Evaluating Teachers More Strategically: Using Performance Results to Streamline Evaluation Systems

BY TAYLOR WHITE

TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEMS INTRODUCED by states and school systems in the past several years have focused attention on improving the performance of public school teachers, but they have been cost- and time-intensive, placing a significant burden on states’ and districts’ resources. In Tennessee, for example, trained evaluators conducted nearly 300,000 classroom observations during the 2011-2012 school year, prompting administrators to complain that “the amount of time spent to implement TEAM [the state’s new system] was unmanageable.”

Even among school leaders who did not feel overburdened by the number of hours spent observing classrooms, many felt the time had not been used efficiently, as the system treated all teachers with the same intensity, despite the fact that teachers’ skills and needs for support varied widely.

To address these concerns, Tennessee and other systems have replaced their one-size-fits-all evaluation approaches with more differentiated models, using past performance data to determine which teachers should be evaluated with more or less intensity in subsequent evaluation cycles and, in some cases, what that attention should include. This brief explores differentiation strategies in nine districts, two charter management organizations, and three states, Tennessee, Delaware, and Ohio. Interviews with system leaders and analyses of teacher evaluation policies reveal that these systems now vary the format or frequency of formal evaluation cycles, the format or frequency of classroom observations, or the type of observer conducting classroom observations, based on what is known about teachers’ needs, strengths, and goals.
Many of these school systems have embraced differentiation strategies as a way to conserve teacher evaluation resources or to deploy existing resources more efficiently. In some of the systems, however, differentiation strategies have required increased resources, as system leaders have introduced more frequent classroom observation or trained additional observers (e.g., peers, coaches). But even in those instances, officials claim differentiation strategies have helped make evaluation systems more attentive to teachers’ individual needs for supervision and support. And that, they say, is likely to lead to more effective teacher evaluation systems.

**Flexibility for Top Performers**

Some school systems have sought to shrink principals’ workloads by reducing the amount of time they spend evaluating top-performing teachers. In Ohio, for example, districts adopting the state’s model evaluation system can opt to evaluate Accomplished teachers bi-annually instead of annually, the requirement for teachers rated Proficient or below. Delaware’s state system allows for a similar approach, although, unlike in Ohio, top-performers are not removed entirely from the evaluation cycle; they receive a “student improvement score” and at least one observation annually, but a full performance evaluation is conducted only once every two years, thereby reducing evaluators’ administrative workloads.

Though these approaches can save time, critics worry that such policies may discourage top-performers by limiting their opportunities for feedback and professional growth. To ensure top-performers are still engaged in such opportunities, Burlington, VT; Providence, RI; and Pittsburgh, PA, allow their strongest teachers to complete alternative projects (action research, self-directed study, etc.) in lieu of traditional evaluations. In all three cases, teachers receive annual performance evaluations based on their progress toward specific project goals or outcomes, but the process is still generally less resource-intensive for school administrators, who draw heavily on evidence from teachers’ self-reflections and peers’ assessments of their progress to determine final evaluative ratings. For these three districts, alternative cycles are also a way to reward top-performers with greater autonomy to design and monitor their own professional growth.

**New Formats, Tailored Frequency**

Even in school systems that require traditional performance evaluations for all teachers annually, officials now vary how and how often they observe teachers based on past performance data.
Increasingly, districts are experimenting with different formats for classroom observation, recognizing that traditional, full-length observations may not be the best use of observers’ time, or the best way to gather data about teachers’ performance. Delaware, for example, now requires districts to use combinations of announced and unannounced classroom observations. Tenured teachers rated Highly Effective or Effective participate in one announced observation each year, while their lower-performing peers must undergo at least one additional unannounced observation, which provides evaluators a chance to “watch a teacher in action without providing prior notice.”

The RISE system in Pittsburgh and Tennessee’s TEAM system also use combinations of announced and unannounced observations, depending on a teacher’s past performance.

Several districts also use walkthroughs—informal check-in visits during which observers spend a brief amount of time in a teacher’s classroom focusing on a specific skill or behavior, rather than an entire domain of the observation rubric (as would occur during a full-length observation). This shortened format has become a popular way for observers to gather more frequent and more focused evidence of teacher practice, making it easier for them to provide regular, targeted feedback to teachers on specific areas of need—a task that’s difficult to do well when an observer must evaluate several areas of a teacher’s practice simultaneously.

The charter school network Achievement First, convinced these shortened observations are the key to driving improvement in teacher practice, has reduced the number of required formal observations to create more time for these shorter, growth-oriented conversations to occur—especially for teachers who need more frequent support. Many other early adopters also note that because walkthroughs are shorter and do not require careful scheduling (most are unannounced), they allow for more frequent interaction between teachers and their observers, a feature which helps build trust and comfort with the process.

Called by different names in different places (e.g., partials, rounds, etc.), versions of these narrowly focused, abbreviated observations have gained popularity in Denver, Providence, Pittsburgh, at the charter network DC Prep, and elsewhere. Though many school systems label these observations informal, it’s worth pointing out that informal does not always indicate that these observations are entirely disconnected from teachers’ formal performance evaluations. To the contrary, many districts take input from those who conduct informal observations into account in teachers’ formal evaluations, though how much weight they carry varies considerably (and is often not formally defined).

