TEACHNJ: An Evaluation of Two Years of Implementation

Kathe Callahan, Leila Sadeghi
Kean University, Union, New Jersey, USA

In July 2009, the Obama administration launched its \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTT) Fund, providing states with competitive grants in an effort to reform education. One of the main conditions of this program was to award educational innovation. With this in mind, states enacted new legislation in the hopes of attracting more funding for their proposed programs. Although there were many levels of reform targeted by the RTT, of significance to this research is the emphasis placed on improving teacher effectiveness and measuring teacher performance via evaluation systems. The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act was adopted by the New Jersey legislature in August 2012 with the intent to raise student achievement by improving the quality of instruction. This research explores the impact the TEACHNJ Act has on teacher evaluations and professional development. A survey was administered to 1,235 public school teachers in New Jersey to ascertain teacher perceptions of the: (a) evaluation system in their school; (b) level of communication between teachers and administrators; and (c) availability, frequency, and effectiveness of professional development opportunities. The response rate was 21%. We found that formal evaluations are conducted infrequently with a varying degree of accuracy and impact. Nearly half of the teachers indicated that formal evaluations did not lead to improvements in their classroom. A majority of teachers questioned the administrative value of formal teacher evaluations, in particular the rewards and sanctions associated with the outcome of evaluations and a concern that poor performers were not sanctioned nor were effective teachers rewarded. We found that teachers perceive the greatest value to professional development, which is derived from peer mentoring and observations. We also found that professional development is the most effective when it is offered onsite, embedded in the classroom, continuous, and sustained over time.

Keywords: teacher evaluations, professional development, teaching practice, peer mentoring, classroom observations

Introduction

The funding to support the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act comes from the federal reform initiative Race to the Top (RTT). Background on RTT provides insight as to why so many states, including New Jersey, introduced legislation to reform their teacher evaluation systems and tenure decision processes. In July 2009, the Obama administration launched its \$4.35 billion RTT Fund, one of the largest competitive grant programs in the history of public education in the United States. As such, it significantly altered the level of federal involvement in public education through the sheer size of its financial investment and through the articulation of specific federal priorities that were to be met through RTT funding.

Kathe Callahan, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Kean University.
Leila Sadeghi, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Kean University.

In an effort to secure RTT funds, at a time when state budgets were eviscerated by the economic crisis, many states enacted new legislation that would reform the standards for teacher evaluations and tenure decisions. Many states rushed through hastily crafted legislation to secure federal dollars that were needed to close the revenue gap and forestall drastic cuts in personnel.

TEACHNJ

The TEACHNJ Act was signed into law on August 6, 2012. In 2011, after two failed rounds of competition, New Jersey was awarded \$38 million to “reform” education. According the New Jersey Department of Education (2013), RTT funds would be used to pilot and develop a new educator evaluation system, which is the foundation of the TEACHNJ Tenure Reform Act. The TEACHNJ Act calls for a four-level evaluation system of teachers that links individual student data to teachers and creates a more difficult process for teachers to earn tenure.

Under the new law, teachers work for four years, with one of those years under the guidance of a mentor before the tenure decision is made. During their first four years, new teachers must consistently earn good grades on annual performance evaluations in order to attain tenure.

Beginning in September 2013, all of New Jersey’s teachers were to be evaluated on an annual basis. The evaluations were to be based on multiple observations of classroom performance as well as student learning outcomes. Rather than relying on absolute standardized test scores, a statistical formula was devised to determine student growth from year to year (called value-added) and compare that growth to that of their peers. Every teacher would receive a summative rating of “Highly effective”, “Effective”, “Partially effective”, or “Ineffective”, which replaced the binary system that rated teachers as “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory”.

Teacher Evaluations

In theory, a teacher evaluation system should measure a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses through an accurate and consistent process that provides timely and useful feedback. The evaluation and feedback should inform instruction and professional development opportunities to improve classroom instruction and educational outcomes (Marzano, 2012). According to Kelley and Maslow (2005), “Teacher evaluation systems ideally should foster improvement in both professional development opportunities and teaching practices” (p. 1). However, in the real world, theory often fails to inform practice. Marshall (2005) demonstrated that “The theory of action behind supervision and evaluation is flawed and the conventional process rarely changes what teachers do in the classrooms” (p. 274).

Inadequate assessments are all too common, which means poor performance is not addressed, teaching excellence goes unrecognized, new teachers do not receive the feedback they need, and professional development is not aligned with areas of need. The evaluation process can play an important role in developing teachers’ instructional capacity, which in turn contributes to the academic achievement of students (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 2002); however, teacher evaluations, as currently conducted, fall short. Overall, teacher observations are brief and infrequent and they fail to differentiate among teachers.

