

Educator Quality Study Group

Summary Paper

Introduction

This document represents the findings of a voluntary group of school board members, teachers, and building and central office administrators from Southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey school districts.

This group of educators met every other week for a four-month period to learn about the role of educator quality in school improvement and accountability. The members heard from a variety of experts and practitioners and shared their ideas, experiences, and concerns.

This paper does not reflect a consensus on this topic, but rather a collection of observations and perspectives that are meant to serve as the first step in a much larger dialogue about the future of our public school system.

Improving student learning requires the proliferation of best practices in classroom instruction. This means that school districts must focus on pedagogical leadership at all staff levels. Moreover, districts need to find ways to recruit and retain excellent teachers. It is important to remember that while some educators enter the profession at high skill levels, others are able to thrive only when given in-service opportunities for growth.

The Role of Evaluation

Teacher evaluation has traditionally been thought of as a mandate and a burden. Stories of teachers who went unevaluated for years are common. Few teachers are ever rated as unsatisfactory, and few districts are allowed by contract or custom to rate extraordinary teachers any differently from those who are satisfactory. One of this group's challenges was to discuss how evaluation could be used to actually improve teaching practice.

A differentiated evaluation scale is likely one prerequisite for a meaningful evaluation system. In such a system, rankings could include categories for teachers who need improvement but are still satisfactory and for teachers who have clearly demonstrated instructional excellence. Some of the districts represented in the study group and by the speakers have experimented in this area; many others have not. But even rethinking the labels we use for teachers is useless unless evaluation is credible and clear. Teachers and administrators must have a common understanding of what it means to be in any one category and how a teacher can take advantage of available resources to improve his or her skills and move from an undesirable ranking to an acceptable one.

This leads to a necessary discussion about the tools for evaluation. Is one classroom observation a year enough to constitute a meaningful evaluation? Are classroom observations, in general, enough – no matter how many there are? One district with members in the study group observes each teacher at least 15 times per year. Speakers who addressed the group participants

described some districts that do not even include classroom observation but instead include the collection of diverse data. Other systems are hybrids. Classroom observation has an important place in evaluation. The challenge is in finding ways to make observations effective and meaningful for both the principal and the teacher. This necessitates careful consideration of the tools we use for evaluation as well as the requirements for duration and frequency of visits.

One common theme from the presenters and heard frequently from the study group members was that at the very least, evaluation systems must go beyond a limited number of classroom observations if they are to be truly meaningful in helping improve practice.

Using Student Achievement Data

Many study group members believe that student achievement should always be used, and that it should be one of a number of measures in evaluation. Only by examining whether students learn is it possible to examine the outcomes related to teaching and to judge whether schools and educators are succeeding at doing their jobs. Employing assessment data requires that there be annual tests that are aligned with the curriculum and standards. Unless that is the case, achievement data will neither serve as an appropriate gauge of classroom activity nor offer teachers and administrators the opportunity to use data to examine instructional successes and failures.

Participants stressed that the value-added technique could offer the most meaningful and fair way to evaluate classroom activity using student achievement. Value-added tracks each student longitudinally, so that while there are high standards for all students, the expectation at the end of the year is different for a student who enters the year above grade level and one who enters the year below grade level. Teachers are therefore responsible for helping each child achieve one year worth or growth – regardless of the level at which the child enters the classroom. A value-added system can be extremely useful for diagnostic as well as evaluation purposes.

It is important to make explicit that these evaluation tools – certainly including student achievement – are applicable to both teachers *and* administrators. Evaluation systems should be aligned for all school system employees who have responsibilities for instructional excellence so that everyone is focused on the same district goals and measures of success.

Professional Development, Peer Review and Collaboration

Focusing on educator quality entails a lot more than an appropriate system of measuring educators' abilities and outcomes. Districts must provide the resources, opportunities and culture for teachers and administrators to improve and to succeed.

Professional development opportunities allow one of the clearest paths to improve practice. Linking staff development with individual educator evaluation is important because it would give districts the ability to target professional development in specific content areas to the educators who need them the most. In addition, such a system would provide a meaningful and reliable sense of who within the ranks may be most appropriate to lead professional development sessions or help other teachers.

Peer mentoring and review systems are proven methods of disseminating the best skills and building collaborative communities within school. Peer mentoring works by pairing new and career teachers so that novices gain not only a sense of what works in the classroom but are also able to receive crucial support during their first years in a district. In addition, mentoring has the potential to help experienced teachers who are in need of remediation. Teachers must feel that self-referral is acceptable within the educational culture for this to be possible. Is peer review a system of policing or of helping? Is it possible to do both without destroying the necessary level of trust?

Conclusions

Ensuring and improving educator quality is the responsibility of teachers, administrators and school boards – in short, everyone. Districts must fund and provide the appropriate resources and systems of evaluation. Teachers must take responsibility for their professional development needs. Unions therefore need to take an active role in their members' professional standing and in developing structures for evaluation and accountability. In addition, school-based administrators can only become instructional leaders when they are given the power to lead and the skills to do so.

Colleges that train teachers also have an important role. Education schools need to get potential teachers into the classroom earlier and provide more meaningful instruction on how to teach. Moreover, there is room for long-term collaborations between school districts and higher education so that professional development is continuous and job-embedded.

A number of additional themes or areas for further study were raised during the group's sessions:

- Trust is imperative in order for evaluation systems to work and in helping educators improve practice. The system itself and the leaders – at both the teacher and administrator levels – must have a great deal of credibility.
- Evaluation systems should use multiple measures to determine how well educators are doing. This could include classroom observation – when done on a regular basis and with a meaningful instrument – and should employ measures of student learning, preferably with a value-added analysis system.
- Professional development and collaboration are necessary in order for educators to succeed. Peer mentoring is one means of developing these relationships and resources in schools. Collaboration requires not just the professional opportunities to construct dialogues around student learning, but also the time in the day to do so.
- Compensation may serve as a means of rewarding excellence and spurring improvement. For that to be the case, novel compensation structures – such as bonuses related to student learning gains (Columbus, Ohio) or new pay systems linked to certain demonstrated skills or differentiated evaluation – must be developed credibly and collaboratively and build on intrinsic values.