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How Does Performance Management Affect Teacher Motivation?

Lessons from Year One of the Teacher Career Continuum at YES College Prep

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**Introduction**

Research has demonstrated that some teachers are dramatically more effective than others, and further, that these differences are among the most important schooling factors affecting student learning (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Less effective teachers are disproportionately concentrated in the neediest schools and districts, making students from low-income families less likely to be exposed to high quality instruction than their peers in higher-income communities (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Krei, 1998; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). To exacerbate matters, about half of all teachers leave the profession in the first five years, and these rates are nearly a third higher in urban districts (Ingersoll, 2001).

Despite this variation in teacher effectiveness, traditional performance management systems demonstrate little or no connection between teacher evaluation results and student learning gains (Peterson, 2000). Rather than rewarding excellence based on performance, two factors currently drive teacher pay raises in the vast majority of US districts: years of experience and the acquisition of education credentials (Podgursky & Springer, 2006). Unfortunately, research has demonstrated that high quality instruction is not strongly correlated with either of these observable teacher characteristics (Goe & Stickler, 2008; Hanushek, Kain, O’Brien, & Rivkin, 2005; Rivkin et al., 2005). While proponents of the single salary schedule contend that it continues to promote equity, reformers argue that not all teachers should be paid equally, given what we now know about
the significant variability in teacher effectiveness (Hanushek et al., 2005; Odden, 2008).

The U.S. Department of Education’s proposed guidelines for awarding grants from the Race to the Top Fund, directly challenge the current system. To make their applications competitive, states were required to develop systems for using student growth data - as one of multiple measures - to evaluate and reward highly effective teachers. These shifts in policy have resulted in a flurry of activity surrounding the development of new teacher performance management systems. In the past few years alone, over 30 states and dozens of districts have made changes to their policies, increasing the emphasis on student growth in teacher evaluation and ramping up the consequences of evaluation results (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2011).

Advocates of new teacher performance management systems contend that differentiating performance and aligning pay directly with outcomes will address the shortcomings of these existing systems by sending important messages about what the school system values and how educators must improve to meet new goals. Clear performance expectations and consequences will, in turn, motivate current teachers to change their behaviors (Odden & Wallace, 2007).

Unfortunately, the direct evaluation literature on these new systems is limited. Existing research has demonstrated a positive correlation between principal observation of teachers and student progress (Gallagher, 2004; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Kane & Staiger, 2012; Kimball, White, Milanowski, & Borman, 2004; Sartain, Stoelinga, & Brown, 2011), but the results of these new performance
management systems’ impact on student achievement has been more mixed (Glazerman & Seifullah, 2010; Podgursky & Springer, 2006; Springer et al., 2010). What is unclear is why certain changes may or may not be occurring, as these studies did not systematically explore how teacher motivation and behavior resulted in observed outcomes. Prior research on teachers’ attitudes demonstrates that their support for these types of reforms varies considerably depending on how the system is designed and implemented (Ballou & Podursky, 1993; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Goldhaber, 2009; Kelley, Heneman, & Milanowski, 2000). Though there is some research on motivational responses to accountability policies (Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Kelley et al, 2000), most studies of performance management systems do not take into consideration how individual and environmental characteristics affect teacher attitudes towards compensation reform and subsequently influence motivation (Goldhaber, DeArmond, & DeBurgomaster, 2007).

This analysis moves the body of research on performance management policies forward by examining teachers’ motivational responses during the early implementation of the YES Prep Teacher Continuum. In spring of 2010, YES Prep, a network of charter schools in Houston, Texas, began developing the Teacher Continuum with the explicit goal of transforming teacher career pathways and better aligning compensation to evaluation. Using data from interviews and focus groups, I draw on expectancy theory to discuss (a) teachers’ perceptions of whether their motivation level changed as a result of the new policy, and (b) how individual and organizational characteristics moderated these responses. Results
from this analysis suggest that the Teacher Continuum focused teachers on goals they valued, and, for the most part, believed they could achieve. Findings also suggested that individual characteristics (e.g., experience, effectiveness, motivation) and specific organizational conditions (e.g., connection between feedback and support, time, trust) influenced teachers’ motivational responses.

**Perspectives on Teacher Performance Evaluation**

In an era of high stakes accountability, policymakers face intensified pressure to improve test results, and a growing body of research evidence has demonstrated that teacher effects can have a substantial impact on student progress (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2008; Rockoff, 2004). Though the United States has a long history of efforts to measure teacher quality, most existing evaluation systems do not meaningfully differentiate performance or reward excellence (Peterson, 2000). Indeed, in *The Widget Effect*, the New Teacher Project researchers discovered that more than 99% of teachers in examined districts were rated satisfactory and that this tendency fostered an environment where teachers came to be treated as interchangeable parts (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009).

