



Supporting Effective Teaching Through Teacher Evaluation

A Study of Teacher Evaluation in Five Charter Schools

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Introduction and summary

Teacher evaluation and charter schools feature prominently in President Barack Obama's proposals to transform our nation's public schools. To be eligible for additional educational funding from the \$4 billion Race to the Top program, for example, states must permit the use of student test scores in teacher evaluation and allow charter schools to expand and play a central role in efforts to turn around low-performing schools. In this way, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are highlighting teacher evaluation as a critical problem.

Indeed, the weaknesses of teacher evaluation systems are well known. Exerting scant influence on instruction, they tend to have little effect on student learning or achievement.¹ The consequences of a poor teacher evaluation process are two-fold: little improvement in teachers' instruction in the classroom and the continued employment of weak teachers.² Given the profound influence that teachers have on student achievement, accurately evaluating their performance is a natural leverage point for increasing teacher quality and expanding student learning.

The importance of meaningful teacher evaluation is receiving national attention from other sources as well. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, for example, recently described a need for major changes in teacher evaluation and pledged support from the national union in this endeavor.³

In addition to shining a spotlight on teacher evaluation, the Obama administration advances charter schools as a potential solution to the persistent failure of some public schools. There may be a natural link between these two policy emphases. Charter schools create their own teacher evaluation systems and are not usually constrained by school district mandates, union rules, or laws governing tenure and dismissal. This means they may tightly link appraisal to instruction, learning, and achievement and generate results with real consequences. But the operative word here is "may."

Despite the potential of charter schools to more tightly link teacher evaluation with improvements in teacher quality, there is very little published research that examines the norms, practices, and outcomes of teacher evaluation in charter schools.⁴ As a result, a number of critical questions stand unanswered:

The consequences of a poor teacher evaluation process are two-fold: little improvement in teachers' instruction in the classroom and the continued employment of weak teachers.

- Does teacher evaluation in charter schools improve instruction, enhance student learning, and raise achievement?
- Do charter school evaluation ratings exhibit wider variation than the narrow distribution of high marks commonly found in “conventional” public schools?
- Are charter school administrators able to use teacher evaluation as a means to identify and dismiss teachers who are not effective or recognize and reward those who are?

If charter schools do, in fact, differ from regular public schools on these matters, policymakers need to understand the differences. Especially important is the question of whether the absence of tenure and contract protections in many charter schools accounts for variations in teacher evaluation, or whether there are other factors, such as instructional coherence, school culture, or school size, which are more responsible for divergences in policy and practice.

This paper reports the findings from our study of teacher evaluation practices in five charter schools affiliated with three well-established charter management organizations.⁵ Based on interviews with teachers, principals, and charter management organization officials, supplemented by document analysis, our study begins to answer the three defining questions listed above. While modest in scope and scale, this study is the first of its kind. It seeks to lay an initial foundation for further inquiry regarding teacher evaluation in charter schools.

As such, it examines the practices, procedures, and norms related to teacher evaluation. The study further explores influences on and outcomes of teacher evaluation in these five charter schools. In the pages that follow, we will first briefly explore the opportunities to innovate that charter schools generally enjoy compared to many of their conventional public school counterparts. Then, we will delve directly into the findings at five charter schools run by three different charter management organizations.

We selected three CMOs, which we call West, North, and National. All three organizations are nationally recognized for the achievement of their students, many of whom come from low-income and minority families living in urban areas. All three charter management organizations focus on preparing students for college and base their work on a small number of guiding principles.

West CMO is a group of schools serving students in two of the nation’s largest urban centers. It is a network of conversion and start-up charter schools in which teachers collectively bargain. North CMO is a network of schools serving students in several medium-sized cities in the northeast. This CMO spawned in a relatively small geographic region from one successful school. National CMO includes a larger number of schools than the other two organizations and serves about three to four times as many students in some of the nation’s largest cities as well as some of its medium ones. National CMO features a more decentralized CMO structure than West or North CMO.

What we found

- Teachers in our sample report that the evaluation process they experience in these schools is more frequent and more robust than that of their former schools, whether charter or conventional public schools.
- In general, the three charter management organizations and the five schools included in this study posit that the primary purpose of teacher evaluation is to continually improve teacher performance. As a result, they focus on the performance growth function of the evaluation process rather than summative assessment of individual teachers.
- These schools seek to develop in teachers and administrators a mindset of continuous improvement rather than a checklist of appropriate teacher behaviors. In this way, evaluation in these settings seems to be focused on becoming a professional habit rather than an administrative act.
- In all five charter schools, student performance played a key role in teachers' evaluation. Yet none of these schools used value-added data in teacher evaluation. All three charter management organizations say they are considering doing so in the future, however.

Similarly, the practices and procedures at these charter schools differ from those governing teacher evaluation in many conventional schools. Specifically, these charter schools require:

- Annual summative evaluations for every teacher
- Frequent, structured observations of teachers accompanied by detailed feedback throughout the academic year
- Attention to a culture of reflection and accountability in the day-to-day work of the school
- Hiring as a crucial primary step in assessing the candidate's commitment to continuous instructional improvement
- Efforts to advance a "no surprise policy" so teachers and administrators are on the same page throughout the year about teachers' performance so that the consequences for teachers' jobs are predictable
- Substantial training for evaluators on how to observe classroom instruction and provide feedback.

In all five charter schools we researched, teachers' evaluation ratings cover a slightly broader range than that reported in conventional schools. But somewhat to our surprise, only a slightly higher proportion of teachers are dismissed from these schools than from their conventional counterparts.

In tightening the links between teacher evaluation, instructional improvement, and student learning, and then implementing consequences for teacher performance, these charter schools encounter some of the same barriers to improving teacher performance as conventional settings. In the main section that follows, we explore in depth how these charter management organizations and charter schools conduct teacher evaluation and what it may mean to education policymakers in the Obama administration, in Congress, and in state and local school districts across the country.

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