

Teach Plus Los Angeles Teaching Policy Fellows Recommend Phasing In Teacher Evaluation Changes

The Teach Plus Los Angeles Teaching Policy Fellows are a group of district and charter school teachers who meet regularly to address issues of importance to students and teachers in Los Angeles. Our goal is to ensure that teachers' voices are heard as policy decisions are made that impact our classrooms. In Los Angeles, important changes are being made to how teachers are evaluated, and after talking to a variety of teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), we have recommendations for how the new evaluation system could be implemented to improve teaching and learning in our district.

As teachers, we believe that student growth measures must be included in teacher evaluation and that improving evaluation is going to help teaching and learning in the district. We call on United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) as our professional association to lead the way in this work. In February 2012, thousands of UTLA members voiced their desire to have UTLA lead the way by voting to negotiate a teacher-driven evaluation system.¹ Our union has made great strides in proposing a multiple measure framework for teacher development and evaluation.² However, LAUSD and UTLA have yet to negotiate the inclusion of student growth measures in teacher evaluation. As part of a multiple measure evaluation system, we believe that it is critical to include student growth measures because it provides important insight into effective teaching.

76% of teachers responded that student growth measures, such as AGT, should play a role in teacher evaluation.

However, we acknowledge that teachers are skeptical about the use of student growth measures in evaluation. To that end, we worked with LAUSD to design and conduct a series of forums across the district in which we gathered teacher feedback on the use of Academic Growth over Time (AGT). We were encouraged by the district's desire to hear what teachers have to say about AGT. More than three-quarters (76%) of teachers we spoke with agree

that student growth measures, like AGT, should play a role in teacher evaluation. The majority of teachers who gave feedback are ready for a meaningful evaluation system that recognizes student growth as an essential part of a teacher's performance.

At the same time, teachers voiced significant concerns about how well the district could reliably measure a teacher's contribution to student learning. Whether perceived or real, these concerns significantly limit the ability of teachers to trust AGT as a valid component of a professional evaluation. As a result, we propose a new component to the implementation of AGT in LAUSD that will address these concerns and bring LAUSD and UTLA together to get the conversation moving to help more teachers improve: a phased-in implementation of AGT that allows the district to refine and improve this major change before it fully takes effect.

The phase-in process would work by counting AGT for a smaller percentage of a teacher's evaluation in the initial phase of implementation. AGT would then rise incrementally, going no higher than a predetermined cap within the overall evaluation as the district meets benchmarks that demonstrate the validity of AGT and its fidelity to implementation. The district needs to be held accountable in the rollout and this will show teachers that LAUSD is implementing AGT with a careful and thoughtful approach. There has been little progress in negotiating a mutually agreeable teacher evaluation system and the most contentious issue has been the inclusion of student growth measures. It is our desire that the phase-in will provide the solution to begin conversations that include teacher voice.

What follows is a report detailing our findings from our forums, including teacher hopes and concerns, and our subsequent recommendations. We highlight two areas of hopes and two areas of concern regarding AGT, which provide a rationale for implementing AGT with a phased-in approach.

Area for Hope: Improved Professional Development

There is optimism that the use of AGT will help identify strengths and weaknesses in pedagogy and lead to improved professional development. Specifically, teachers selected the “identification of strength and weaknesses in their pedagogy” as their greatest hope for the use of AGT. Teachers spoke about the hope that AGT would provide information that would help them hone in on their craft. Many teachers spoke about their desire for “usable” data that was timely and provided teachers with actionable feedback.

Teachers said that it will be essential for their schools and the district to be able to use the feedback provided in their AGT reports by aligning future professional development to help teachers develop and improve in their craft.

Area for Hope: Teacher Leadership Pathways

There was also optimism that AGT will help “identify high impact colleagues at their school site and in the district.” By identifying high impact teachers across the district, LAUSD has an opportunity to showcase great teaching and allow teacher leaders to share promising practices. In addition to identifying teachers to run content-specific professional development, this could lead to establishing a pipeline for future leadership roles.

“I like my AGT report. It’s the first time I’m getting recognized for the growth in my more challenging kids.”

Teacher, Teach Plus Event

One of the challenges associated with this hope is that it raised concerns amongst teachers regarding the privacy of their AGT scores. In the phrasing of this statement, neither Teach Plus nor LAUSD intended to imply that AGT scores become public. As teachers, we are opposed to publicly releasing individual AGT scores. The intent of the statement was to identify whether teachers would benefit from knowing if a colleague at their school site was particularly successful with a certain population and/or in a particular subject.

