Teacher Evaluation
getting it right/avoiding the traps
Lessons learned

Three lessons emerge from Los Angeles Unified School District’s implementation of a new system for teacher evaluation, growth, and development.

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Teachers matter. They are the most important school-based influence on student achievement, and research suggests that having a particularly good teacher will positively affect students’ current academic performance and their future success. So, it’s no surprise that researchers, policy makers, and

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practitioners want to know how to measure teacher effectiveness and how to help teachers improve.

Policy makers across the country are proposing and passing legislation that requires states and districts to establish new systems of teacher evaluation and support, and many districts are working to implement such systems in ways that will allow administrators to identify and learn from the best teachers and to provide targeted support and intervention to help teachers with their growth and development needs. Such systems commonly require multiple measures of performance, including classroom observations, measures of teachers' contributions to their students' performance on standardized tests, and surveys of parents and/or students. These new evaluation and support systems are complex and often require huge shifts in how administrators and teachers think about and engage in performance evaluation. Policy makers advocating these new programs say they will better measure a teacher's "true" level of effectiveness and provide a mechanism for targeting supports to help teachers continually improve, but the rush to implement them may undermine their potential benefits.

Be realistic about the human capacity required by the system.

This article is coauthored by researchers engaged in a study of the Los Angeles Unified School District's new Educator Growth and Development Cycle (EGDC), and the district's executive director of talent management, who is responsible for implementation and long-range strategy of the EGDC. After spending a year on research and design, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) piloted most of the EGDC for the first time in the 2011-12 school year, focusing on a small subset of volunteering school administrators and teachers. The pilot year involved multiple tools and activities including:

- Teacher self-assessments and lesson planning;
- Classroom observations by a site administrator and second (external) observer, using protocols aligned to LAUSD's Teaching and Learning Framework (adapted from Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching);
- Pre- and postobservation conferences between teachers and observers;

- An online platform for teachers and administrators to report observation notes and ratings;
- Stakeholder feedback surveys of students and parents; and
- Teacher-level, grade and subject-level and schoolwide value-added measures (known as Academic Growth over Time [AGT]).

In addition, future iterations of the program will include a greater focus on teachers' individual growth planning and professional development activities targeted to needs identified during the evaluation process.

LAUSD's purpose in the pilot year was to begin to introduce the EGDC to a subset of district employees and learn from the successes and challenges that arose during this pilot year in order to position the system to productively scale up over time. During pilot implementation of the EGDC, the external research team collected extensive data, including surveys of participating teachers, administrators and second observers, along with interviews with 11 administrators and focus groups with 18 teachers in five case study schools. Researchers also collected data from interviews with five district leaders instrumental in the development and initial implementation of the EGDC. The intent of this external evaluation was to help LAUSD identify strengths and weaknesses of the program as implemented and to make recommendations for future iterations of the reform.

Based on these data, we believe that the EGDC pilot has allowed the district to learn valuable lessons that can inform future scale-up — and three in particular are important for federal, state, and local policy makers.

Lesson #1
Be realistic about the human capacity required by the system.

Initial survey data indicated that most pilot participants believed the EGDC would be an improvement over the existing teacher evaluation system; 60% of participating teachers and 77% of participating site administrators reported that they agree either to a moderate or great extent that this is the case. However, in the surveys and at case sites, teachers and administrators remarked on the system's increased workload. The EGDC instituted several new structures and processes at once, requiring teachers and administrators to spend additional time on evaluations over and above older evaluation processes, which were typically inconsistently implemented. LAUSD's experience demonstrates that it's critical for districts to be realistic about participants' capacities — in terms of their time, knowledge and skills, and shared values — required to actively and
thoughtfully engage with new evaluation procedures and tools.

Administrators at all five sites reported being constrained by time, scheduling, and staffing demands. One school administrator said:

It’s extremely challenging because, first of all, we don’t have enough resources on site. . . . And so, when you go in and you have to really dedicate time to observing and transcribing, and going back and tagging the work, it’s very time-consuming. . . . I have two people on site who are doing this, going through this process. Each one has a different second observer. So, I have to coordinate. . . . it’s so hard to coordinate people to have that second observer. So, that in and of itself is a huge obstacle.

Teachers referenced the same difficult time burden. As one said:

I have a family, married with kids, so the time that it takes us to . . . really sit . . . and do this . . . it’s not feasible, to be honest with you. And the detail in what they want us to describe, certain tasks or lesson plans we have. . . . I had no problem doing that in college because I was in college, but now I’m working, I’ve got to do lesson plans, I’ve got a wife, kids . . . a couple hours a weekend is all I have to do this.

