



The Role of State Education Agencies in Reforming Teacher Evaluation

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“Race to the Top,” the Obama administration initiative to encourage state-level improvements in schools and student performance, has spurred a nationwide wave of efforts to better evaluate teacher performance. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, 36 states plus the District of Columbia have changed their teacher evaluation systems since 2009. State education agencies are playing a crucial role in supporting school districts as they launch new systems. In a recent report for the Center for American Progress, I presented results from one of the first research studies of how agencies in six states – Colorado, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Tennessee – have prepared and implemented new teacher evaluation systems. Important lessons from these pioneering states can help other states in the future.

State Agencies and Local Districts

Across the United States, each state’s education agency has a unique history and operates in a distinctive fiscal, political, and legal context. In particular, states vary significantly in the balance they strike between local control of schools and the role of state-level educational oversight. States that give maximum authority and flexibility to local school districts leave little room for state agencies to provide support for the implementation of reformed evaluation systems. Traditionally, moreover, state education agencies have placed the emphasis on holding local school districts accountable to basic standards. Local authorities are thus wary about candidly identifying problems and seeking help as they struggle to implement new reforms.

As they embrace a shift from monitoring basic compliance to delivering new services and support to schools in the throes of making improvements, many state education agencies must make wrenching changes in their own structures and staffing. Important as they may be for the longer term, organizational changes take time, because new staff members with different duties must acclimate to new roles. Several difficulties have become evident:

- Many state education agencies have added new Teacher Effectiveness units, but in the process longstanding habits of creating silos – keeping various staff units separate and walled off from each other – have gotten worse in some agencies.
- Often, state agencies simply do not have the resources to add staff and enhance capacities to support new teacher evaluation reforms. Resource shortfalls are especially acute in states that did not win federal grants under the early rounds of Race to the Top competitions managed by the U.S. Department of Education. Given the current tight fiscal climate, most states have been unable or unwilling to allocate new money of their own.
- In the short term, state education agencies with insufficient resources are relying on two kinds of stop-gaps – outside consultants and foundations. But this could preclude or delay the development of the fiscal and expert capacities state agencies need to support effective new systems of teacher evaluation over the long term.

Training and Supporting Evaluators

State education agencies often aim to support local evaluation reforms by providing training to administrators who conduct teacher observations. Approaches vary widely. Some state agencies, such as Tennessee’s, directly train all evaluators; others, including Colorado and Pennsylvania, prepare trainers to instruct other evaluators; and still other states follow the New Jersey model of leaving training entirely up to local districts. A majority of teachers do not teach in subjects or grades with regular student tests, so student results cannot contribute to evaluations of those teachers. Districts are developing their own student learning objectives to serve as benchmarks for evaluating how well teachers help students – but such efforts are of widely mixed quality within and across states. State agencies may have an important role in boosting these standards.

December 1, 2013

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Given limited resources, leaders of state education agencies often must find ways to reallocate existing staff and budgets to tackle new responsibilities and build capacities. Constraining federal regulations, state budgets, and civil service requirements should be revised to permit greater managerial flexibility. Leaders of state agencies need to think carefully about what they can do that local districts cannot accomplish on their own. Often the answers will include technical assistance and policy interpretations, the fostering of new communication networks to allow local officials to share information. State agencies can identify and spread best practices and establish online training modules to help local evaluators do their jobs.

Advancing School Reform

State legislatures and education agencies alike need to think carefully about how reforms in teacher evaluation should fit with the roll out of other important school changes – including improvements in teacher preparation and professional development as well as the implementation of new systems for evaluating school principals and assessing instructional standards and tests for schoolchildren. With so many challenges to meet at once, how can the state encourage a large and sustained supply of agency staffers as well as principals and superintendents with the necessary training and technical expertise? In partnership with local districts and state agencies, colleges and universities will need to devise appropriate new training and certification programs and provide new research results to front-line officials.

Improving teacher quality has become a centerpiece of President Obama's education agenda and is vital to the contemporary school reform movement as a whole. Many states and local districts are embracing the multiple challenges involved. Yet as new evaluation systems take hold, mistakes are bound to happen; and thus far, too little transparent communication is happening about what works and does not work for effective teacher evaluation in the overall context of upgrading U.S. schooling. Both the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies must learn how to execute a delicate balance between mandating reforms and fostering trial-and-error communication and learning. In the years ahead, getting the balance right will be crucial to reforming teacher evaluations – and advancing U.S. school reform overall.

Read more in Patrick McGuinn, “The State of Teacher Evaluation Reform: State Education Agency Capacity and the Implementation of New Teacher-Evaluation Systems,” Center for American Progress, November 2012.