

## 5 Ways to Ensure That Teacher Evaluations Are Fair, Reliable, and Effective

### Introduction:

We are a group of teachers from Greater Boston district and charter schools who have come together to ensure that teachers' perspectives are included as our state implements changes to its teacher evaluation system. We know that policy leaders in Massachusetts and across the country are currently rethinking teacher evaluation and we have specific suggestions to offer.

We support many of the principles underlying the new evaluation system. It has the potential to identify and celebrate high-performing teachers, as well as identify, support, and potentially dismiss teachers who are repeatedly deemed ineffective. The new evaluation system also provides teachers with regular opportunities to receive feedback and improve their practice. All of this will benefit our most important constituent: our students.

However, it is important that the new evaluation regulations are implemented consistently and thoroughly to allow for all teachers to experience the potential benefits. We have surveyed 112 teachers from across Massachusetts who have already experienced the new evaluation system this school year (those in Level 4 or "Early Adopter" schools). We recognize that our data reflect a relatively small sample of teachers, but we still see great value in sharing the results because they provide a window into teachers' real-time experiences. And, they provide more collective teacher-level data than we have seen anywhere else.

The data show that there is a high degree of variability: many teachers describe their experience as frustrating and ineffective, many others paint a more neutral picture, and some are quite positive (even given that this year is essentially a pilot year). We have concerns for the large number of teachers who are experiencing weak

### Our 5 Recommendations

1. Ensure that teachers understand the purpose and structure of the evaluation system before they are evaluated.
2. Require robust training of all evaluators.
3. Require rigorous certification & recertification for all evaluators.
4. Ensure that evaluators have the capacity, time, and support necessary to complete their evaluations.
5. Collect and use teacher feedback throughout the evaluation process.

implementation and are not benefitting from the intended purpose of the new system. We want the new system to succeed, both for the sake of teachers and of students.

The recommendations that follow are based on our survey results, as well as recent research on teacher evaluation and our own diverse experiences with evaluation.

Much of our focus is on the quality of *evaluators*. We feel that this is an essential component of a fair, reliable, and effective evaluation system that is not garnering much attention right now. We welcome greater accountability for teachers based on whether or not our students are learning from our instruction; however, we implore policymakers to hold equally high expectations for evaluators.

# Our Recommendations:

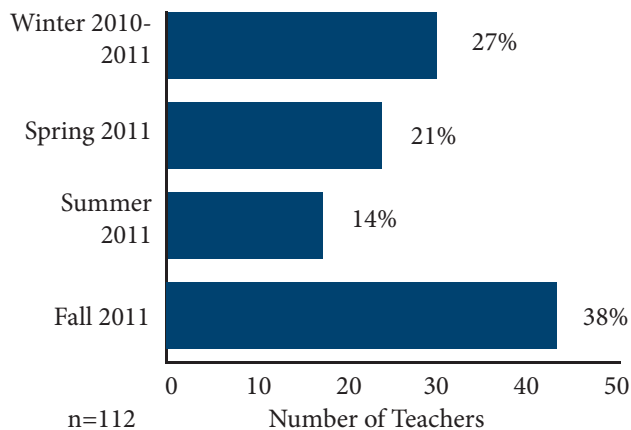
## 1. Ensure That Teachers Understand the Purpose and Structure of the Evaluation System Before They Are Evaluated

The new Massachusetts educator evaluation system is detailed and complex. Teachers must have a reasonable opportunity to learn about the purpose and structure of the new evaluation system before they are evaluated.

