

State of the States: Trends and Early Lessons on Teacher Evaluation and Effectiveness Policies

Executive Summary

Each year, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) publishes the *State Teacher Policy Yearbook*, a comprehensive examination of the state laws, rules and regulations that govern the teaching profession, measured against a realistic set of reform goals. For five years running, the full *Yearbook* compendium (www.nctq.org/stpy) presents the most detailed, thorough analysis of teacher effectiveness policy in the United States. In advance of the next *Yearbook*, to be released in January 2012, we offer a closer look at trends on teacher evaluation and effectiveness policies.

Across the states, there is unprecedented momentum towards developing and implementing teacher evaluation systems that factor student achievement into teacher ratings. While it is still too early to assess whether and to what extent states have actually been successful in developing and implementing meaningful performance-based teacher evaluation systems, in this report, NCTQ provides:

- A detailed picture of the teacher evaluation policy landscape across the states;
- An in-depth analysis of states with some of the most ambitious teacher effectiveness policies; and
- A set of early observations on the development and implementation of performance-based teacher evaluations.

The move to rethink how to evaluate teachers and explicitly tie assessments of teacher performance to student achievement marks an important shift in thinking about teacher quality. The change is significant because policymaking around improving teacher quality to date has focused almost exclusively on teachers' qualifications rather than on their effectiveness in the classroom and the results they get with students.

The landscape is changing. There are a host of policy recommendations focused on increasing the effectiveness of the teacher workforce that turn on the critical need to be able to evaluate and differentiate teacher performance reliably and consistently with clear criteria that include measures of how well teachers move students forward academically.

The federal Race to the Top (RTT) competition was certainly a first impetus for change in this area, but more than a few states have revised their policies on teacher evaluation without any federal incentives (and some RTT states haven't yet delivered). Regardless of motivation, the amount of evaluation reform activity is impressive:

- Across the U.S., **32 states and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)¹ have made some change to their state teacher evaluation policy** in the last three years.
- Just two years ago, only 15 states required annual evaluations of all teachers, with some states permitting teachers to go five years or more between evaluations. As of this year, **24 states and DCPS require annual evaluations for all teachers.**
- Over this same short period of time, we've seen dramatic changes regarding the use of student achievement data to inform teacher evaluations. In 2009, 35 of the 50 states did

not, even by the kindest of definitions, require teacher evaluations to include measures of student learning. Only four states could be said to be using student achievement as the preponderant criterion in how teacher performance was assessed. Today **23 states require that teacher evaluations include not just some attention to student learning**, but objective evidence of student learning in the form of student growth and/or value-added data.

- **Seventeen states and the DCPS** have adopted legislation or regulations that specifically require that student achievement and/or student growth will “significantly” inform or be the preponderant criterion in teacher evaluations.
- In **19 states and DCPS, teachers are eligible for dismissal based on teacher evaluation results**, although it is in only 14 of those states that teacher evaluations are explicitly tied to student performance.

Though the states we analyzed stand out for their specific focus on student achievement, it is still early to truly assess the state of the states on teacher evaluation. A few places, such as Delaware and D.C. Public Schools, are already implementing teacher evaluation systems. Others, such as Idaho and Minnesota, have just passed new requirements, and there has been no time for them to translate new policies into practice. Still other states, such as Colorado and New York, are deeply engaged in the process of developing evaluation instruments, negotiating specific system operating rules and in some cases, fighting hard battles to maintain commitment to a system where student learning is central to defining teacher performance.

While most policies are still very new, with many of the details to be determined, the changing landscape of teacher evaluation policy provides an opportunity to reflect on some of the early lessons:

- **Teacher effectiveness measures don’t have to be perfect to be useful.** Are emerging teacher effectiveness measures perfect? No. But they are a marked improvement on evaluation systems that find 99 percent of teachers effective with little attention to a teacher’s impact on students and offer little meaningful information on teachers’ strengths, weaknesses and professional development needs.
 - Although the District of Columbia has not enacted new state-level teacher evaluation policy, the District of Columbia Public School’s evaluation system is among the most ambitious in the nation and thus is included here.
- **Insistence on comparability of measures for all teachers could cripple evaluation efforts.** The drive to identify or develop comparable measures for teachers regardless of grade or subject taught is understandable, but the more important emphasis ought to be on fair and valid measures.
- **Designing measures of student growth for non-tested grades and subjects is an important challenge facing states.** Thinking about the full complement of teachers – including K-2, social studies, special education, and non-core subject area teachers – states are approaching the challenge of how to develop fair and rigorous measures of student growth and achievement for all teachers in a variety of ways.

