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USING EVALUATION SYSTEMS FOR TEACHER IMPROVEMENT

Are School Districts Ready to Meet New Federal Goals?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA — the main federal education law) was signed into law at the end of 2015, but schools and districts have until the 2017-2018 school year to begin implementing their plans to comply with it. ESSA represents a substantial shift from prior law in how it addresses teacher professional growth and evaluation, and as schools and districts prepare to implement it, it is worth understanding how they may make the best use of their existing investments in those areas. This brief, which draws on data from a large survey of secondary school teachers and principals conducted by MDRC in the spring of 2016, discusses how existing evaluation and support systems could be better used to realize the new law's vision of teacher improvement. The data from the survey suggest that if districts wish to move toward the type of continuous growth opportunities for teachers that ESSA envisions, they could do so by investing in additional training for school leaders; such training would be intended to help them use existing teacher evaluation systems to identify teachers' needs and connect them with professional development opportunities.

A SHIFTING POLICY CONTEXT

Professional Development

ESSA states that professional development should be a sustained endeavor that is embedded in teachers' jobs and that is part of a broader school or district improvement plan. It also says that professional development should "address the educator's specific needs identified in observation," be "developed with extensive participation of" educators, and be "regularly evaluated for

[its] impact on teacher effectiveness.”¹ In contrast, No Child Left Behind (NCLB — the federal education law that ESSA replaced) discussed professional development as activities that improved teacher knowledge, that enabled them to become highly qualified, that were aligned with content standards, and that helped improve instructional strategies.² One way to view the shift from NCLB to ESSA is that ESSA envisions professional development as one part of a process of continuous improvement, whereas NCLB largely defined professional development as a transfer of knowledge to teachers.

Teacher Evaluation

While NCLB itself did not explicitly require teacher evaluations, federal initiatives during the NCLB era — including Race to the Top and NCLB waivers — gave states and districts strong incentives to revamp their teacher evaluation systems.³ As a result, the last decade has seen sharp increases in the number of states in which teachers are evaluated annually, as well as in the number of states that include evidence of student learning in their teacher evaluations.⁴

Although ESSA contains no specific requirements concerning teacher evaluations, the law does allow states and districts to use Title II improvement funds to invest in evaluation systems.⁵ In addition,

because ESSA requires states to ensure that their efforts give disadvantaged students equal access to effective teachers, it is likely that states will continue to use existing systems to document teacher effectiveness.⁶ Finally, ESSA also encourages states and districts to develop career ladders for teachers, and although it does not say so explicitly, it implies that states and districts may use existing evaluation frameworks to identify teachers who would be suited for leadership roles.⁷ For these reasons, the strong teacher evaluation systems that are now widespread are unlikely to disappear. In fact, because many of these systems focus on providing teachers with feedback on their performance, they can also be used to meet ESSA’s new goals.⁸ Additionally, research evidence suggests that when teacher evaluations give teachers information intended to help them grow professionally, students benefit.⁹ In other words, there are many reasons that districts may continue investing in systems to foster professional growth.

Just after ESSA passed, MDRC administered a survey about professional development systems to secondary school principals and teachers in five districts across the country (see Box 1). This brief uses data from the survey to identify areas where districts could improve, and discusses how making those improvements could help them realize ESSA’s vision of professional development and continuous improvement.

1 Government Printing Office (2015).

2 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2015).

3 Race to the Top and NCLB waivers were administrative initiatives undertaken during the Obama administration.

4 National Council on Teacher Quality (2015).

5 Title II improvement funds are federal funds districts can use for system-wide improvements.

They can invest these funds in evaluation systems provided they include multiple measures of teacher performance, including student achievement.

6 Klein (2016).

7 They would do so through the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund grant program, as amended by ESSA.

8 Aldeman (2017).

9 Kraft and Papay (2014); Taylor and Tyler (2012).

BOX 1

THE SURVEY DATA USED IN THIS BRIEF

The surveys described in this brief were administered as part of a research study conducted under the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Innovative Professional Development Challenge. Teachers and principals were asked how often teachers received formal and informal observations and evaluations, and were asked to rate the usefulness of the suggestions and criticisms teachers received as a result.*

The surveys were administered in five school districts — three urban districts and two large, suburban ones — in four states. Nearly all full-time middle and high school classroom teachers and their principals in each of the districts were invited to participate. In total, 6,658 secondary school teachers and 149 principals responded.