Competition among states to win Race to the Top funds has reinvigorated conversations around teacher quality issues, and an increasing number of states and districts are in the process of developing new initiatives. The fundamental aim of these new systems is to provide a mechanism for differentiating teacher effectiveness for accountability purposes, while simultaneously driving improvements in instructional practice. To accomplish this goal, advocates have
called for a balanced approach, using multiple sources of data to gauge teacher effectiveness and recognize outstanding performance (Aspen Institute, 2011; Heneman & Milanowski, 2004; Odden, 2004).

Designing these new performance management systems is at the heart of current education reform efforts; yet, surprisingly little information exists about how these new approaches work in practice. Much of the existing research focuses on the validation of various performance measures and their suitability for use in high-stakes accountability systems (Baker et al., 2010; Glazerman et al., 2010; Kupermintz, 2003) but the literature on these systems’ impact on student achievement is considerably more limited. Unfortunately, to complicate matters, the evaluations that do exist reveal mixed results. In their 2006 review, Podgursky and Springer reported on rigorously conducted studies employing a treatment and control design and found that in most instances, performance incentives were associated with increased student achievement. To the contrary, the first scientific study of performance pay initiatives ever conducted in the United States (of the Project on Incentives in Teaching - POINT - experiment in Nashville) found that teacher performance pay alone did not raise student test scores. The only effect was observed in fifth graders taught by teachers who received bonuses, but the gains in student achievement did not persist into the subsequent year (Springer et al., 2010).

Given the many ways programs could be designed and implemented, simply knowing whether new performance management systems have an impact on student outcomes does not provide policymakers with the information necessary to
craft sound initiatives. In fact, accountability policies have been found to result in both positive and negative teacher behavioral responses depending on a range of factors (Hamilton, 2011). To truly understand the impact of new performance management systems, we cannot simply examine their ultimate effect on student achievement; rather, we must simultaneously investigate how new policies impact teacher motivation and how this impact is moderated by specific individual and organizational factors.

**A New Theoretical Lens for Evaluating Impact: Teacher Motivation**

To frame this analysis of teacher motivation, I draw on expectancy theory, which contends that individual performance in an organization is a function of ability and motivation (Lawler, 1983; Vroom, 1964). Motivation, or the process governing the choices individuals make, is influenced by the value of certain outcomes and the perceived relationship between actions and outcomes. In other words, how individuals respond to performance incentives can best be understood in terms of two sources of motivation – valence – the desirability of a particular outcome – and expectancy – a person’s belief that with increased effort, they can achieve that outcome (Lawler, 1983; Vroom, 1964).

Outcomes are valent when they are aligned with individual values and experiences (Vroom, 1964). When it comes to compensation, psychologists have discovered that individuals are not typically concerned with the amount of a reward but rather, with its perceived fairness. In other words, a reward’s valence is a result of how much is received compared to how much an individual feels should be
received. Presuming they perceive the rewards to be fair, individuals will likely increase effort toward actions they believe will be rewarded (Lawler, 1983).

Whether an individual is motivated to act will ultimately be a function of the valence of an outcome combined with the expectancy that it can be attained. Expectancy can best be understood as the perceived probability of successful performance given increased effort. Individuals’ motivation to perform effectively must be consistent with their conception of their own abilities. Regardless of the valence of particular outcomes, individuals will not be motivated to work toward a level of performance they do not believe they can achieve (Lawler, 1983; Vroom, 1964). Much like with students, teachers’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy mediate their effort level. Indeed, efficacy, though less tangible than other behaviors, has been shown to be an important predictor of effective instruction (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1989; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

Even if individuals are motivated to act, expectancy theory posits that they will not increase effort unless they believe that improved performance will result in valued outcomes. In other words, to improve performance, incentive systems will need to motivate teachers to achieve specific performance outcomes, translate that motivation into increased effort, and finally ensure that teachers have the necessary capacity to implement the desired changes. Known as the instrumentality principle, this means that individuals need to trust that outcomes are probable and that rewards will be received in a timely and predictable fashion (Lawler, 1983).
Expectancy theory does not posit that effort alone will lead to improvements in performance, but rather, that performance is ultimately a function of both motivation and ability. To possess “ability,” often referred to as capacity, individuals need both the knowledge of how to improve and the necessary skill to implement changes in behavior based on this knowledge (Lawler, 1983).

