



So Long, Lake Wobegon?

Using Teacher Evaluation to Raise Teacher Quality

Morgaen L. Donaldson June 2009

Executive summary

In recent months, ideas about how to improve teacher evaluation have gained prominence nationwide. In April, 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan proposed that districts report the percentage of teachers rated in each evaluation performance category. Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public schools, has proposed evaluating teachers largely on the basis of their students' performance. Georgia and Idaho have launched major efforts to reform teacher evaluation at the state level. Meanwhile, researchers have noted that a well-designed and implemented teacher evaluation system may be the most effective way to raise student achievement.¹ And teacher evaluation reaches schools and districts in every corner of the country, positioning it to affect important aspects of schooling such as teacher collaboration and school culture, in addition to student achievement.

Historically, teacher evaluation has not substantially improved instruction or expanded student learning. The last major effort to reform teacher evaluation, in the 1980s, petered out after much fanfare. Today there are reasons to believe that conditions are right for substantive improvements to evaluation. Important advances in our knowledge of effective teaching practices, shifts in the composition of the educator workforce, and changes in the context of public education provide a key opportunity for policymakers to tighten the link between teacher evaluation and student learning. What's more, some districts have already instituted rigorous teacher evaluation programs that affect instruction and learning.

This report will explore how best to implement teacher evaluation. The first section examines the structure of teacher evaluation and the role of student learning in assessments of teachers' effectiveness. Across a variety of approaches to evaluation, students' learning and achievement typically play a small role in the evaluation of their teacher. The approaches reviewed—observation, performance-based assessments, portfolios, and value-added analysis—have distinct strengths and clear weaknesses. For this reason the paper argues that the most robust approach likely combines these methods to capitalize on their benefits and minimize their drawbacks.

In the second section, the paper draws on research to examine the reasons why teacher evaluation has generally had little effect on instruction, learning, and achievement. Teacher evaluations often suffer from the “Lake Wobegon effect”: Most if not all teachers receive satisfactory evaluation ratings.² It is possible that all teachers are above average in some schools, but there is generally more variation in teacher effectiveness within schools than

between them. Thus, *any* school—low -performing or high -performing, wealthy suburban or under-resourced urban—is likely to employ more under-performing teachers than its evaluation ratings suggest.³ In fact, principals *and* teachers believe that teachers are less effective than evaluation ratings would indicate.⁴

Multiple factors, often working in tandem, produce this effect. External constraints decrease evaluators’ inclination to evaluate rigorously—vague district standards, poor evaluation instruments, overly restrictive collective bargaining agreements, and a lack of time all contribute to this problem. Internal constraints, such as the absence of high-quality professional development for evaluators, a school culture that discourages critical feedback and negative evaluation ratings, and a district culture that offers little oversight and few incentives for administrators to evaluate accurately, also contribute to inflated ratings.

Evaluation has few negative or positive consequences, which is a reality that reduces evaluators’ will to evaluate accurately and thoroughly and teachers’ motivation to take evaluation seriously. Evaluators rarely provide teachers with substantive feedback, which further reduces evaluation’s impact on teaching and learning. Across all these factors, the teachers union, the structure of evaluators’ jobs and training, and the culture of schools strongly influence the quality of teacher evaluation and whether it improves teaching and learning.

The report’s third section assesses the current prospects for teacher evaluation reform, concluding that the time is right for major change. Traditional public schools now face pressure from without by charter schools, voucher programs, and the growing home-school movement and from within by accountability measures. They can no longer do business as usual, or merely assert that their teachers are “highly qualified.” Increasingly public schools must demonstrate that their teachers are effective.

Retirements in the educator workforce are changing the face of the classroom and main office in today’s schools. New educators, both teachers and principals, are more receptive to differential treatment of teachers than were prior generations. Seventy percent of new teachers in a representative sample said that the fact that teachers do not get rewarded for superior effort and performance is a drawback.⁵ Eighty-four percent of these teachers said that making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers would be an effective way to improve teacher quality. The influx of so many new educators also provides an opportunity for supervisors to evaluate teachers more rigorously now, before these individuals gain tenure.

Lastly, we now have more developed collective knowledge about good teaching and the infrastructure to support pedagogical change. The National Research Council’s work on how children learn has produced a growing body of knowledge on how best to teach. Inquiries into pedagogical content knowledge are helping researchers and policymakers develop an increased understanding about effective teaching approaches. State curriculum frameworks and assessment systems have been widely implemented over the last 20 years, providing

the infrastructure to promote systemic improvements in teachers' pedagogy. States have also developed databases to track student (and, in some places, teacher) progress over time. Finally, substantive improvements to teacher evaluation are underway in sites around the country. The paper specifically examines Cincinnati's Teacher Evaluation System, or TES, a program that could affect teacher and student learning. With TES, Cincinnati has systematically addressed many of the problems that plague teacher evaluation.

With conditions ripe for reform, districts and states need the will to make the structural and—more importantly—cultural changes necessary to improve teacher evaluation in substantive and meaningful ways. The paper concludes by offering seven recommendations to districts and states that seek to reform teacher evaluation to increase its impact on teaching, learning, and achievement.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