LAUSD’s experience makes it clear that districts need to find ways to integrate new evaluation and support systems with — rather than on top of — existing teacher and administrator responsibilities. Doing this successfully will require districts to consider changes to the system and to participants’ job responsibilities and job descriptions in order to preserve the rigor necessary for teachers and administrators to benefit from evaluation while also making it manageable for staff. This is especially important in the early years of these reforms, when evaluation and support activities will necessarily take even more time as participants master the new system.

Meaningful participation in a system like the EGDC also demands a certain level of knowledge and skills about teaching and shared beliefs about the value of the kinds of activities required by the evaluation process. Although our survey results indicated that 84% of participating administrators and 67% of participating teachers believe the EGDC activities would benefit all teachers in their schools, many respondents at our case sites said the required time investment for EGDC participation would be prohibitively high for teachers who don’t value such a process. Four administrators and three teachers suggested that implementation would be far more difficult with other, nonvolunteering teachers. One teacher noted:

There are a lot of teachers who can’t even get their grades into the computer. This would be overwhelming . . .

Another administrator reported:

We have a lot of teachers here who have been teaching for years and years, and they have their own style of teaching. These things that we have now, with strategies . . . and collaborative teaching and rigor, all these things, to some of the older teachers who are used to just standing and lecturing, these things are new, and they’re not used to it. So, you have to gradually mold and shape their behavior and still be respectful . . . Slapping this on them and coming up with all these variables, it’s too much too soon.

LAUSD purposefully built in time to pilot the EGDC to learn more about implementation challenges, and allocated the 2012-13 school year for administrator training and adjusting the program to reflect pilot learnings.

Lesson #2
Be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances.

Although developing a “perfect” system for teacher evaluation and support is a worthwhile goal, tradeoffs are inevitable when budgets are constrained, capacities are uneven, and politics is volatile. The LAUSD experience highlights the need to keep implementation plans flexible to accommodate uncertainties regarding fiscal resources, internal politics, and external pressures.

The capacity constraints outlined above are in part a consequence of the budget environment within LAUSD. The EGDC pilot was introduced during a time of intense fiscal constraint, with diminishing funding at the state and local levels. As a result, across the system teachers and administrators have been asked to do more with fewer resources. Although LAUSD has provided many new resources to enable teachers and administrators to implement the EGDC, the reform arrived at a time when funds were being cut across the district. Administrators at three case sites acknowledged the difficulties of carrying out the EGDC given continued budget reductions. One commented:

What I see is that we’re getting more and more cutbacks and this [the EGDC] takes more and more time, and that this should be our first work. We should be observing teachers every day, as many hours as we can all day long, and giving them feedback, and having two-way communication. But, with . . . less people, we’re running in several different directions when alarms go up.

Teachers in four of five sites identified similar strains and expressed concern about a reform that holds them accountable for performance in a time when they feel that budget issues have diminished
the resources that enable them to do their jobs. As one teacher noted:

It’s as if they want to do something, they want to show people that we’re marching. But, when we’re marching, what are we marching with? I’m looking around and I’m all by myself. . . . and now they’re going to fire more teachers, so now we’re going to have to put more fingers in the dike to prevent the dike from leaking.

The uncertainty surrounding teacher evaluations in LAUSD is amplified by ongoing negotiations with the teachers’ union, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA). Because teacher evaluations are governed in part by the collective bargaining agreement, the union argued that the EGDC could not be implemented until it was negotiated. Teachers, school site administrators, and district leaders all voiced concern that the union had not yet negotiated the new evaluation process; several suggested that the union’s lack of support hurt EGDC participation and contributed to skepticism about its future. One school administrator reported that the union asked teachers not to participate, while another maintained that “union-minded” teachers in the school felt that “. . . this too shall pass.”

Also contributing to uncertainty around teacher evaluation is Jane Doe et al. v. John Deasy et al., a recently decided lawsuit in which the judge sided with plaintiffs and ruled that LAUSD (like most California school districts) is not appropriately implementing the 1971 Stull Act, which mandates regular evaluations of teachers and principals that incorporate students’ progress against state standards. The judgment found that the district was not in compliance with state law because it did not explicitly include student outcomes in summative teacher evaluations. The case was still pending at the time of our interviews, and all five district leaders interviewed voiced concern about the lawsuit. Of paramount concern was that the district would be required to implement a student outcome measure as part of a final evaluation before having an opportunity to adequately refine the EGDC system as a whole. In response to the judge’s order, the district and UTLA are negotiating an agreement that will comply with state law. Negotiations were in progress as of press time.

Lesson #3
Allow time for research and development.