Figure 1. Framework for Understanding Teacher Motivation

In addition to using expectancy theory to understand teacher motivation in response to new performance management systems, this study builds on previous literature on teachers’ motivational responses to accountability policies. Though there is some evidence that teachers are motivated by accountability policies (Kelley, Heneman, & Milanowski, 2002), other research reveals more mixed results (Hamilton, 2011; Mintrop, 2003) depending in part on the alignment between teacher goals and the policy (Leithwood, Steinbach, & Jantzi, 2002) and teachers’ expectancies of their own capacity (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Finnigan & Gross, 2007). If teachers do not think the targets are worthwhile and fair (valence) or that they have the skills necessary to meet group targets (expectancy), they will not change their behavior accordingly.
Valence. Historically, scholars have documented that performance pay policies encounter intense resistance from some teachers, most notably the teachers’ unions (Murnane & Cohen, 1986), but it is unclear if this dislike has been shared by the broader teacher corps. In 2003, the Public Agenda Foundation conducted a nationally representative survey and found that only 47 percent of teachers supported financially rewarding those whose students made more academic progress, and further, many teachers in focus groups expressed a “visceral reaction” to the idea of linking pay with performance (Farkas et al., 2003). In a study surveying a stratified random sample of teachers in Washington State, Goldhaber, DeArmond, and DeBurgomaster (2007) reached similar conclusions, as only 17 percent of those surveyed were in favor of incentive pay based on test-scores gain.

To the contrary, in their first year evaluation of the Texas Educator Excellence Grant (TEEG), Springer et al. found that 71 percent of teachers strongly desired to earn a TEEG bonus and 59.9 percent agreed that the TEEG program did a good job of identifying effective teachers. Additionally, more than 90 percent of the respondents thought increasing student test scores should be of either moderate or high importance in teacher evaluation, making it the highest ranked measure out of 17 other indicators (2008).

Expectancy. To increase motivation, expectancy theory posits that teachers must not only value the reward but also see a link between their effort and increased performance. Though a substantial body of research has examined teacher self-efficacy more broadly (Bandura, 1977; Kane & Staiger, 2008;
Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), few studies have systematically explored teacher expectancy related to new performance management systems. In one such study evaluating the impact of school-based incentives on teacher motivation in Kentucky and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Kelley, Heneman, and Milanowski (2000), observed that individual teachers’ expectancy was weaker than initially anticipated. Through surveys and individual interviews, researchers discovered that levels of individual expectancy were influenced by a number of enabling conditions – principal leadership, professional community, feedback of assessment results, perceptions of fairness, and trust that the system would actually pay out the reward (Kelley et al., 2000). However, they do not examine how various enabling conditions interact with one another to shape teacher expectancy or posit which conditions were most important in improving teacher motivation.

The survey research conducted on individual incentive programs provides some information on teacher expectancy; however, this data is limited in scope. In the evaluation of the first year of the TEEG program, the majority of teachers (85 percent) reported that they were already working as hard as they could before TEEG implementation, and only 25 percent reported that they changed their behaviors as a result of the program (Springer et al., 2008). Though this study provides evidence that teachers believe they are already working as hard as they can, it does not explore whether the presence of certain enabling conditions – such as strong leadership or a collegial environment – altered teachers’ level of expectancy. Understanding teacher expectancy as it relates to performance management policies is a complex endeavor. Current research provides some
indication that teacher expectancy is influenced by enabling conditions. However, we still know very little about which enabling conditions have the greatest impact on motivation in the context of individual performance pay systems.

Researchers need to move beyond exploring how the general pool of teachers feels about performance management systems and begin developing an understanding of how various policies work with subgroups of teachers in different types of contexts. Systematic analysis of teachers’ attitudes shows that their support depends on how the system is designed, as well as on specific teacher characteristics and other contextual factors (Ballou & Podursky, 1993; Goldhaber et al., 2007; Goldhaber, 2009). Unfortunately, most studies do not take into consideration how individual and organizational characteristics affect teacher attitudes towards performance management systems and subsequently influence motivation (Goldhaber et al., 2007). Data is lacking on how teacher motivation is influenced by certain enablers and which of these enablers are most important for policy makers to consider when designing initiatives in specific contexts.