Unfortunately, our recent survey of Massachusetts teachers in Level 4 schools and Early Adopter districts suggests that this has often not been the case. Our survey data found that:

- 38% of teachers surveyed had no knowledge of the new evaluation system until it was implemented in their schools in the Fall of 2011. (Table 1)
- When asked to rate their satisfaction regarding their introduction to the new evaluation system on a 1-5 scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = highly satisfied), 50% of teachers selected a rating of 1 or 2. 22% selected a rating of 4 or 5. (Table 2)

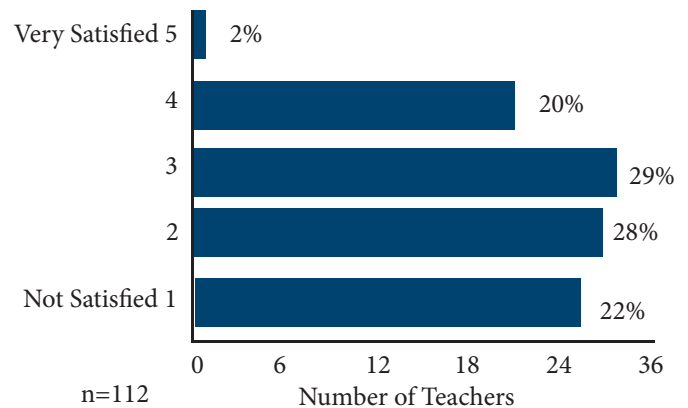
**Table 1. When did you first learn about the new evaluation system?**



Several respondents described their introduction to the new evaluation system as a frustrating experience. One respondent explained, “Administrators were unclear about the new evaluation themselves, so they could not present it clearly and effectively.” Another noted that “there was a great deal of confusion in our building surrounding the new evaluation system.”

A poor, confusing introduction of the evaluation system has the potential to undermine teachers’ buy-in to that system. Indeed, a National Institute for Excellence in Teaching study on teacher evaluation in Chicago noted that an effective evaluation system “requires much more than just new evaluation tools, procedures, and training. It requires deliberate and ongoing efforts to help teachers understand why professional standards have to be raised and how they and their students will benefit and be supported, etc.”<sup>i</sup>

**Table 2. Overall, how satisfied were you with your introduction to the new evaluation system?**

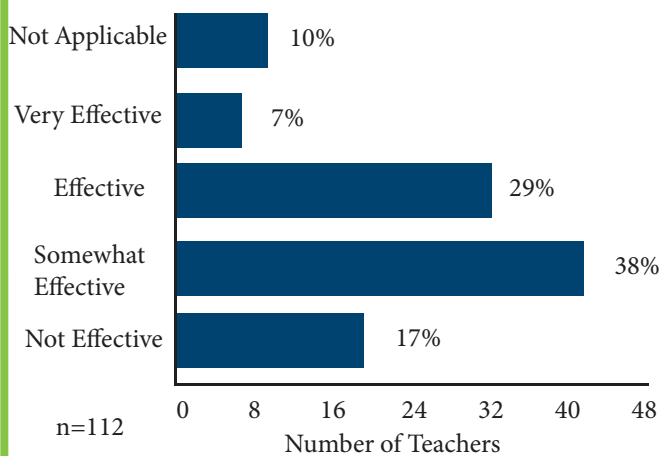


In order to ensure that teachers understand the purpose and structure of the evaluation system before they are evaluated, we recommend that the state and districts:

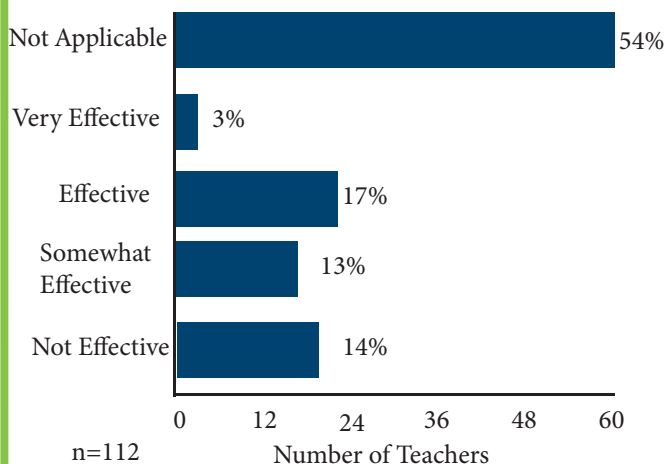
- Provide a clear, coherent introduction to the evaluation system that focuses upon its most important aspects – such as its purpose, the evaluation cycle, and the evaluation rubric.
- Ensure that school administrators understand the purpose and structure of the new evaluation system before it is introduced in their schools.
- Ensure that teachers have a reasonable opportunity to ask questions about the evaluation system during and/or after the introduction.
- Help teachers understand the rubric by providing model videos with accompanying rubrics.
- Use end-of-session surveys to collect teachers’ questions and comments and assess their understanding of the evaluation system. Create plans to follow up if those surveys suggest further explanation and clarification is needed.

