



California Council on Teacher Education

The Complexities of the Relationship of Teacher Evaluation and Student Achievement: A Policy Analysis for the Fall 2010 CCTE Conference

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How best to evaluate teachers in an impartial, objective, fair, constructive, productive, and useful manner is a topic that has confounded educators and the public policy community for many decades. Traditional procedures in which teachers are periodically reviewed and evaluated by their school administrators remain the primary practice in most schools and school districts, but this approach has often proven inadequate given the workload of the typical school administrator, occasional individual and organizational frictions between administrators and teachers, and the frequent situations in which the content expertise of the administrator does not match the classes being taught by the teachers being evaluated.

During the ongoing review of teacher evaluation over recent decades, teachers as a professional group have often been chided for not seeking to serve as evaluators of their peers, since as professionals it can be assumed that they should have the most current knowledge about teaching as well as a desire to help colleagues improve their practice. Over the years, teacher workloads and educational budgets have seldom allowed time or compensation for school districts or schools to develop a systematic peer review process. The passage of AB 1 (Villaraigosa) in 1999 established the California Peer Assistance and Review Program (PAR) for Teachers, under which school districts were required to establish a PAR program through negotiations with the organization representing the certificated employees. Some successful PAR programs were already in place in Poway and Lompoc in California and at other locations across the country prior to AB 1, and the focus of PAR was typically on teachers with permanent status, although some programs also included probationary teachers. In the PAR process trained consulting teachers work with identified and volunteer teachers to develop performance goals aligned with student learning goals, and the consulting teacher then makes multiple observations and selects staff development activities geared to assist teachers improve their teaching skills and knowledge. Following passage of AB 1 adequate funding for PAR programs was available, but in more recent years state budget difficulties have decimated the program, and it remains functional only in a few of the larger school districts in the state. Nationwide the PAR program evolved from a labor-management initiative between the Toledo Federation of Teachers and the Toledo Public Schools in Ohio over 25 years ago, and the concept has been praised recently by both President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan.

A seemingly natural constituency to involve in the evaluation of teachers would be teacher education faculty at the college and university level, since by education and profession they can be assumed to have the greatest knowledge and expertise about teaching. Once again, however, the workloads of teacher educators are heavy and funding is absent to establish and compensate a network in which teacher educators would serve as evaluators of K-12 teachers. Furthermore, elements of distrust or uncertainty between K-12 public schools, the organized teaching profession, and teacher educators at the college and university level make development of such an evaluation system unlikely.

Given such ongoing quandaries, the regular evaluation of teachers in most schools has languished, with occasional successes typically reflecting the elevated funding status of those rare K-12 schools that are able to support adequate staff to regularly mentor, observe, and effectively evaluate teachers through PAR and other mentor programs. Some

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useful advances have also accompanied the development of the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) system in California over the past two decades, a structure in which state funding has been provided to county offices and school districts to employ mentors and evaluators for teachers during the first two years of induction into the profession. As this system blossomed it resulted in improvement in retention rates of new teachers in the state, but it has currently fallen victim to the economic downturn and resulting state budget crisis. There are now many fewer new teachers being employed and needing support and evaluation coupled with reduced state funding for such support and evaluation. Even during its best years, however, BTSA provided support and evaluation only to new teachers, who comprise a small fraction of the total teacher cadre in the state.

Thus, while there have been conjectures regarding who within the education community might be in the best position based on knowledge and expertise to evaluate teachers, and while there have been some model programs such as PAR for veteran teachers and BTSA for support and assessment of new teachers during the induction years, overall little has changed during recent decades and the typical practice in most schools and school districts remains a process in which teachers are periodically reviewed by their school administrators, despite a context in which those administrators are seriously pressed for time in their schedules for such evaluations and in which they do not necessarily represent the best match in terms of subject and grade level background to conduct such evaluations. Despite such concerns, all parties to the process appear to share the view that it is the expectation of teachers that they will be evaluated by their school administrators and the understanding of those administrators that it is their responsibility to evaluate the teachers at their schools. Indeed, the California Education Code specifies that school superintendents and/or their designees will evaluate all certificated personnel, at least every year for probationary staff, and every two years for permanent staff. What is then at issue is how best to accomplish such evaluations.