Proponents of education reform rightfully argue that the current teacher evaluation systems are inadequate (Danielson, 2001; Marzano, 2012; Weissberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). Often, these evaluations involve a short “walk through” visit by the principal or other administrators. The evaluators rely on a rubric that

serves as a checklist of what they observe in the classroom. These rubrics tend to focus on trivial items that can be measured and have little to do with learning outcomes, school improvement efforts, or professional development opportunities (Donaldson, 2009; Varlas, 2009).

Decades of research show that there is a significant relationship between teacher effectiveness and student learning (Danielson, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999; Tucker & Stronge, 2005). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), the “effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement can be stronger than the influences of student background factors, such as poverty, language background, and minority status” (p. 39). And yet, existing teacher evaluation systems often illustrate no relationship between teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. In New York City, a school system with 89,000 teachers, only 1.8% of the teachers were rated unsatisfactory (Brill, 2009), and in Chicago, where roughly 25% of high school students do not graduate on time, 33% of the fourth graders are not reading at grade level, and 99.7% of teachers are evaluated as satisfactory to distinguished (Rich, 2012). Weissberg et al. (2009) conducted a research on the rigor of teacher evaluations of 12 school districts in four different states and found “less than one percent of surveyed teachers received a negative rating on their most recent evaluations” (p. 10).

According to Donaldson (2009), “Multiple factors, often working in tandem, produce this effect. External constraints decrease evaluators’ inclination to evaluate rigorously—vague district standards, poor evaluation instruments, overly restrictive collective bargaining agreements, and a lack of time all contribute to this problem” (p. 2). Internal constraints including a school culture that discourages negative ratings and a district culture that offers little oversight and few incentives contribute to the inflated teacher ratings.

The American Federation of Teachers (2010) and the National Education Association (2010) have acknowledged the need to reform teacher evaluation systems, as the existing systems are inadequate. Both associations highlight the importance of using multiple measures to assess teacher effectiveness, such as classroom observations and district-wide assessments, as well as additional opportunities for feedback. They also emphasize the importance of targeted professional development.

Measuring teacher performance is complicated, and there is no formula for what makes a good teacher, which means that there is no formula for what should be included in the evaluation. Evaluation systems have multiple purposes. Danielson (2012) believed that teacher evaluations should focus on accountability and improvement, while Marzano (2012) identified the dual purpose of teacher evaluations as measurement and development. Both experts agreed that one system of evaluation cannot effectively serve both purposes.

Although efforts to move quickly in designing and implementing more effective teacher evaluation systems are laudable, we need to acknowledge a crucial issue that measuring teachers and developing teachers are different purposes with different implications. An evaluation system designed primarily for measurement will look quite different from a system designed primarily for development (Marzano, 2012, p. 15).

Professional Development

Research demonstrates that professional development opportunities, when properly designed and developed, have the potential to enhance classroom practices and ultimately improve student learning outcomes (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Guskey, 2002). The key is providing professional development that is timely, relevant, and effectively delivered. Professional development that is provided in an effective way can have a measurable impact on school improvement and student achievement (Mathers, Olivia, & Laine, 2008).

Historically, professional development programs were developed with little input from teachers. Research shows that when professional development programs are mandated, and there is a “pre-determined political agenda for instructional change and teachers’ perspectives are not valued during professional learning”, little professional development takes place (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013, p. 403). When teachers have the opportunity to inform the professional development training agenda, positive learning outcomes are realized and the transfer of knowledge is more effective (Alderman, 2004; Gregoire, 2003).

Johnson and Kardos (2002) conducted a study of 224 teachers and 23 administrators to assess their perception of New Jersey’s professional development opportunities. The findings highlighted “considerable disjuncture between what teachers value and what they do in the area of professional development” (p. 156). According to Johnson and Kardos (2002), professional development was a “compliance vehicle” (p. 158) with teachers attending random workshops to accumulate the mandatory 100 hours of professional development required by the initiative. The focus was compliance, not on professional or personal growth.

S. Chappuis, J. Chappuis, and Stiggins (2009) found that “It’s essential to emphasize the long-term, ongoing nature of professional development as opposed to a short-term, commercially promised quick fixes (sic)” (p. 57). A one-time professional development seminar for hundreds of teachers is not as effective as ongoing and personalized professional development that is found in professional learning communities and realizes through peer coaching (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). Research demonstrates that professional development is the most effective when it is offered on-site, is job-embedded, sustained over time, centers on active learning, and focuses on student outcomes (Chappuis et al., 2009; Sparks, 2003).

Although there is a substantial body of research on professional development that identifies the essential characteristics of professional development, there is growing evidence that only a small percentage of what is known to work is actually being implemented (Hawley & Valli, 2000).

