



Educator Evaluation

A Case Study of Massachusetts' Approach

By Catherine Brown, Lisette Partelow, and Annette Konoske-Graf

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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**

- 3 The past and present of educator evaluation nationwide**

- 7 The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework:
The basics**

- 16 What makes the Massachusetts framework different?**

- 23 Lessons learned**

- 27 Where do evaluations go from here?**

- 30 Conclusion**

- 33 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

There has been a sea change in teacher evaluation over the past eight years. Inspired in part by President Barack Obama’s policies, schools have instituted teacher evaluation systems that include multiple measures of teacher impact. Model systems are aligned to systems of continuous improvement, helping teachers identify areas of weakness in their practice and linking them with related support. This shift toward more formal systems of evaluation is essential to ensure high-quality teaching and learning. Evaluation systems are not the only lever for improving teacher quality, but when they are well-designed, they can be a critical part of teacher development and support because they provide a framework from which teachers can improve their practice.

In recent years, teacher evaluation systems have come under fire in some communities. Teachers and advocates have argued that student test scores are not an accurate or fair way to assess teacher performance. Though only a small fraction of the teacher workforce has standardized testing connected to their performance evaluation, this argument has taken hold. Nevertheless, many teachers and system leaders have embraced the need to improve teacher evaluation systems so that they become tools for improving practice and ensuring teachers are receiving appropriate supports.

As federal policies shift to provide states and districts greater flexibility to craft their own evaluation systems, Massachusetts offers an interesting model. It has been less controversial because test scores serve as merely a check on the system rather than a driver of it. In addition, instead of using an algorithm to determine teacher effectiveness, Massachusetts empowers school leaders to use their judgment to make these decisions. By empowering evaluators and educators—who are able to determine their own growth plans if they are high-performing—and embedding the evaluation system within a broader system of feedback and professional development, the Massachusetts model supports continuous improvement of educators.

Teacher testimonial

Lisa Caponigro is a fifth-grade math teacher in Revere, Massachusetts. As a 12-year veteran, Lisa's career has spanned the evolution of educator evaluation that has taken place in Massachusetts and across the nation. Lisa remembers annual evaluations in the old system: the infrequent formal observations, the checklists, and the summary of findings she would receive at the end of the year. This system was more of a pronouncement on the quality of her teaching, rather than clear direction for improvement.¹

Now, under the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework, Lisa is evaluated by her principal—a trusted advisor with whom she “talks shop” every day and someone who regularly visits her classroom. When the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in Massachusetts passed new regulations in 2011 defining a new framework for evaluating teachers and administrators, Lisa's district signed on as an early implementer. A group of teacher leaders, including Lisa,

supported initial implementation by supporting their colleagues in understanding the evaluation process, writing goals, and receiving and using feedback.²

Lisa says Revere's new evaluation system creates many new opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice. She explains: “Our old system wasn't growth-oriented. Our current system is all about a continuous dialogue between my evaluator and me. He visits my classroom often and provides feedback that helps me adjust my practice over time. I have confidence that he has the full picture of me as a teacher.”³

Lisa believes the evaluation process is helping her students as well. The goal-setting process has helped her to stay on track in her support of students who are struggling. Through specific action steps spelled out at the beginning of the evaluation cycle, she is able to hold herself accountable for doing what she believes is necessary to attain her goal.⁴

The past and present of educator evaluation nationwide

Prior to 2012, teacher evaluation in the United States was sporadic and uniformly viewed as unproductive. Most states and districts failed to make meaningful distinctions between their best teachers and others. A 2009 study found that, even in districts that utilized a broad range of rating measures, 94 percent of teachers received one of the top two ratings, and fewer than 1 percent were rated unsatisfactory. Many teachers did not receive feedback tied to their performance, and those who did often received feedback only once per year. This feedback typically was not accompanied by actionable steps to help teachers improve their instruction, and it was not used to determine personnel decisions, such as attaining tenure or receiving a raise. Among teachers who were surveyed in 2009, 73 percent said that their most recent evaluation did not identify any areas in which they needed to develop skills. And 63 percent of administrators said their district was not doing enough to identify, compensate, promote, and retain the most effective teachers.⁵

Enter Race to the Top, or RTTT, and the U.S. Department of Education's waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB. The RTTT initiative encouraged states to conduct annual teacher evaluations based on multiple measures of instructional performance, including student achievement results. Additionally, states received points for using multiple rating categories to classify teacher performance and for using evaluation results to drive professional development and inform decisions regarding teacher career advancement.⁶ Congress appropriated approximately \$5 billion for Race to the Top between 2009 and 2012, qualifying RTTT as the biggest competitive grant program ever administered by the Department of Education.⁷

In place since 2012, the Department of Education's NCLB waiver policy required all states that received a waiver to "develop, adopt, pilot, and implement, with the involvement of teachers and principals, teacher and principal evaluation and support systems."⁸ The department required these systems to be used for continuous improvement of instruction; meaningful differentiation of performance; regular evaluation of teachers and principals; provision of clear, timely, and useful feedback; and informed personnel decisions.⁹ States were to use multiple and valid

measures in determining educator performance levels, including data on student growth for all students as a significant factor.¹⁰ Subsequently, the department allowed states to postpone the use of student growth data based on state assessments to allow for a smooth transition to more rigorous assessments that aligned with Common Core State Standards.¹¹

NCLB waivers also required that these evaluation systems be used for more than providing feedback for teachers to improve their instruction. States were to use the evaluation system to review the quality of all staff of schools that were identified as within the bottom 5 percent of all schools in their state—based on achievement and lack of academic progress—and high schools with a graduation rate of less than 60 percent over three years. They were to retain only those staff whom the evaluation determined to be effective and those who had the ability to be successful in the turnaround effort. States that sought waivers were required to create evaluation systems designed to prevent ineffective teachers from transferring to low-performing schools. Additionally, these states were required to provide job-embedded, ongoing professional development informed by teacher evaluations, as well as support systems tied to teacher and student needs.¹²

