

## Overview

The purpose of this brief is to assess whether the new evaluation system in Memphis, the Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM), is improving teacher practices, and to provide a set of actionable recommendations for refining the TEM after the first year of implementation. The ideas presented in this policy brief were generated by focus groups totaling approximately 150 teachers from across Memphis City Schools (MCS) that were conducted in the spring of 2013 by Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows to determine the impact of the (TEM) 2.0 as experienced by teachers. The TEM was first implemented in the 2011-2012 school year and the second iteration, TEM 2.0, was implemented in the 2012-2013 school year. Teach Plus has worked collaboratively with MCS since the design phases of the TEM to ensure effective implementation.

Teach Plus Fellows found that teachers support the clear expectations and accountability that has stemmed from the implementation of the TEM. The recommendations will serve to ensure the TEM is not just an accountability check, but a means to improve teacher effectiveness. They reflect trends in the data across schools and teacher groups for TEM 3.0 improvements. The most important finding is that the TEM has had a major impact on teacher practices and behaviors in ways that are likely to lead to gains in student learning. This has occurred through the new observation process and rubric. While there are still important opportunities to improve and refine the observation and feedback process, the greatest area of concern identified by teachers is professional development because most teachers still do not experience high-quality professional development that is aligned to their needs.

## Teacher Recommendations

- 1) **Ensure consistency in the observation process across the district.** In order to maintain the integrity of the observation process, teachers want to ensure consistency in observations across the district and the adherence to observation protocol (i.e. receiving post-conference feedback within seven days of an observation). Teachers suggest using district content experts and facilitators to perform a portion of the observations to reduce the burden on principals and also to provide specific, content and grade level aligned feedback (i.e. clarify goals of “higher-order thinking” based on students’ grade and ability levels).

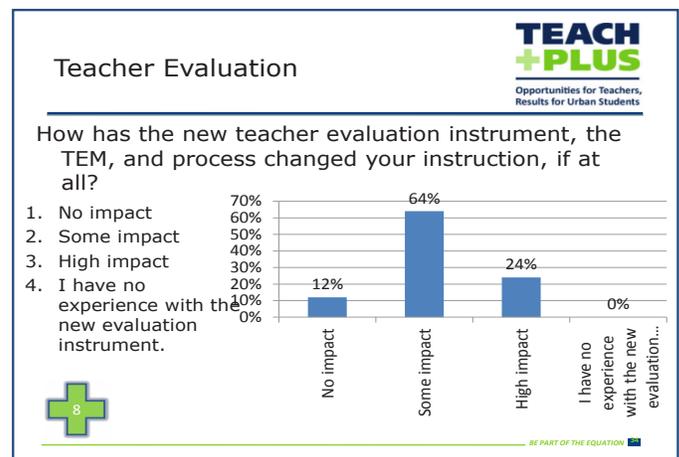
2) **Provide specific, actionable feedback.** Teachers are eager for feedback that will help them improve their effectiveness. For example, post-conference follow up conversations should include suggestions for concrete professional development that is specific to each teacher’s individual needs as identified by the evaluation. As an option, TEM 4 and 5 teachers can be strategically utilized to mentor lower-performing teachers, and school-based professional development options and resources should be available throughout the year. Additionally, MCS could partner with local universities to create specific professional development opportunities for already high-performing teachers.

3) **Offer training – including focus groups of teachers – throughout the implementation process.** Training should continue during the implementation of TEM 3.0 to show how the TEM will be utilized in alignment with the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Focus groups could be formed to engage teachers in shaping the rubric to align to CCSS teaching strategies.

The data in the following pages support the recommendations and share more detail as to how they could be implemented in future iterations of the TEM.

The implementation of the TEM has changed the experience of observations for teachers. Overall, 88% of teachers at a TEI Ambassador session stated that the TEM had changed their instruction. Comments from teachers in TEM 2.0 focus groups included the following:

- “By looking at the rubric, it helps me reflect on my instruction.”
- “I know what they’re (observers) looking for; it’s a blueprint and I like that.”
- “The process has had high impact. I make sure to insert vocabulary through my lesson and I can frame the lesson around the evaluation rubric.”
- “I have implemented strategies based off of TEM because that’s what they are looking for.”



