

Best Practices in a Teacher Evaluation Program

A White Paper Prepared by the Center for Innovative Technology¹

For a number of years, students in other nations have outperformed their U.S. peers,² generating anxiety that American students and, ultimately, the American economy, will be handicapped in global competitiveness in the years to come. One crucial component in our future economic success will be a productive, educated workforce and it is essential that we raise the performance levels of our students if we are to compete globally. Many in the education community view a comprehensive teacher evaluation program as one tool to affect student achievement positively.

Introduction

The current workplace environment is one of perpetual change. Workers must be lifelong learners to cope with the global shift toward a knowledge-based economy in conjunction with continuous technological advances and a hyper-competitive marketplace. There is tremendous concern among parents, educators, and politicians about whether our students are sufficiently prepared to enter the workforce and if they have the skills required for current and future learning experiences. To reverse the current trend, public officials and educators across the nation are striving to improve student achievement by reforming the educational system.

Efforts to improve education were put into overdrive in February of 2009 when Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), through which the Race to the Top (RTTT) program was created to aid in the reformation process. Over \$4.3 billion has been earmarked to aid states in implementing innovative and ambitious plans for increasing student achievement. School officials across the U.S., already concerned with improving teacher performance and student achievement, are aligning their efforts to meet the eligibility requirements of the ARRA program.

Teacher Evaluation as a Means to Raise Student Achievement

In the wake of vigorous public debate and in response to federal requirements to improve and reform education systems, states have embarked upon updating their education laws and reforming policies and procedures in an effort to increase teacher effectiveness and to raise student achievement. Public demands for long-term solutions have spurred researchers, educators, and legislators across the nation to explore the possibility of using teacher evaluations as a means to improve teacher performance and, thus, to raise student achievement and student growth.

¹ Portions of this white paper were adapted from Center for Innovative Technology. (2010). *National trends and research synthesis: Teacher performance evaluation* (Rep.). Herndon, VA: Center for Innovative Technology.

² U.S. students' test scores are significantly lower than scores of students in other countries, particularly in mathematics and science. Results from the 2009 PISA tests revealed that U.S. students scored 487 in mathematics, described as "statistically significantly below the OECD average." See <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/12/46643496.pdf> for further details.

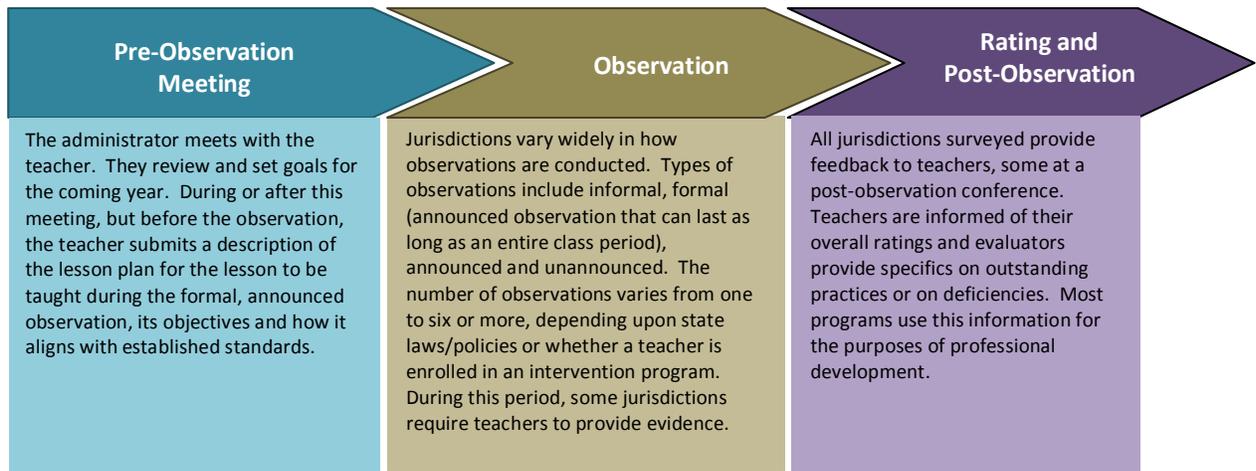
State and local efforts³ fall into the following categories:

- Jurisdiction has legislation and/or policies related to teacher evaluations, but has not yet created a program or implemented teacher evaluations.
- Jurisdiction has legislation and/or policies related to teacher evaluations and conducts evaluations, but does not link these evaluations to student achievement.
- Jurisdiction conducts teacher evaluations, but does not link evaluations to student achievement and does not have a uniform, statewide/district-wide model.
- Jurisdiction conducts teacher evaluations that link evaluations to student achievement, but program is not uniformly implemented.
- Jurisdiction has legislation and/or policies related to teacher evaluations and conducts teacher evaluations that link to student achievement.

