



Educator Evaluation

A Case Study of Massachusetts' Approach

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

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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

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