As a result of this policy, more than two-thirds of states have made considerable changes to their teacher evaluation systems since 2009.¹³ Today, 27 states require annual evaluations for all teachers, while 45 states require annual evaluations for all new probationary teachers.¹⁴ In 2009, by contrast, only 15 states required all teachers to undergo an annual evaluation.¹⁵ Many states, including Delaware and Connecticut, have also adopted improved professional development systems and expanded the tools used for measuring instructional effectiveness.¹⁶ Nearly every state has revamped how classroom observations are conducted: In most states, trained evaluators observe teachers multiple times a year, and the evaluators use a research-based rubric to measure teacher effectiveness.¹⁷ In 2013, 41 states required or recommended that teachers be evaluated on multiple measures as a more complete and accurate reflection of performance, while more than half of all states used evaluation systems to target professional development opportunities for individual teachers.¹⁸

In addition to student achievement and classroom observations, many teacher evaluation systems now include student and parent surveys, lesson plan reviews, teacher self-reflections, and so-called student artifacts. Each of these components is designed to provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture of a teacher's performance in the classroom.¹⁹ In 2013, 47 states required or recommended

that stakeholders, including teachers, provide input into the designs of new evaluation systems.²⁰ Such new designs would help create systems of continuous improvement that support teachers and will hopefully continue regardless of federal policy or incentives.

Additionally, there has been a culture shift in education: Teachers and school leaders widely accept that student learning—however it is measured—is a core measure upon which school success ought to be judged. In the past five years, more states decided to consider student growth an important component of teacher evaluations; 17 states now include growth as the most critical criterion in evaluations, up from only four states in 2009.²¹ Another 18 states include growth measures as a “significant” criterion in teacher evaluations.²²

There is evidence that teacher evaluations can serve as critical levers for teacher growth if they are tied to support and professional development. In Washington, D.C., for example, teacher evaluations have helped improve teacher quality because they were paired with an intensive support and development network.²³ Connecticut’s System for Educator Evaluation and Development, or SEED, focuses on providing teachers with detailed, constructive feedback and custom, professional development opportunities, in addition to multiple chances to frequently discuss teaching practice with evaluators.²⁴ In Denver, the Framework for Effective Teaching helps teachers identify areas of strength and growth through feedback conversations, coaching cycles, and profession learning sessions, all before year-end evaluations.²⁵

New evaluation systems can focus on growth for all teachers, as all teachers can benefit from feedback that helps them improve their performance.²⁶

At the same time, these policies have also generated significant political backlash. One reason for this is that some states and districts have put in place new assessments in previously nontested—and even performance based—subjects, such as art and physical education, in order to meet the requirement that teacher evaluation ratings be informed by student growth.²⁷ In some communities, educators have come to see teacher evaluations as tools for discipline instead of growth, causing teachers to feel that they are not trusted by school districts and state legislators.²⁸ In addition, in many communities, most teachers still do not receive any specific feedback in their evaluations regarding how to improve their performance.²⁹

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—now called the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA—in December 2015, gives states complete autonomy over their teacher evaluation systems.³⁰ After state NCLB waivers expire in August 2016, states and districts will no longer be required to have teacher evaluation systems in place. Although Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program grants—formerly known as Teacher Incentive Fund grants—will continue to support states that implement performance-based compensation systems that are rooted in student achievement and multiple classroom observations, federal funds will not be tied to federal teacher evaluation requirements.³¹ ESSA also authorizes, but does not require, the use of federal funds to develop mechanisms for effectively recruiting and retaining teachers and to create “human capital management systems” for teachers, which a local education agency can use to make personnel decisions.³²

Over the next few years, states will be able to adapt their systems to work better within their unique contexts. As they do so, they may look at other states as models. Massachusetts’ system provides a framework that could prove illuminative to states.

The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework: The basics

Recognizing the limitations of Massachusetts' teacher evaluation system in 2009, policymakers and educators sought to create a novel framework that prioritizes teacher growth. The new evaluation framework was designed to promote continuous development, ensuring that educators have multiple opportunities and methods to maximize student learning.

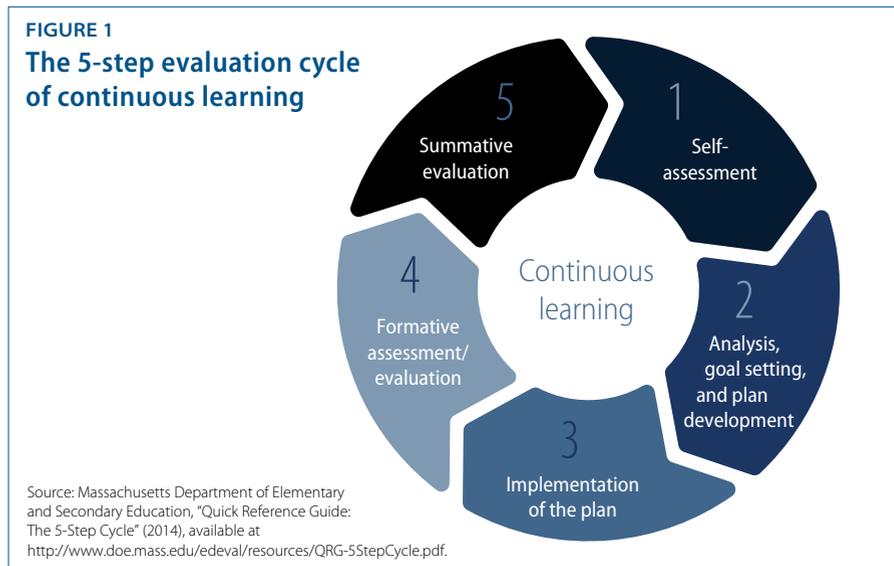
What was the state of educator evaluation in Massachusetts before 2010?

Prior to 2010, educators, administrators, and policymakers alike felt that Massachusetts' system of teacher evaluation could be improved. Notably, the previous district evaluation systems in Massachusetts:

- Relied heavily on a small number of formal, announced observations
- Often failed to differentiate between levels of effectiveness
- Rarely identified excellence
- Were inconsistent between districts
- Did not promote self-reflection or continuous improvement
- Were pro forma compliance exercises

In August of 2010, Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell Chester convened a 40-member task force to recommend a revised set of principles for educator evaluation. The Task Force on Educator Evaluation included a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including leadership of statewide organizations, active practitioners, higher education representatives, members of the business community, and local and national experts.³³

The task force concluded that educator evaluation practices in the commonwealth suffered from many of the shortcomings seen across the nation, including those listed above. The task force realized the need to create an evaluation framework that addressed these problems. It sought to create a framework that includes multiple measures of educator practice and honored the professional judgment of evaluators. The task force proposed the creation of an evaluation framework that includes three categories of evidence and a five-step evaluation cycle, which incorporates educator self-assessment.



