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Measuring Learning, Supporting Teaching:

# Classroom Experts' Recommendations for an Effective Educator Evaluation System

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By the Teachers of the Illinois New Millennium Initiative



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The Illinois New Millennium Initiative (NMI) unites an innovative, energized group of early-career and veteran teachers, diverse in experience but committed to making a difference for Illinois students. We teach in a variety of schools throughout the state and entered the profession through myriad pathways. We share common principles, fortified through our diverse perspectives, which motivate us to advocate for a new vision for transforming education in our districts, statewide in Illinois and nationally. The NMI is an initiative of the Center for Teaching Quality.

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# Measuring Learning, Supporting Teaching: Classroom Experts' Recommendations for an Effective Educator Evaluation System

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**T**he Illinois New Millennium Initiative (NMI) is a statewide team of accomplished, early-career teachers and educators focused on classroom- and community-based solutions to improve public schools. In virtual and face-to-face collaborations, we work to connect research findings with our own teaching experiences in order to design policies and practices that advance our vision of a student-centered, effective teaching profession. We believe that many stakeholders—including parents, our unions, policymakers, and the general public—have important roles to play in our public schools. But we also know that too often, teachers and other school staff are left out of critical discussions about the direction of public education and the direction of our profession. We are focused on re-engaging in those conversations, making our voices heard on issues of policy and practice and leading the direction of our profession for the new millennium.

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The Illinois New Millennium Initiative believes effective teachers share these characteristics:

- Design all aspects of their work as educators—from planning to assessment—with the needs of their students foremost in mind, differentiating strategies as needed to reach every child
- Create a positive, safe, caring, focused and engaging classroom environment for student learning
- Learn constantly, always staying abreast of best practices and recent research
- Collaborate with colleagues to exchange best practices and spread effective innovations
- Utilize all resources (e.g., parents/families, administration, the community, other staff, student data of all kinds, instructional technology) to ensure the success of all students
- Exhibit respect for students, parents and families, and our colleagues by reinforcing 21st century professional standards among the ranks of teachers

These defining characteristics of effective teaching draw on our own expertise as accomplished young teachers, our experience in diverse schools around our state and our conversations with other like-minded teachers in the Midwest and nationally. We have studied what leading researchers have concluded about effective teaching—and the best ways to identify and grow it. We propose “promising practice” guidelines for teacher evaluation systems that can lead to meaningful reforms for teacher effectiveness and evaluation. While these recommendations could be implemented in any American public school, they have special importance right here in Illinois, where the new Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) will be implemented over the next several years—and we urge state policymakers to take these into account in implementation design.

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## New Millennium Recommendations for Teacher Evaluation Systems

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### Well-designed evaluation systems offer tools to grow effective teaching.

As a group of young teacher and union leaders, we all agree that evaluation systems have an important role to play in making every teacher more effective. “Drive-by” evaluations are all too common in many schools, and even those are too infrequent to offer the kind of feedback teachers need to grow as professionals. We believe that if new evaluation systems go beyond carrot-and-stick diagnostics of “good” and “bad” teachers, and instead are used as systems to support professional development, teachers and unions will be much more willing to support evaluation reforms. Policymakers and political analysts often downplay the importance of buy-in from these groups, but the fact is that reform will be much more meaningful, much more sustainable, and much more smoothly implemented if teachers and school staff are at the table from the very beginning. We have a passion for our work with students, and like other professionals, we’re not afraid to receive constructive criticism that helps us refine our skills. We just need evaluation systems that can help give that to us.



### Student learning growth should be measured with sophisticated assessment strategies, not just sophisticated statistical models.

At the end of the day, we teach to help students learn, and outcomes matter—so we applaud the inclusion of student learning measures in PERA and other new evaluation policies. However, testing systems must be organized to support teachers’ efforts to improve instruction, not just to diagnose more- and less-effective teachers. We recognize that money is tight, especially since Illinois did not receive a federal Race to the Top grant last year. Nonetheless, we encourage the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) and others charged with implementing PERA to develop or adopt and validate new and more meaningful assessments *before* scaling up implementation.