**Teachers rated the effectiveness of the following ways they were introduced to the new evaluation system:**

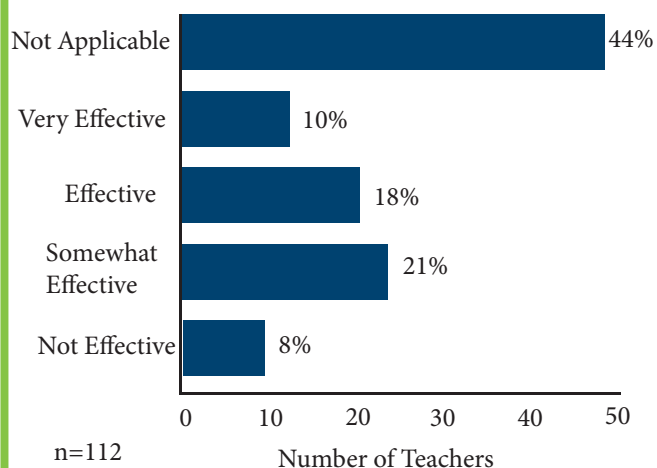
**Table 3. School-based Meeting**



**Table 4. Districtwide Meeting**



**Table 5. Individual Meeting With Administrator or Mentor**



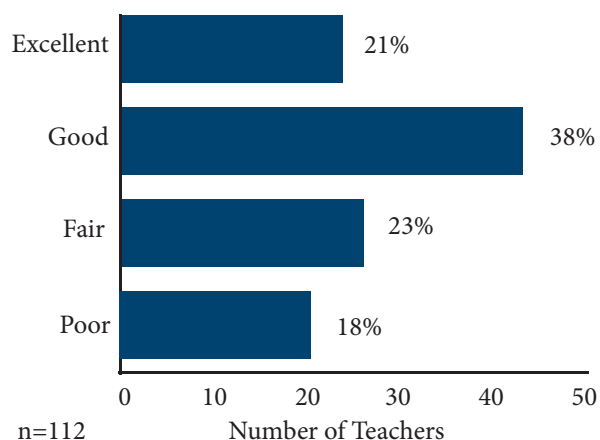
**2. Require Robust Training of all Evaluators**

Evaluators must have a clear and thorough understanding of the evaluation regulations before they are allowed to evaluate teachers. A poor evaluator undermines the reliability and effectiveness of the entire evaluation process. Unfortunately, our survey data suggests that many teachers view their evaluator as unprepared or unable to perform their job well as evaluator.

- While 59% of survey respondents gave their evaluators an overall rating of good or excellent, 41% gave their evaluators an overall rating of fair or poor. (Table 6)
- While 52% of respondents rated their evaluator’s content area knowledge as good or excellent, 45% rated it as poor or fair. (Table 7)
- While 60% of respondents rated the quality of their evaluator’s feedback as good or excellent, 35% of respondents rated it as fair or poor. (Table 8)
- 34% of respondents rated their evaluator’s understanding of the evaluation process as poor or fair. (Table 9)

We must ensure that evaluators are fully trained – and this will take time. Research conducted by the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) suggests it may take up to 40 hours to properly train an evaluator.<sup>ii</sup> The Gates Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project advises 17-25 hours of training.<sup>iii</sup> These robust evaluator training programs help to ensure that all evaluators – not just some – are reliable and effective.