- **States shouldn't lose sight of the importance of classroom observations.** While there is a great deal of attention focused on linking value-added and student growth results to teacher evaluation, it is equally important to gather evidence observing behavior – what teachers do and what students are learning in the classroom – during classroom observation.
- **In addition to providing actionable feedback to all teachers, perhaps the most useful initial capacity of new evaluations will be to discern the most and least effective teachers.** The precision of growth and value-added data may not be at a very high level of sophistication but that doesn't mean they should be discounted.
- **Stakeholder input is important – but bold leadership is even more important.** Nothing about building a truly effective teaching force is going to come easy and the reality is that teacher reform is being met with unparalleled, vocal opposition. While it is critically important to have stakeholder voices represented, it must be balanced with real leadership and technical expertise where necessary.
- **State review and approval of district evaluations may not be an adequate approach to ensuring quality and rigor.** State approval sounds like a good idea in states that leave it to districts to design a performance-based teacher evaluation system. But it may not be realistic given state capacity. These states may do better to provide specific tools, models and detailed frameworks for conducting and scoring teacher evaluations. States that have left districts to their own devices without any oversight are even more worrisome. There is a good reason to be skeptical that all districts in such states will have the capacity and will to implement strong evaluation systems on their own.
- **States should start with annual evaluations for all teachers and modify for highly effective teachers once the system is fully operational.** Modifying an evaluation system to allow for less than full fledged annual evaluation may be sensible in some states, given issues of capacity, but states shouldn't start out that way.
- **States and districts should use third party evaluators when possible.** A third party evaluator can provide important feedback on the evaluation process and important checks for principals and other administrators.
- **A scarlet letter isn't appropriate teacher effectiveness policy.** Some think parental notification for students whose teachers received ineffective ratings is good accountability policy. But this humiliation tactic does a tremendous disservice to the teaching profession. Teachers with unacceptable levels of performance should be dismissed.
- **Teacher evaluation policy should reflect the purpose of helping all teachers improve, not just low-performers.** Many states are only explicit about tying professional development plans to evaluation results if the evaluation results are bad. Good evaluations with meaningful feedback should be useful to all teachers.
- **States should anticipate and address the anxieties a new evaluation system creates for teachers.** Teachers, not unlike most of us, are afraid of the unknown. States can do more to anticipate fears and diminish tensions over performance-based evaluations.

- **Escape clauses need to be shorn up and loopholes closed that may undermine new teacher evaluation systems.** Whether intentional or accidental, loopholes are already visible in some states' evaluation policies that can undermine their intended rigor. Without quick action to shore up these identified weaknesses, states may find themselves disappointed with the results they achieve and/or fighting unnecessary battles.
- **States need to get on top of policy plans for equitable distribution of effective teachers now.** Without some proactive planning, the exact opposite of more equitable distribution could occur when evaluation results are out and highly-effective teachers are identified.
- **States need to attend to potential bias with systematic checks of their evaluation system; states also need to maintain flexibility to make adjustments to the system as needed.** We are at the beginning of a new policy era about which there is still much to learn. In light of that, states should implement checks to ensure their evaluation systems are fair and reliable. Evaluation systems need to be flexible enough to take advantage of what we learn and be able to adjust.

What this policy review and early lessons suggest is that performance-based teacher evaluation must be approached in a measured, realistic and transparent way. Performance measures are not perfect and good teachers are not the product of formulas. Conducting teacher performance evaluations that focus on the results and the behaviors that matter most will move us toward a system that recognizes and encourages effective instruction and prepares and values highly-effective teachers.

The policy implications of an evaluation system that truly measures teacher effectiveness are profound. If done well, and if policymakers act on the results, the consequences could change much of what is now standard practice in the teaching profession by setting the foundation for better targeted policies for struggling teachers, higher standards for teacher preparation programs and fair but rigorous policies for replacing persistently ineffective teachers. Compensating teachers based on effectiveness could help attract and retain the best teachers in the profession. A system that cultivates effectiveness will also be crucial to other reform efforts, from implementing new Common Core State Standards and promoting educational equity, to turning around low-performing schools.

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