In our experience with ISAT and Prairie State exams, test preparation emerges as its own component of the curriculum, as teachers and other school staff push to meet accountability goals—sometimes to the detriment of *learning* goals. Students become skilled at taking multiple-

choice tests as opposed to engaging deeply with content and mastering higher-order thinking skills that are critical for success in college and 21st-century careers. Current assessments in Illinois are also generally acknowledged not to be too reliable or well-aligned with curricular goals and lacking in “stretch” to measure every student’s growth accurately, making them unsuitable as a basis for value-added models planned under PERA. Also, Illinois teachers currently do not receive student assessment results until the following school year—after those students have moved on to another teacher. Reporting delays make results useless as tools to improve instruction for our students now.

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### Multiple measures are important, but they depend on thoughtful design.

We believe that an over-reliance on standardized tests puts too much emphasis on testing and not enough on the important work of teaching and learning. However, we agree that well-designed assessments—administered formatively as well as summatively, aligned with curricula, focused on higher-order skills and with timely turnaround of results—can be useful tools to support effective teaching in every subject and grade. We encourage PEAC to consider use of multiple measures of student assessment including portfolios, computer-adaptive tests, observations of student learning behaviors and oral examinations or presentations. Moreover, this assessment development process needs to begin with the educators. Teachers should be the ones taking the lead on development of these measurement tools in conjunction with other district, state and union leaders.

Outcomes for our students matter, and getting positive results for students is why we became teachers in the first place. But we also need to acknowledge, track and reward other elements of good practice that lead to those good outcomes, many of which we’ve included in our definition of effective teachers. We acknowledge that some of these elements are hard to pin down, but the challenge should not prevent us from trying to develop evaluation systems that can measure these things. For instance, the [Measuring Effective Teaching \(MET\) Project](#) sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is finding that student engagement surveys can accurately measure the extent to which teachers engage in important but otherwise hard-to-capture behaviors that contribute to student learning.

Observations are most widely used as an additional evaluation measure, but we encourage PEAC and districts to think carefully about practical challenges to getting these protocols right. It is likely that the Danielson framework for observations will be used throughout Illinois—a good model, but one that typically requires time and training to build observers’ facility with the rubrics and inter-rater reliability. Importantly, though, expert teaching is not always “seen” with these types of classroom observations. Often what distinguishes effective teachers is how they analyze student problems and challenges, which happens both inside and outside of classrooms.

Peer assistance and review (PAR) systems are being discussed for some of the PERA “early adopter” districts, which we support as excellent formative evaluation tools that build capacity for teacher leadership in schools. However, this model is resource-intensive, perhaps needing up to 16,000 evaluators who are carefully matched by content area and grade level in order to maximize reliability and usefulness as a professional development tool. We believe virtual tools can build capacity to involve more expert teachers in providing formative and even summative evaluations for their peers.

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### Evaluations should link to professional development plans for every educator.

Just as our students need formative feedback from us to improve their skills and understanding before a final project or test, teachers need formative evaluation results to improve our professional practice. We applaud PERA's requirements for more frequent teacher evaluations. Of course, frequency of feedback only matters if the feedback is of high quality. We need formative evaluations that tell us clearly not just whether we are proficient or satisfactory in a given area of classroom practice but specifically where our strengths and challenges lie and exactly what we can do to serve our students better. We also need our evaluations to be linked to our professional practice.

Most of all, these linked evaluation and professional development programs should be available to *all* teachers and school staff, not just early-career or struggling educators in core academic subjects. Increasingly, educators are working collaboratively to improve student learning experiences and outcomes through team and co-teaching among classroom teachers, the involvement of specialists and pull-out teachers and related services staff who help students become ready to learn. Evaluation systems must catch up to that reality rather than continuing to assume that only one teacher impacts a student's performance in a given year. One of our colleagues in the Illinois NMI, for instance, is a school social worker. We believe that her work with students makes a difference in their engagement, attendance, and success—and that evaluation systems should be able to identify and reward her contributions as well as ours.

