

After adopting the Framework for Teaching, CPS should convene expert teachers within disciplines and grade levels to create specific exemplars for each component of the Framework. This process will give CPS teachers a degree of voice in the evaluation process and would build a bank of exemplars for the teacher observation process.

1. Adopt the Framework for Teaching as the rubric for all teacher observations.

We support using the Framework for Teaching because it:

- *Uses clear language to define quality practice.* It enables an impartial observer to use evidence

from the classroom to make a fair analysis of a teacher's strengths and weaknesses.

- *Divides teaching into distinct components.* (See Figure 1) The four domains and twenty-two components of the Framework for Teaching accurately describe the challenges and responsibilities of teaching. The general language and succinct format of the framework informs constructive conversations about a teacher's strengths and weaknesses.
- *Has a focus on professional responsibility.* The domain focused on professional responsibility asks teachers to reflect on their practice and to develop connections with parents, teachers, and the greater school community. This domain is vital to the observation because it is vital to a teacher's work.
- *Describes teaching from a general standpoint.* The framework establishes a shared language about quality practice.

Figure 1: Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching¹

Four Domains of Teacher Performance:

1. Planning and Preparation
2. The Classroom Environment
3. Instruction
4. Professional Responsibilities

Within each domain, the framework describes

Four Levels of Teaching:

1. Unsatisfactory
2. Basic
3. Proficient
4. Distinguished

Weaknesses of the Framework for Teaching

Although we are advocating for the adoption of the Framework for Teaching, there are limitations. The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) found four areas of the Framework that were challenging to evaluate (on three of these aspects, principals consistently gave lower ratings than external observers and in one area, principals rated teachers higher than external observers): communicating with students, using assessment in instruction, organizing

physical space, and student engagement.² Further, the Consortium's "Rethinking Teacher Evaluation" report pointed out that principals use the "distinguished" rating more than external observers. Thus, the Framework for Teaching is not reliable at the high end of the scale (in other words, because principals so frequently identified teachers as distinguished, it is hard to differentiate among teachers, particularly at the higher end of performance). Principals may be trained to use the rating less frequently, but the finding suggests reason for concern.³

2. Distribute Observation Tasks among Principals and Other Teachers or Peer Reviewers.

Teacher observation is not for the faint of heart. The work is complicated and requires skill and time to be executed well. An effective system of observation requires great capacity within the organization. Principals, as the instructional leaders of the school, should formally observe every teacher in their buildings once a year. Principals should then continue to observe teachers informally as frequently as they want. However, we strongly believe that principals should not be the primary observers of teacher practice. The Consortium's findings suggest that principals struggle to handle the time commitment to observe teachers regularly using the Framework for Teaching, but also emphasized that observations and reflection conferences are necessary to drive teacher improvement.⁴

In order to observe all teachers well, we have concluded that CPS should expand capacity beyond the principal by initiating a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program (see Figure 2). Principals should evaluate teachers once on all four domains of the Framework, but carefully trained teachers with a track record of effectiveness should act as peer reviewers for additional observations of the domains "Classroom Environment" and "Instruction."

Benefits of Peer Assistance and Review:

- High-quality feedback from experienced teachers in similar subject areas and grade levels will build teacher trust in the evaluation process.
- PAR observers will add objectivity to the observation process since, unlike principals,

Figure 2: A Closer Look at PAR

Who are PAR observers?

PAR observers should be full-time Chicago Public School teachers with a history of effective practice over several years in CPS. CPS and the union should agree on a rigorous selection process that ensures PAR observers are of the highest quality. In order for the PAR program to attract the strongest candidates, CPS should give PAR observers a three to five year position that moves along the teacher pay scale and promises them a teaching position when they leave their PAR work to return to the classroom.

PAR observers should only evaluate teachers in schools where they have never worked. They should also have experience in a similar subject area and grade level as the teachers they observe, which will facilitate more productive reflection conferences. Since PAR observers will be expected to identify areas of need for each teacher, they should be able to provide actionable suggestions for teacher growth using their own expertise as a guide.

