

GRADING THE GRADERS:

A REPORT ON TEACHER EVALUATION REFORM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Teacher Evaluation, a Critical Challenge

- Teacher quality is at the heart of the educational enterprise.
- We spend upwards of half a trillion dollars a year on public school teacher salaries and benefits.
- But until recently, we had virtually no idea what we were getting for that investment.

A Flawed System

- **Traditional teacher evaluation:** cursory annual visit by a principal wielding a checklist, looking for clean classrooms and quiet students—superficial exercises that didn't focus directly on the quality of teacher instruction, much less student learning.
- No incentives to thoughtfully compare teacher performances.
- Most school districts didn't.

A Flawed System continued

- Nearly every teacher received satisfactory rating.
- Virtually no one fired for under-performance.
- The absence of meaningful measures of teacher quality made rewarding talent and other steps to strengthen the profession nearly impossible to implement.

Unprecedented Response

- Since 2009, one of the most rapid and wide-ranging policy responses in the history of public education.
- 46 states have introduced more comprehensive teacher evaluation systems.
- No state required teacher performance to be part of tenure decisions in 2009, now nearly two dozen do.

The Failure Narrative

- Lobbying by teacher unions (wanting to end the new scrutiny of their members) and the Tea Party (as part of its larger anti-Washington agenda) has eliminated the most powerful catalyst of the reform movement:
- The Obama administration's financial and regulatory incentives for state and local leaders to take more seriously the task of identifying who in the teaching profession was doing a good job, and who wasn't.
- Incentives ended under the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

The Failure Narrative continued

- **The accompanying narrative:** The campaign for more meaningful ways to measure teacher performance has been ineffective—more hurtful than helpful to the teaching profession, and of scant consequence to students.

A Brighter Picture

In fact, more comprehensive teacher evaluation systems have launched several important improvements in public education.

- **Elevating Instruction** (clearer teaching standards; ending teacher isolation/sparking discussions about what good teaching is; forcing school leaders to prioritize classrooms over cafeterias)
- **Removing lower performers** (in some school districts, removing teachers for underperformance for first time ever—through dismissal **and** voluntary attrition)
- **Beyond bad apples** (states and school districts increasingly prioritizing ways to help teachers improve their practice—we can't fire our way to a stronger teaching force)

A Brighter Picture continued

- **Smarter staffing decisions** (using new data to manage human capital systems more effectively)
- **Foundation for new roles, responsibilities** (tapping highly-rated teachers to be peer evaluators, mentors, lead teachers—new roles that give teachers more pay and higher status. Career ladders.)
- **Raising student achievement** (the early evidence from places with comprehensive reforms in place the longest is encouraging: District of Columbia, Tennessee, Cincinnati)

Challenges

Many of the new evaluation systems are in early stages and are far from perfect.

- **Technical problems** (especially with student-achievement measures).
- **Lack of infrastructure** (rubrics, systems design, evaluator training, data systems, etc).
- **Cost** (more comprehensive systems are more expensive).
- **Teacher morale** (speed, early "bad apples" focus, student test scores).

Not surprising, given pace/scale of reform to a core element of educational enterprise.

An Emerging Infrastructure

But infrastructure of change is catching up to reformers' aspirations.

- Simpler rubrics.
- Multiple measures/reduced role for student achievement.
- Stronger evaluator/teacher training.
- Efficiency through differentiated observations.
- Better evaluator feedback/stronger links to professional improvement (Common Core).

Teacher morale is rising.

The Upshot

- A complex policy change at the heart of the education enterprise is a long-term proposition; can't happen overnight.
- No evaluation system is perfect.
- But you can't help people improve if you don't know what needs improving—even if measuring teacher performance is an inexact science.
- Hard-learned lessons of recent years: building on progress since 2009—staying the course on reform—is in the best interests of students **and** teachers.

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