Compared with all urban and suburban districts across the country, the districts surveyed were larger and had higher average student-teacher ratios (20:1 rather than 14:1), lower average enrollment of Black students (13 percent rather than 23 percent), higher average enrollment of Hispanic students (40 percent rather than 21 percent), and somewhat higher average enrollment of students eligible for subsidized meals (60 percent rather than 50 percent).† Moreover, since the survey data were collected from districts that were actively addressing teacher development as part of the Gates Foundation's initiative, they may not represent a typical district's progress in transforming existing systems of evaluation or professional development into systems for continuous improvement. While the districts that participated in this survey do not represent urban and suburban districts nationally, the data from these surveys nevertheless provide insight into challenges that many districts may be facing as they try to implement ESSA's new requirements.‡

NOTES: *The survey had very high response rates. The survey was fielded to virtually all regular classroom teachers in almost all secondary schools in each of the five participating districts. The overall response rate for the teacher survey was 86 percent. The overall response rate for the principal survey was 93 percent.

†Comparison data are drawn from the 2014-2015 Common Core of Data.

‡Overall means in this brief are adjusted to account for differing district sizes, but means within districts are presented as raw response means.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Providing Support to School Leaders

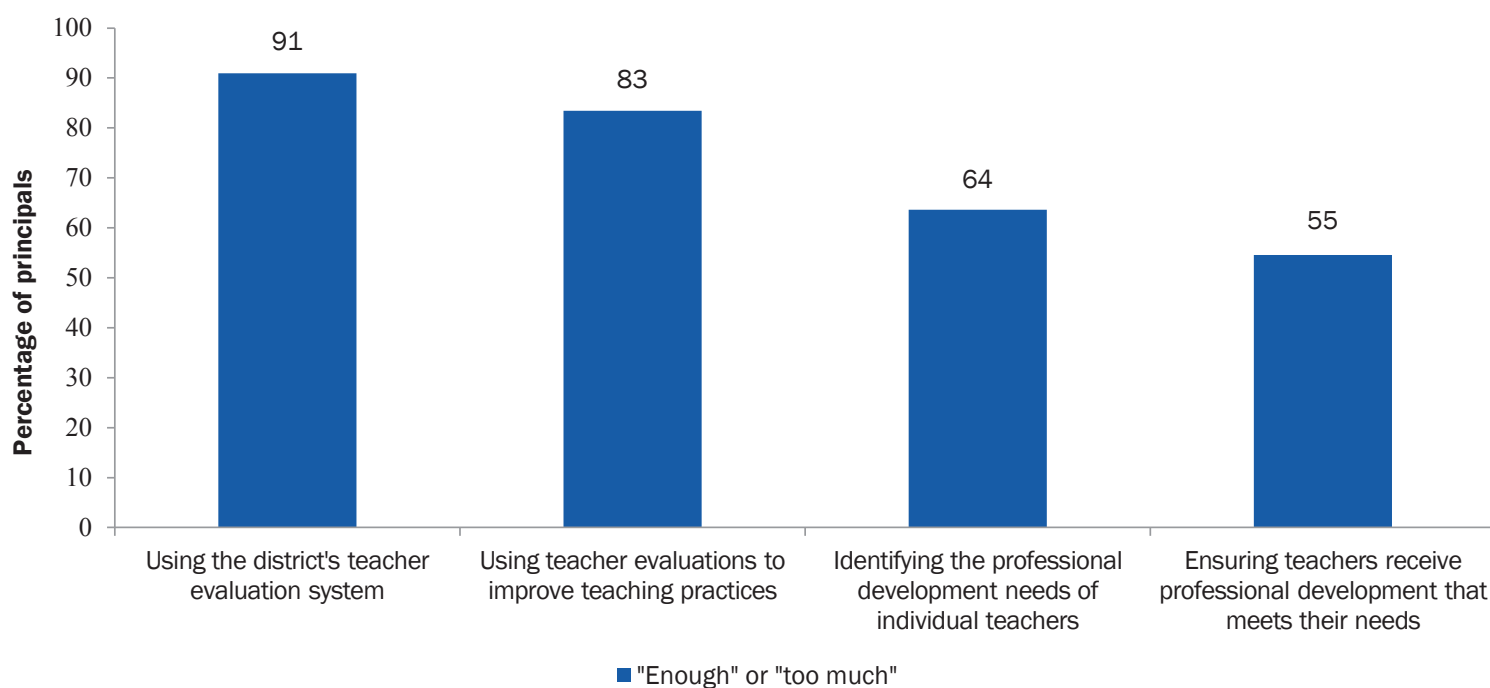
The survey of secondary school principals asked how much assistance they received from districts in a number of areas related to supporting teachers. The findings show that districts have indeed been focusing on evaluation in recent years, and suggest some areas where districts may want to adjust their evaluation models to meet the goals