How are observers trained and held accountable?

Each PAR observer and principal should undergo extensive training and ongoing professional development both about the application of the Framework for Teaching to classroom situations and also about how to facilitate trusting, critical reflection conferences. The Aspen Institute's "Building Teacher Evaluation Systems" report emphasizes that "the value isn't just in collecting the [observation] information, but in tapping its diagnostic potential to guide reflection and adjustments to practice."⁵ This important piece would be initiated by high-level conversations in the reflection conferences.

CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union should create a system to measure inter-rater reliability to frequently monitor PAR observers, comparing one observer's scores to those of other observers and to master observers to look for statistical anomalies.⁶ Further, CPS and CTU should collaborate to bargain a process by which a teacher who is dissatisfied by the result of the Peer Assistance and Review process could appeal the process and the results to a joint labor-management committee.⁷ Professional development should be modified to address specific challenges encountered by observers as well as inconsistencies identified by researchers as they analyze data.

they don't know the teachers they are evaluating.

- PAR observers will reduce the time demands on principals.

3. Use Classroom Observation to Capture Accurate Evidence of a Teacher's Practice.

- Each observation should last the length of an entire lesson or class period to collect enough evidence within the context of the lesson.
- Observations should be a combination of announced and unannounced visits. Announced visits give teachers and observers the opportunity for a planning conference to learn more about the classroom context, lesson architecture, and other elements of domain one. Unannounced visits ensure that observations capture typical classroom practice. Teachers will be additionally motivated to prepare high-quality, observable lessons every day because they will be unable to anticipate when they'll be observed.

4. Use Post-Observation Reflection Conferences to Promote Further Improvement.

Effective teachers constantly want to improve. They want feedback in order to do so. Timely, robust feedback is critical to attaining the purpose of observation. Thus, the conversation that follows the observation is essential as an opportunity to share feedback and build teacher practice. In order to be effective, these reflection conferences should share the following characteristics:

- Teachers complete a self-reflection form before the meeting (What went well? What did not?)
- At the meeting, teachers and observers present their evidence for what went well and what did not in "Classroom Environment" and "Instruction."
- The conversation should focus on the teacher's reflection and the evidence collected by the observer.
- The reflection conference should move toward goal-setting by providing teachers with actionable steps to improve future instruction.

5. Differentiate the Number of Classroom Observations Based on Teachers' Years of Experience and Level of Practice.

All teachers should be observed either two, three, or four times each year. One of these observations should be conducted by the principal and the rest should be by a PAR observer. Since the observation process is meant to inform quality practice, teachers who receive “unsatisfactory” or “basic” ratings on a single observation should receive additional observations as an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency and elevate their rating. Likewise, tenured teachers who perform proficiently will need less frequent observations, which will save time and money while fostering teacher autonomy (see Figure 3).

First year teachers and tenured teachers who received an “unsatisfactory” rating on the previous year’s annual evaluation should receive additional support from a PAR observer who also acts as a coach. The PAR observer should meet regularly with the teacher both to observe classroom performance informally, as well as facilitate conversations focused on strategies to help the teacher improve. In order to allow teachers time to build a trusting relationship with their coach and to begin implementing suggestions for growth, formal observations of these teachers should not begin until after the first quarter. After that point, two of the four formal observations should be unannounced.

6. Build and Continually Refine the Infrastructure to Support an Effective Evaluation System.

Shared Responsibility

Since teacher evaluation blends accountability with teacher development, CPS should situate evaluation work jointly between the Office of Performance Management as well as the Office for Teaching and Learning. These departments should work together to build a technical infrastructure that can accommodate the documents and ratings that a system this size will require.

Independent Evaluation of Evaluation Needed

CPS should contract an independent, third-party group to study the effectiveness of the overall evaluation system and recommend changes, and they should regularly elicit feedback from PAR observers, teachers, and principals about the program’s implementation.

