

Want to Build a Better Teacher Evaluation? Ask a Teacher

By Ross Wiener & Kasia Lundy

Reformers have invested massive financial resources and political capital in new teacher-evaluation systems, but early results show that these policies won't lead to improvements on their own. To generate more effective teaching through evaluations, teachers, principals, and school system leaders need to embrace a culture of ongoing two-way feedback and a commitment to continuous improvement. Surveys are a critical component of well-designed continuous-improvement systems, which high-performing organizations inside and outside the education sector have adopted as a reliable, cost-effective means of gathering and valuing front-line perspective. Surveying teachers, and acting on the results, respects teachers' voice, provides diagnostic information regarding principals and schools, and provides an invaluable, authentic lens into classroom implementation. Used well, teacher surveys just might save evaluation reform from itself.

The problems evaluation reform is trying to address are deep-seated issues of culture and management. There is still an aversion to distinguishing based on performance; principals haven't been expected to provide rigorous feedback, and teachers aren't accustomed to receiving critical appraisals. But perfunctory evaluations are a symptom, not the cause, of lackluster performance management, and inserting test scores into the equation won't produce meaningful evaluations of teachers on its own. The changes that require the most attention relate to building the will and capacity of leaders and inspiring teachers to embrace evaluation as an improvement strategy, and these aren't easily advanced through quick fixes in policy.

To leverage teacher evaluation for improvement, public education needs to teach principals to accurately assess quality in teaching practice, create the expectation that school leaders will regularly give teachers direct feedback that guides improvement, and coordinate the massive investments in professional development with content and activities that address teachers' identified needs. Surveys can provide important, timely information on whether this work is happening and how it is being perceived. This is the premise of our recently published study, **"Evaluating Evaluations: Using Teacher Surveys to Strengthen Implementation"**.

So far, the formative aspects of teacher evaluation have been insufficiently emphasized in terms of

energy and investment compared to the measurement and accountability aspects. While accountability is certainly an important issue, systems need to find ways to prioritize the formative aspects or risk imposing a new compliance regime that fails to make anyone a better teacher. Even under the most rigorous systems, an overwhelming majority of teachers fall in the middle of evaluation ratings, so the biggest prize lies in using evaluations to improve performance of current teachers.

To determine whether the powerful, adaptive work of using evaluations for improvement is taking hold, we should ask teachers directly. If done right, surveys can increase teachers' engagement in the evaluation process and communicate explicitly that the system is intended to prioritize teachers' growth and development. When results are shared transparently and real changes are made in response, surveys allow principals and system leaders to model the type of openness to feedback and willingness to change that teachers are expected to embrace.

High-performing private-sector companies conduct all-employee surveys regularly to gather critical, front-line feedback, and then use this feedback to make organizational changes. At Apple, retail employees are surveyed every few months, and employee focus groups develop responses to the key issues identified from the surveys, which are presented to store management. By the time the next survey comes around, everyone can see whether the changes made in response to employee suggestions had a positive impact. Recognizing that people are the most expensive and most important asset, many employers use surveys to gauge employee engagement and satisfaction with their supervision and support. Employers act on the results because they know top talent is more likely to be attracted to and retained by workplaces that value employees' perspective.

High-performing education organizations also use surveys to support continuous improvement and employee engagement. Aspire Public Schools, a network of 34 charter schools that serves 12,000 low-income students in California, relies extensively on teacher surveys and has developed strong processes for using the data to support a culture of continuous improvement. Survey results are incorporated into annual goal-setting discussions that system leaders have with principals. In addition, at the beginning of each school year, senior system leaders visit schools to share the results of the prior year's survey, analyze results collaboratively at a whole-staff meeting, and encourage action at the local level. These close-the-loop meetings engage entire school faculties in identifying improvement priorities for everyone—central-office leaders, principals, and teachers—and send a powerful signal that teachers' voice is important.

A handful of early adopters of new teacher evaluations in the traditional public school sector are also incorporating teacher surveys to measure and improve implementation. A survey of teachers in Memphis, Tenn., revealed that 40 percent were concerned about the objectivity of observers; as a result, Memphis focused on more rigorous training and norming for principals, and in a subsequent survey only 26 percent of teachers expressed this concern. The Tennessee Department of Education administered a statewide survey to gauge fidelity and quality of implementation, and published results to encourage transparency and a focus on continuously improving evaluation implementation.

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Current evaluation efforts will be for naught unless teachers feel an ownership stake in the effort to define expectations, provide feedback, and continuously improve instruction. Surveys create vital implementation information quickly, reliably, and relatively inexpensively. They provide a tangible vehicle for expressing values and priorities, and assessing leadership quality and organizational health. If used well and situated in cycles of inquiry and action, surveys can advance meaningful teacher evaluations and support a healthier culture in schools.

Ross Wiener is a vice president at the Aspen Institute in Washington and the executive director of its education and society program. Kasia Lundy is a senior principal in the education practice of the Parthenon Group, a consulting firm based in Boston. They are the co-authors of the study "Evaluating Evaluations: Using Teacher Surveys to Strengthen Implementation," which was released last week.

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