To take advantage of these new observation formats and to use observers’ time more strategically, districts and states have also rethought how often they observe teachers. In Tennessee, for example, the state board of education recently modified requirements for the
number of observations teachers will undergo under the state’s TEAM evaluation system, differentiating the frequency based on a teacher’s licensure status and his or her last overall evaluation score.

This change, driven by feedback from teachers and administrators after the first year of statewide TEAM implementation, is intended to allow evaluators to “spend more time with the teachers most in need of improvement, while reducing the amount of time spent with teachers whose student outcomes demonstrate strong performance.” Teachers in Tennessee now undergo one, two, three, or four full-length observations depending on their prior performance (a composite score of value-added measures and observation scores) and licensure status.

A similar system exists in Hillsborough County, FL, where observers conduct 11 observations of the district’s lowest performing teachers, but only three for its highest-performers. And, in Providence, a new Peer Assistance and Review program will provide at least 15 observations and coaching sessions to the district’s Ineffective or Developing teachers, in addition to the observation and support they receive through the district’s standard evaluation process.

Other school systems set a minimum number of formal observations, but allow building administrators to conduct additional observations—whether formal or informal—according to teachers’ demonstrated needs and the school’s available resources. In Jefferson County, CO, for example, teachers must be formally observed three times annually, but schools’ Instructional Leadership Teams can opt to conduct between four and ten additional observations based on their assessment of a teacher’s performance. Seattle, Denver, Providence, Burlington, Achievement First, DC Prep, and Pittsburgh encourage similar case-by-case differentiation.

New Sets of Eyes

To distribute the responsibility for classroom observations and other evaluation duties, many states and districts now extend observation responsibilities beyond administrators to include high-performing peers, coaches, and other instructional leaders in the evaluation process. Doing so not only reduces principal workloads, but can also provide specialized expertise in particular disciplines (e.g., content, grade-level, or ELL expertise). Using data from prior evaluations, school systems now deploy these observers more strategically, using different combinations of observers for teachers with different needs.

多くは現在、管理職者一人だけが観察の責任を負っているが、高いパフォーマンスを持つ同僚、コーチ、そして他の指導管理者を含む観察の責任を負っている他の教育リーダーを含む観察責任を引き受けることができるようになった。
New Haven mandates a similar combination system, relying on what the district calls “Third Party Validators” (TPVs) to conduct observations of teachers rated at the high or low extremes of the district’s scale by their supervisors; TPVs conduct three extra observations for teachers on track to receive Needs Improvement ratings and two for those projected to be rated Exemplary. By employing these trained external observers, New Haven validates the ‘extreme’ scores and introduces additional objectivity to the process—all without creating more work for principals and other instructional leaders.

More commonly, policy dictates a minimum number of observations teachers must receive, but provides flexibility for school leaders to determine who conducts those observations based on a teacher’s past performance and content-area (or grade-level). In Pittsburgh, for example, administrators and master teachers called Instructional Teacher Leader 2s (ITL2s) share caseloads of “high touch” teachers (pre-tenure and low performers) and “low touch” teachers (average and high-performers with tenure), with the ITL2s taking on more “low touch” cases. Similar discretionary differentiation can be found in Maricopa County, AZ; Jefferson County, Denver, and Providence. Ohio’s Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), which also gives school leaders this discretion, goes one step further, giving teachers with above average student growth scores the option to select their own “credentialed evaluator” for formal observations.

In some cases, alternative observers often receive extra compensation (stipends and/or release time) and intensive, on-going training in observation, evaluation, or coaching techniques. Some districts also use external contractors to observe teachers or to score videos of teaching. Though none of the school systems could provide Carnegie cost estimates, several reported the addition of alternative observers had been expensive, but, they believe, ultimately effective in providing more supervision and support for teachers.

Realistically, many districts do not have the capacity to build and maintain cadres of alternative evaluators, particularly given how many are struggling to provide sufficient training to principals and other traditional evaluators. And little is known about exactly how to select, train, and deploy these alternative evaluators most effectively or most efficiently. But given that the Gates Foundation’s MET project concluded that, “adding a second trained observer increases reliability significantly more than having the same observer score an additional lesson,” it seems likely that the use of multiple observers will become more common.