**Table 6. Overall, how would you rate your primary evaluator?**



“I truly believe that this evaluation procedure could improve my teaching; I know that I am not reaching all of my students at the moment. However, when I had a difficult time writing my goals, my evaluator did not seem to understand how to write these much better than I did. I felt if I had written better goals I could have seen more success this year. I have colleagues who had a different evaluator and they seemed to benefit a great deal from the process”

-Teacher from a Massachusetts Level 4 School

“Everything I presented for my plan, my evaluator could not approve it without asking and sending for outside help. I am very interested in improving my practice, and I feel this is doing the opposite.”

-Teacher from a Massachusetts Level 4 School

We recommend that a robust evaluator training program in Massachusetts should:

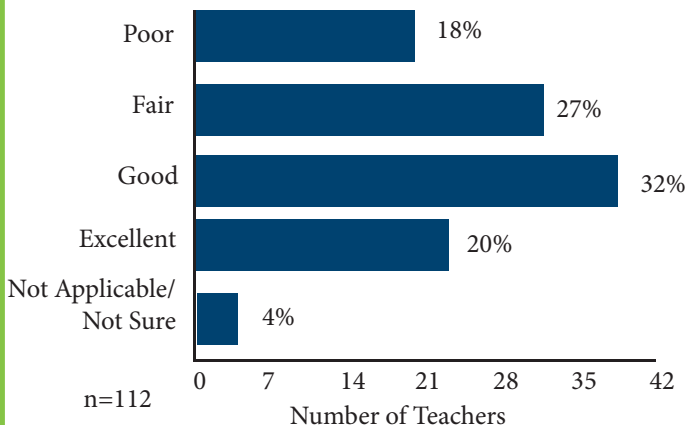
- Ensure that evaluators have an accurate understanding of the new evaluation system – especially its purpose and the steps in the evaluation cycle.
- Norm evaluators’ scoring by providing model videos and rubrics.
- Consider creative, cost-effective options for comprehensive training, including both on-line and in-person training.
- Provide evaluators with ongoing opportunities to network and communicate with each other.

Finally, one critical – but frequently overlooked – component of the evaluation system is the relationship between the evaluator and the person being evaluated. Trust is a foundation for that relationship to flourish. In order for this relationship to “work,” the teacher must trust that the evaluator has been trained thoroughly and has knowledge and skills that will inform the teacher on how to improve his or her practice.

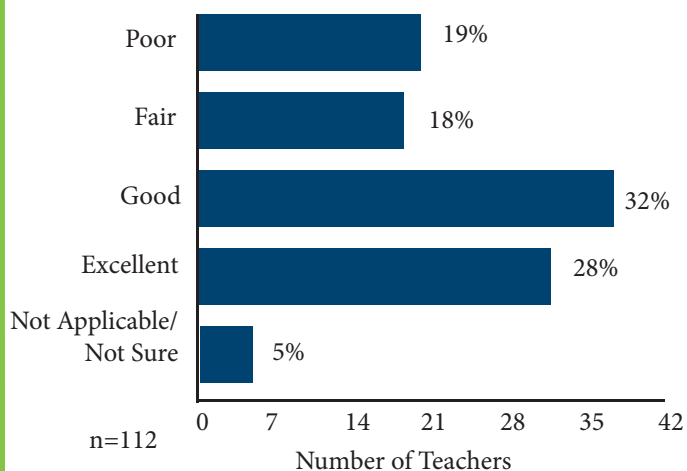
Thus, a robust evaluator training program must prepare evaluators to do more than just use the evaluation tools