**Research Design**

The current investigation responds to the limitations of prior research by examining the impact of a new performance management system on teacher motivation in a sample of teachers at YES Prep Schools. Specifically, I address the following research questions:

- What impact does the implementation of a new performance management system have on YES teachers’ motivation?
• How does this impact vary depending on certain individual characteristics (e.g., experience, effectiveness level) and organizational conditions (e.g., quality of leadership, working conditions) characteristics?

**Sample**

YES Prep began in 1995 as a district charter school program called "Project YES" in Houston's East End community. In 1998, YES Prep expanded to serve students in grades 6th-12th and became a state charter school. Over the last twelve years, YES Prep has grown into a charter school system that serves 5,400 students at ten schools.

YES Prep is committed to ensuring that every student has highly effective teachers so that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to complete college. These efforts began with the development of *Teaching Excellence*, an intensive training model for supporting new teacher development. To complement these efforts, according to YES Prep Leadership, the selection model has been consistently refined to screen for candidates that demonstrate the behavioral strengths and technical skills necessary to successfully lead a YES Prep classroom.

In the 2010-2011 school year, YES Prep had 261 teachers teaching across their ten campuses. The average age of teachers was 25.8 years, which not surprisingly meant that the average years of teaching experience was low, with 1.89 years overall and 1.28 years at YES Prep. 64.6% of the teachers were white, 9.2% African-American, 15.2% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, and .8% identified as Other. The turnover rate of teachers at YES Prep was approximately 28%. As YES continues to grow, retaining high-quality talent has become an increasingly important organizational priority.
In spring of 2010, YES Prep began developing the Teacher Continuum to transform teacher career pathways and better align compensation and progression to the YES culture of high performance. The Continuum aims to create a system for educators that encourages professional growth over time and creates new pathways for leadership. By better aligning teacher evaluation with support and compensation, the goal is to improve the quality of teaching and increase the annual retention of high-performing teachers.

To ensure broad stakeholder investment, a steering committee composed of home office staff, board members, administrators and teachers (one elected representative per campus) was developed to guide the Continuum’s initial design process. In addition to the steering committee, working groups composed of teachers and administrators provided recommendations in four key areas – (1) gatewaysing teachers, (2) financial sustainability, (3) student achievement, and (4) professional learning models. The outcome, piloted in spring of 2011, was an articulated progression that was comprised of four levels: Novice, Developing, Practiced, and Advanced (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The YES Prep Teacher Continuum
Teachers who met or exceeded performance expectations at each level (see Figure 3) for a specified number of years were eligible to be promoted to the next level and receive additional compensation.
Figure 3: Performance Measures Determining Advancement Along the YES Prep Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuum Equivalent: Met Expectations For...</th>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Practiced</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Excellence Rubric Thresholds</strong></td>
<td>Data will be examined in the early spring of the school year and reassessed in May with completion of Teaching Excellence</td>
<td>Data will be examined in the early spring of the school year</td>
<td>Data will be examined in the early spring of the school year</td>
<td>Data will be examined in the early spring of the school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Culture and Management</td>
<td>Earned 12.5 points or higher in this domain. Even one indicator at a 1 or a 1.5 would cause someone to remain at this level.</td>
<td>Earned at least 15 points in this domain with no more than one indicator below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned at least 17.5 points in this domain with no indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned at least 18.5 points in this domain with no indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Planning and Delivery</td>
<td>Earned 14 points or higher in this domain (excluding Assessment and Long Term Planning). Even one indicator at a 1 or a 1.5 would cause someone to remain at this level.</td>
<td>Earned at least 42 points in this domain with no more than three indicators below a 2.5 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned at least 46 points in this domain with no indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned at least 50 points in this domain with no indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and Responsibilities</td>
<td>Earned 23 points or higher in this domain. No more than 4 indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned 25 points or higher in this domain. No more than 2 indicators below a 3 regardless of total points.</td>
<td>Earned 31.5 points or higher in this domain. No indicator below a 3.</td>
<td>Earned 32.5 points or higher in this domain. No indicator below a 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Achievement Data (for SY 11-12)</td>
<td>If rated “ineffective”, would remain at this level. In all other cases, promoted to the next level.</td>
<td>Rated as “effective” for 2 years.</td>
<td>Rated as “highly effective” for 2 years.</td>
<td>Continued rating as “highly effective”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Comments</td>
<td>Successful completion of Teaching Excellence Program required, including certification.</td>
<td>Recommendation of School Director required</td>
<td>Recommendation of School Director required</td>
<td>Recommendation of School Director required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedures and Measures**