Area for Concern: Reliability of AGT

While 3 out of 4 teachers at our events agreed that student growth measures ought to be used in teacher evaluation, teachers expressed concern about whether AGT accurately reflects their impact. Specifically, teachers question the statistical methodology behind AGT and the assessment used to generate AGT scores, the California Standards Test (CST). LAUSD has attempted to allay these fears through creating a web portal that explains how the algorithm works, yet some teachers still expressed skepticism. LAUSD must continue to demonstrate transparency and pursue new methods to address these concerns by improving communication with teachers, as

well as creating a plan for the transition to Common Core Standards, before full-scale implementation.

“When you have a value added model, when so much is based on a single test (CST), you’re going to have a situation where individual teachers or schools are going to try to game the system – making decisions that may not be in the best interest of the student.”

Teacher, Teach Plus Event

Many teachers, including those whose students do and do not take the CST, were not comfortable using the CST as a metric of teacher performance. Teachers were not only concerned about the ability of the CST to assess students’ higher order thinking, but also about many students’ ambivalence toward their own test results.

Area for Concern: Unintended Consequences of Using AGT in Teacher Evaluation

Teachers are also concerned about unintended consequences that might arise from the implementation of AGT as a measure of teacher effectiveness on student learning.

First, some teachers are concerned that a greater emphasis on testing could lead to a narrowing of the curriculum. Once a teacher’s evaluation is tied to test results, teachers may have an incentive to focus on standards most likely to appear on a high-stakes test, while neglecting or outright ignoring other standards less likely to appear on a test. In addition, teachers may engage in unethical test preparation. As the experiences of several districts have shown, some teachers and administrators facing the pressure of a high-stakes test have engaged in unethical practices. We urge LAUSD to take proactive steps to safeguard against this occurrence.

“Why use a statistically flawed method to evaluate anything, especially the human phenomena of teaching?”

Teacher, Teach Plus Event

In addition to changing teachers’ behavior, AGT could change the teaching environment and culture. Teachers at each event pointed out that the structure and implementation of AGT inherently creates a perceived competition among teachers. This may shift teachers’ focus away from professional collaboration and instruction that benefits students, and instead toward isolationism motivated by a desire to simply have a higher AGT than one’s colleagues.

Design Principle: Phased-In Implementation

Given these concerns, it is important for LAUSD to proceed deliberately. AGT should count for something -- 76% of teachers agreed that AGT should play some part

of their evaluation -- but it also should not count for the entire evaluation. Before AGT can constitute a significant fixed percentage of a teacher's evaluation, LAUSD must address these concerns. In the meantime, the question remains -- "Where do we start?"

In our focus groups, attendees provided their proposed percentage of AGT in teacher evaluation. The average for their responses was approximately 18%. Given the intensity of concerns about the implementation of AGT and to provide a palatable starting point, we recommend an initial baseline weighting of 10% at the start of the evaluation system. We also discovered that teachers would be willing to weight AGT much higher if the district could overcome the previously stated concerns. Ultimately, for AGT to be a meaningful part of a teacher's evaluation it is essential that the fixed percentage be more than 10%. The phased-in implementation process would encourage LAUSD to engage in a continued process of ensuring that AGT accurately assesses student growth while promoting excellent teaching.

In summary, we recommend that LAUSD negotiate to **start low, by using AGT at 10%** of the total evaluation score, **with the percentage rising incrementally as concerns are addressed and our recommendations are implemented.** Even as LAUSD addresses these implementation concerns, AGT should account for **no more than 33 1/3%** of a teacher's evaluation. LAUSD should weight AGT according to specific benchmarks that assess its own implementation effectiveness. We recommend that AGT be weighted towards a larger portion of a teacher's evaluation only as LAUSD demonstrates measurable progress toward an effective implementation of AGT.

Recommendations

For LAUSD to effectively implement AGT as a component of teachers' evaluations, the district must address teachers' concerns. We identified the following six specific recommendations that can be clustered under three headings: Assessment Accuracy, Excellent Teaching, and Teacher Understanding and Acceptance.