Professional Development

Infrastructure also includes consideration of professional development. CPS should create a clear link between the evaluation process and professional development. At the beginning of each year, teachers should create a personal professional development plan that focuses on one or two components of the Framework for Teaching and includes specific actions to achieve professional goals. CPS should group teachers according to these components and offer professional development opportunities within each component for a variety of grade levels and subject areas. At the end of each year, teachers should submit documents that detail their work toward improving each component and explain how their growth impacted their teaching. First year and “unsatisfactory” teachers should work with their coach to write these documents. Principals should use these documents, along with any other documents related to professional responsibility, as evidence to evaluate teachers on the fourth domain of “Professional Responsibilities.” This evidence should be used as a separate component of a teacher’s annual evaluation rating at the end of the year.

Why invest in teacher observation?

Teachers need to be held accountable for their instructional practices and for promoting student learning and growth. Observation is one part of assessing teachers. Teach Plus and the Teaching Policy Fellows seek to advance various ways of measuring and promoting teacher effectiveness, including measures of student learning and measures of instructional practice such as observation rubrics. Teach Plus is collaborating with states and districts across the country to help them advance thoughtful evaluation systems that include teachers in the design and implementation.

Building and maintaining this program will cost money. Harvard University’s “User’s Guide to PAR”⁸ suggests that costs for PAR range from \$4,000 to \$7,000 per participant. Since our recommended PAR structure only offers intense coaching and observation to a small portion of CPS teachers and since we estimate that nearly half of CPS teachers would only require one PAR observation per year, we estimate the cost to be closer to \$2,000 per teacher per year. With approximately 21,000 teachers in the system, we approximate that adopting our PAR program would cost CPS between 40

LAURA'S STORY

It stood in the way of raising my students' achievement. I knew nothing about the components of my evaluation and worried all year about my performance and my future at the school. Approaching the end-of-the-year evaluation conference, I thought of many areas I could improve, and hoped my principal would recognize them. Yet that year, I received a rating of "excellent." I was confused about the rating, because I had never once been observed for an entire lesson. While I knew I had potential to be excellent someday, I knew I wasn't there yet. As much as I wanted to celebrate my "success," it felt empty, because it was not fully true. Instead of being glad, I left that meeting confused about how to improve, and yearning for more honest, instructive feedback.

Four years later, my current school participated in the pilot program with the Danielson "Framework for Teaching." At first, the shift from very infrequent (or nonexistent!) observers in my classroom to regular and frequent observations seemed daunting. I worried about how I would be rated and if the observers would like what they saw. Then I learned more. The Framework for Teaching clearly lays out the evidence of effective teaching. The four domains list explicitly what an observer would notice in a "distinguished" classroom, and leave little room for subjectivity. The rubric also clarifies what I should be doing to get better; my goals for improvement are listed plainly. No more was the case that my principal's subjective opinion would be the sole basis for the content of my evaluation. Instead, my principal comes into my classroom to record exactly what my students and I do. Then she codes what she sees according to the rubric. The post-observation conference focuses on evidence of my teaching compared to the specific elements of the Framework for Teaching rubric. My principal and I spend time discussing what took place and our reflections. The conversation describes what I did well, but then always follows with suggestions for improvement. I leave feeling empowered to re-enter my classroom as a more effective teacher.

The difference between the evaluation in my first year and the process of evaluation I experience now is tremendous. Now, instead of distrusting empty praise, I truly appreciate my strengths because I know they were objectively measured with evidence against descriptors of quality practice. Similarly, when I struggle, I know exactly where to look to find the path to improvement. No longer do I feel confused or helpless; instead, I know exactly what it will take to grow in my profession, and that sense of empowerment makes all the difference.

My first year, I walked into a school serving students in Cabrini Green, one of Chicago's housing projects notorious for violence. I was optimistic about giving back to the Chicago Public Schools System that educated me. I knew the environment I had chosen would be challenging, but I felt that with a little support from administration I would be more than prepared. However, after my first day I wondered, "How can these seven and eight year olds nearly bring me to tears?" My classroom was chaotic. Administrators advised me, "Do your best!" I wanted to walk out that day and never return, but I refused to give up. I was not going to be just another statistic.