This analysis incorporates data collected from YES Prep teachers and school leaders during two main phases: design of the Continuum (August 2010 to January 2011) and early implementation (May 2011 to June 2011). Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with administrative and instructional staff at each of the eight YES Prep schools, this study investigates how the Teacher Continuum affected teacher motivational responses. In the design phase, teachers were
purposively selected for participation in focus groups to represent a subset of experience and effectiveness levels, subject areas, and campuses. To gather information on motivational responses, I probed administrators and teachers on their perceptions of different performance measures, as well as how motivating they found certain types of incentives. In total, 26 teachers and 10 administrators from the eight schools participated in a total of four focus groups. This data was accompanied by data collected from teacher interviews. Each of the eight school leaders was asked to identify two of their highest-performing teachers and eleven of these sixteen teachers participated in interviews. 23 teachers representing a range of experience levels and subject areas across campuses were selected by principals to be interviewed. In total, 34 teachers and eight administrative staff members from the eight schools participated in a total of 42 interviews.

The interviews and focus groups from both phases were taped and transcripts were coded to identify references to teacher perceptions and attitudes toward the performance management system. The coding process was iterative and involved both codes that were derived from the theoretical framework and those that emerged from the data analysis. These qualitative data offer rich descriptions of teachers’ view of the performance management system. Although they do not warrant generalizations to other populations, they help build our understanding of the theory of action undergirding these types of performance management policies.

Results
My analysis begins by examining the underlying motivation of teachers in the YES schools. Specifically, I investigate the valence teachers place on the performance targets, as well as their expectancy that their students can meet them. As motivational theory posits, if teachers do not think the goal they are working towards is valuable or that they can help students master the necessary skills, it is unlikely that they will change their practice in response to new policies.

To understand how the Teacher Continuum impacted the motivation of teachers, teachers were asked whether they felt certain metrics (e.g., student growth data, principal observations) were fair and meaningful gauges of performance (teachers’ valence) and whether the Continuum would provide them with the skills they needed to improve performance (teachers’ expectancy).

**Valence**

Results indicate that teachers valued measures they found to be clearly defined and meaningful reflections of practice. In the design phase, teachers reported being conflicted about the use of certain measures for high-stakes purposes and worried whether the Continuum would accurately capture their performance. Most notably, many had mixed feelings about the use of student growth data. Though all teachers believed student achievement was an important and worthy goal, they raised concerns about whether focusing on any one measure would lead teachers to narrow the curriculum. One such teacher shared the following: “though I think the move towards common assessments for our district has been a very good thing, I feel like there’s almost this push to teach towards
that assessment and really teach to that test.” She later indicated that tying these results to pay would only exacerbate her concern.

Across our sample we found that most teachers felt the rubric provided a comprehensive picture of their performance. Initially, however, there was concern among some teachers as to whether increasing the stakes attached to observation results would discourage teacher creativity and risk-taking behavior. One teacher shared that this was a concern she had discussed with her colleague: “I was talking to one teacher who is really creative but he felt like he couldn’t take any risks in his teaching because they might come in and score him low at a time when he took a risk.”

However, these concerns did not again surface in interviews conducted during the early implementation phase after teachers had been placed along the Continuum (though it is important to note that student growth did not end up being included as a performance measure in the 2010-2011 school year). Instead, teachers consistently reported that performance metrics were “fair,” “clearly defined,” and “comprehensive.” As one teacher shared, streamlined communication resulted in clear expectations for performance:

I think they (administration) were just very clear about the expectation of what requirements you’d have to meet to be placed at a certain level. Just knowing that, knowing how long I’d been here, obviously having an idea of my scores, I knew exactly where I would be. There wasn’t a lot of guessing.

This clarity allowed teachers to assess where they fell along the Continuum and set goals for their own improvement. One such teacher reported how this translated into motivation, “I don’t want to be developing, I want to be practiced. That kind of
mindset is obviously motivating me to get better. And the continuum shows me exactly where I need to improve.”

Although most teachers felt motivated by the Continuum, the nature of their motivational responses varied. Some teachers appreciated the monetary reward associated with increased levels of performance. However, many teachers reported that it was not the money itself, but rather, the recognition for their hard work, that was the source of their increased motivation. One teacher emphasized the importance of this validation: “What’s so beautiful about the continuum is that it rewards me for all the hard work that I’ve done and all the results that I’ve seen. So I feel really validated as an employee and that’s what matters most.”

