

TEACH +PLUS

**Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students**

Teacher Evaluation Reform in Massachusetts: Recommendations from Greater Boston Teachers

As classroom teachers in Greater Boston district and charter schools, we believe that changing how and when teachers are evaluated is critically important. We believe that a better teacher evaluation system will improve outcomes for students in public schools across our state. Right now, our evaluation system is broken. Too many teachers go without the feedback and support they need to become more effective. Teachers need and want a robust evaluation system that:

- provides specific, actionable feedback on a frequent basis that will help all teachers to improve;
- includes reliable, timely student growth data;
- incorporates multiple measures of teacher impact in addition to student growth as measured by standardized assessments;
- identifies high-performing teachers who can share best practices with other teachers; and
- identifies teachers who are underperforming so that they can receive targeted professional development or be counseled out of our profession if they are unable to demonstrate substantial improvement.

We also believe that it is essential that schools and districts are held to the same high standards for promoting teacher growth as teachers are held to for promoting student growth.

Based on our collective experience as teachers and on current research and innovations from across the country, we have identified the major obstacles to effective evaluation that are in place now and several solutions that will improve student achievement through improved teacher evaluation.

Right now, the majority of teachers are rarely observed and given constructive feedback. Evaluations are treated as a formality and they are not useful.

- Teachers want to be able to improve their practice through the evaluation process. However, the infrequency of observations and evaluations does not allow for this to occur.
- Often, when evaluations do occur, they are based on an insufficient amount of time spent in a teacher's classroom. Current evaluations do not sufficiently address both strengths and areas for growth because evaluators are not appropriately trained to give meaningful and constructive feedback.

Our recommendations: Ensure every teacher is observed frequently and given timely, meaningful feedback in order to improve instruction.

- Formal observations should be conducted three to five times per year at evenly spaced intervals in order to allow teachers to participate in an inquiry cycle focused on their own practice.
- For both beginning teachers and struggling teachers, observation and feedback should occur more frequently to allow more chances for growth and support.
- Observations should be conducted by a combination of principals and "master teachers" who have demonstrated success in the subject and grade level of the teacher they are observing. "Master teachers" will need additional training on how to work with peer teachers effectively.

- Observations should be conducted using a transparent protocol that is well-known to teachers and administrators. Principals and master teachers must be adequately trained in using that protocol and in providing high-quality feedback; additionally, a certification and on-going training process for observers would help ensure reliability among observers.

Right now, most Massachusetts teachers do not have access to reliable, timely student growth data.

- The current MCAS does not help teachers track growth or improve their teaching. Current MCAS results cannot be used to inform and improve practice throughout the year. For example, a 10th grader who takes the English MCAS in March will not receive scores until September of the following school year. Therefore, the 10th grade teacher is unable to utilize that data effectively, as the students on which it is based have already moved on.
- Because the current MCAS measures student proficiency in only select subjects and grades, nearly 80% of Massachusetts teachers do not have any student growth or proficiency data measured on a state level. There is currently no method of assessing these teachers' contribution to student growth.

Our recommendations: In order to responsibly incorporate student growth data in teacher

ALL ASSESSMENTS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL:

The current MCAS is administered once annually to a small percentage of students and it does not provide detailed information on students' strengths and weaknesses. Teachers cannot use results to analyze their success in helping students grow. Teachers only receive student data after the end of a given school year.

Some teachers have access to assessments such as the Northwest Education Association's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). The MAP test is administered electronically at multiple intervals within a school year. It can measure students where they are – and show growth and progress in detailed ways. Data is useful immediately and assessments are offered for a much wider range of grades and subjects. Assessments like these truly allow teachers to drive their own improvement strategies.

evaluations, there should be useful, timely, assessments in all subjects and grade levels.

- Teachers need a more robust system for collecting student data. This system needs to provide timely, accessible, and detailed data that can be used to improve instruction and is available to teachers at multiple points throughout the year.
- A task force of high performing teachers across various grade levels and subject areas should convene to review the best assessments (which may or may not be standardized tests) for each subject and grade level. Teachers will be able to best identify which assessments are most useful to measure student growth over one school year.