Teacher testimonial

My evaluation experience has changed with the new framework. The new framework has been a more reflective process as compared to the previous evaluation system, which was more procedural—meaning: fill out the paperwork, answer the questions, and then put it in the drawer until it needs to be signed off.

The new system gives a teacher specific language to follow, explaining what “proficient” or “exemplary” means. Therefore, it has impacted

my practice, which ties to professional growth. As I go through the year I look at my practice and reflect on where I would fall on the rubric, asking myself, “What am I doing well and what do I need to work on?” I also look at planning, assessments, or communications as possible pieces of evidence or measurement of student learning. So, yes, it may go in a drawer for a time, but comes out much more often for reflection on practice as compared to the previous system.

—Mary Stickley, teacher and union leader, Mashpee, Massachusetts³⁴

How did Massachusetts successfully implement a new kind of Educator Evaluation Framework?

The Task Force on Educator Evaluation's recommendations were integral to the development of new educator evaluation regulations adopted by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2011, establishing the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework.³⁵ Importantly, the task force represented a broad coalition of stakeholders who jointly agreed on these recommendations. The Massachusetts Teachers Association, for example, played a vital and leading role in developing the framework and working with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, or ESE, and district superintendents to roll it out.

The regulations included a staggered implementation process. Districts that participated in Race to the Top were required to implement systems aligned to the new framework in the 2012-13 school year with at least half of their educators. In the 2013-14 school year, all remaining districts began implementation with at least half of their educators. By the 2014-15 school year, all Massachusetts educators were expected to be evaluated using systems aligned to the Framework. In addition, the regulations acknowledge the need for sufficient time to identify measures of student learning, growth, and achievement in nontested grades and subjects before districts would be required to incorporate student outcome data in the evaluation process.

What were the framework's initial goals?

The regulations, which apply to administrators and teachers throughout the state, were designed to bring consistency to all districts and to achieve five goals:

1. Promote growth and development among leaders and teachers
2. Prioritize student learning, using multiple measures of student growth and achievement
3. Recognize excellence in teaching and leading
4. Set a high bar for professional teacher status, or tenure
5. Shorten timelines for improvement

What are the primary components of the Massachusetts framework?

Massachusetts' new framework, designed over the course of several years, allows for more local control, distinguishes between educator practice and educator impact, and ensures that teacher development is an essential component of the evaluation process.

Local control

In Massachusetts, procedures for conducting performance evaluations are subject to collective bargaining. Furthermore, education leaders in Massachusetts recognized that overly prescriptive regulations often make the mistake of imposing a one-size-fits-all model on a set of unique districts. As a result, the regulations that establish the Educator Evaluation Framework provide the principles of evaluation as determined by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education but leave many details to the local level.

To support districts in developing locally responsive systems, the ESE developed a model system that is consistent with the regulations and, with it, collective bargaining agreement language. This language was adopted or adapted with minor changes by most districts.³⁶ In sum, the regulations promulgated by ESE represent the non-negotiables in every district, and ESE's model system and subsequent guidance serve as recommendations for local decisionmakers.

The Massachusetts framework is designed to allow educator performance assessments to be made with a large amount of input from both educators and evaluators with a great deal of understanding of the context in which each educator is operating. In order to assess an educator's performance, educators first conduct a self-assessment. The self-assessment is the first step of a 5-Step Cycle. During the first step, each educator also reviews data on his or her students' learning, as well as prior evaluations to assess his or her performance using a rubric anchored to the Standards and Indicators of Effective Practice described in the regulations. In step two, they use the result of their self-assessment to establish at least one student learning goal and one professional practice goal. Evaluators and educators discuss the self-assessment and proposed goals, working together to develop and implement an educator plan—step three—that fleshes out the next year or two of professional activities and supports that educators will use to meet their goals in steps four and five.³⁷

This experience is tailored to the individual needs of the educator. Only in cases in which an educator has been rated “Needs Improvement” or “Unsatisfactory” does the educator cede autonomy. In those instances, the evaluator plays a larger role in setting goals and developing the plan to target the areas that need improvement.³⁸

Educators also play a lead role on the parallel side of the framework: measuring student impact. In most districts, teams of educators develop or identify the measures they will use to assess student growth. At the end of each year, the educators and evaluators review student outcomes on the measures and reach an understanding of whether each educator’s students have demonstrated high, moderate, or low growth. After data have been collected from at least two measures in each of at least two years, the educators and evaluators discuss the body of evidence and the learning context in which the measures were administered, and the evaluators use their professional judgment to determine a rating of educator impact.³⁹

By keeping decision-making as local as possible, Massachusetts sought to afford each district—and, ultimately, each school—opportunities to leverage the evaluation process to meet individual educator needs aligned to broader school and district priorities.

Focus on growth

The Massachusetts framework is focused on supporting educator growth and development. Using multiple measures of both student learning and educator practice, educators and evaluators work together to understand educator performance and develop plans to support his or her continuous improvement. Teachers who earn effective or highly effective ratings determine their own growth plans. Evaluators are responsible for providing educators with feedback and targeted support throughout the process. According to Colleen Mucha, principal of West Brookfield Elementary, part of the Quaboag Regional School District:

*The self-assessment piece drives teachers and administrators to thoughtfully identify areas for growth within their own practice. This has really transformed the mindset of many educators because they are much more open to the idea of continuous learning and improvement for themselves, which has made them more receptive to feedback.*⁴⁰

The framework is not about compliance, conformity, or submitting the right forms with the right boxes checked. Instead, the evaluation framework is aimed at shifting the culture around teacher growth and development to encourage frank conversations about teacher practice. This shift in culture took time. Massachusetts districts benefitted from a staggered rollout, both in terms of the number of educators evaluated—50 percent of educators were evaluated in the first year, 100 percent thereafter—and the types of evidence collected—measures of student learning and student and staff feedback were phased in over several years—as well as a framework that respects professional judgment and local flexibility.

