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Schools and the Stimulus

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## New Teacher-Evaluation Systems Face Obstacles

By Stephen Sawchuk

Buoyed by the promise of federal funding and a burgeoning dialogue about teacher effectiveness, districts are beginning to overhaul their evaluation systems to provide more finely grained information on teacher performance.

Among the places considering, piloting, or implementing teacher-evaluation systems based at least in part on a set of performance-based standards are Ann Arbor, Mich.; Chicago; the District of Columbia; Elgin and Rockford, Ill.; Prince George's County, Md.; and select districts in states such as Idaho, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

But as those school districts scale up their work, they face a phalanx of obstacles, the greatest of which is probably the paucity of highly regarded models to draw on.

What's more, few districts have ever attempted to go beyond the typical function of evaluations—ensuring teachers meet a basic level of competence—to connect their systems to professional development, teacher promotion, and compensation. Yet that is the ultimate goal of the evaluation language in the \$4 billion federal Race to the Top program.

In the view of Allan R. Odden, a professor of educational leadership at the the University of Wisconsin-Madison, putting evaluation at the center of teacher-quality efforts is likely to take time.

"Five years minimum, and that is going at racetrack speed," he said.

### New Directions

A renewed interest in teaching frameworks, or descriptions of instructional performance at four or more escalating levels of competence, is probably the most immediate effect of the newfound attention to teacher evaluation. Though a number of such models exist, among the best-known examples is consultant Charlotte Danielson's 1996 [Framework for Teaching](#).

The idea behind these models holds that evaluation standards for teacher instruction should be clear and detailed so that teachers understand the targets and evaluators can provide focused help on where they need to improve.

"It is giving everyone the same language to talk about progress compared to those standards," said Sheri Frost Leo, the project manager of the [Excellence in Teaching Project](#), a pilot performance-based evaluation system in Chicago that is built on Ms. Danielson's framework

The District of Columbia's new IMPACT evaluation system uses a variety of measures to weigh teacher performance. Point scores from all the components are put on a common scale, weighted, and used to determine one of four final ratings: "ineffective," "minimally effective," "effective," or "highly effective."

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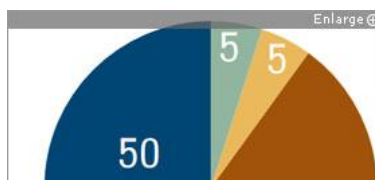
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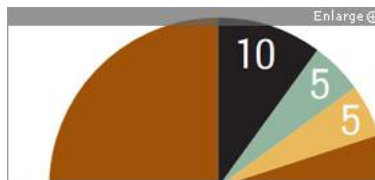
and is now in its second year.

Emerging evidence suggests that observational ratings according to such standards do, in fact, correlate with improved student achievement.

Experts reviewing data from Cincinnati, which has used a Danielson-based system since 2000, found a strong correlation between teachers' evaluation scores and student achievement on year-end tests, said John Tyler, an associate professor of education, economics, and public policy at Brown University.



**General-education teachers in nontested grades or subjects:**



SOURCE: District of Columbia Public Schools

"High value-added teachers are doing something different in the classroom than teachers with lower value-added scores, and the evaluators are picking that up and scoring it," said Mr. Tyler, who co-wrote a forthcoming study on the data.

Yet many questions face districts that attempt to put such measures into place in order to make sure they are fair, consistent, and produce accurate data. Should observations be announced or unannounced? How many observations are needed to get a meaningful sense of the quality of classroom instruction? Who should conduct the evaluations?

Several of those problems have emerged as sore spots in debates about evaluation in the District of Columbia, which introduced a new teacher-evaluation system this year. Unlike in many other school districts, the system—called **IMPACT**—was not subject to collective bargaining.

That's been a sore spot for the Washington Teachers' Union and its parent, the American Federation of Teachers. In particular, the unions object that the system relies partially on performance reviews by "master educators" who were not jointly selected by the school district and the local union.



"Nobody thinks of the people in IMPACT as peers; they think about them as somebody that [Chancellor] Michelle [Rhee] picked," said Randi Weingarten, the president of the AFT.

But the district's director of human-capital strategy, Jason Kamras, said that the 45,000-student district held more than 50 focus-group meetings with teachers while crafting the system and has already made revisions to it based on teacher feedback.