Virtually all teachers shared that while the Continuum was a motivating factor, to sustain their performance levels over time, monetary incentives would have to be coupled with other forms of incentives designed to increase the sustainability of the role. As one teacher described:

My work life balance is non-existent. Work is all I have time for. I don’t currently have a life. I had one before as a teacher but since working at YES I just haven’t been able to reestablish that. It’s just going to get to the point where I just physically cannot maintain this job and really do anything else. So for me it’s very much about workload. I don’t need more compensation, I need more time.

The most commonly mentioned incentives associated with sustainability were reduced workload and more flexibility over professional life – e.g., choice in classes/professional development, flex hours.

*Expectancy*
Across the sample, most teachers expected they could advance along the Continuum through enhanced effort. However, as one teacher describes, this effort would need to be significant:

I think it’s tough but I feel like that makes me feel a lot better. It should be hard to get to even practiced. I think prior to this I wasn’t totally motivated by just the IER (rubric). It’s like I kind of always knew I was going to be at a certain level and I knew what I needed to improve in, but just that piece of paper didn’t really motivate me a whole lot, but I feel like this system where you have to show growth, even if you’re one of the highest levels, I feel like that’s very motivating. It will be challenging for sure but I just think I have a better sense of direction for where I need to grow as a teacher.

Teachers attributed this high level of expectancy to the clarity of expectations embedded in the Continuum. Throughout the year, the district leadership kept an open line of communication with teachers by offering consistent email updates and in-person trainings from both central office and school administration. As one teacher described: “they (the administration) were very clear about the expectation of what requirements you’d have to meet to be placed at a certain level.” Consequently, most teachers remarked that on the day of the conference, there were “no surprises” and that the conferences to discuss placement along the continuum were straightforward and efficient.

Variation in Responses: The Impact of Individual and Organizational Characteristics

Individual Characteristics. Though the above findings were consistently shared in focus groups and interviews, it is important to note several variations across subgroups of teachers. Most notably, the level of teacher expectancy varied based on teachers’ years of experience. Though newer teachers expressed feeling
supported in their work, they had questions about their capacity to reach higher levels of the Continuum. One new teacher shared,

You hear at YES that we want everyone to be at proficient, it’s hard to be at proficient, it’s really hard to be at mastery... it was sort of like if it’s so hard to hit these indicators, then how in the heck am I going to continue.

Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers rated higher on the Continuum placed greater stake in the quality of the performance metrics. Conversely, teachers who received lower scores were more likely to identify other behaviors they felt were not captured in their ratings. One teacher in particular recounted all the extra responsibilities she took on – e.g., additional courses, coaching, after school tutorials: “I knew how hard I worked, I think that’s when I really started to think about all the things I do. I’m good at a lot, it’s just that’s not reflective on my scores on the Continuum.” This was particularly a concern for teachers who worked in non-traditional subjects, where the instructional rubric was not applicable. These “elective” or “non-core” teachers expressed that performance expectations were not always aligned to their work, leading them to feel as though evaluation was often trying to get them to conform to standards which were not an accurate reflection of their level of performance.

When asked whether the Continuum would be a strong recruiting tool, many teachers identified that it would be, but only for a certain type of person. Specifically, they believed this new system would appeal to those teachers who set high expectations for their students and were incredibly persistent in reaching them. As one teacher shared, “inherent in the Continuum, you’re going to have to
work extremely hard and there is no way around that. It’s definitely not going to be for everyone."

**Organizational Conditions.** Teacher valence and expectancy across campuses was also influenced by a variety of organizational conditions - the connection between feedback and support (which varied across schools), perceived time to devote to improvement, and the level of trust in leadership. Across the sample, most teachers felt the rubric provided a very clear indication of performance against expectations. One teacher shared,

People really do the observations and often. They don’t just say they did and mark stuff down. So that rubric is used and it’s pretty transparent. I know what’s on the rubric. They know what’s on the rubric. And I feel like if I was ever unclear about what does this look like, there’s an answer to that question and all I need to do is ask.

Though most teachers shared that specificity of feedback allowed for improvement, several reported lacking a well-defined path to bringing about that change. Teachers who did not feel feedback led to clear next steps also reported feeling less motivated by the Continuum. One such teacher shared:

There was never this is where you are and then this is how you can get where you need to be. It was just here’s where you are and see you later. And so, I was really in here for like ten minutes and looking back on it, I didn’t feel like that did anything for me personally or professionally to know how to grow.

It is important to note that this type of response was not common across the sample, but did appear to be more prevalent in schools with less experienced administrators.