Though it is too soon to quantify the impact these differentiation strategies have had on teacher evaluation systems (most have been in place for less than three years), evidence from the education systems in this study suggests that they have helped districts deploy their resources more strategically. Even where system leaders have added new components (e.g., training for new types of observers) to their evaluation systems, they report that their investment in more adaptable evaluation systems has allowed them to better match teachers with the supervision and support they need.
## EVALUATING TEACHERS MORE STRATEGICALLY

### STATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delaware</th>
<th>Ohio</th>
<th>Tennessee</th>
<th>Burlington, VT</th>
<th>Denver, CO</th>
<th>Hillsborough County, FL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>131,029</td>
<td>1.87 million</td>
<td>934,000</td>
<td>3,362</td>
<td>78,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3,305</td>
<td>1,728</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>8,594</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>64,227</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>4,681</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### EVALUATION SYSTEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System or Framework Title</th>
<th>DPAS II</th>
<th>Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES)</th>
<th>TEAM</th>
<th>Differentiated Teacher Supervision and Evaluation System</th>
<th>LEAP</th>
<th>Empowering Effective Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Components of Final Score</td>
<td>Matrix of 5 Components: 4 related to classroom practice, 1 related to student improvement</td>
<td>50% Teacher Performance + 50% Student Performance</td>
<td>35% Student Growth + 15% Academic Achievement + 50% Observation</td>
<td>No Numerical Scores Provided. Qualitative feedback based on observation and conversations between teachers &amp; administrators</td>
<td>30% Observation + 10% Professionalism + 10% Student Perception Data + 50% Student Achievement Data</td>
<td>30% Principal Appraisal + 30% Peer/Mentor Appraisal + 40% Student Achievement Gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Number of Formal Observations Required Annually</td>
<td>1 to 3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 to 4</td>
<td>0 to 4</td>
<td>2 to 4</td>
<td>3 to 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness Levels</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHO CONDUCTS OBSERVATIONS?

| Administrators | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Alternative Observers (Peers, Mentors, Coaches, Third Party, etc.) | Yes | Yes | District discretion | Yes | Yes | Yes |

### BASED ON PRIOR EVALUATION RESULTS, DOES THE SYSTEM DIFFERENTIATE....

| Frequency or type of evaluation cycle? | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No |
| Frequency or type of mandatory classroom observations? | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Observer Type? | No | District discretion | District discretion | Yes | No | Yes |

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1. System data from NCES (2010-2011) or from CMO leadership.
2. Data in this table describes a pilot program in Jefferson County, CO. The pilot, funded by TIF, impacts the number of students, schools, and teachers in parenthesis.
3. The REIL project directed by the Maricopa County Education Service Agency includes six districts (Alhambra, Gila Bend, Isaac, Nadaburg, Phoenix Union, and Tolleson) in greater Phoenix, AZ.
4. Data for Providence, Rhode Island represents policies set by the Rhode Island Innovation Consortium, of which Providence is a member. Some of these policies have been provisionally approved but have not yet been enacted. For more information, see the profile for the district.
5. In Pittsburgh, high-performing teachers doing Supported Growth Projects in lieu of the formal RISE process are not observed formally while in a project year.
Tenured teachers in Providence who receive a Highly Effective Rating in their PPG&R domain can participate in the district’s Differentiated Model of evaluation which requires two informal observations, but no formal observation.

Seattle’s STAR program uses veteran teachers as mentors for novice teachers, but their observations only supplement those conducted by an administrators; they are not formal observations.

These districts set minimum requirements for annual formal evaluations but allow school-level leadership to conduct additional observations at their discretion. The frequency and format of these additional observations varies across districts.
ENDNOTES


2 This brief considers the model evaluation systems created by the state departments of education in Tennessee (TEAM) and Ohio, but recognizes that other district-specific systems are in place in those states. Delaware’s DPAS II’s system is mandatory for all districts.

3 Many districts also provide additional support for novice teachers, regardless of their evaluation results. Though these programs are promising strategies for improving practice and retaining teachers, this brief does not include such programs because they tend to differentiate based on experience rather than performance. Additionally, most are supportive, rather than evaluative in nature.

4 Accomplished and Proficient are rating categories used by the Ohio Department of Education. Here and throughout the brief, systems’ terminology will be used when describing rating categories.

5 Ohio’s state model allows for alternative evaluation formats for top-performers. It is not clear how many districts have chosen or will choose to introduce such formats.


7 Providence’s PAR program provides similarly intensive support to the district’s novice teachers and to veteran teachers new to the district. The program’s purpose is to provide support to improve teachers’ practice, rather than to provide more opportunities for evaluative observation. Seattle’s STAR program provides similarly intense, growth-oriented mentoring for novice teachers as well.

8 This policy applies only to the 20 schools participating in the Jefferson County Public Schools’ Teacher Incentive Fund Pilot project.


10 ITL2s cannot issue final formal evaluations of teachers, however, even if their observations are a part of that score. In Pittsburgh and many other school systems throughout the country, only administrators may issue summative ratings.

11 Teachers with average student growth scores can “have input” in selecting their evaluator; those with below average scores have no say and are assigned an evaluator.

12 Teachscape provided this service to the Measures of Effective Teaching project and serves as a clear example of how this might work. See McClellan et. al. (2012).

13 The Carnegie Foundation has developed an online cost calculator to help district employees and members of the K-12 community understand the different components of designing a district’s teacher evaluation system. For more information, please visit: http://commons.carnegiefoundation.org/what-we-are-learning/2013/carnegie-cost-calculator-a-tool-for-exploring-the-cost-of-educator-evaluation-systems/

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