Trust and engagement

In order for an evaluation system to be useful in promoting educator growth and development, teachers need to trust the system; they need to believe, for example, that the evaluation is an accurate portrayal of their practice. The tenets of the Massachusetts framework reflect the input of a diverse set of stakeholders synthesized by the ESE staff. Massachusetts has sought to build a world-class educator evaluation framework with the field, and not by imposing a mandate on the field. All of the guidance materials and policy decisions related to educator evaluation—and educator effectiveness more broadly—are vetted by members of the field before they are finalized. Adding stakeholder voices to the mix took more work and more time, but the process earned credibility for the framework and buy-in from educators and teacher advocacy groups.⁴¹

Because principals are the lynchpin of the framework in their roles as both evaluators and evaluatees, ESE's Center for Educator Effectiveness established a Principal Advisory Cabinet, or PAC, in 2011 to provide feedback on the ESE model system as it was being developed.⁴² Teacher and superintendent advisory groups—known as TAC and SAC, respectively—followed soon after.⁴³ In the 2014-15 school year, these advisors provided input on a host of educator effectiveness policies and initiatives, ranging from authoring a paper on building a school culture that supports teacher leadership, to assisting in the development of video-based educator evaluation training materials, to informing ESE's decision to open up new flexibility for districts to develop systems for evaluating educator impact.

In July 2014, ESE published a set of model student and staff surveys for districts to consider using. These would fulfill the regulatory requirement that student feedback be used in educator evaluation and staff feedback in administrator evaluation. These surveys were developed by staff from ESE—including those with deep expertise in survey design and psychometrics—through a lengthy process.

They engaged extensively with stakeholders and consulted with more than 2,000 educators who helped identify the most critical content to include in the surveys. It was essential that all items:

- Were representative of the Standards and Indicators of Effective Practice they are designed to measure
- Allowed students or staff to give an informed response
- Provided information that educators can use to inform their practice
- Used grade-level appropriate language

In the 2014-15 school year, ESE selected four districts that have embraced educator evaluation as a key lever for district and school improvement and profiled their efforts on video. The resulting video series depicts how four peer districts approached the task of creating educator evaluation systems and showed how such systems benefitted their schools. The video series was designed to help districts that might be lagging or struggling to launch an educator evaluation system.⁴⁴ The video series includes clips aligned to the 5-Step Cycle and clips designed to explore district systems that must be in place to glean the most from the process.⁴⁵

Massachusetts found it useful to feature the work of districts that are finding success with implementation so other districts can learn from them. Connecting districts to each other builds more credibility and investment in the belief that this work is not only possible but also valuable.

Juxtaposition of practice and impact

One unique aspect of the Massachusetts framework is that educators receive feedback related to their practice separate from feedback related to their impact on student learning. The separation of these two ratings helps create a richer picture of educator effectiveness.

In many other states, by contrast, educators receive one rating that is calculated using a formula or algorithm that includes a score based on observations of their practice and another based on their students' performance on assessments.⁴⁶ Sometimes educators understand where the rating comes from, but other times, they are not clear. As a result, educators and evaluators often lose the ability to collaborate and have a conversation about why, for example, educators' observation

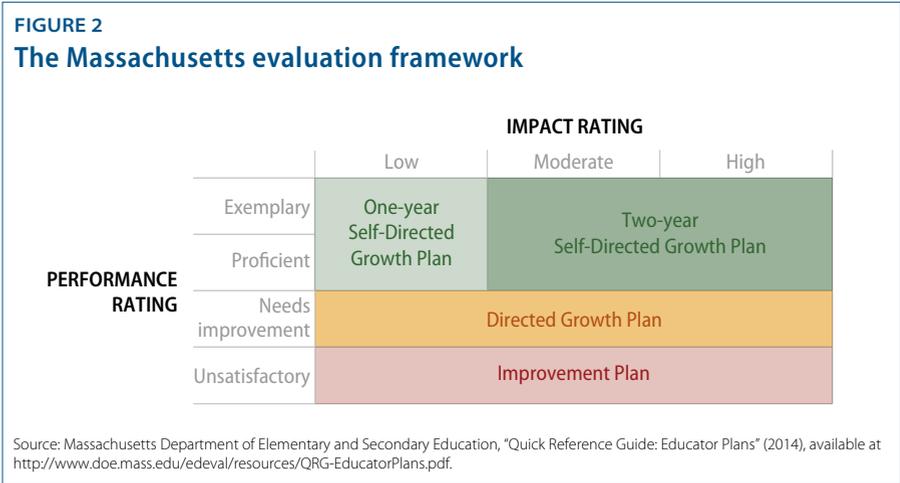
scores were high but their students were not meeting expected growth rates or why educators’ observation scores were low but their students still demonstrated high growth rates.⁴⁷ These approaches underscore the performance rating but may miss the opportunity to really grow and develop educator skill and knowledge.

The Massachusetts framework calls for every educator to receive two independent but linked ratings that focus on the critical intersection of educator practice and educator impact on student learning. Keeping the ratings separate offers educators and evaluators the chance to investigate any discrepancies between practice and impact. The summative performance rating measures practice and is anchored by the 5-Step Cycle that, unless educators are struggling, places them in a position to set the course for their own professional growth.⁴⁸

The Student Impact Rating measures educator impact on student learning and similarly invests educators in the process. Teachers have opportunities to contribute to the identification or development of multiple measures of student learning, growth, or achievement. Teachers are also included in the process of determining parameters for high, moderate, and low student growth that are used to inform the ratings.⁴⁹

The processes associated with both ratings are grounded in three main steps:

1. Educators and evaluators collect evidence
2. Evaluators analyze evidence from the educators
3. Evaluators apply their professional judgment to the body of evidence and determine a rating



While the two ratings are separate, they do intersect to determine the type and length of an educator’s plan. It is important to note that the summative performance rating must be based on evidence from multiple categories. It is also important to recognize that employment decisions are based on summative performance ratings. In other words: In the Massachusetts framework, an educator cannot be dismissed solely on the grounds of a low Student Impact Rating.⁵⁰

Because districts have latitude to identify the measures used to determine educator impact—even though measures of student growth do not exist in many grades and subjects—ESE urged districts not to link these ratings directly to employment decisions. ESE believes this decision has resulted in less teacher anxiety about the evaluation process than observed in many other states. That said, misconceptions about the consequences of the Student Impact Rating do persist, and the process of identifying and developing measures has been slower than anticipated, varied across districts, and unpopular with both teacher and administrator associations.