Drop-in observations have also improved accountability to ensure a high level of teaching instruction on a daily basis. Now that teachers are familiar with the TEM process, it is increasingly important to ensure the adherence to the TEM protocol. Adhering to TEM protocol not only ensures fidelity of implementation, but also shows a commitment from the administration to teachers that the TEM process is truly a measure designed to help support teachers, not penalize them.

## Recommendation 1 .....

# Ensure consistency in the TEM observation cycle

In many schools there is consistency, but in others the experience of teachers is mixed, with concerns about objectivity and timeliness (i.e. receiving feedback within the seven day requirement). One teacher who moved to a different MCS school for the 2012-2013 observed inconsistencies in the implementation of the TEM. “Coming from a different school, the observation was different, and it seems it should be the same.” The amount of time spent completing observations, the degree to which teachers are able to provide evidence supporting their interpretation of their own ratings, and the quality of the professional development options provided by the observer vary from school to school. An option for the unified district could be to identify high-performing principals in the areas of concern for teachers: following TEM protocol/providing timely feedback and identifying appropriate professional development opportunities— and have high-performing principals lead norming and training sessions for the TEM (as well as serve as mentors). The work should also include the following:

### Ensure that observations include adequate time for observers to see elements of the rubric in practice.

Several teachers expressed concerns that the time allotted for observations was inadequate. For example, “Some lessons might take two or three days, and not just for the time the evaluator is in the classroom.” Another stated, “It’s stressful. Fifteen minutes is not enough time to see all indicators performed.”

### Ensure that evaluators have content knowledge in the disciplines they observe.

Teachers have shared at Teach Plus events since 2011 that they are concerned about the subjectivity of the observation process. Teachers believe this stems from the lack of content knowledge of some administrators in given content areas, so they aren’t able to provide sufficient, concrete feedback and appropriate professional development options. The belief that it is essential for evaluators to have a full understanding of the expectations for the disciplines that they observe was a consistent point of discussion. This was of particular concern in the cases of Fine Arts and Honors courses. In the words of one teacher, “They expect for the arts teachers to teach like the math or English teacher (but) ... it is a different project.” If necessary the district should bring in content experts and facilitators to conduct observations in order to provide tailored content specific support for teachers and reduce the time commitment for principals. The district should also consider allowing teachers who consistently earn a Level 5 rating to serve as observers for their peers. They may also want to encourage opportunities for Level 5 teachers to open their classrooms for observations by teachers who have not yet seen a Level 5 teacher in action.

Finally, teachers have had positive experiences with principals and administrators spending more time in their classrooms than prior to the implementation of the TEM. Teachers stated the following:

- “I’m more able to communicate with my principal now, because they are in the classroom more, so they understand more.”
- “I didn’t really see the principal before, maybe for the year if I didn’t have a student fight. Now you see the principal often and that’s a good thing.”
- “Administrators are pretty good about giving positive and constructive feedback.”

Teachers have appreciated the greater visibility of the building administrator and that administrators are more invested in classroom instruction.

## Recommendation 2

# Provide specific, actionable feedback

The TEM is designed to identify the effectiveness level of teachers and support them in their development. Teachers are currently receiving a wide variety of professional development regarding effectiveness. While some teachers found that the quality of the feedback they receive has improved under the TEM, many others reported that this is still insufficient. Examples of the range of feedback received are below.

### Examples from teachers for whom feedback is meeting their needs:

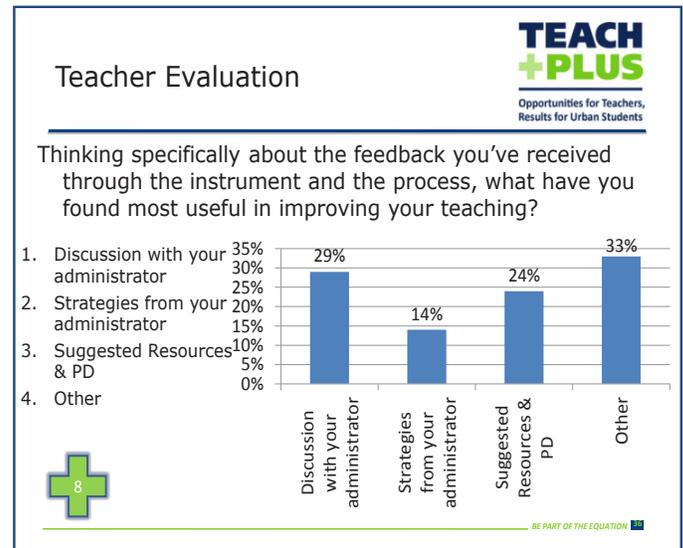
- “They are pretty good at giving positive and constructive feedback.”
- “Before the TEM process, you did a ‘dog and pony show,’ gave the kids candy and did well on (the) observation...Now I’m getting real feedback, amazing amount of support.”
- “The dialogue with my principal is honest, and I do not fear for my job.”
- “(I’m) more able to communicate with the principal now because they are in the classroom more, so they understand more.”
- “The principal is really good about saying what I did well in the lesson.”