Method

This research explores the current teacher evaluation and professional development practices in the state of New Jersey. The survey we administered was designed to ascertain teacher perceptions of: (a) the evaluation system in their school; (b) the level of communication between teachers and administrators; and (c) the availability, frequency, and effectiveness of professional development opportunities. In addition, we wanted to ascertain if teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development activities as a result of their evaluations.

The survey was pre-tested with a random sample ($N = 50$) of New Jersey schoolteachers. Based on the feedback from the pre-test phase, the survey was revised and administered to a random sample ($N = 1,235$) of New Jersey schoolteachers and yielded a 21% response rate (254 completed surveys). The researchers did not include data from partially completed surveys. Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents were female and 34% were male. An overwhelming majority (94%) of the respondents worked in public school districts, and over half (54%) worked in a school district that was participating in the state pilot system. New Jersey piloted the new teacher evaluation system in 11 school districts during the school year 2012-2013. Thirty percent of the teachers worked in high schools, while 21% were elementary school teachers (K-8) and 19% represented others (K-2, K-4, and K5-K8). In terms of tenure, 72% of the respondents were tenured teachers, while 28% were untenured.

Findings

After analyzing the data, we categorized the responses into four themes: formal evaluation process, impact of evaluation on teaching practice, perceived administrative value, and professional development needs.

Formal Evaluation Process

We asked the respondents to indicate how often they received a formal evaluation by their school principal or assistant principal, other teachers, members of the school management team, or from an external individual, such as a supervisor from a central office (see Figure 1). Twenty-one percent of the respondents indicated having never been evaluated by their principal or assistant principal during the school year, whereas only 15% indicated having been evaluated three or more times. Only 23% of the respondents strongly agreed that the evaluation was a fair assessment of the quality of their work.

Figure 1. Formal evaluation process.

Impact of Evaluation on Teaching Practice

We asked the respondents to what extent the formal evaluation they received led to changes in teaching children with special needs, raising student test scores, handling student discipline, knowledge of subject pedagogy, and classroom management. Across all five categories, over half of the respondents felt that the evaluation had no impact and resulted in no change (see Figure 2).

Interestingly, when asked about engaging in peer observations with colleagues, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (87%) felt that this had a moderate to large impact on their teaching practice. Additionally, the respondents were also asked to indicate whether they engaged in informal dialogue with colleagues and the impact that had on improving their teaching practice. Over half of the respondents (56%) engaged in informal dialogue and of those, 66% felt it had an impact on their teaching effectiveness. Finally, the respondents were asked whether they agreed that the use of teacher evaluations has little effect upon the way they teach. Over

half of the respondents (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that their evaluation did not have an effect on their teaching pedagogy.

Figure 2. Perceived effects of formal evaluation.

Perceived Administration Value

In an effort to develop a better understanding of the administrative value of the teacher evaluations, we asked the respondents to indicate how and if the outcomes of evaluations impacted personnel decisions (see Figure 3). Only 25% of the respondents agreed that a teacher would be dismissed because of sustained poor performance, slightly more than 30% agreed that administrators work with teachers to develop individual professional development plans, and 25% of the respondents indicated that the administration offers no incentives for improved teaching practices.

Figure 3. Perceived administrative value.

Professional Development Needs

The survey asked a series of questions related to professional development. Overall, a majority of respondents (59%) indicated that they wanted more professional development but felt that there were barriers that prevented them from doing so (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Barriers to professional development.

Additionally, we asked the teachers if they participated in professional development activities, such as engaging in informal dialogue with their colleagues and/or conducting peer observations. We found that over half of the respondents did participate in informal dialogue with their colleagues and over 60% found it had a moderate to large impact on their teaching. The informal dialogue was perceived to have more impact on teaching pedagogy than formal professional development.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this survey support prior research on teacher evaluations and professional development. We found that formal evaluations are conducted infrequently with a varying degree of accuracy and impact. Nearly half of the teachers indicated that the formal evaluations did not lead to improvements in their classroom as measured by five different indicators. In addition, a majority of the teachers thought the formal evaluations they received were not an accurate assessment of their teaching abilities. Some of the teachers were not observed at all and many indicated that they were only observed once, and often not by a school administrator. This raises questions about the administrative burden associated with conducting teacher evaluations.

In addition, teachers questioned the administrative value of formal teacher evaluations with the majority questioning rewards and sanctions associated with the outcome of the evaluations. They agreed that the poor performers were not sanctioned nor were the effective teachers rewarded. Again, this raises questions as to the value of the evaluation system.