Research and Investigation

In the summer of 2010, a state Department of Education commissioned the Center for Innovative Technology (CIT) to support its teacher evaluation/performance models development project. During the project, utilizing the proven proprietary CIT Connect process, the CIT Connect project team compiled and synthesized current research, conducted data collection surveys to establish the current status of teacher evaluation within the state, and conducted interviews with representatives of departments of education in a number of states and localities to identify nationwide trends and models and to develop best practices recommendations.

The CIT Connect team analyzed the teacher evaluation programs and practices at the state and district level in a number of states. The team found that the process of evaluating teachers is similar in most jurisdictions.



³ Very few jurisdictions have mature programs (in place five years or more). Several have programs under development, a few are conducting pilot programs and a number plan to implement an evaluation system by the 2012-2013 school year.

Of those jurisdictions that conducted teacher evaluations, the primary differences among them are the standards to which teachers are held and their scoring or ratings scales. The majority of jurisdictions use an appraisal system based on a national model. These models use a system of overall standards and indicators of proficiency. The number of standards for which teachers are held accountable range from four to as many as ten, and indicators of proficiency and rubrics vary widely. Ratings scales can be as simple as a two-rating scale (either satisfactory or unsatisfactory) or as complex as a five-step scale. The majority of those interviewed characterized their programs as growth models and several indicated that evaluations are used to inform professional development plans.

BEST PRACTICES/LESSONS LEARNED

Those surveyed were asked to identify what elements would be essential to the success of a teacher evaluation program. These best practices were categorized and the practices generally fell into the following topic areas:

- Buy-In and Overcoming Resistance
- Addressing Issues to Avoid the Need for Further Clarification
- Training
- Benefits
- Challenges
- Miscellaneous

Buy-In and Overcoming Resistance

- In order to build trust and to achieve buy-in, people must be comfortable that the program is valid and reliable and that it measures teaching practices, not teachers. Equally important is the need for strong accountability structures for administrators so that inter-reliability can be measured. Finally, it is important to address the question of validity. Does the tool actually accurately predict student improvement?
- Make the process as transparent as possible. The state should not dictate without involving stakeholders.
- Get stakeholder buy-in and have teachers at the table early on. Teacher buy-in is very important, especially in a model using value-added data and performance pay programs.
- Involve teachers and administrators in the design and development of the model (e.g., have an advisory committee comprised of teachers and principals who review the model and make recommendations as issues arise). Invite individuals to be part of the process and provide them opportunities to make comments. Give people the opportunity to hear the issues, ask questions and hear the answers. Overcome opposition by including in the task force those who might resist the plan and seek their input on standards. This is very helpful when the plan is ready for presentation to the legislature.
- Inform all stakeholders in a number of ways, not just through the media (meetings, media, web-postings, newsletters, etc.).
- Use peers to encourage buy-in.
- Conduct a large number of meetings – provide points where input is invited and shared. Webcasts and meetings can be hosted throughout the state to stimulate discussion and comments. It is important to “meet people to death.”

- Create a quality check system. Employees must have access to the data and have the opportunity to review and correct errors on an ongoing basis. For example, one school system’s employees touch, review and sign-off on the information contained in the system every year to ensure that all attendance and eligibility requirements are accurate. In addition, the Department of Education releases bonus information a month prior to issuance so employees can see their expected awards and how they were calculated, etc. Employees may appeal if they believe their awards are inaccurate, and the Department of Education will correct the award, if warranted. In a case where an employee is in error, the Department of Education will issue an explanation. Checks are not cut for anyone until all concerns have been resolved.
- Preempt potential issues before they arise. One of the states surveyed conducted a teacher survey, four teacher forums and generated a Memorandum of Understanding to reduce potential union resistance.
- Have union representatives on a Peer Review Panel to reduce problems, especially in the cases of teachers recommended for dismissal. The panel is informed and participates in every step of the process, so there are no surprises at the end.
- Get all members of a campus involved. When everyone has ownership of the school improvement plan, the plan becomes a living document. For instance, due to their subject specialization, high schools are frequently the hardest schools to “get on board.” This can be remedied by helping high school teachers think differently about what/how they teach in order see the connection with each of the elements.