Yet another factor that complicates the evaluation of teachers concerns the purpose of such evaluations. Is the purpose primarily to assist each teacher in improving his or her practice by offering commentary and suggestions based on a review by the school administrator? Or are the results of the evaluation to be tied to such considerations as contract renewal, possible termination, granting of permanent status, and compensation. And if compensation is involved, will it be based on a standard salary scale reflecting preparation and experience, or an alternative or performance approach based entirely upon evaluation of practice. As any of these employment and salary related factors are introduced into the process, questions about the reliability and validity of the manner in which the evaluation is conducted become far more important, both to the teacher being evaluated and the credibility of the process in general, especially so within the “value-added” approach to teacher evaluation advocated by proponents of pay for performance.

It is interesting to note that while public opinion surveys over several recent decades have consistently shown that most people have positive attitudes towards their local public schools and their own children’s teachers, at the same time they profess negative attitudes about American education in general. Such uncertain and conflicting public opinion has fostered a policy vacuum. Elected officials at both the federal and state level have grown increasingly interested in and critical of schools and teachers, articulating concerns about both the quality of American teachers and the presumed inadequate performance of students. These concerns have been reflected in policy proposals calling for the evaluation of teachers based specifically upon the performance of the students they teach, with the intention that the results of such evaluations will serve as the basis for performance pay structures for teachers. This idea has become a centerpiece of the current national Race to the Top (RTTP) initiative, which includes a requirement that any states wishing to apply for RTTP funding must facilitate a teacher assessment system based on assessment of student performance. In a rush to qualify California for RTTP consideration, the State Legislature passed and Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law late last year Senate Bill X5 1 which cast aside several decades of thoughtful protections for California teachers and instead called upon school districts to implement teacher evaluation systems related to student performance.

This approach to teacher evaluation is one that CTE has consistently opposed, primarily because it tends to oversimplify and inappropriately quantify the presumed relationships between teaching practice and student

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achievement as measured by standardized tests, ignoring a myriad of factors that can and do complicate such relationships. However, it is indeed an approach that both federal and state proposals, initiatives, laws, and regulations now champion, and thus it is a reality that states, school districts, and schools will be attempting to implement, whether the teacher education community approves or not.

Given that reality, the challenge for CCTE as the voice of the teacher education community in California is to use our professional knowledge to explain the inherent complexities of such an approach and to develop and propose state legislation that can be translated into regulations that will require that such evaluation of teachers, when it is to be employed, be structured in a careful, fair, balanced, and appropriately scientific and professional manner prior to use in any educational settings.

CCTE is therefore devoting major portions of its Fall 2010 Conference, to be held on October 14-16 in San Diego around the theme “Teacher Education in Challenging Times: Initiating Leadership to Inform Policy and Create Opportunities,” towards a policy analysis of the issues of teacher evaluation and student performance. The Conference will foster discussion that in turn will lead to a commitment by CCTE to drafting, introducing, and supporting new legislation in cooperation with other educational organizations and one or more members of the Legislature.

To this end, CCTE is in the process of collecting information from educators across the state who have experience to date with teacher evaluation systems that involve student performance data. Of particular interest has been information provided by the California Charter Schools Association, which has established a data division and accountability department devoted to working with individual charter schools on issues of and processes for teacher evaluation. Materials received and reviewed from several charter schools suggest that productive teacher evaluation systems typically involve the development of individual teacher growth plans, considerable time invested by school administrators in teacher evaluation, and the use of multiple forms of data on student achievement, including both paper and pencil tests and student performance activities. Similar feedback has also been obtained from the Los Angeles Unified School District and will be sought from other K-12 schools throughout California. Another important source of information was the Alternative Teacher Compensation conference organized by Full Circle Fund and Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) in March 2009, held in both Los Angeles and Oakland. Also of interest was the Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education conference entitled “Working Collaboratively for Teacher and Student Success” held June 23, 2010. This evolving collection of proposed and in many cases already implemented teacher evaluation approaches should offer some important guidance for broader applications across the state, and it will be these evolving ideas which will guide CCTE’s legislative initiative.