Research and development is the systematic study and improvement of a product or program. Allowing time for such effort is especially critical when developing a comprehensive educational reform such as the EGDC and sustaining its implementation over time. To ensure that the district had time to capitalize on its successes and learn from its challenges, LAUSD added a “research and development year” (2010-11) before pilot implementation to work with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. During that time, they developed the LAUSD Teaching and Learning Framework (and related tools, protocols, and training for classroom observations), the Academic Growth over Time analysis, and other aspects of the system. In addition, LAUSD is devoting the 2012-13 school year to training observers districtwide on the framework and the EGDC process. LAUSD is working with external evaluators—including the authors of this article—and conducting its own data-gathering activities to ensure that it learns from these early years. Unexpected difficulties during implementation may arise—ranging from simple questions to technological hiccups or unrealistic expectations about system capacity—and all must be addressed. To build and maintain stakeholder buy-in and ensure that the system meets the needs of the district and personnel, districts must allow time to learn from initial implementation and further develop the system in a no- or low-stakes setting.

That’s what LAUSD did and as a result we found that participants in the pilot year supported the new system: Eighty-one percent of participating teachers and 89% of participating administrators who responded to our survey said they were glad they had participated in the pilot phase, and over 70% of each group said they believed participating in the pilot was worthwhile “even though it was a lot of work.”

Keep implementation plans flexible to accommodate uncertainties regarding fiscal resources, internal politics, and external pressures.

However, issues did arise during the pilot year. LAUSD’s research and development phase allowed them to implement changes to improve the EGDC process based on this feedback. For instance, administrators and teachers highlighted the need for increased consistency and alignment between the trainings provided to each group, which LAUSD addressed in upcoming training sessions. In addition, survey and case respondents reported having trouble navigating the online system, complaining that entries were deleted or server crashes bounced them from the system. In response, LAUSD upgraded the hardware capacity while also making critical functionality changes to streamline the user experience.
LAUSD also learned the importance of increased communication and transparency, as participants at all levels noted a lack of transparency about various processes and consequences involved with the EGDC. Some of these communication difficulties occurred because the district intended the pilot phase to be a learning period in which several critical elements of the EGDC would be determined based on stakeholder feedback and pilot year outcomes. However, the district was unsuccessful in communicating this intent, which caused confusion among some stakeholders about the intent and activities of the EGDC.

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Perhaps the most significant source of confusion stemmed from the ambiguous connection between teachers' identified needs and targeted support services. One district administrator noted:

I don't think we've done a good enough job on providing links to professional development. Some of it is our own fault of not thinking enough about the communication around support to start. Some of it, I think, is just natural. We live in a time of racing to the top, and you have to fight against that current... That doesn't excuse the fact that I think we could have done, and continue to be called to do, a better job of communicating to teachers... That's part of why I do have a tremendous hope for it. If next year [for 25,000 teachers, if their first experience is actually really instructionally focused and less 'How much does this count in my evaluation?'], then I think we have a different opportunity.

Although LAUSD administrators understood this at the outset, the district's intention to build up the professional development opportunities associated with the EGDC before full implementation of the system was not adequately communicated to all participants. To address this issue, year two of the EGDC rollout (2012-13) is devoted to training administrators on the EGDC, including clearly expressing where the district is in its implementation and what's left to be done. In addition, LAUSD is building a “learning management” system with a menu of professional development options for each focus element in the district's framework. District leaders know such connections will be crucial next year.

The pilot year has also allowed LAUSD to focus its vision for the EGDC and consider how best to shift district culture to embrace the reform. One district leader stated:

I think that the district made a good decision when they decided not to try to implement anything for stakes next year [2012-13] and to spend all of next year developing and making certain that every teacher in the system receives at least the six to eight hours of orientation to the Framework, and that every principal in this system go through the training and be encouraged to continue practicing until they reach a level of mastery that would allow them to do an evaluation for stakes... I think that was a really good decision, and probably an initiative-saving decision.

Overall, the principles underlying the EGDC resonated with certain participating teachers and administrators. “I was encouraged to look at my own practice, and set new goals for myself,” one teacher emphasized. “I felt like I had a particularly effective year, because of my participation... But there [was] too much work involved,” she said.

Conclusion

Efforts like the EGDC represent worthwhile endeavors that strive to increase reflection, produce better information about teaching, and improve professional feedback in schools. But implementing evaluation reforms — and changing the requisite professional behaviors, skills, and values — is a difficult and labor-intensive process. It is vital that the field learn from efforts like the EGDC in LAUSD. Policy makers must be realistic about the capacities of all the stakeholders involved, keep policies flexible for uncertain circumstances, and allow time for authentic learning and change to take hold.