Despite high levels of expectancy, most teachers believed that improvement would require a great deal of hard work and several expressed concern around their ability to find the time to put in the necessary effort given the amount of
other responsibilities on their plate. One teacher discussed how overwhelming being a teacher can be:

Like coaching, service, extra responsibilities that I will take on, it’s difficult because in taking those on, I feel like the classroom stuff will suffer and so I guess ideally you’d want to find somebody who could do it all, but I don’t know if it’s fair to expect that you can balance coaching and extra stuff while simultaneously becoming the best teacher in the classroom you can be.

Regardless of concerns, virtually all teachers indicated that they had high levels of trust in their school leaders and district staff, which in turn, contributed to enhanced motivation. One such teacher shared: “I was very interested in it, very eager, and mostly because I feel like at YES, they are very reflective about what they do and as best as they can be, it’s fair. It’s well thought out.” A teacher in another building remarked that though YES could be challenging to work at for a number of reasons, “relationships and trusting people that are in charge is certainly not one of them.” This high level of trust creates a strong culture of excellence:

There is just a culture built around student achievement. It’s everything we do – there’s a team mentality of let’s get these kids ready for college. It starts with the second they walk in the door in sixth grade until they leave at the end and even after that. So it’s like every one of us is responsible for that. So just having that underlying culture that allows for teachers to say that the most important things are for my students to learn and grow. Without that culture I think it is about me, not about them.

Across schools, teachers and administrators report feeling as though they are working on the same team toward a common set of goals and that the new performance management system provides that mission with greater clarity.

Discussion
In this investigation, I reported on the impact of a new teacher performance management system on a sample of teachers in YES Prep Schools. Results from this analysis suggest that the Teacher Continuum caught teachers’ attention and focused them on goals they felt were meaningful and for the most part, perceived to be attainable. Yet findings also demonstrate how specific design features (e.g., clarity of expectations, types of incentives) coupled with certain enabling organizational conditions (e.g., connection between feedback and support, time, trust) can influence teachers’ valence and expectancy. Indeed, this study suggests that teachers’ responses to performance management policies are influenced by the nature of the work, the nature of the worker, and the nature of the working conditions.

**Nature of the Work**

Because teaching is such complex work, it is more difficult to assess than performance in many other professions. Often referred to as the “nature of teaching” hypothesis, the fundamental challenge in determining teacher quality has always been how to clearly define outcomes and separate the impact of the teacher from all the other influences on student learning (Podgursky & Springer, 2006). In particular, the problem of multi-tasking arises; in other words, teaching performance has multiple dimensions, making it challenge for any one measure to capture the complexity of teachers’ work (Fensel & Richardson, 2005; Podursky & Springer, 2006; Springer, 2009).

At YES Prep, the Teacher Continuum in Year 1 of implementation was built around a comprehensive instructional rubric, which most teachers felt provided an
accurate and complete picture of their performance. In accordance with expectancy theory, their motivation was strengthened because performance goals had been clearly defined. This clarity of expectation allowed teachers to assess how likely they were to achieve specific goals with increased effort and in most cases, provided them with an explicit path to improvement. Had YES Prep implemented student growth as a second measure of teacher performance, it is unclear whether the motivational response would have been as positive given concerns teachers expressed about the use of student growth in the early design phase. As policymakers consider which measures to include as part of new performance management systems and how to strategically implement those measures over time, they should take heed of teachers’ motivational responses. If systems become too complex, they run the risk of resulting in a lack of clarity and a corresponding decrease in motivation (Cannon, 2007; Heneman, Milanowski, & Kimball, 2007).

**Nature of the Worker**

Expectancy theory makes clear that to be motivating, performance management systems must be congruent with the needs, values, and capabilities of the people they attempt to influence (Lawler, 1983; Vroom, 1964). Yet, most performance management systems treat teachers as a monolithic entity. Indeed, at the same time policymakers are calling for new systems to differentiate teachers based on their performance level, the assumption seems to be that their motivational responses to specific policies will be consistent.
Analysis of the YES Prep sample suggests important variation in motivational responses across subgroups of teachers. Novice teachers reported lower levels of expectancy and were more likely to feel that performance targets along the Teacher Continuum were out of reach. This finding supports prior research that indicates self-efficacy increases with demonstrated success or mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977; Gist, 1987) and that teachers improve their effectiveness considerably in the first few years in the profession (Hanushek, 1996; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004). Expectancy theory makes clear that goals will be more motivating when workers not only value the performance criteria but also believe that through hard work, they can successfully improve their own effectiveness on these measures. Not surprisingly then, highly effective teachers placed more stock in the performance metrics, while teachers not meeting expectations were more likely to question the validity of the measures.