Assessment Accuracy

1. Proactively align AGT with Common Core Assessments and curricula. LAUSD must take leadership to ensure both smooth and comprehensive implementation of Common Core assessments and control for the transition from CSTs to the new assessments. LAUSD should engage a robust and diverse group of stakeholders to ensure smooth transition and alignment to Common Core.

2. Hold students accountable for results of any assessment used to evaluate teachers. Especially at the secondary level, students must accept ownership of their own scores. For example, assessment scores could be included as a first grade in the following year or potentially by incorporating scores into students' final grades.

AGT should be scaled towards a larger portion of a teacher's evaluation only as LAUSD demonstrates measurable progress toward an effective implementation

Accurately Assessing

1. Proactively align AGT with Common Core Assessments and curricula.
2. Hold students accountable for results of any assessments used to evaluate teachers.

Excellent Teaching

3. Develop incentives to encourage collaboration within schools and departments.
4. Proactively implement rigorous assessment integrity measures.

Teacher Understanding and Investment

5. Ensure and measure systemwide teacher understanding of and investment in AGT.
6. Further refine the AGT algorithm as additional methods of capturing relevant student control variable data become available.

Excellent Teaching

3. Develop incentives to encourage collaboration within schools and departments.

In order to prevent the type of competitive isolation and teaching to the test that was previously described, LAUSD must create incentives for collaboration. This might take the form of schoolwide, department-wide, or individual incentives.

4. Proactively implement rigorous assessment integrity measures. Teachers must feel that AGT is a balanced and fair metric, and to achieve this LAUSD must ensure that assessment preparation and administration are accomplished ethically.

Teacher Understanding and Investment

5. Ensure and measure system-wide teacher understanding of and investment in AGT. LAUSD should develop a method to measure both teacher understanding and teacher investment. This data should then be utilized to inform professional development planning decisions. A continuous feedback loop is a critical piece of this recommendation.

6. Further refine the AGT algorithm as additional methods of capturing relevant student control variable data become available. It is both conceivable and likely

that in future years, LAUSD will be able to gather more nuanced student data where it is lacking. Rather than merely relying on the AGT algorithm circa 2011, LAUSD needs to continually push for better methods of capturing relevant data and adjusting the AGT algorithm as necessary. Given the large number of value-added models in use in different states and districts, we encourage LAUSD's leadership to collaborate with their counterparts to ensure they fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of the different models.

Conclusion

We recommend that LAUSD move forward with its implementation of AGT in teacher evaluation, but with a new level of district accountability. Similarly, we recommend that UTLA work proactively with LAUSD to ensure that AGT is included in teacher evaluation and implemented with fidelity. While a majority of teachers agree that student growth measures should account for some part of teacher evaluation, the fear that poor implementation may lead to inaccurate data causes many to be wary of making AGT too high a percentage of a teacher's evaluation.

Additionally, some teachers do not understand how AGT will impact their evaluations. In an environment of distrust and lack of understanding, the new AGT model may not be received well upon full implementation in the district. If LAUSD starts using AGT as a very impactful percentage of teacher evaluation before teachers are truly confident in the measure, the district risks causing irreparable damage which may fundamentally hinder effective implementation.

"It's our job as teachers to make sure that our students are achieving and this (AGT) is one of the best measures of doing that."

Teacher, Teach Plus Event

In order for this reform to be truly successful, teachers must understand AGT and be confident that it accurately assesses their teaching ability. The use of a phased-in implementation process for the weight of AGT as a percentage of a teacher's evaluation allows the district to phase in use of the measure at a pace that will ensure proper implementation. At the same time, the district will demonstrate its responsiveness to teacher concerns, thus building support for full-scale implementation at a higher percentage. The approach we recommend will allow the district to begin implementation of AGT, but will ensure that there is room to improve the measure and adapt it over time. A reform as significant as adding student growth data to a teacher's evaluation is profound enough to take the time to do it right.

Methodology

The data was collected from 133 attendees at five teachers forums organized by Teach Plus between November 2011

and March 2012. During these forums, LAUSD shared information about how AGT will be used in the district and participants shared hopes and concerns about the upcoming implementation.

End Notes

¹Blume, Howard. (2012, February 11). "Teachers want moratorium on layoffs and a new evaluation system." Los Angeles Times.

²UTLA Teacher Effectiveness Workgroup (2012, March). UTLA Teachers Development and Evaluation Framework. http://www.utla.net/system/files/TDEF_Framework_march_2012.pdf

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