Teacher testimonial

Under the new evaluation system, I find that colleagues and I are constantly talking about the best practices described in the Teacher Evaluation Rubrics and finding ways to implement these practices on a consistent basis. Between unannounced observations and evidence collection, teachers are making a genuine effort to improve their practice. I feel these efforts will have both an immediate and long-term impact on student learning.

The evaluation system has me constantly analyzing my own practice, looking for ways that I can improve, grow, and develop as a teacher. Through self-evaluation and goal setting, I find there are lots of opportunities to recognize what works, doesn’t work, and what can be improved.

—Bryan Aries, Easton Middle School math and science teacher,
North Easton, Massachusetts⁵¹

What makes the Massachusetts framework different?

The Massachusetts framework represents an alternative to many existing evaluation systems across the country. The framework uses test scores as a check on the rating instead of a component of the rating. It also prioritizes educator growth and improvement, applies to all employees in licensed positions, and allows for district flexibility in determining the specifics of the evaluation process. Massachusetts strives to use evaluation ratings to promote educator learning and positive changes to schools, as opposed to using ratings as a punitive metric of educator performance.

Evaluator judgment: Front and center

The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework places evaluator judgment front and center—and educator growth and development is the primary focus. Educators and evaluators can juxtapose conclusions about educators’ practice with conclusions about their impact on student learning. As discussed in the previous section, within the Massachusetts framework, educators receive feedback related to their practice separate from feedback related to their impact on student learning. The ratings then intersect to determine the type and length of an educator’s plan.

Although other models of educator evaluation, such as the Robert Marzano and Charlotte Danielson frameworks, helped inform the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s model rubrics, the Massachusetts framework focuses even more heavily on teacher growth. Proven educators are trusted to design their own growth plans, with the support of their evaluator.

The framework is universal

The Massachusetts framework does not apply only to teachers; it is used by all employees in positions that require a license. School nurses, guidance counselors, psychologists, principals, curriculum leaders, and superintendents, among others, are participating in the same process. This broad application has largely spared

districts from an us verses them set of challenges and has limited the likelihood that teachers would find the framework punitive. Many districts deliberately included all administrators in the first wave of their rollout plans to model continuous improvement for their educators.

The task force initially observed that before the new regulations, there was little consistency in the expectations at the center of the evaluation process between districts. The Massachusetts framework addresses this problem by establishing four Standards and Indicators of Effective Teaching Practice and four Standards and Indicators of Effective Administrative Leadership Practice, which are all measured in the evaluation of teachers, other service providers, and administrators.⁵² To support these standards, ESE released a set of four model performance rubrics that have been almost universally adopted by districts.⁵³

The teacher and specialized instructional support personnel rubrics are aligned to the teaching practice standards, and the school-level administrator and superintendent rubrics to the administrative leadership practice standards. These common standards and rubrics have helped Massachusetts develop a shared language across the commonwealth to describe practice and support the idea that all employees are working toward a singular goal: improving student achievement.

ESE has received feedback from some professional organizations that believe specialized support personnel roles may be too particular to fall under one of the four model rubrics. However, ESE has maintained the perspective that developing additional role-specific rubrics would serve only to divide the field and foster isolation. Instead, ESE collaborated with these organizations to support their development of resources that help their members map their core responsibilities to the most appropriate model rubric.⁵⁴

One consequence of an educator evaluation system that is over-reliant on the use of state standardized assessment data is that noncore academic teachers are often an afterthought. Their impact on student learning is frequently measured using student learning objectives, which are typically less structured and objective than common measures, or with schoolwide value-added data that reflect the English/language arts and math outcomes of students whom the educator may not even teach. The Massachusetts framework, with its use of district-determined measures and the role of professional judgment in determining educator impact, mitigates this sidelining of noncore educators.

Principal testimonial

The framework has helped me to become a better administrator because it requires you stay focused on the improvement of teaching and learning. It can be overwhelming sometimes. There are so many demands on a school administrator. As an administrator, I need to model the process of continuous improvement in a concrete manner. I share my own goals with my staff, I share some of my reflections when I identify an area where I feel I can do better, and I try to seek feedback from my staff on initiatives to let them see that I too am a part of the continuous cycle of improvement.

At first, the framework is daunting. However, given time, patience, and a belief that we can always get better, it provides us with a roadmap to help stay on course and to keep the important things in our work—the important things.

—Beth Chamberland, principal of Bryn Mawr Elementary, Auburn, Massachusetts⁵⁵

Flexibility at the district level

The Massachusetts framework attempts to honor the professionalism of evaluators by ensuring that multiple evidentiary components are available while leaving summative judgments in evaluators' hands. ESE sets expectations about the types of information that should inform evaluations and defines the major process components. However, determining ratings and the process that must be used to make the ratings is left to local districts in consultation with teachers.

According to Heather Peske, the associate commissioner for educator effectiveness at ESE, the evaluation framework is:

*statewide versus “choose your own adventure” at the local level: we’re trying to strike the right balance. Our colleagues in the field have largely embraced the opportunity to build evaluation systems that meet the goals of the state framework, while staying true to local priorities and needs. They are also always willing to let us know when they believe we at ESE have taken a step too far and to work with us to find a way forward.*⁵⁶

Most other state evaluation systems have taken a centrally mandated route. The Massachusetts framework, by contrast, provides flexibility to districts to align local evaluation systems to existing structures and culture.