Another challenging issue is that of "inter-rater reliability"—whether several successive observers will make equally accurate judgments of teachers, based on the performance standards.

A study of the first year of Chicago's pilot evaluation system found that teachers and principals were overwhelmingly positive about the new system. But it also suggests room for improvement. Principals, it found, were generally more likely to give higher ratings to teachers than were other observers, though the pattern didn't hold for every evaluation strand.

According to Ms. Leo, the findings underscore the need for a gradual implementation of the evaluation system and its refinement over time to ensure principals are consistent in providing evidence-based feedback.

Finally, Mr. Odden points out, it is expensive to hire and train a cadre of

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evaluators to take part in high-quality observations, especially if such evaluations are to take place every year.

### **Great Expectations**

Such issues are important to settle, people in the field say, because attempts to connect an evaluation system to other initiatives can be made or broken on whether teachers come to view such systems as reliable and fair for identifying high-quality teaching.

Cincinnati's case is instructive. In the early 2000s, the 35,000-student district attempted to overhaul its salary schedule to match its new performance-based evaluation, which drew on multiple observations of teacher performance on a 4-point scale.

The joint committee of teachers and administrators that crafted the pay proposal agreed that it was appropriate to boost salaries for high-performing teachers at all experience levels—and to withhold a significant amount from those who scored poorly on the evaluation for several years in a row. But implementation problems helped derail the plan, recalled Kathleen Ware, a former associate superintendent of the Cincinnati public schools.

In particular, she said, professional development on the new system lagged. And the pay plan would have applied to nearly all teachers, rather than allowing veterans the choice of opting into the new system.

Concerns about the plan led to a change in union leadership and ultimately to a vote by an overwhelming majority of Cincinnati Federation of Teachers members to reject the pay component.

Ms. Ware said it was hard to overcome the "fear factor" that set in when some teachers initially scored below their expectations on the system.

"We probably went too far, too fast, and should have, from the beginning, said that the compensation would be implemented for new teachers," she said.

Still, the possibilities for linking evaluation systems to other aspects of the teacher-quality continuum are tantalizing, and districts are considering a gamut of possibilities.

The District of Columbia, Mr. Kamras said, hopes to align its recruitment practices to IMPACT and to analyze evaluation data to address patterns of teaching strengths or weaknesses in specific grades, schools, and neighborhoods.

Also, it would like to use the evaluation system as the basis for an individual differentiated-compensation initiative, although that feature would need to be bargained.

In Montgomery County, Md., a committee of union officials and administrators is discussing the idea of a "career lattice" for teachers who meet evaluation expectations and other criteria, said Douglas L. Prouty, the president of the National Education Association affiliate there. Teachers who qualified for "lead teacher" status could in theory take on roles as curriculum developers, coaches, or peer evaluators, and perhaps earn an additional stipend.

Chicago has already received union backing to align an induction program and other pilot initiatives with the standards in the revised evaluation system. It envisions one day tying career ladders to the evaluation.

"We'd want to make sure the union is with us at every step of the way," Ms. Leo added.

Experts like Ms. Danielson, however, caution that such initiatives, especially ones that would affect how salaries are set, must be approached with caution so that they don't overshadow the focus on continuous teacher improvement.

"You don't want to get into a situation where a teacher is going to argue or parse words, or get defensive about a rating, if you're interested in teacher performance improving," she said. "I think it's easy to create unanticipated consequences inadvertently."

### Benefits and Drawbacks

Even without such stakes, experts say that well-designed systems can become less rigorous over time. Cincinnati, for instance, is now weathering the fallout from [a report about its system by the New Teacher Project](#), a New York City-based training program that has conducted analyses of several districts' talent pipelines.

That report found that most teachers, even novices, received observational scores in the "teaching and learning" category of the evaluation in the top two tiers, and that no teacher had been scored as unsatisfactory in that domain since 2004-05.

The Cincinnati district is due to open contract negotiations shortly with its AFT-affiliated union, and the evaluation system could be one focal point for discussion.

As for the District of Columbia, Mr. Kamras acknowledges that it is still working to ensure the ratings are appropriately normed. But he defends the school system's decision to implement the new model rapidly, saying the accountability component has focused principals' and teachers' attention on the teaching standards.