### Examples from teachers for whom feedback is not meeting their needs:

- “I haven’t received enough feedback from administrators because I am a Level 5 teacher.”
- “Feedback is minimal and observer can sometimes be subjective, too easy on the teacher.”
- “Still subjective from one observer to the next.”
- “Feedback is not really helping me as far as providing something I can take back in the classroom.”
- “Sometimes the principal does not know what you think they know because they have been out of the classroom for so long.”
- “Feedback is minimal. Need more support.”
- “Some things the principal has told me have helped, such as setting up the room, but as for pedagogy, he has not.”
- “We need teacher models.”
- “How does one receive a TEM 5? We need more modeling on how a 5 looks in the classroom.”

Teachers identified the following three areas to improve professional development options for teachers.

- High-performing teachers also want to improve. Regional workshops, opportunities to travel for national PD opportunities, or collaboration with local higher institutions of learning are solutions suggested by teachers to support TEM 4 and 5 teachers.
- If model lessons are shared with teachers in professional development sessions, it is critical these model lessons are examples that align with their grade and content level. Teachers want to see more examples of what TEM 5 teaching looks like.
- Teachers feel isolated in the profession, and there is limited time for collaborative planning available for teachers to learn from one another. Teachers suggest implementing regional planning opportunities with master teachers as options for professional development.



As seen in Figure 2, there is a wide range of what teachers find most beneficial regarding the feedback they have received through the observation process. This can be attributed to the varying professional growth needs of teachers and the varying level of observer expertise in matching professional development with a teacher's growth areas. A teacher suggested that developing school-level professional development offerings and resources could provide a more accessible inventory of professional development options, and successful professional development resources could be shared from school to school. Instructional facilitators or leaders of content teams could lead the accrual of these resources in partnership with the district professional development office.

Additionally, teachers want to ensure that the observation is consistent throughout the year when they have different observers. Teachers cited communication as a key area of improvement in this regard. Teachers shared that one observer assigned next steps, then a different observer completed the next observation, and the second observer was unaware of the professional development the teacher had already completed. In order to maximize the time in a post-conference, observers should make sure to review the results of past observations before making recommendations of professional development to be included in a teacher's Professional Growth & Support Plan (PGSP).

### Recommendation 3

## Offer training - including focus groups of teachers - throughout the implementation process

One way to actively include teachers in the alignment of the TEM rubric to CCSS is to design teacher focus group teams, where teachers are sharing with teachers— best practices and areas for growth. As teachers begin to implement CCSS in their classrooms in preparation for full implementation in the 2014-2015 school year, some teachers have seen a clash between the TEM rubric and the expectations of CCSS. Teachers felt they were penalized for not using language found in the TEM rubric while teaching but felt they were implementing CCSS correctly. Teachers want to ensure they can exercise creativity in planning as they implement CCSS and that the TEM rubric accounts for such freedom, along with observers being trained to identify CCSS aligned instruction during observations. Teachers are aware that this will be an ongoing conversation as CCSS is more fully implemented; however teachers are eager to continue the conversation of how utilizing new standards will affect their observation experience.

## Summary

Teachers shared a variety of strengths and weaknesses from their experience with TEM 2.0. The most commonly shared feedback is below.

### Strengths of TEM 2.0

Teachers and students alike know what is expected of them, and expectations are much higher than in the past.

Teachers increasingly rely on student data to effectively lesson plan and differentiate instruction.