Focus on human capital

Rolling out the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework has challenged ESE to enter previously uncharted territory for a state agency. The creation and implementation of the Massachusetts Framework required staff with specialized skill sets. Because ESE has focused on developing novel strategies to ground evaluations in a professional growth framework, it sought creative employees with highly specialized data skills and who are capable of communicating technical details to a broad audience. ESE's internal human capital strategy has three components:

1. Recruit and retain high performers who are collaborative and enjoy creating new programs from scratch
2. Provide ample opportunity for team members to think, strategize, and design together
3. Unleash team member innovations by aligning staff with work that is of interest to them and granting significant autonomy in exchange for accountability

ESE staff members—who were valued for their presentation skills and willingness to take risks—created a host of tools, including examples, for using common measures in educator evaluation, and communicated these strategies to schools and school districts across the state.⁵⁷

Using the process to promote positive change

With Massachusetts districts now in either year three or year four of implementation, ESE is making a concerted effort to shift the lens to focus on how educator evaluation can promote positive change in schools and districts. For example, the process can help school and district leaders identify high-performers who are ideal for teacher leadership roles—such as mentors, coaches, and professional development providers. It can also be used to identify individual professional development needs and promote specific instructional priorities aligned to school and district goals.

In the 2014-15 school year, ESE launched a new approach to guidance development by establishing two Professional Learning Networks, or PLNs, around two key goals for educator evaluation: sustaining meaningful teacher leadership opportunities and supporting evaluators to deliver high-quality feedback to educators. These were topics about which districts told ESE they wanted more support and ideas. The PLNs were comprised of small groups of 8 to 10 districts that applied

to participate and were accepted based on their demonstrated commitment to the topic. They were expected to commit time and resources to building or refining a project related to the topic area. The PLNs engaged in a year-long effort with each other and ESE to explore the topics and test strategies in their local contexts.⁵⁸

ESE's job was to support and chronicle the work done by the PLNs. In May of 2015, both groups presented their work at ESE's annual spring conference; over the summer, ESE posted a suite of new resources for the field-at-large to benefit from their learning. Managing the PLNs was time-intensive—including monthly planning calls with each district, several face-to-face meetings of each group, and targeted assistance and site visits as needed—but the end results reflect guidance that is largely already field-tested, adding to its credibility. In 2015-16, ESE has added a PLN on Educational Equity that is testing some of the strategies articulated in the Massachusetts Equity Plan. Each state is required to identify a plan to eliminate the inequities in student access to excellent teachers and principals. Additionally, ESE is combining the themes from last year's PLNs into a single PLN on Distributed Leadership.⁵⁹

Another example of a project designed to illustrate how the educator evaluation process can be used to promote positive instructional shifts is the Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practice. In the 2014-15 school year, a report by Dr. Thomas Hehir and Associates found that, in Massachusetts, students with learning or communication disabilities who are educated full time in general education settings are nearly five times more likely to graduate high school in four years or fewer than are similar students in substantially separate placements.⁶⁰ Seizing on this finding, ESE staff recognized the potential of leveraging the educator evaluation process to promote inclusive practice in the areas of Universal Design for Learning and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports.⁶¹ ESE enlisted a cadre of teachers and administrators to write content, develop tools, and conduct mini field-tests, resulting in the guidebook. In the 2015-16 school year, ESE identified 125 educators who have committed to testing the Guidebook tools and provide feedback as ESE conducts a comprehensive review in the summer of 2016.⁶²

Proficient as a rigorous, high bar

From the very beginning, ESE communicated that “Proficient” represents a rigorous high bar and that “Exemplary” should be reserved for truly the highest performing educators. For example, the description of “Exemplary” in the model system states,

“A rating of Exemplary is reserved for performance on an Indicator or Standard that is of such a high level that it could serve as a model. Few educators are expected to earn Exemplary ratings on more than a handful of Indicators.”⁶³

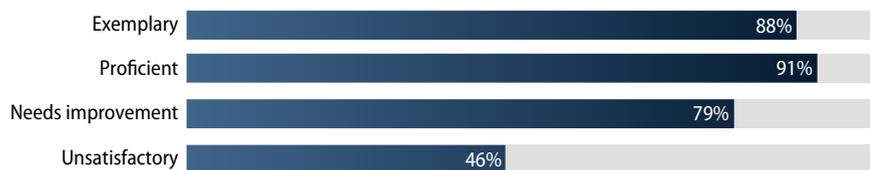
All educators are expected to meet a rigorous level of “Proficient” performance and the vast majority do. Of the 79,418 educators evaluated in the 2014-15 school year, only 9.6 percent were rated “Exemplary,” while 86 percent were rated “Proficient.” ESE is paying close attention to the rating distribution in order to understand whether the process enables districts to identify where teachers need support for improvement and to recognize and retain truly outstanding educators.⁶⁴

ESE has also studied the relationship between ratings and gender, race/ethnicity, new teacher status, and median student growth percentiles from state assessments. One of its primary findings from both the 2012-13 and 2014-15 school years was that teachers who were rated “Exemplary” in the summative performance rating were more likely than other teachers to have achieved high student academic growth, as measured by median student growth percentiles from state assessments. Teachers rated “Needs Improvement” or “Unsatisfactory” were more likely than other teachers to have produced low student academic growth.⁶⁵

In a related analysis, ESE found that teachers who were rated “Proficient” and “Exemplary” one year are much more likely to teach the following year than those rated “Needs Improvement” and “Unsatisfactory.”⁶⁶ This finding is evidence that the framework is delivering on the goal of shortening timelines for improvement and supports the notion that districts are identifying high performers and retaining them at high rates.

FIGURE 3

Teachers who received ratings in 2014: Were they still teaching in 2015?



Source: Authors received materials from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on January 26, 2016.

Principal testimonial

The current educator evaluation model differs from past models in its sustained effort on improving teacher effectiveness, teacher reflection, a focus on student learning, and constant growth. While in the past, professional conversations have occurred in pockets, the new educator evaluation model provides a structure and clear expectation for all staff to engage in professional conversation, reflection, and growth. The shift in culture has been powerful, and all educators—of all levels and titles—are now consistently expected to engage in a constant growth cycle.

The new educator evaluation system has had a large impact on educator growth and development. Educators have increased their collaboration around team goals—which has increased communication and collaboration in our school—and all educators are expected to focus on growing their own practice. This has become a very collaborative process, opening lines of communication between educator and evaluator, focusing on student learning, and reflecting about areas of student need and also professional need.