## Teachers were asked to rate their primary evaluator in the following areas:

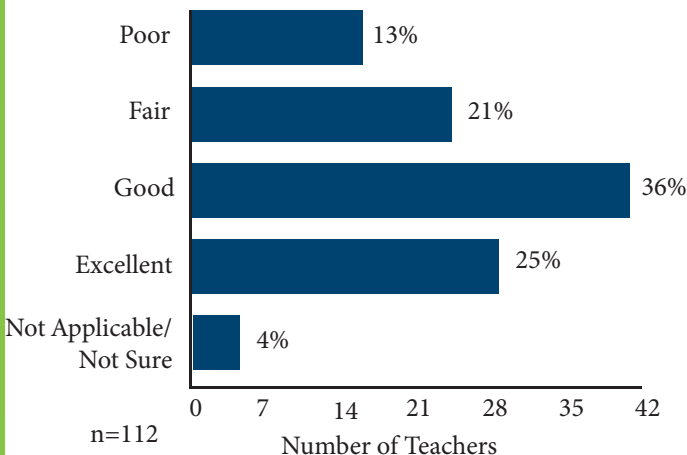
**Table 7. Knowledge in the Content Area**



**Table 8. Quality of Feedback**



**Table 9. Understanding the Year-Long Evaluation**



– it must prepare them to develop caring, supportive relationships with educators. As Anthony Bryk, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, recently noted in his research on trust in schools, “It must be made clear what it means to mentor well.”<sup>iv</sup>

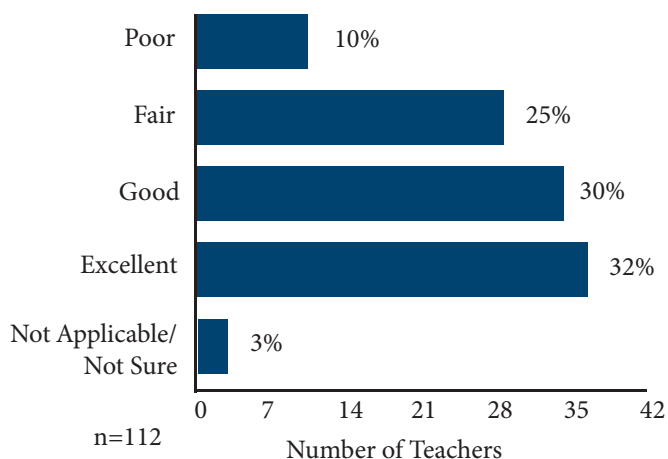
### 3. Require Rigorous Certification & Recertification for All Evaluators

While initial training for evaluators is essential, training alone is not enough to ensure that evaluators are reliable and effective. Evaluators must also pass certification and recertification assessments to demonstrate their competency. A rigorous certification and recertification system is necessary to ensure that evaluators are effective and reliable, and thereby foster trust between evaluators and teachers.

Our survey data suggests that even under the new evaluation regulations, some Massachusetts teachers are rarely being observed, and when they are observed, they frequently do not trust the feedback they receive. Our data revealed:

- In schools required to formally evaluate at least half of educators in year one of implementation, 18% of teachers were not observed at all this year and 24% were observed only once. (Table 11)
- 39% of teachers rarely or never use the feedback given by evaluators. That number increases to 56% if teachers who incorporated feedback just once a month are included. (Table 13)

**Table 10. Rate your evaluator’s availability to meet with you.**



One respondent to our survey noted, “This evaluation is totally subjective. What one evaluator sees is not what another sees.”

It is essential that we reverse this trend. We must acknowledge that evaluating classroom teaching can be as complex as teaching itself. Thus, as part of the certification and recertification process, we must:

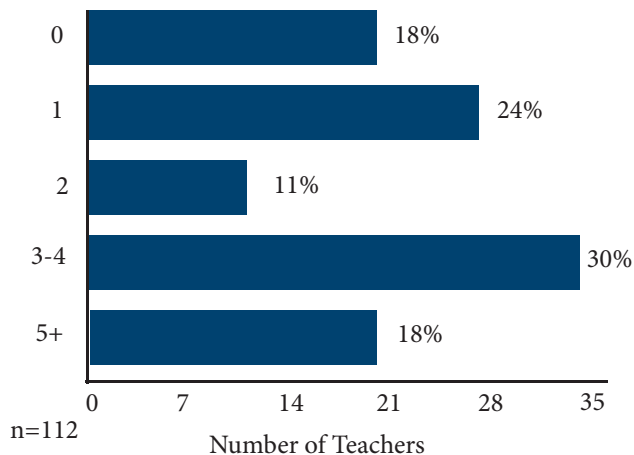
- Use model videos and/or other performance-based assessments to certify that evaluators can evaluate teaching reliably and effectively.
- Create clear expectations for evaluators related to mentoring and providing feedback and ensure that evaluators meet these expectations.
- Hold evaluators accountable for their work even after they have been certified by requiring periodic recertification. The recertification process could include a variety of:
  - feedback from teachers with whom the evaluator has worked.
  - additional videos and/or other performance-based assessments to ensure that evaluators are still reliable and effective.
  - a portfolio of the evaluator’s work which can be submitted for recertification.