The overall purpose of the legislation which CCTE seeks to develop, propose, and advocate will be to require in any instance (schools, districts, county offices, state agencies, or other entities) where efforts are undertaken to evaluate teachers on the basis of student performance, that the following factors at minimum must be addressed and incorporated into the process:

(1) That the process of any evaluation of student performance to be used for the purpose of teacher evaluation must involve multiple measures (student work, classroom-based assessments, formative assessments, school-wide and district assessments, performance measures, including essays, applied projects, portfolios, demonstrations, and oral presentations) in addition to use of standardized tests, that any paper and pencil examinations used be carefully reviewed to assure that they do indeed measure what is intended and desired, and that at least some of the assessments of student performance be actual live performances by the students. There is ample evidence from educational research that students respond in differing ways to various instructional approaches and assessments, which therefore supports the call for the use of multiple measures, including performance as well as written tests, to secure equitable assessment of all students. In addition, if any written test is to be used for an intended “value-added” purpose, such as seeking to measure student performance where such measurements will then be used

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to evaluate teachers for the awarding of performance pay, the test must be validated for that purpose. Any such validation must also include consideration of its use by English learners (ELs) and students with special needs. Most tests currently in use have not been normed with ELs and special populations in mind, which means that those tests are an invalid measure of that portion of the student population, and thus will prove invalid for purposes of teacher evaluation across California, since nearly all California classrooms have a few if not many ELs and special education students in their student population.

(2) That the process of evaluation of teachers involve appropriate and adequate time on the part of school administrators or others involved in the evaluation to assure a careful review of all aspects of a teacher's performance, and further that any classroom observations of teachers be conducted by administrators with the same content area specialization as the class being observed, and finally that such evaluations take place on a frequency schedule negotiated as part of the collective bargaining agreement between the exclusive representative of the certificated employees and the district. The issues here are significant. Experience has shown that most school administrators do not have adequate time in their busy schedules for multiple teacher observations, so if effective evaluation processes are to occur, the time frame and workload of school administrators will need to be adjusted for this purpose. Perhaps even more important, many school administrators are not familiar with the pedagogy and content knowledge teachers are expected to teach, and most school administrators have not received training related to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTPs) or any other potential criteria for evaluation, and thus a statewide effort will be needed to assure that administrators involved in evaluation of teachers are aware of both pedagogy and curriculum as well as versed in observational and evaluation skills. With respect to assuring that evaluations at the secondary level are conducted by individuals familiar with the content area of the teacher being evaluated, one proposal has been to develop a cadre of mentor teachers who can serve along with school administrators as co-evaluators. Once again, such an approach would have staffing and budgetary implications. Finally, in determining the frequency of evaluations, it should be noted that California Education Code stipulates that probationary or temporary teachers are to be evaluated at least once a year (for two years) and permanent teachers at least once every two years. Any change in this frequency would need to be agreed to by both teachers and the school district or school.

(3) That procedures for the evaluation of teachers be mutually and carefully developed, described in writing, and agreed to both by those being evaluated and those doing the evaluating, resulting in some form of relevant and personalized professional growth program for each teacher. Just as with students, different teachers will demonstrate their professional knowledge and skills in varying ways, and effective procedures for the evaluation of teachers will need to involve multiple measures that are appropriate to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each teacher. Will all teachers be evaluated using the same criteria (such as the CSTPs or the standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards), and in the same manner (timing and frequency of reviews, and assignment of relevant administrators or mentor teachers), or will such procedures vary depending upon decisions at individual schools and school districts as well as the needs and professional status of each teacher?

(4) That any procedures for evaluation of student performance must be weighted to take into account such potentially relevant factors as depleted school budgets, lack of textbooks and other instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, the language status of students, the impact of hunger, homelessness, or other conditions in the lives of the students, all to be factored in to assure that teachers are not being held responsible for teaching and learning conditions beyond their control that negatively impact student achievement. There is ample evidence in educational and social research concerning the impact of language, cultural, environmental, and economic factors on a student's ability to succeed in school. Special concerns abound over the impact of students' language skills, home language, and second language on their school success and the manner in which their school achievement is measured. All such dimensions must be recognized and compensated for in any processes developed for assessing student performance and linking those assessments to teacher evaluation. At the same time, some of the traditional and long-standing arguments that failure of students in school is the fault of students who "can't learn" and thus not the responsibility of teachers must be forcefully rejected by all segments of the educational community. It is

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the responsibility of teachers to produce educational results from their students, while at the same time it is the responsibility of school administrators and the state to assure that the processes used to measure those results and to inform decisions about teacher employment and compensation be fair to all concerned.