Clearly, the teachers perceive the greatest value from peer mentoring and observations. Nearly everyone took part in mentoring and peer observations, and the majority felt that the peer relationships and feedback had

a moderate to large impact on their professional development as teachers. This is also consistent with prior research which indicates that districts often offer the same training workshops year to year without determining which are the most appropriate for their teaching faculty. Professional development is the most effective when it is offered onsite, embedded in the classroom, continuous, and sustained over time.

References

- Alderman, M. K. (2004). *Motivation for achievement: Possibilities for teaching and learning*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- American Federation of Teachers. (2010). *A continuous improvement model for teacher development and evaluation*. Retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/teachers/improvemodelwhitepaper011210.pdf>
- Brill, S. (2009). *The rubber room*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/31/090831fa_fact_brill
- Chappuis, S., Chappuis, J., & Stiggins, R. (2009). Supporting teacher learning teams. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 56-60. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Danielson, C. (2001). New trends in teacher evaluations. *Educational Leadership*, 58(5), 12-15. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Danielson, C. (2012). Observing classroom practice. *Educational Leadership*, 70(3), 32-37. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 15-17. Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/392/515>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wise, A. E., & Klein, S. P. (1999). *A license to teach: Raising standards for teaching*. San Francisco, C.A.: Jossey-Bass.
- Donaldson, M. L. (2009). *So long, Lake Wobegon?* Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress.
- Dufour, R., & Dufour, R. (2012). *The school leader's guide to professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, I.N.: Solution Tree Press.
- Fullan, M. (2008). *The six secrets of change*. San Francisco, C.A.: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Crevola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough*. Thousand Oaks, C.A.: Sage Publications.
- Gabriel, R., & Allington, R. (2012). The wrong \$45 million question. *Educational Leadership*, 70(3), 44-49. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Gregoire, M. (2003). It is a challenge or a threat? A dual-process model of teachers' cognition and appraisal during conceptual change. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(2), 147-179.
- Grierson, A. L., & Woloshyn, V. E. (2013). Walking the talk: Supporting teachers' growth with differentiated professional learning. *Professional Development in Education*, 39(3), 401-419. doi:10.1080/19415257.2012.763143
- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3), 381-391. doi:10.1080/135406002100000512
- Howley, W., & Valli, L. (2000). Learner-centered professional development. *Research Bulletin*, 27(1), 7-10. Retrieved from http://www.paadulredresources.org/uploads/8/6/3/4/8634493/learner_centered_pro.pdf
- Johnson, S. M., & Kardos, S. M. (2002). Redesigning professional development: Keeping new teachers in mind. *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 149-159.
- Kelley, C., & Maslow, V. (2005). Effects of teacher evaluation on equity and systems of change in large diverse high schools. Paper presented at *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, San Francisco.
- Marshall, M. (2005). It's time to rethink teacher supervision and evaluation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86, 727-730. Retrieved from <http://www.kappanmagazine.org/>
- Marzano, R. J. (2012). The two purposes of teacher evaluation. *Educational Leadership*, 70(3), 14-19. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Mathers, C., Olivia, M., & Laine, S. (2008). *Improving instruction through effective teacher evaluation: Options for states and districts*. Washington, D.C.: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality.
- National Education Association. (2010). *Teacher assessment and evaluation*. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/TeachrAssmntWhtPaperTransform10_2.pdf
- New Jersey Department of Education. (2013). *Christie administration advances regulations to implement statewide educator evaluator systems provided for in landmark tenure reform law*. Retrieved from <http://www.nj.gov/education/news/2013/0306tnj.htm>

- Rhodes, C., & Beneicke, S. (2002). Coaching, mentoring and peer-networking: Challenges for the management of teacher professional development in schools. *Journal of In-service Education*, 28(2), 297-310. Retrieved from <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/triangle.asp>
- Rich, M. (2012, September 11). *National schools debate is on display in Chicago*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/education/chicago-is-focus-of-national-debate-on-teacher-evaluation.html?_r=0
- Sergiovanni, T. J., & Starrat, R. J. (2002). *Supervision: A redefinition* (7th ed.). Boston, M.A.: McGraw Hill.
- Sparks, D. (2003). Change agent: An interview with Michael Fullan. *Journal of Staff Development*, 24(1), 55-58.
- Toch, T. (2008). Fixing teacher evaluations. *Educational Leadership*, 66(2), 32-37. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Tucker, P. D., & Stronge, J. H. (2005). *Linking teacher evaluation and student learning*. Alexandria, V.A.: ASCD.
- Varlas, L. (2009). Making teacher evaluations meaningful. *Education Update*, 51(11), 5-7. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/>
- Weissberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The widget effect: Our national failure to acknowledge and act on differences in teacher effectiveness*. Retrieved from <http://widgeteffect.org/downloads/TheWidgetEffect.pdf>