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### Tenure and staffing decisions are important to the profession, but they should be informed by measures of effectiveness, not just by seniority.

One of our colleagues, a fourth-year art teacher, was laid off last year because his district had to cut costs and did so by letting teachers with the least experience go. Several teachers in the fine arts, physical education, foreign language, and business, technology and career fields were also let go. They were replaced by teachers who held the appropriate certificate and more seniority, though not necessarily the same skills and unique talents the departing teachers possessed. We believe that seniority as a sole metric for making personnel decisions will weed out too many promising young teachers. We have to be much more strategic about how tenure and other staffing decisions are made if we want to build a more effective profession. However, we believe that tenure should be based on meeting performance metrics, while also serving as an important guarantee of due process for educators.

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### Schools and districts must have the right conditions in place to support effective teaching and student learning.

Research, including some reviewed by another team of teacher leaders last year, is clear: When it comes to improving and spreading teaching effectiveness, conditions in schools matter most. Informed by this research, we believe evaluation systems have two roles to play:

- First, evaluation systems must account for a number of factors in order to be accurate and flag the right next steps to meet student needs. Specifically, evaluation systems need to capture and acknowledge the role that class sizes (not just student-teacher ratios), supportive school cultures, and access to needed materials and professional development play in challenges to improve student learning. Student mobility is a special challenge for many of us who teach in urban, high-needs schools, and as a result we may not necessarily know how a student was doing before he or she entered our district or classroom. School climate surveys and other

diverse and rich data sources—and systems that can truly manage such data in comprehensive, longitudinal ways—are a must.

- Second, evaluation system overhauls need to be seen as the opportunity they are: a chance to get many of those conditions in schools back on track. An evaluation system that meets our best practice criteria—offering rich and timely feedback, aligned with meaningful learning goals and standards in a strong curriculum, and tied to differentiated professional development and collaboration experiences—can help struggling schools develop more supportive climates for teaching and learning.

In addressing both of these underlying needs for evaluation reform, we think it is vital that teachers and other educators not just adopt a “wait and see” approach as policymakers re-engineer evaluation systems. Rather, we should take charge of evaluation reforms ourselves and be full participants in the design and implementation process in Illinois. Teachers are the professionals who work with these systems day in and day out to improve instruction for students, and our expertise should be used to improve teaching effectiveness and strengthen our profession. For instance, teachers and other educators could help design new student assessments to replace or improve on the ISAT and Prairie State exams (and ensure they are well-aligned with standards and actual curricula), create evaluation rubrics for teachers in non-tested subjects and for related-services staff or develop plans for how evaluation results can inform professional development plans or retention decisions for teachers.

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### Strategic compensation can help to reward teachers for high effectiveness, but our experience and the research suggest that it doesn't create effective teaching.

We believe that evaluation systems should give more meaning to the career and compensation ladder for teachers, by helping to advance and retain the most accomplished and effective teachers. Right now, most teachers are compensated based on a schedule that primarily takes into account their experience and their graduate course work. While this system is fair and transparent, we aren't convinced that it serves the purpose of creating a more effective teaching profession. Instead, we should compensate teachers for things that do impact effectiveness. National Board Certification, evidence of improved student learning or engagement and participation in collaboration and mentoring of peers to spread the expertise of already-effective teachers are all worth the investment of higher salaries.

We want to be clear that these are *investments*, not incentives for effectiveness. A 2010 study of the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) shows that teachers do not choose teaching because of financial reward and that most teachers perform their best regardless of the reward. The biggest rewards of the profession are intrinsic. However, effective teachers are consummate professionals in the profession that makes all other professions possible—and they should be compensated as such. Strategic compensation programs can also play key roles in attracting teachers to high-demand areas like science or special education or to schools that are hard to staff.