Addressing Issues to Avoid the Need for Further Clarification

- Maintain accurate documentation.
- Keep stakeholders informed. One state implemented a series of “What’s Working?” workshops sponsored by the State Board of Education. The series focuses on key issues related to teacher evaluation and each segment is presented by an expert from outside of the state.⁴ Dates, times, topics and presenters are posted on the website.
- Eliminate confusion by increasing explanation. One state wrote descriptors after each element to reduce misunderstanding on term use and understanding of the rubrics (“What does excellence mean?”).
- Address all concerns and issues to make the process as fair as possible, even if it creates a more complex model.
- Provide a description and an explanation of the evaluation model throughout the hiring process.

Training

- Build in sufficient time and support for teachers and principals to learn and to understand the standards and how teachers will be measured. It is important to define and to illustrate the differences between a “good” teacher and one who is struggling.
- Ensure that training materials (copies of state code, guidebooks, rubrics, videos) are easily accessible in a number of forms (e.g., print and online).

⁴ One exception is a segment that will be presented by a state-wide union representative.

- Publicizing training sessions is critical to a program's success. Consider creating a website for documentation and send employees a newsletter.
- Use data that has pinpointed weaknesses as an opportunity for professional development/in-service.

Benefits

- An evaluation program creates a common language – one that says what is valued in teachers – or what are the most important things on which teachers should be focused.
- Teachers who score at the very top of the evaluation program correlate very highly with students who are performing well.⁵
- Results of evaluations highlight areas of strengths and weaknesses and can be used for targeted professional development. This type of system encourages teachers to grow and to increase in effectiveness.

Challenges

- Many background elements must be in place to ensure a successful program.
- Data system reliability: It is essential for this system to be in place so that there is confidence in the information, and student/teacher linkages are accurate.
- Ensuring inter-rater reliability is very difficult.
 - There is very little information on measures of inter-rater reliability in teacher evaluations.
 - It is difficult to know conclusively that there are inter-rater reliability issues or how to measure it because it is impossible to reproduce the exact teaching episode.
 - Some systems may investigate videotaping episodes to test inter-rater reliability.
 - Some sort of certification/reliability tool should be considered.

Miscellaneous

- For programs that will be administered, systems must be in place before they begin.
- Funding must be available jurisdiction-wide, down to the campus level, in order to create reliable data systems, to publicize the program, and to fund training.
- Evaluation programs should consider using a third party to evaluate any teacher evaluation program.
- Evaluation programs should consider using a third party to evaluate teachers.
- Consider employing staff development teachers. In one district, every school has a staff development teacher (a master teacher) to assist the administration where needed.
- Consider using specially trained evaluators whose sole responsibility is evaluating teachers. Evaluators should be responsible for no more than 2-3 teachers in the same building, if possible.

⁵ Tyler, J. H., Taylor, E. S., Kane, T. J., & Wooten, A. L. (2009). Using student performance data to identify effective classroom practices. Brown University and Harvard Graduate School of Education. Working Paper. Available: http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/events/colloquia/Tyler_Colloquia_Working_Paper.pdf. This study found a 0.5 correlation between student achievement data and teacher performance in one of the jurisdictions we contacted.



- If the program is based on specially trained peer evaluators, consider cycling them back into the system.
- Teachers should be able to discuss key themes and to have a unified answer to help to build school culture.
- Changes may be required of other entities that have relationships with the school system. For example, one state changed its university teaching program approval processes to ensure university programs for student teachers tied into the state's teacher evaluation process. Some punitive measures were added to gain cooperation.
- Jurisdictions should ensure that the transition is smooth and issues are addressed as they arise. An example in one division is its Implementation Team Committee (ITC) (comprised of administrators and union teachers). The ITC meets monthly to consider how the program is working and addresses issues that have arisen. It is co-chaired by an administrator and by the vice president of the teachers' union. The committee updates the program handbook annually to include any changes that have been implemented during the previous year.

We would like to express our appreciation to the representatives in the education departments of the participating states and localities who so generously shared information on their programs and for their insights on how best to build a valid, reliable teacher evaluation program.

For additional information pertaining to this project or CIT Connect Services, please contact Paul McGowan, Vice President & Managing Director, Center for Innovative Technology, Phone: (703) 689-3030, Email: paul.mcgowan@cit.org

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