### 4. Ensure That Evaluators Have the Capacity, Time, and Support Necessary to Complete Their Evaluations

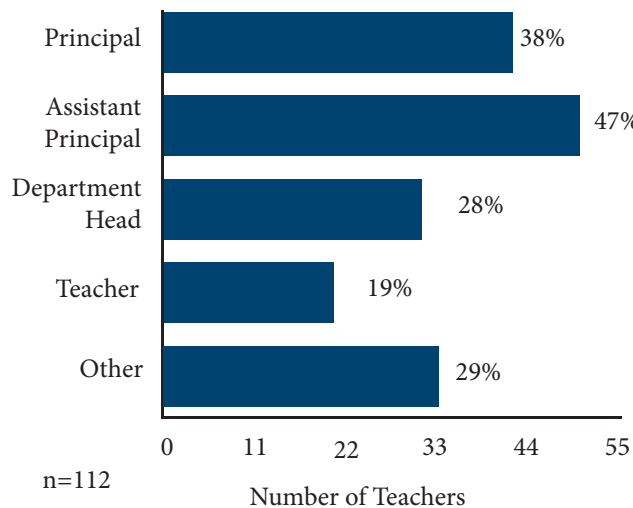
An effective evaluation system must ensure that evaluators have the capacity, time, and support necessary to fulfill their responsibilities. Our survey results suggest that evaluators are primarily principals and assistant principals, and that they often lack the time and/or support to complete their evaluations. More specifically, our survey found:

- The Massachusetts model system suggests that each teacher should have one announced observation and multiple brief unannounced observations with feedback between October and May. However, more than half way through this first year, 42% of teachers in our survey had been evaluated only 0 or 1 time. (Table 11)

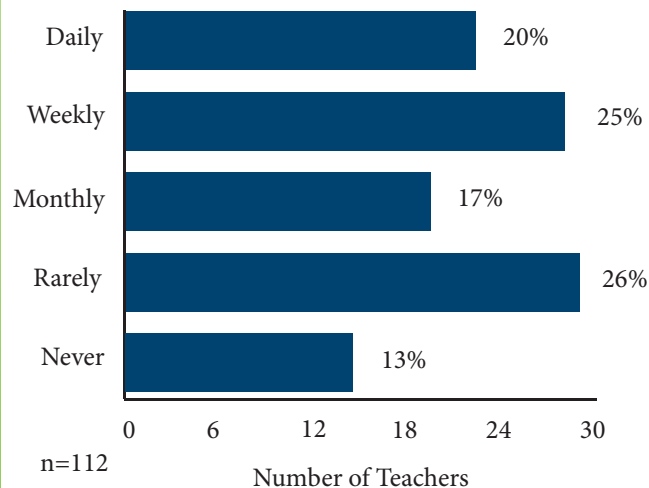
**Table 11. How many times have you been observed this school year?**



**Table 12. Who observed you?**



**Table 13. How often have you incorporated evaluator feedback into your teaching?**



- 85% of teachers reported that their observations were performed only by their principals or assistant principals.

The data above suggest that it may be extraordinarily difficult for many principals and assistant principals to complete high-quality evaluations for all teachers while still fulfilling their other important responsibilities. One respondent to our survey noted that “time seems to be the limiting factor in the process.” Another shared that her evaluator “barely has time to meet with me and give me feedback on the class he visited.” This may be a particularly salient concern for large, comprehensive high schools.