It is important for everyone involved to recognize the complex realities inherent in schools and classroom contexts, as well as among teachers and students. Students are not all the same, they learn in different ways and at different paces, and they are impacted by many factors outside of school. Similarly, teachers are also not all the same, with each teacher having certain personal strengths and weaknesses which will impact different students in different ways. When these teacher and student differences come together in any given classroom, the complexities are multiplied. A student experiencing difficulties in a classroom will frequently impact not only that student's success, but because of additional time required of the teacher, it may also impact the success of other students in the class. The real-life circumstances in each classroom, for each teacher and each student, will always be extremely difficult to measure. For these reasons, there are many educational scholars who will continue to argue that the causal link between the performance of a teacher and the performance of that teacher's students can not and will not be successfully or accurately measured. These arguments involve not just the complexity of the classroom in question, but also such factors as the influence on students of other school programs, home or peer tutoring, after school activities, parental support, and neighborhood programs. In most educational research one seeks to control for such factors, to establish matching experimental and control groups. The realities of schools, however, will not make this possible as schools, districts, and other entities attempt to measure teacher performance based on student achievement, since K-12 education is not and can not be a controlled research laboratory.

(5) That the student achievement upon which teachers are being evaluated be calculated specific to the time period of the evaluation, i.e., specific to a given school year or given semester, with clear starting and concluding points of evaluation consistent with the time period, in order to assure that teachers are not being held responsible for any lack of prior achievement on the part of the students in question or rewarded for prior positive performance of students before they arrive in the current teacher's class. In other words, if a teacher is charged with teaching a given group of students, many of whom come into that class with a lack of prior achievement, the teacher should be held responsible only for any achievement or lack of achievement during the time the students are in that teacher's classroom, and not blamed for the prior lack of achievement by the students. Similarly, if a teacher is assigned a class of primarily already high achieving students, that teacher should not be rewarded for that prior achievement, but only for what is accomplished during the semester or year being evaluated.

Proponents of a "value-added" model of teacher evaluation, which they contend will be appropriate for making decisions about continued employment and compensation, argue that such concerns as differentials in student readiness, cultural and language backgrounds, and success in prior grades and with prior teachers will all level out and be appropriately measurable. Will the tests used be capable of doing this? Typically, tests based on content standards such as the California Standards Tests (CSTs) are not parallel and are not vertically structured to measure from school year to school year, nor do they include both pre- and post-tests. While proponents will argue that the value-added model will be fair because all students and therefore all teachers will be judged by the same instruments, even if those instruments are not fully sophisticated, basing gain scores on such a shaky structure may well lead to untrue gain scores, and thus to untrue evaluations of teachers.

There are many additional issues of consequential validity that demand consideration. How will such evaluation impact the act of teaching? Knowing that their employment and compensation will rest on the evaluation of their students, will teachers narrow the curriculum and teach to the tests being used? Will scripted curricula become even more the rule of the day? Will teachers be reluctant to innovate? How will such evaluation processes address team teaching, or will such often useful and appropriate collaborative instruction disappear? Is teaching a totally individual act, as would be suggested by value-added evaluation, or is it a community endeavor within each school, where teachers talk to each other, assist each other, and work as a team? If the latter, how will such collaboration be measured and rewarded?

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When all such questions are on the table, many educational scholars will indeed argue that teaching and schools are such complex operations that it will never be possible to develop reliable measures of the multiple impacts that the work of any specific teacher has upon the achievement of his or her students. Given the current realities, in which schools are being asked to undertake such measurements regardless of such complexities, the charge to CTE must be first to identify all of the relevant concerns, and then to propose and seek passage of legislation that will establish an informed and cautious context in which such evaluations will be performed, with the interests of teachers, students, their families, and the public all recognized and honored to the greatest degree possible.

All of these factors, and others as they are identified, will be given careful consideration before, during, and following the CTE Fall 2010 Conference, and through that process will be deconstructed and reassembled to inform the legislative initiative to be drafted and advocated.

In addition to the need to recognize and honor the complexity of teacher evaluation based on student performance, and assure that all procedures utilized in California schools are as valid, fair, and effective as possible, there are several other reasons why this is an ideal topic for CTE to explore. First, since teacher evaluation based on student performance is an approach that the policymakers have already mandated, but have not yet spelled out with respect to implementation, the opportunity is before the educational community to help shape such procedures in an appropriate manner. Second, this form of teacher evaluation can be approached not as something that educators applaud or universally think should be undertaken, but rather for the specific but important purpose of proposing necessary cautions to assure that any such evaluation is done in as careful and fair a manner as possible. Third, and equally important, this issue offers CTE an opportunity to get out in front on something where we can invite teachers, teacher organizations, school administrators, school boards, parents, and other educational groups to join us in this effort while also forging alliances across significant educational sectors and groups in the state that should serve all of us well now and in the future.