

Teachers' Views on Measuring Effectiveness: Principles for Implementation of State and District Reforms

Teacher and leader effectiveness is a key pillar in Race to the Top priorities, catalyzing states around the country to rethink how they evaluate teacher performance. As states move their plans to action, it is critical that they are informed by the teachers who will be affected by new policies. Teach Plus was commissioned by the Aspen Institute and New Leaders for New Schools to gather teacher input into states' development and implementation of new teacher effectiveness measures. Two current teachers, Christina Porter of the Revere Public Schools (MA) and James Larson of Tindley Accelerated Charter School (IN) led the work on the brief. In addition, Teach Plus staff conducted focus groups with 50 accomplished, early-career (years 3-10) teachers from three cities: Boston, Indianapolis and Chicago. The following are their recommendations for policy makers on moving from design to implementation to improve teachers' effectiveness:

Improve Student Outcomes by Improving Teacher Evaluation

We believe that improving teacher evaluation is a key lever to improving student achievement.

As a nation, we spend tens of millions of dollars annually on professional development for teachers, with little regard to first assessing the strengths and weakness of individual teachers. Improving this system to ensure regular evaluations of all teachers based on multiple measures would positively affect teaching and learning in at least four ways:

- Supporting improved classroom practice
- Investing teachers in their own growth and development
- Identifying high-performing teachers for leadership and targeted retention
- Identifying low-performing teachers for remediation and/ or dismissal

We want to be a part of a profession that is based on visible, high standards of practice. In today's superficial evaluation processes, teacher ratings are often binary—satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Where a more nuanced scale exists, almost all teachers are rated in the top category.¹ Teaching is complicated; evaluation instruments *should* have a range of performance levels. However, the difference between satisfactory and excellent must be meaningful. We envision a future in which a top rating would represent a significant achievement for a teacher and a clear indication that students in that classroom were attaining above average growth.

¹ Daniel Weisburg, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, and David Keeling, 2009. *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*. New York: The New Teacher Project.

Link Teacher Effectiveness to Student Learning

We believe student growth data is an essential part of teacher evaluation.

As teachers who entered the classroom in an era of standardized assessments, student performance data is an important tool that we use to understand our students' progress and our role in accelerating it. We evaluate ourselves based on our students' data and agree that data should play a role in how supervisors evaluate us. We must be clear, though, that all assessments are not created equal. As connections are made between student and teacher performance, we urge the use of assessments that, in combination:

- Measure student growth in addition to absolute performance
- Are administered multiple times during the year
- Provide us immediate, deliverable feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses
- Are aligned to our standards, curriculum, and annual state assessments

Formative assessments that have these qualities will allow us to monitor our own practice and give us insight into the academic needs of our students.

We have real concerns about being evaluated solely based on students' scores on once-annual state tests designed to determine whether students are reaching grade-level standards. Those of us who teach students who begin the year far below grade level and/ or have classes with high student mobility could be making major gains with a stable core of students but have few students who attain proficiency. Creating disincentives for the best among us to work in high-need classrooms could be the result, and this outcome would be unacceptable. For this new dimension of evaluation to be implemented without alienating teachers, the assessments that are used must be seen as credible and reliable by teachers themselves.

Ensure High Quality Evaluators

Evaluation will only promote teacher efficacy if evaluators are credible and competent.

The purpose of evaluation is to improve teacher practice. This can only happen if (1) performance expectations are clear and measurable and (2) evaluators are knowledgeable and well-trained. Too often, when we are evaluated, it is a "show" that occurs at a pre-arranged time, by an administrator who is never otherwise in our classroom, and who is unfamiliar with the curriculum for our grade and subject. We want regular, specific feedback on our everyday instruction from leaders whose expertise we trust.

We believe that *peer* evaluation is an opportunity for teacher leadership that would appeal to many strong teachers and help to retain them in our classrooms. The Washington, DC Public Schools,

for example, recently overhauled its evaluation system and now uses both principals and Master Educators to conduct teacher observations. Districts around the country such as Toledo and Cincinnati (OH) have been using Peer Assistance and Review programs for years. As professionals, we value the wisdom and credibility of those who remain in classrooms alongside us.

We urge that attention and resources be devoted to training evaluators. Building sophisticated and precise tools for evaluation without concurrent attention to training of evaluators will doom the work to having little positive impact on teachers or students.

Promote a Culture of Accountability

School and district leaders must be held to the same high standards for promoting teacher growth as teachers are for promoting student growth.

Accountability must be shared by all adults in the system, with measurable expectations at each level. School and district administrators are responsible for creating the conditions under which teachers can be successful with students. This includes ensuring access to:

- **Curriculum** aligned to state learning standards in all grades and subjects
- **Time** for common planning and collaboration
- **Ongoing support** in the form of coaching, mentoring and relevant professional development
- **Positive working conditions**, such as a clean, safe, engaging learning environment

As teachers, we want to work in a building where we are learning alongside our students. We want our practice to become more public than the “closed-door” model of a bygone era. We want to be observed often—both formally and informally. We want to debrief our classroom observations, look at data with colleagues and administrators and try new methods with our students. Across schools that operate this way and those that do not, a defining difference is the adult culture of the school. Teachers and administrators, too often separated as “us versus them,” must be accountable to one another in a shared effort to improve student learning.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Teachers need information on why their effectiveness matters to their students and how it will be measured.

The research on teacher effectiveness creates a sense of urgency for all who read it. Three years of highly effective teachers could close the achievement gap,² yet poor and minority students are least likely to have access to those teachers.³ Research like this has been the catalyst for sweeping changes in federal, state and district policy. The irony is that most teachers are unaware of this research. Without this critical information, policies that might be intended as pro-teacher (designed to promote and value effectiveness) risk being labeled as anti-teacher (designed to be punitive).

Effective communication is the path to teacher support for these initiatives. Policy makers must be prepared to answer the following questions:

- ***What is your vision of effective teaching?*** How do my students benefit if I am an effective teacher? How will I be supported to become more effective, especially in areas that I find challenging? How do I benefit from being identified as an effective teacher?
- ***How is effectiveness determined?*** What is the difference between measuring growth and absolute performance? In addition to student growth, what measures will be used to evaluate my effectiveness?
- ***In what ways will you involve teachers in developing tools to measure effectiveness?***

This last question is perhaps most important. We hope that the policy focus on effectiveness in teaching can spur a transformation in the profession, but we believe that transformation must be owned by teachers. We were inspired when President Obama advocated for reform done “with teachers, not to them.” We hope we can be a part of realizing that vision.

² Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, 2006. *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

³ Heather Peske and Kati Haycock, 2006. *Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students Are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality*. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust.



Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students

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For a full list and biographies of the Teaching Policy Fellows in Boston and Indianapolis, see: http://www.teachplus.org/work/boston_about.htm (Boston) and <http://www.teachplus.org/work/indianapolis.htm> (Indianapolis).

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. To that end, Teach Plus supports the retention of effective teachers in urban schools by expanding leadership opportunities and performance incentives for those who demonstrate success with students. 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. In order for schools to continuously improve student achievement, teaching must become a career that motivates and rewards continuous improvement among practitioners. www.teachplus.org

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