Perhaps the most interesting finding emerging from teachers’ responses was the observation that a new performance management system similar to the one implemented at YES would only work for “a certain type of teacher.” According to YES teachers, these individuals would need to have a strong locus of control and thus, when faced with obstacles, would respond with resiliency and persist in the face of even the most significant challenges. Of course, it could be the case that these traits would be particularly necessary for teachers in the YES culture of excellence. However, self-efficacy research demonstrates that individuals who attribute attainment to effort, not ability, and can accurately assess their progress towards goals are more likely to remain motivated in the face of setbacks (Bandura...
& Schunk, 1981). As such, policymakers and researchers should consider how specific personality characteristics may moderate the motivational response of teachers to performance management systems.

**Nature of the Working Conditions**

Ultimately, effectiveness of a new performance management system depends on a set of organizational factors. Expectancy theory makes clear that outcomes acquire valence as their instrumentality – or the belief that actions will lead to outcomes – increases (Vroom, 1964). Organizational stability and trust will thus contribute to teachers’ perceptions that the offered rewards will be fair and awarding according to expectation. Indeed, much research has substantiated the importance of trust as a foundation of school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2004).

The culture at YES Prep is characterized by a high level of trust and collaboration. Administrators and teachers alike consistently reported a common set of goals and a clear set of cultural expectations and norms. Within such an environment, teachers could trust that the Teacher Continuum performance measures were being consistently applied. Unfortunately, this level of shared vision and mutual trust is not characteristic of most districts; instead, attempts to implement performance management systems are traditionally characterized by a considerable amount of hostility (Odden, 2008). When moving forward with new policies, the YES Prep experience indicates the importance of prioritizing stakeholder buy-in and the cultivation of trust between teachers and administrators.
An initial level of trust is necessary to build value in the performance metrics but research demonstrates that initial motivation is best sustained through a process of setting specific expectations and consistently benchmarking progress against those goals (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bandura, 1993). At YES, administrators set clear standards of performance and provided consistent feedback throughout the course of the year, which allowed teachers to engage in direct conversations about their performance. In so doing, most were able to use performance feedback to focus on achieved progress towards goals and sustain high levels of motivation.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This investigation has several limitations that suggest profitable directions for future research. The results substantiate prior research by corroborating that teacher support for reform appears to be influenced by the context in which it is implemented (Ballou & Podursky, 1993; Farkas et al., 2003; Goldhaber, 2009; Kelley et al., 2000) but they also suggest that variation in motivational responses may be due to individual characteristics, not just contextual factors. Since the analysis relies on a qualitative methodology, it cannot assess the magnitude of the impact of individual characteristics (e.g., teacher experience, effectiveness, personality traits) and organizational conditions (e.g., trust, leadership) on teacher motivational responses. Further research needs to systematically examine how these factors moderate teacher motivational responses and subsequently influence changes in teacher behavior.
Second, there were limitations that circumscribe the external validity of the conclusions. YES Prep teachers are, on average, younger and less experienced than the broader teacher population. Additionally, as raised during interviews, they subscribe to a particular culture of excellence and as such, tend to possess a strong work ethic and commitment to outcomes. Although results from this analysis do not warrant generalizations to other populations of teachers, they are critical to our understanding of the theory underlying performance management systems. Future research should replicate this type of analysis in other settings to examine how performance management policies operate through different subgroups of teachers’ motives.

**Conclusion**

The availability of federal and philanthropic funds to reform teacher performance management systems has resulted in a substantial amount of activity at both the state and district level. Evidence has demonstrated that teacher acceptance will ultimately contribute to the effectiveness and survival of these types of policies (Heneman et al., 2007). Yet, the body of research on how teachers respond to these initiatives remains surprisingly underdeveloped. Given how widespread implementation of these new systems has become, it is essential to improve our understanding of how they impact teacher motivation and ultimately, behavior. This study contributes to these efforts by examining teachers’ motivational responses during the early implementation of the YES Prep Teacher Continuum. Although the findings from this report focus on a pilot in a specific city, they suggest implications for districts and states nationwide that are working to design and develop evaluation systems that rely on classroom observations to differentiate teaching practice and improve instructional practice.
Additionally, this study provides a framework for policymakers to better understand how individual and organizational characteristics affect teacher attitudes towards performance management systems and subsequently influence motivation.
References