Right now, professional evaluations do not reflect whether and to what degree teachers have helped their students achieve academic growth.

- All teachers work hard individually or school-by-school to figure out where their students are and how much they are growing throughout a school year. This is a piecemeal system that allows students to fall through the cracks.
- A system that doesn't put students' learning at the forefront will not allow teachers and principals to effectively organize a school and its resources around students' needs.

Our recommendations: Develop an evaluation system that incorporates multiple dimensions of teaching.

- It is reasonable to expect that teachers can help students make one year's worth of growth from wherever they are at the start of a given school year. However, figuring out how to determine growth in a fair, reliable way is of great concern. We do not agree that a one-shot, annual assessment is a fair way to determine whether and how much students are progressing.
- Student growth data should not account for more than one third of a teacher's evaluation. There are myriad other factors that are essential to consider in teacher evaluations, including but not limited to: equity and high expectations in the classroom, culturally sensitive and responsive teaching styles, and partnerships with families and communities. These elements are observable, but not assessed by a standardized paper-and-pencil test.
- It is imperative that a more robust assessment system is implemented and piloted for at least two

academic years before it is used to make high-stakes decisions. At no point should a teacher's "growth score" be a surprise. Instead, teachers should understand how it is calculated and should be able to track their students' growth throughout the entire school year.

- In addition to individual teachers, the entire school community should be held accountable for students' progress. Teacher evaluation reform is a policy lever that can encourage collective responsibility for student growth and achievement.

- Evaluations should also consider a teacher's collaboration with other teachers, participation on school-wide teams, and positive contribution to the overall school climate and culture.

Right now, there is no differentiation or recognition for teachers based on their effectiveness. High-performing teachers are not being utilized to support other teachers.

- Most teacher evaluation systems only have two

Voices from the Classroom

DESPERATE FOR BETTER DATA

I teach in an MCAS-tested grade. As a tenth grade teacher my students take the MCAS every March. While the MCAS can provide some feedback, I will not learn how well I have taught until the following September when my students have moved on to a new teacher, a new room, and a new curriculum. I receive my students' results too late—when I cannot use the data to affect their learning.

Nevertheless, I am desperate for anything that will help me become a better teacher. I take time to analyze my prior students' results. I pore over them, looking for trends and patterns and any clues from last year to inform my teaching this year. It is an inefficient and flawed system, it is time-consuming and prone to error, but it is all I have.

As we look to ways to improve teacher evaluation, in some ways, I find a heavy emphasis on data troubling. But it is in part because I do not have very useful data. This isn't about "teaching to a test," it is about having timely and pertinent information that will guide me toward being a more effective teacher of literacy skills. I am not afraid of data. I need data that is timely, accessible, and useful. I need data that is broken down by specific skills and gives me frequent, individualized feedback that I can use to guide my lessons and individualized work with students.

Teaching is time-consuming. It is an urgent endeavor. There is simply not enough time in the classroom. When the students are gone, I am left at my desk assessing, analyzing, creating, and preparing ways to teach more effectively. Sometimes I feel like I am groping in the dark while I am at school planning lessons. I constantly look for ways to improve my effectiveness; having solid data on my students' learning would be invaluable. I am desperate for truly meaningful data that could help me improve my teaching. At this point I simply don't have it.

--Karen McCarthy

TEACHING IN A DATA-DRIVEN SCHOOL

I am fortunate to be part of a school that looks at educating students as a team. Accountability for student achievement does not end and begin with one teacher. Instead we have a sustainable, data-driven, team-based structure for reaching all learners. My administration and colleagues agree that looking solely at one data source to determine student success and teacher effectiveness does not work, so we have developed a system that allows us to track students' progress on a multitude of assessments. Our focus is collecting incremental data to drive instruction and service delivery.

We use standard benchmarks (like DIBELS and Fountas & Pinnell) to identify where students are academically in the fall, winter, and spring. All classrooms do progress monitoring every three to four weeks. Each grade level analyzes the incremental data weekly and decides how to attack instruction. Students are closely monitored to determine the success of the interventions and supports we implement.

