COMMENTARY

The Daunting Challenge of Teacher Evaluation

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Last week PACE and Pivot Learning Partners co-hosted a conference in southern California that focused on teacher evaluation. The conference brought together teams of administrators, teachers, and union leaders from more than 30 school districts to discuss how to evaluate teachers' performance in smarter, more effective ways.

The starting point for the discussion, of course, was the meaningless way in which most California teachers now experience evaluation: brief, "drive-by" observations by harried administrators, announced well in advance, that almost invariably conclude that teachers exhibit superior performance. These evaluations are quick and mostly painless, but they produce almost no useful information—for teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, or taxpayers—and they are radically disconnected from efforts to improve the performance of schools or students. It's clear that the way we evaluate teachers now is wrong, but we're at the very beginning of a conversation about how to do it right, for two main reasons.

First, as participants in the conference recognized, effective teacher evaluation is just one necessary element in a comprehensive strategy to improve teaching and learning. In most California school districts the other elements—which include policies on recruitment, induction, mentoring, professional development, and pay—are now no more thoughtful and effective than performance evaluation. Smarter approaches to evaluation will only have their full effect when they are closely linked to policies that give teachers the guidance and support they need to improve their practice at each stage in their careers. Designing systems where all of these elements work together will be a heavy lift for California's overburdened school districts.

Second, we are a long way from agreement on what a fair and effective system of teacher evaluation would look like, and even further away from a time when such a system can go into effect. California ranks next to last in the ratio of school administrators to students, which means that principals lack the time to do careful evaluations of their teachers. Even if they had the time, though, they would still need reliable criteria including value-added measures and inventories of effective practice to support their judgments about teacher performance, and these are in short supply.

These are daunting challenges, but the nearly universal acknowledgment that the way we evaluate teachers now doesn't work and the readiness of district teams to come together to talk about alternatives provides some ground for hopes that we can make progress toward a system that provides useful information for teachers and supports improvement in the effectiveness of their work.

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