—Steve Guditus, principal of Manchester Essex Regional Middle School,
Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts⁶⁷

Lessons learned

Other states can take several lessons from Massachusetts' experience in creating the Framework. Many of the hurdles that Massachusetts faced could have been avoided with more strategic planning, as well as a greater emphasis on educator feedback and providing more local support during rollout.

1. Titles matter

The Framework would likely generate more support if it were called the Massachusetts Educator Growth and Development Framework, instead of singling out and incorporating the word evaluation in the title. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's messaging and guidance have been focused on using the process to support and coach educators to reflect and improve. The evaluation process results in dismissal for only a small minority of educators. Framing this work as evaluation has slowed educator buy-in and belied the framework's true intent: to ensure that all students have access to excellent educators—a feat most effectively accomplished by strengthening the existing workforce, rather than replacing it.

2. Set implementation dates in order to streamline negotiations

The Educator Evaluation Framework might have been more smoothly implemented if laws or regulations bounded the time for collective bargaining. Moreover, Massachusetts could have emphasized that parties that failed to reach an agreement by a certain date would be required to use the model system. Such requirements would have encouraged parties to adhere to clear timelines. Districts frequently report to ESE that implementation delays have been the result of slow or stalled negotiations—a problem that has hindered the rollout of the Student Impact Rating, in particular.

3. Regional training and support are important

ESE conducted regionally based Getting Started workshops, which were well-received but limited due to ESE's capacity.⁶⁸ These efforts might have been more effective if teams of educators—including both teachers and administrators—were targeted, rather than just administrative teams. A more robust regional support network to strengthen local dissemination of professional development and guidance could improve training and support efforts.

4. Evaluation and curriculum should be aligned

Expectations for teacher and administrator practice should be inextricably linked to expectations for curriculum and instruction. ESE could have done more to initially focus on this connection. As a result, teachers, administrators, and advocates have shared that ESE's work in these areas felt like a series of disparate initiatives that distracted from, rather than buoyed, each other. ESE has made strides to improve model initiative integration.

The Student Impact side of the framework relies heavily on district-determined measures. Identifying or developing Student Impact measures has proven to be a major undertaking in many districts—especially in traditionally nontested grades and subjects.⁶⁹ Districts that are still working to implement the framework would benefit from a stronger collection of example district-determined measures that are aligned to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

ESE continues to focus on strengthening the connections between educator evaluation and curriculum and instruction, both within the agency and at the district level. Given that the model performance rubrics assess elements that are applicable across content areas, ESE is working to develop resources that support educator growth in teaching the content of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. For example, ESE recently published “What to Look For”—a series of observation guides that are available for English/language arts, math, and science in grades K-8—which connects the Standards of Effective Practice assessed in educator evaluation with the content standards.⁷⁰

5. Do not overlook a communications strategy

Race to the Top funding allowed ESE to bring on a communications firm to help tailor communication to appropriate audiences, employ video messages, format guidance materials to make them more accessible, reduce jargon, and help the field understand how ESE's initiatives are connected.

Repeating consistent messages to varied audiences is essential. When rollout first began, ESE relied too much on targeting superintendents and expecting trickle-down communication. Such a strategy was not effective, and ESE has since adjusted course. For example, ESE introduced an Educator Evaluation newsletter in February 2013 that was initially targeted at district leaders.⁷¹ Over time, ESE has broadened the content to appeal to a more diverse audience and expanded topic areas to highlight connections between educator evaluation and other educator effectiveness or agency initiatives. ESE has also launched a new direct-to-teachers communication called, Teachers Top 3 from ESE.⁷² Most importantly, ESE has learned from its Teacher Advisory Cabinet about the importance of “leading with the why” when communicating with the field.⁷³ The purpose behind the project or policy is just as important as the approach.

6. Implement impartial feedback loops

ESE contracted with an external research team to study the Educator Evaluation Framework during the first three years of implementation.⁷⁴ The researchers conducted statewide surveys of teachers and administrators, ran focus groups and interviews, and produced case study reports on topics of interest. According to Carrie Conaway, the associate commissioner for planning and research at ESE, “Each year, we learned something new and adjusted course accordingly. For example, after the first year of the study, we learned that most educators understood the 5-Step Cycle, which meant the program office could focus on new areas of work in the second year.”⁷⁵ Most importantly, ESE was provided with regular research briefs that they used to understand successes and challenges in near real-time, as opposed to waiting for summative annual reports.⁷⁶ The research findings have been invaluable in setting strategic priorities and governing the development of new resources. ESE has communicated the findings to the field, such as using the findings in memos sent to superintendents.⁷⁷

Teacher testimonial

Throughout that past few years, evaluations have guided which professional developments I participate in for the school year. For example, one of the goals for my evaluation cycle, which began two years ago, was to identify and implement close reading strategies for fiction and informational texts in my eighth grade ELA classes. My district paid for me to attend a workshop on close reading strategies, and I now regularly utilize the specific strategies I learned from the workshop in order to increase students' comprehension of the texts we read in class.

—Terri Dsida, Norwell Middle School English language arts teacher,
Norwell, Massachusetts⁷⁸

Where do evaluations go from here?

There is more work to be done to fully implement the Massachusetts framework, particularly as it relates to helping districts leverage the evaluation process as a means to improve school quality—such as by retaining high performers by providing teacher leadership opportunities, targeting professional development offerings to specific educator needs, and better understanding the educator practices that produce the most student growth.

As the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act places more accountability for educator development and performance on states and phases out No Child Left Behind waivers, Massachusetts has already begun discussing the consequences of the new law.⁷⁹ For example, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is interested in taking a close look at the model performance rubrics.⁸⁰ Are they rigorous and useful tools for evaluating educator practice? Are certain indicators or elements of the rubrics more predictive of overall performance? Are there redundancies that can be eliminated? Do the descriptions of practice help evaluators make meaningful distinctions?