The TEM encourages individual teacher reflection.

Teachers appreciate the immediate feedback when they receive it.

Administrators are much more visible in the school and more knowledgeable of teacher instruction.

The TEM encourages collaboration among teaching teams for PD resources.

Teachers have appreciated the opportunity to be observed by content specialists and would like to expand their use as observers.

### Weaknesses of TEM 2.0

TEM protocol is not consistently followed across the district. The observation rubric is, at times, utilized subjectively.

Teachers want increased length of observations to not feel rushed to show all indicators – some teachers gave positive feedback for observations that are at least 30 minutes long.

Aspects of the rubric could be more aligned to students' grade level and ability.

Some teachers feel the rubric represents a checklist and limits creativity.

The professional development options are not challenging or appropriate for high performing teachers.

Teachers would like more access to what TEM 5 teaching looks like in each grade/content area.

TVAAS and Tripod Survey data are still questioned as accurate measures of student growth and stakeholder perceptions respectively.

Teachers support the use of a rubric such as the TEM to quantify and identify effective teachings. Teachers want to ensure the process is consistent and fair for all teachers, and the above recommendations seek to address these concerns for teachers.

## *Further Research*

### **Teachers strongly encourage the district to ensure the TEM Summative Score is representative of an individual teacher’s effectiveness.**

Strides have been made for each teacher to have his/her own student achievement available for the 15% student growth portion of the TEM, such as the use of the Fine Arts portfolio. Pre-tests and post-tests should be considered for non-tested grades and subjects to provide more options outside of school level data and ensure the accuracy of the TEM. Teachers feel strongly this data collection method should be piloted to show a clear link between teacher effectiveness and student results for all grades and subjects. Teachers in non-tested grades and subjects are eager for continued support in developing metrics to determine individual student growth and achievement data for all teachers. The creation of the Fine Arts rubric and the creation of a similar portfolio for physical education teachers is a step in the right direction – teachers feel positively that their feedback has been heard by district staff and appreciate the collaboration in working groups to develop these measures.

### **Teachers strongly encourage the district to ensure clarity of goals of the “higher-order thinking” component for early grades, especially grades K -1.**

One teacher explained, “The wording on the rubric is a lot. They can say it one way and I can perceive it in another way. I need to know what a TEM 5 looks like in higher-order thinking for the primary grades.”

### **Teachers strongly encourage the district to ensure appropriateness of Tripod language and length.**

Teachers still feel uncertain regarding the accuracy of the results from the Tripod Survey. Though adjustments were made from the first to the second year of implementation, questions on the appropriateness of the language and length for different grade levels remain. K-2 teachers or grade level specialists could review the language of the survey to ensure it is accessible to all students.

# Conclusion

The new evaluation system in Memphis is positively impacting teacher practice, while at the same time improvements are necessary. The May 2013 *Education Week* commentary, “Want to Build a Better Teacher Evaluation? Ask a Teacher,” by Ross Wiener & Kasia Lundy noted that

“reformers have invested massive financial resources and political capital in new teacher-evaluation systems, but early results show that these policies won’t lead to improvements on their own. To generate more effective teaching through evaluations, teachers, principals, and school system leaders need to embrace a culture of ongoing two-way feedback and a commitment to continuous improvement. Surveys (and teacher-led focus groups) are a critical component of well-designed continuous-improvement systems, which high-performing organizations inside and outside the education sector have adopted as a reliable, cost-effective means of gathering and valuing front-line perspective. Surveying teachers, and acting on the results, respects teachers’ voice, provides diagnostic information regarding principals and schools, and offers an invaluable, authentic lens into classroom and school building implementation.”

Teach Plus looks forward to continuing collaboration with Memphis City Schools regarding teacher evaluation as the nation watches and learns from our design and implementation.

## Memphis Teaching Policy Fellows, 2012-2013:

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**Perry Cleaver** – Chickasaw Middle School  
**Tonya Collins** – A. Maceo Walker Middle School  
**Casie Jones** – MLK Student Transition Academy  
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1 The sample included 149 teachers— forty-one of whom participated in focus groups at local schools, 99 gave feedback at a Teacher Effectiveness Initiative (TEI) Ambassador monthly session, and nine participated at a Teach for America Teaching as Leadership workshop.