We strongly advise that districts use individuals from a variety of roles as evaluators. Besides principals and assistant principals, evaluators could include:

- School-based Master Teachers
- Teacher Mentors
- District-based Peer Evaluators
- Instructional Coaches
- Department Heads

All qualified evaluators should be assigned a manageable number of teachers so that they can dedicate the appropriate time necessary to complete high-quality evaluations. Furthermore, we encourage Massachusetts and its districts to explore other creative ways to address the amount of time needed to complete teacher evaluations reliably and effectively. For example, in-person classroom observations can be supplemented with the use of digital video recordings of teacher instruction which can be viewed outside the school day.

## 5. Collect and Use Teacher Feedback Throughout the Evaluation Process

Teachers themselves have a wealth of knowledge concerning the effectiveness of their evaluators. They are the only ones who will interact with evaluators during every stage of the process, and as such, are the only people with a global view of how well evaluators are doing their job. Our survey contained 16 questions and took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Only a small portion of this survey directly concentrated on evaluator performance, and yet, we garnered information

about evaluators' frequency of visits, quality of feedback, dedication to improving teacher instruction, availability to meet with teachers, and understanding of the year-long process.

**Data collected at a Boston T+ Network event held in the fall of 2011 suggests that many teachers are willing to provide feedback to their school leaders.**

**Data from that event showed that:**

- Teachers are amenable to evaluating their principals 2-3 times a year.
- 54% of teachers would spend up to 60 minutes a year evaluating their principals.
- 58% of teachers favored a combination of evaluation methods including online surveys, focus groups, and to a lesser extent, paper-based surveys.

Ninety-three Greater Boston teachers were present at the event.

This type of feedback is indispensable to support evaluators' professional development, as well as to hold evaluators accountable for their work. It also values teachers as professionals who can provide important feedback to their co-workers in the education field.

We recommend:

- Teachers should be called upon to give formal feedback related to their evaluator's ability to provide effective and reliable evaluations.
- Teachers should be asked to give feedback on multiple dimensions of evaluation. These dimensions could include:
  - Quality of feedback
  - Ability to support teachers
  - Availability to meet
  - Frequency of observations
  - Ability to connect teacher to resources
  - Depth of pedagogical knowledge
  - Depth of content knowledge
  - Knowledge of the evaluation system

This feedback should be used as one part of the evaluator's overall job performance evaluation.

## A Final Word

The new Massachusetts evaluation system has the potential to transform the teaching profession and improve student achievement throughout the state. However, our survey data suggests that unless more is done to ensure that all evaluators are reliable and effective, it will fail to live up to that potential. Some good evaluators are not enough – all evaluators must have the support, training, and certification they need to ensure that all students have the great teachers they deserve.

To get in touch with us, please contact Maria Fenwick, Teach Plus Boston Executive Director, at [mfenwick@teachplus.org](mailto:mfenwick@teachplus.org).

## Methodology

The survey data included in this memo was collected from 112 teachers who teach in Level 4 or Early Adopter schools across Massachusetts. We designed the survey ourselves with input from a Strategic Data Fellow from Harvard's Center for Education Policy and Research. We disseminated the survey via email to as many teachers in Level 4/Early Adopter schools as possible.

## References:

- i Jerald, Craig D. and Van Hook, Kristin. (2011). More than Measurement: The TAP System's Lessons for Designing Better Teacher Evaluation Systems. Chicago, IL: National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.
- ii Ibid.
- iii Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Measures of Effective Teaching Project. (2012). Gathering Feedback for Teaching: Combining High- Quality Observations with Student Surveys and Achievement Gains.
- iv Bryk, A., Harding, H., and Greenberg, S. Contextual Influences on Inquiries into Effective Teaching and Their Implications for Improving Student Learning, Spring 2012, Harvard Educational Review Volume 82, Number 1 / Spring 2012.

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