CHANIQUA'S STORY

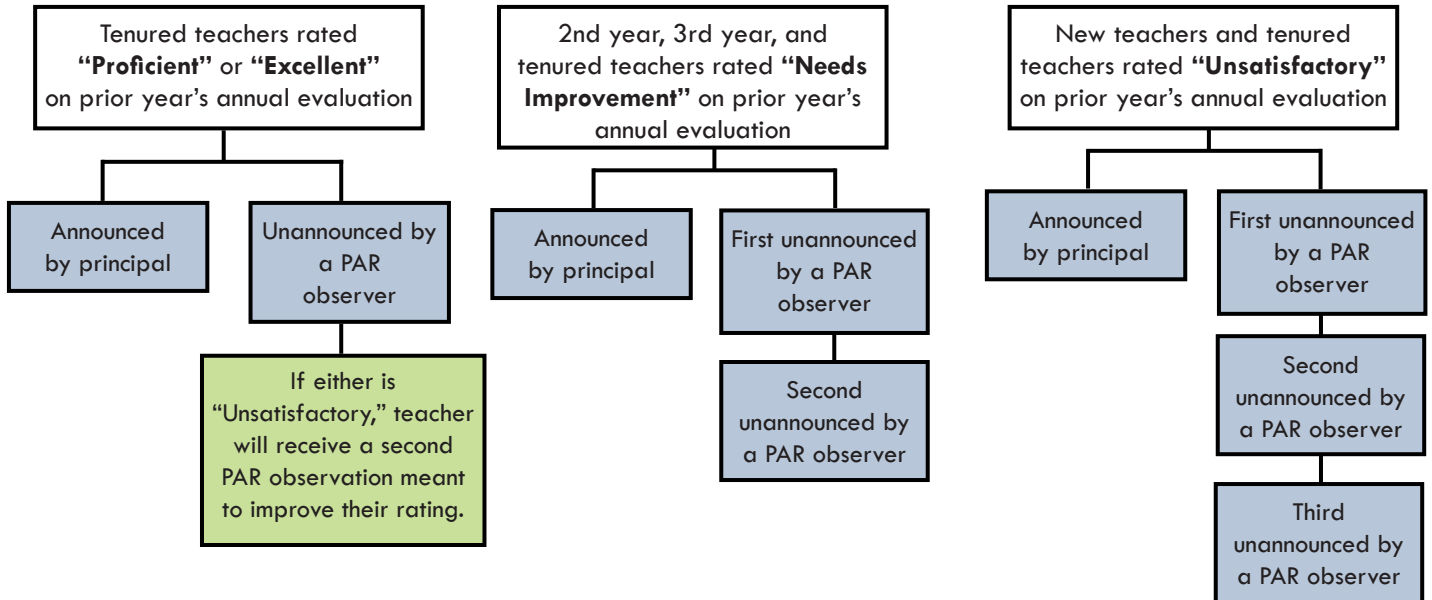
On day two, I left the textbook theories behind and used my knowledge of growing up in a similar environment to relate to my students and quickly earned their respect. Goodbye, chaos! Visitors were brought in to observe my class. I was considered a success. Administrators left me notes of praise after leaving my classroom: "Keep up the good work," "Job well done," "I love your classroom." On the last day of school, I received my evaluation: a checklist of strengths (no weaknesses) and an overall rating of "excellent." I could not believe it. Excellent how, I thought? I still had questions about curriculum, strategies, differentiation, modifications and accommodations. I would not have rated myself as "excellent" on my best day, but I signed the document and left that day with one year of teaching experience under my belt.

After two years of continuously working in isolation, searching hard to find support outside of my building and receiving no constructive feedback to improve my instruction, I changed schools. My new principal came to my room unannounced every week to observe my lessons. I would quickly rush to her office after school to seek feedback. She provided techniques, resources, and made me aware of professional development opportunities to help me improve my practice or would lead me to another teacher in our building that could assist me or answer my questions. I felt empowered.