Managing and maintaining this amount of data could seem daunting, but we have an accessible, comprehensive, school-wide student database. Every student is represented on a spreadsheet where we record language level, special education qualification, specific skill data (such as Oral Reading Fluency, etc.), progress monitoring scores, MEPA, MCAS, and other standardized test scores, social-emotional supports, family contact, and more all in one place. Principals, teachers, and extra support providers are able to see exactly what kind of instruction and additional support each student is receiving: extra doses, who provides them, and the duration and frequency.

Teachers need these tools and continuous support to ensure that student learning is maximized throughout the whole school year and that all adults are invested in student learning.

--Sarah Cooper

gradations: “Meets or Exceeds Standards” and “Does Not Meet Standards.” A binary evaluation system that sorts teachers into two groups is not useful. It does not allow for the identification of teachers who exceed standards, and does not differentiate teachers who may not currently meet standards, but are progressing.

Our recommendations: Identify high-performing teachers to take on school and district leadership positions.

- We advocate for a rubric-based evaluation and a summary rating with at least five descriptors that would allow teachers to see themselves on a continuum of effectiveness. This would enable the identification of high-performing teachers.
- Effective teachers should be rewarded with incentives such as formal recognition, additional leadership opportunities, “master teacher” designation, and, most importantly, the chance to share their effective teaching practices with other teachers. This will make evaluations more meaningful for teachers.

Right now, underperforming teachers are not given targeted professional development to significantly improve their practice.

- Professional development often does not match the needs of teachers. It is usually too general and not specific to current needs for improving practice.
- Teachers are not given actionable feedback that addresses areas for improvement. Often, evaluations merely state their weaknesses.

Our recommendations: Underperforming teachers must have access to support.

- Professional development must be aligned with each teacher’s specific areas of growth as identified through the observation and evaluation process.
- Evaluations should result in actionable suggestions for improvement.
- All students deserve an effective teacher every year. Teachers who are consistently rated as ineffective and who are not making progress ought to be terminated within two years. This time frame allows teachers to experience several cycles of inquiry and targeted support aimed at improving their practice before they are terminated.

Right now, the conditions within which teachers work vary widely.

- Some schools receive far more resources and services than other schools. For example, some schools have robust before- and after-school programs, mental and physical health supports, and additional adults who support instruction in classrooms.
- Not all teachers have access to sufficient classroom supplies and resources.

Our recommendation: Schools and districts must create better working environments for all teachers.

- Just as teachers need to be held accountable for fostering and supporting student growth and learning, schools and districts need to be held accountable for creating environments where teachers can learn, grow, and have access to resources to assist their work with students.
- The state should make teaching conditions (such as the availability of additional supports for students that impact teacher performance and student growth) transparent on a school-by-school basis. This information will inform decisions about the allocation of resources to optimize student growth.

Boston Teaching Policy Fellows 2009-2011

Sean Brooks, Dever-McCormack K-8 School
Elizabeth Butler,* Codman Academy Charter Public School
Laura Cennamo,* Tobin K-8 School
Sarah Cooper,* Blackstone Elementary School
Judy Fahey, Boston Collegiate Charter School
Laura Fleming, Community Charter School of Cambridge
Adam Gray, Monument High School
Karene-Sean Hines,* Timilty Middle School
Greg Hurley, Malden High School
Talmadge Nardi, Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School
Christina Porter,* Revere High School
Karen McCarthy,* Brighton High School
Kristina Sullivan, Graham & Parks Alternative School
Brinda Tahiliani,* New Mission High School
Jessica Tang,* Young Achievers Pilot K-8 School
Tim Suba, Boston Preparatory Charter Public School
Wendy Soref, Edward W. Brooke Charter School
Shakera Walker, Young Achievers Pilot K-8 School

Maria Fenwick, Teach Plus Boston Executive Director
mfenwick@teachplus.org
Heather Peske, Teach Plus National Program Director
hpeske@teachplus.org

*Denotes lead author