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## The Illinois New Millennium Initiative Team

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### Jacob Bretz



Jacob Bretz is a social studies teacher at Danville New Tech High School in Danville, and a graduate student in the Education Organization and Leadership program at the University of Illinois in Urbana. Jacob is in his fourth year as a high school educator, teaching world geography and American studies. Jacob is currently part of a small initiative within Danville High School called Danville New Tech, which implements wall-to-wall project-based learning instruction in partnership with the New Tech Foundation based in Napa, California. Jacob is currently the Danville New Tech House Leader and, in collaboration with his co-leader, provides professional development and training in PBL for the Danville New Tech staff. Jacob is also a member of the American History Teacher's Collaborative based in Urbana. He has given several presentations on research fellowships he has completed based on local history.

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### Mark Danielson



Mark James Danielson is a physics instructor at Thornwood High School in South Holland. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in geology: Earth science education with a secondary education minor. His teaching career began in fall 2007 with Thornton Township District 205 at Thornwood High School. In spring 2009, Mark was hired to be the assistant activities director at Thornwood, expanding his impact on students to include reaching out to student leaders. His duties have included being the student council sponsor for his school.

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### Gayla Dial



Gayla Dial is a special education teacher working in a rural area of Illinois. She has worked with students from early childhood through college. She earned her B.S. at SIU-Carbondale and began teaching elementary school. In 1998, she earned her M.S. in curriculum and instruction with an area of specialization in early childhood special education. That year, Gayla became the preschool master teacher in a child development laboratory. In 2000, she returned to SIU-Carbondale to begin work on a doctorate in curriculum and instruction, returning in 2004 to the classroom to teach special education. She is trained as a teacher mentor and works closely with the Illinois Education Association to promote education excellence statewide.

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### Bill Farmer



Bill Farmer is a biology and chemistry teacher at Evanston Township High School where he began his career seven years ago. He earned his M.A. in school leadership from Concordia University Chicago in June 2007. Bill currently serves as the president of Teacher's Council, the local union affiliate of the Illinois Education Association and the National Education Association. As president, he serves to promote a collaborative and productive working relationship between teachers and administrators as they work toward the common goal of improving the school for its students.

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### Laura Finch



Laura Finch is currently a kindergarten teacher at Dallas City Elementary School. She earned her teaching degree at Western Illinois University. Laura began teaching at Dallas City in March of 2002. During eight years in the classroom, she has taught junior high language arts and social studies, fifth grade, and now is in her second year of work with primary-grade students. She has been nominated as teacher of the year three times for her tri-state region. She was also selected to travel and study our nation's history in Washington, D.C., through a federal grant program.

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### Lana Gundy



Lana Gundy is a teacher in the Peoria Public Schools District 150. She currently teaches fourth grade at Thomas Jefferson Primary. In another school-based role, as the gifted coordinator, she provides professional development for the staff and is developing and implementing a new gifted program for her school. She is also a member of the Universal Leadership Team (ULT), bringing schoolwide issues back to the fourth grade team and grade-level concerns to the ULT, and she served on the Targeted Team, which provides services to student who are not meeting academic or behavioral goals. Lana earned her B.S. in elementary education from Illinois State University along with a psychology minor. In spring 2011, Lana joined the writing team for the New Millennium Initiative's blog, TransformED.

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### Alicia Hart



Alicia (Ali) Hart teaches science for special education students at Evanston Township High School in Evanston 202. In addition, she coordinates a summer freshman transition course for about 300 students annually and a mentoring program that works with 1,000 student mentors and mentees. Outside the classroom, Ali serves as a member of the local union executive board, and is co-chair of her district's School Improvement Team. She has been teaching for six years and intends to remain in the classroom, but she has also been trained as a counselor in order to sharpen her abilities to engage

students and differentiate instruction based on their academic and nonacademic needs. Ali earned her undergraduate degree in special education at Ball State University in 2004 and a master's in counseling in 2009.