The summative performance rating has been met with stakeholder reactions that range from acceptance to excitement. The Student Impact Rating is a different story. ESE knew from the outset that the use of measures of student learning, growth, and achievement to determine a rating of educator impact would be challenging. Nevertheless, the department sees the Student Impact Rating as essential to an Educator Evaluation Framework that keeps student learning at the center of the process.⁸¹ By keeping the summative performance and Student Impact Ratings separate, Massachusetts has taken a balanced approach. The Student Impact Rating is a check on the system, ensuring that educators do not feel that test scores wholly determine their effectiveness. The framework keeps student growth as a critical goal, but the focus is on other indicators of instructional effectiveness that are more connected to practice.

The time and effort necessary to develop or identify measures—especially in traditionally nontested grades and subjects—has proven considerable in many districts. While many districts have robust assessments in place in English/language arts and math, the same is not true for subjects such as science, social studies, physical education, and the arts. The work underway to develop common measures for the Student Impact Rating is helping all educators improve their assessment literacy and fostering common expectations that educators collect, analyze, reflect, and act on student assessment data as part of their craft.

Data collection and feedback

In Massachusetts, most educator evaluation data are maintained locally at the district level. ESE collects very few data points from districts, which makes understanding the quality of implementation a challenge.⁸² Adjusting policy to collect more data will likely be met with resistance from the field.⁸³ ESE will have to determine how to collect better data about the quality of implementation, while maintaining support from stakeholders and not over-burdening districts. The research study described above, which provided ESE with a great deal of data about implementation over the first three years, was funded using Race to the Top dollars and ended when those funds were exhausted. ESE is still exploring ways to fill the data void that was created when the study ended.⁸⁴

ESE still must determine how districts can best distribute leadership responsibilities in order to ensure that educators receive relevant and meaningful feedback, while providing teacher leadership opportunities and balancing evaluator workload. ESE launched a Distributed Leadership Professional Learning Network in the 2015-16 school year in order to explore this question together with districts.

Teacher preparation and professional learning

ESE is continuing to strengthen the connections between educator evaluation, educator preparation, licensure, induction and mentoring, and professional development. ESE has endeavored to create a seamless educator-career continuum by connecting expectations for educator preparation to the language of the standards used in evaluation.⁸⁵ As part of a multifaceted effort to better prepare teacher candidates to meet the demands of 21st century classrooms, ESE first aligned the standards for preservice with the Standards of Effective Teaching Practice.⁸⁶ ESE is

also piloting a new performance assessment for teacher candidates that is aligned to the Educator Evaluation Framework and will become a graduation requirement for all candidates who attend Massachusetts preparation programs beginning in the 2016-17 school year.⁸⁷

Ensuring variability within teacher ratings

By the 2014-15 school year, all Massachusetts educators were evaluated using systems that were aligned to the framework. However, the effect of Massachusetts' Educator Evaluation Framework on improving student achievement has not yet been measured. The state is studying the results from 2014-15 for evidence of rating inflation. Ratings tell only part of the story. In addition, ESE plans to continue to collect information on the success of district implementation and how districts are ensuring that teachers are receiving meaningful feedback. This information will be gathered through the District Review Process conducted by ESE's Center for District and School Accountability, as well as a new statewide survey coordinated by the Office of Planning and Research.⁸⁸

Teacher testimonial

As a new teacher, the evaluation system has acted as a guide of what I should be doing in my classes. The key part of this evaluation for me is the reflection piece. It requires me to sit down and actually think about what I do to prepare for class and in the classroom. I think it has helped me identify areas of weakness and an opportunity to strengthen them.

—Alyssa Miller, Somerville High School physics and engineering teacher,
Somerville, Massachusetts⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework supports educator growth and development by providing significant autonomy to educators who have demonstrated consistently high performance and targeting support to those who have not. The framework allows educators, evaluators, and district leaders to juxtapose conclusions about educators' practice with conclusions about their effect on student learning in order to investigate discrepancies between educator actions and student outcomes.

Massachusetts chose to trust evaluators, who work closely with the educators, in order to determine the ratings. The state education board's role is to set the principles of evaluation, and the department's role is to provide support and guidance to local education agencies in order to determine details that will be effective in local contexts. The framework provides flexibility to districts to align the local evaluation system to existing structures and culture. Similarly, local education agencies should empower well-trained evaluators to identify the specific feedback and supports that educators need to improve, and evaluators should trust educators who have demonstrated high performance to set their own courses.

The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework is not a panacea for improving educator performance and student outcomes. Implementation has yielded as many questions as answers about how to provide educators with high-quality feedback at scale and with consistency, particularly as it relates to feedback about educators' impact on student learning. Massachusetts must continue to use the system to track and analyze data on educator improvement in order to ensure that the system is meeting its stated goal of driving continuous growth and improvement in teacher practice—especially given recent research findings that teachers plateau in their growth after time.⁹⁰ Rigorous evaluation and a willingness to course correct when needed will be essential to success.

About the authors

Catherine Brown is the Vice President of Education Policy at the Center for American Progress. Previously, Brown served as the vice president of policy at Teach for America and as a senior consultant for Leadership for Educational Equity. Prior to her role at Teach for America, Brown served as senior education policy advisor for the House Committee on Education and Labor—now the Committee on Education and the Workforce—where she advised Chairman George Miller (D-CA). In 2008, Brown served as the domestic policy advisor for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Earlier in her career, Brown directed Teach for America’s Early Childhood Education Initiative. She received her bachelor’s degree from Smith College and holds a master’s in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Lisette Partelow is the Director of Teacher Policy at the Center. Her previous experience includes teaching first grade in Washington, D.C., working as a senior legislative assistant for Rep. Dave Loebsack (D-IA), and working as a policy and advocacy associate at the Alliance for Excellent Education. She has also worked at the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor and the American Institutes for Research. Partelow has a master’s degree in public affairs from Princeton University and a master’s degree in elementary education from George Mason University. She received a bachelor’s degree from Connecticut College.

Annette Konoske-Graf is a Policy Analyst with the K-12 Education team at the Center. After studying political science and Spanish literature at the University of California, Berkeley, she moved to Miami, Florida, where she taught ninth- and 10th-grade literature in Little Haiti. Konoske-Graf graduated from Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism in May 2014 and from Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs, or SIPA, in May 2015.

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Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