Recently, our school was chosen for the Teaching for Learning Framework pilot. Even though we are still learning about the lengthy rubric, the conversations about effective practices to improve student outcomes are long overdue in our district. I appreciate having clarity of expectations and look forward to continuing to learn how to increase student's achievement using evaluation. Teachers need feedback, support, and professional development aligned to our evaluations. No matter what neighborhood our schools are in, good classroom management should not be the most important (or only) factor for receiving an "excellent" rating on a teacher's evaluation.

Figure 3: Three Steps to an Observation Rating

Step One: Determining the Number of Observations



Step Two: Converting the Framework for Teaching to an Observation Rating

To implement the Framework for Teaching and be in compliance with state legislation, CPS will need to develop a rating system that corresponds to the observation rubrics. After each observation, a teacher's ratings on the individual components of the Framework for Teaching rubric are converted into a score that corresponds to the four levels of teaching mandated by the PERA legislation.⁹ A teacher's annual evaluation rating should be derived from a combination of factors, including, but not limited to, observation data and rubrics and various measures of student outcomes. We recommend the following system:

Rating	Description
Unsatisfactory	Any "unsatisfactory" rating.
Needs Improvement	No "unsatisfactory" ratings and three or more "basic" ratings.
Proficient	No "unsatisfactory" ratings, fewer than three "basic" ratings, and the remainder "proficient" and "distinguished."
Excellent	No "unsatisfactory" or "basic" ratings and all "proficient" and "distinguished" ratings.

Step Three: Calculating an Overall Observation Rating

A teacher's annual rating for domains 2 and 3 should be a combination of their individual ratings from each observation.

Points are as follows:

- Excellent** = 4
- Proficient** = 3
- Needs Improvement** = 2
- Unsatisfactory** = 1

Combined Score	Rating
<i>For a teacher observed twice</i>	
7-8	Excellent
5-6	Proficient
<i>For a teacher observed three times</i>	
11-12	Excellent
8-10	Proficient
5-7	Needs Improvement
3-4	Unsatisfactory
<i>For a teacher observed four times</i>	
15-16	Excellent
11-14	Proficient
7-10	Needs Improvement
4-6	Unsatisfactory

The overall observation rating would then be combined with other measures of student learning in a transparent way to determine the **annual evaluation rating**.

Figure 4: A Tale of Three Teachers

Ms. Smith, 4 observations: Ms. Smith is observed once by a principal and three times by a PAR observer. She earns one “proficient” rating (3), two “needs improvement” ratings (2 + 2), and one “unsatisfactory” rating (1). This means that Ms. Smith’s final total is $3 + 2 + 2 + 1 = 8$. On the annual rating scale, she would earn a “needs improvement” for the observation component of her evaluation.

Mr. Jones, 3 observations: Mr. Jones, a tenured teacher who received a “proficient” rating the previous year, is observed once by a principal and once by a PAR observer. He earns one “proficient” rating (3) and one “unsatisfactory” rating (1). The unsatisfactory rating means that Mr. Jones receives one more additional observation, where he earns an “excellent” rating (4). Thus, Mr. Jones’ final total is $3 + 1 + 4 = 8$. On the annual rating scale, he earns a “proficient” rating on the observation component of his evaluation.

Mrs. Brown, 2 observations: Mrs. Brown, a tenured teacher who received a “proficient” rating the previous year, is observed once by a principal and once by a PAR observer. She earns one “excellent” rating and one “proficient” rating. Mrs. Brown’s final total is $4 + 3 = 7$. On the annual rating scale, she would earn an “excellent” rating on the observation component of her evaluation.

and 50 million dollars per year. However, there would also be savings that would be more difficult to calculate. PAR and corresponding new teacher induction programs have been shown to reduce the rate of teacher turnover, a major expense for large urban districts like CPS. Moreover, we believe that a successful PAR program would reduce the need for an expensive and complicated appeals system to deal with the removal of tenured teachers.