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### Rana Khan



Rana Khan currently teaches fifth grade at A. O. Sexton Elementary on the South Side of Chicago. She has worked closely with teacher preparation programs at both the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago (her alma mater). She has hosted numerous teacher candidates. Rana has received several grants for materials and technology for her classroom and school. In 2006, she was awarded the Milken National Educator Award. For three years, she has been a TAP Mentor Teacher, where her duties include observing and coaching teachers, rating teachers' effectiveness, serving as a member of the school's Leadership Team and leading professional development throughout the year. In 2009, Rana earned a master's in educational leadership, and she is working toward her National Board Certification.

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### RaVonya Knight



RaVonya R. Knight has been a high school English teacher for four years. She began her teaching career at Thornridge High School in District 205. RaVonya moved to Lake County and assisted with the opening and development of a new high school in District 126. She is currently a lead teacher at New Tech High at Zion-Benton East. RaVonya is now in her third year at New Tech and team-teaches American studies.

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### Devin Olson



Devin Olson teaches computer science and other subjects at Thornton High School. After earning a master's degree in computer science, he originally pursued a career in information systems but chose to become a teacher through an alternative certification program five years ago. In addition to serving on numerous faculty committees, Devin serves as a building representative and a regional representative to the Illinois Education Association. He is particularly passionate about funding equity in education and finding ways to retain and spread the expertise of effective early-career teachers.

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### Cara Pence

Cara Pence teaches seventh grade reading and language arts at Rolling Acres Edison in Peoria and is also involved with the school's leadership team. She has deep expertise in developing formative assessments and using resulting data to guide and differentiate instruction for students who are below grade level or who have special learning needs. Cara has a special interest in the role that families and community partners play in working with teachers to ensure student success.

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### Beth Perce



Beth Perce has been a fifth through eighth grade special education teacher at Rolling Acres Edison in Peoria for the past eight years. She earned her first master's degree at Rockford College in instructional strategies and is currently working on her second master's degree at Illinois State University in middle school mathematics, in which she is conducting action research. Currently, Beth is the Mathcounts coach at her school, on the Universal Leadership Team, co-captain of the CHOICES team and works with destination technology, which is a science and math enrichment program for students in the district.

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### Alison Stachniak



Alison Stachniak teaches kindergarten at a Chicago charter school called the [Academy for Global Citizenship](#). She is in her second year as a classroom teacher and fifth year in education, a career that began in a private school in South Carolina and included time as a Pre-K teacher in urban Atlanta. Alison is bilingual certified (English/Spanish) and particularly enjoys working with urban students and ELLs. Alison earned the Outstanding Future Educator Award from the Indiana Association of Colleges for Teacher Education for demonstrated excellence in both university coursework and K–12 field experiences, including student teaching.

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### Karyn Webb



Karyn A. Webb has been teaching at the fourth through sixth grade levels for ten years in a variety of settings, including a public Montessori school and a second-language magnet school in urban Decatur. Karyn has held leadership positions throughout her career, most recently serving as a member of the Decatur Education Association board of directors and chair of the teacher appraisal/evaluation committee. Karyn earned her undergraduate education degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a master's degree in elementary curriculum and instruction from Northern Illinois University. She also is a candidate for National Board Certification.

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## Kiesha Williams



Kiesha Williams is a school social worker for Elgin High School in District U46. She earned her MSW at Loyola University in May 1999. Kiesha began her school social work career at an alternative middle school for Chicago Public Schools. While in her current district, she has served in various leadership roles at the building, district, union and state levels. She currently serves on her local union board as a section director, the building's PBIS Tier 2 Team, and the district's PBIS School Community Alliance Committee. She has supervised and mentored various social work/counselor interns. In addition to providing crisis management, Kiesha runs various social skills groups including her Young Women's Empowerment Group.