"I agree it takes a long time for the words on the page to become internalized," he said.

Teachers in Washington are still digesting the new model. Many are wary; some are disgruntled. Then there are some, like 3rd grade teacher Jenny Weber, a four-year veteran, who sees both the system's benefits and drawbacks.

On the upside, she said, her observers have been clear about why she has earned certain scores on the strands of the performance rubric. On the downside, observations sometimes occur when a teacher is facilitating independent student work rather than providing direct instruction.

But there is one thing Ms. Weber knows for certain, and that is she prefers IMPACT to the former evaluation system.

"To me," she said, "this seems more fair."

*Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at [www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education](http://www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education).*

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**tfowler** wrote:

I teach in a district with 65,000 students that uses Danielson's 1996 Framework for Teaching for teacher evaluations, including the software that goes with it to write the evaluations. We have state laws requiring building administrators to evaluate every teacher every year by April 1st. Regulations also spell out the length and quantity of observations that are required. And yet, the "drive by" evaluation is still a very common occurrence.

This certainly underscores the point that "it is expensive to hire and train a cadre of evaluators to take part in high-quality observations, especially if such evaluations are to take place every year." If the evaluator is not high-quality, how valuable is the evaluation?

12/11/2009 3:22 PM EST on EdWeek

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**John Mierzwa, CALA Academy, Las Vegas, NV** wrote:

This sounds like some steps in the right direction. I mean really, who can effectively argue with the notion that all employees need meaningful feedback from their managers? And by the way I am an educator myself, with two educator

parents..

Contrary to popular opinion, teachers in general have no monopoly on the aversion to being held accountable for their actions; or the (misguided) belief that their job is unique in its level of difficulty and should be exempt from pedestrian accountability standards.

It's the same with employees in every industry, with the only variables being the recruiting/hiring standard (which sets the initial competence level); and how seriously management/ownership takes the concept of continual improvement through professional development and progressive discipline:

High performers - let's say 15% - welcome the observations, scrutiny and accompanying progressive discipline, penalties and rewards that (should and must) result from the evaluations.

Low performers - another 15% - will weed themselves out through their incompetence (except in Cincinnati, where amazingly there apparently are 0% incompetent teachers).

And the middle 70% of teachers will complain about the process, but quickly realize that it is pragmatic to do what their bosses expect/demand, and thus will continually improve.

The difference for teachers compared to other employees is the iron-clad protection of the unions. Of course the only real barrier to the proposed - and very obvious - method for ensuring that districts retain only the best teachers is, and has always been, their incredibly strong unions.

And again, teachers are not alone in seeking the human nature condition of avoiding accountability when possible. Many industries with strong union representation have created an atmosphere where employees are (relatively) impervious to the negative consequences of incompetence and indifference. This is especially true in comparison to non-union employees.

I know, teachers say there are too many circumstances beyond their control to be evaluated on the performance of their students. But every employer must do something to ensure competence, and this proposed method of evaluation on each teacher's personal sphere of influence is a start.

And yes, I have also heard many, many times the mantra that teachers are different, because they truly care about helping people - so they don't actually need any incentives or consequences to remain in a state of perfect behavior and performance.

Sorry, but I've known too many teachers in my life, and we are all just people - with the same weaknesses as everyone else. Humans, just like every other organism, need competition, fear, motivation, and rewards to stay focused and avoid complacency. It's simply the way the world works.

I for one applaud this long overdue and necessary move to increased accountability. Our students and taxpayers have long deserved it. Now I just hope we can continue the momentum into other areas with union protected public employees as well, to level the field for everyone..

12/11/2009 5:11 PM EST on EdWeek

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**Harsh8** wrote:

Reformers are frustrated by the ineffectiveness of "evaluation" and "professional development" processes because they are trying to do two distinctly different things with one instrument. They try to use the same system to improve teachers and to fire them. It's like using a garden spade to plant and harvest tomatoes.

There should be two systems, two processes. One designed to improve teachers. The other designed to evaluate and re-hire or fire them. Instead administrators, professors, and school systems keep combining the two processes, causing

teachers, who should be focusing on professional growth, trembling in fear that they are going to be fired.