Still, even including these savings, we understand that at a time of increasing budget deficits, an expensive program like ours must make a cogent argument for its necessity. Therefore, we want to be clear: we strongly believe that investing in a program like PAR is critical to the future success of Chicago Public Schools. While we believe that teachers must be held accountable for their teaching, we also believe that in order to hold teachers accountable, we need to first build programs that reliably assess teacher effectiveness and provide clear feedback for teacher growth. Our program would accomplish both tasks, and in doing so, change the face of teaching in Chicago Public Schools.

What might be the impact of this rating system?

Since 2008, CPS has instituted the “Excellence in

Teaching Pilot,” the beginnings of the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system. The Consortium on Chicago School Research conducted a study of the implementation of the pilot.¹⁰ The Consortium’s research shows that the Framework for Teaching is a reliable tool to use in teacher observation.

Further, in the initial pilot, the research shows that observers did rate teachers in different categories. Put simply, teachers were not all rated as “excellent” or “unsatisfactory,” suggesting that the Framework is useful in helping to distinguish among teaching practices—something that has not happened with evaluation in the past. The researchers found that of the 95 pre-tenured teachers who participated in the 44 pilot schools, the teachers were given a much wider range of ratings when they were evaluated with the Framework for Teaching when compared to the previous CPS evaluation system. In the past, only 0.3 percent of teachers in CPS had been rated as “unsatisfactory.” Under the new Framework, 8 percent of teachers in this sample received at least one “unsatisfactory” rating. Specifically: 37 percent received all “proficient” and “distinguished” ratings; 22 percent received mostly “proficient” ratings; 33 percent received a combination of “basic” and “proficient” ratings and 8 percent had received at least one “unsatisfactory” rating.¹¹

Conclusion

As classroom teachers, we are driven by our commitment to our students. We want our practice to become a collaborative enterprise so that we learn from other excellent teachers and from the administrators in our buildings, all focused on the goal of excellent teaching to promote excellent student learning. We want to be held accountable. We want to be observed often—both formally and informally. We want feedback on what works and specific suggestions and resources to get better when things are not working. We want observation that recognizes teacher learning as the key lever to improving student achievement. We believe the recommendations we have provided here will promote a culture of learning that transforms teaching into a profession of excellence.

Endnotes

1. The Danielson Group. "The Framework for Teaching." Available: <http://www.danielsongroup.org/theframeteach.htm>
2. Lauren Sartain, Sara Roy Stoelinga, and Emily Krone. 2010. "Rethinking Teacher Evaluation: Findings from the First Year of the Excellence in Teaching Project in Chicago Public Schools." Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute. Available: http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=143
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. The Aspen Institute. (2011). *Building Teacher Evaluation Systems: Learning From Leading Efforts*. Washington, DC. Available: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/building-teacher-evaluation-systems-learning-leading-efforts>
6. A similar system should be established for principal accountability.
7. Cincinnati and Toledo are pioneers in the use of Peer Assistance and Review. Cincinnati's PAR program has been in existence since 1983 when it was first proposed by visionary union leader Tom Mooney. Toledo's program is even older, have been bargained in the 1970s. For more information about these programs and others, see: "A User's Guide to Peer Assistance and Review" by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Available: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/>
8. Harvard University Graduate School of Education. "A User's Guide to Peer Assistance and Review (PAR)." Available: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/>
9. <http://www.isbe.net/PEAC/default.htm>
10. Sartain, Stoelinga, and Krone, 2010.
11. See Sartain, Stoelinga, and Krone, 2010, page 6 for more details.

About Teach Plus:

The mission of Teach Plus is to improve outcomes for urban children by ensuring that a greater proportion of students have access to effective, experienced teachers. Teach Plus supports the retention of effective teachers in urban schools by expanding leadership opportunities for excellent teachers. It is founded on the premise that teachers want to learn and grow in the profession and want to ensure that their development results in increased learning among their students. www.teachplus.org

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