Formative assessments are different from summative assessments. The two should be clearly separated.

The formative process should be continuous and might follow the "framework" suggested by C. Danielson. Then, periodically, perhaps at the end of each semester, administrators could use a different instrument to determine that an employee should be rehired. This would be a formal, summative assessment of a teacher's classroom performance. Evaluators who write this hire-fire assessment could lower the scores of any teacher who refused to participate in professional development.

Separating the two processes helps everyone. Teachers need to learn new skills. No one wants to be evaluated for purposes of pay or re-employment during the time they are being trained. Rather, after they have had training and an opportunity to incorporate the new skills into their work, most employees acknowledge that the employer has a responsibility to see that they are doing the work at an acceptable level.

Reformers who will not separate the two systems or processes, will continue to be frustrated.

12/12/2009 3:16 AM EST on EdWeek

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[paulhoss@hotmail.com](mailto:paulhoss@hotmail.com) wrote:

John Mierzwa makes a great deal of sense. A revised system of evaluating teachers with a defined objective component has been way overdue. I've long maintained the existing subjective evaluation of teachers where everyone is deemed satisfactory or commendable is an embarrassment to the teaching profession.

Of paramount importance for programs like Danielson's or the one I worked under for years (Jonathan Saphier's The Effective Teacher) is that teachers as well as administrators get the necessary professional development to make it effective. The first few years we had Saphier's program in operation, only administrators were trained. I asked the superintendent how we could expect to appropriately evaluate teachers if they had no idea what they were being evaluated on? Fortunately, he listened and teachers finally got the PD necessary to allow them to get on the right track.

12/12/2009 7:13 AM EST on EdWeek

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[Tom Sundstrom](#) wrote:

Every teacher's evaluation should be directly tied to their job description. Without this connection, there is no foundational context for the evaluation. So there are no misunderstandings, clear accountability and a basis for performance evaluation, teacher's job descriptions must be clear. Unfortunately, most labor agreements are not clear in this area of professional responsibility.

By not having a list of responsibilities to reference in a review, critical areas can be overlooked. For example, I have not seen any mention of evaluating a teacher's lesson plans for quality, cohesion and alignment. Yet, we know that developing quality instructional materials is difficult and time consuming. And we know good curriculum in the classroom can make a big difference. A teacher's ability to develop good curriculum is a significant part of their job and should be evaluated.

Teachers like every other profession deserve to have clear job descriptions and be held accountable for performance against them as the standard. Any framework for teacher evaluation needs to tie back to the job description.

Tom Sundstrom

[www.sundryeducation.com](http://www.sundryeducation.com)

12/12/2009 4:33 PM EST on EdWeek

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[DrLou](#) wrote:



As with any professional, teachers should absolutely be held accountable for their work. But the move to hold teachers 'accountable' would be much more logical and supportable if the system in which they work actually prioritized efforts made by those teachers, their schools and their students. The continual drain of resources and monies to Charter schools and the like may well be a much bigger compromise to the success of public schools than teachers who are understandably struggling to keep up with those lost resources.

Rather than funneling yet more money and resources away from the public schools by way of Charters, or giving parents the 'authority' to pull their children from one over burdened school and move them to another, I would much prefer to see our federal and local governments commit time, money and resources that will directly support the existing public school system. It is my view that policies enlarging the mandates for Charter schools have allowed federal and local politicians to evade, rather than respond to, their responsibility and accountability for real school reform and change.

Charter schools have potential value and relevance. But the use of Charter schools to make up for the wanton political and social indifference to the future of our public schools and so many children is seriously misguided. Teacher accountability is fine and relevant so long as teachers consistently have the support and resources needed to be successful.

Our public school system was never intended to operate based on the free market philosophy of competition. Instead, public schools exist as a legally binding entitlement and a way to create common baselines for citizen success. I have long been astounded by the strange argument that Charters will motivate public schools through competition for students even as funding systems remain incredibly unequal between urban and suburban districts and monies intended for public schools are redirected away from those public schools.

Preaching the creation of successful school environments while continuing to degrade what we know is required for a successful teaching environment is wholly illogical. To hold teachers accountable, the system first has to be unalterably supportive of those teachers, their students and schools.

12/13/2009 11:05 AM EST on EdWeek

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