set out in ESSA. As shown in Figure 1, on average 91 percent of principals in each district reported receiving enough or too much support in using the district's evaluation system. Similarly, an average of 83 percent of principals reported receiving enough or too much support for using teacher evaluations to improve practice.

However, substantially lower proportions of principals reported that they and their leadership teams received enough support to identify teachers'

Figure 1

How much training or support has your school leadership team received from your district in each of the following areas?



SOURCE: iPD school leader 2015-2016 survey.

professional development needs (64 percent) or to ensure that teachers received professional development that met their needs (55 percent). These findings suggest that many districts may not yet be in a good position to meet ESSA's goal of using professional development to facilitate and sustain overall continuous improvement efforts, nor its goal of making professional development respond to teachers' needs. Under ESSA, states may reserve up to 3 percent of their Title II funding to support principals' professional growth.¹⁰ Districts may want to build on the evaluation frameworks they already have in place and use this funding to invest in helping principals identify teachers' needs. Districts may also want to provide advice

on how principals can find professional development opportunities for their teachers to meet those needs.

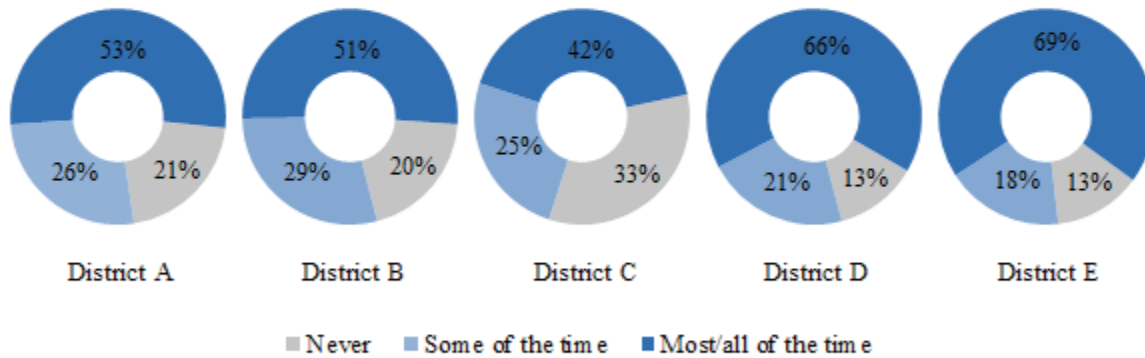
Using Evaluations to Inform Professional Development

The MDRC survey also suggests that principals and teachers have different views of the current relationship between formal evaluations and professional development. An average of 74 percent of principals reported that teachers' formal evaluations had a moderate to large influence on teachers' professional development assignments, but only an average of 36 percent of teachers thought that formal evaluations influenced their professional development to a moderate to large extent. This disparity suggests that there is room

¹⁰ Government Printing Office (2015).

Figure 2

How often did school administrators provide you with useful suggestions for professional development based on observation?



SOURCE: iPD teacher 2015-2016 survey.

to improve communication regarding professional development choices and assignments, and to build teachers' engagement with those choices and assignments. Teachers' interest in and support for changes to professional development systems is crucial if those changes are to be made part of larger school improvement plans.

Further, just as only small majorities of principals said they received enough support to identify teachers' professional development needs or to ensure that teachers received professional development that met their needs, as described above, only small majorities of teachers said that they received useful professional development suggestions. Specifically, while on average 56 percent of teachers said that after being observed in the classroom they received useful professional development suggestions most or all of the time, the range across districts was 42 percent to 69 percent, as shown in Figure 2. Perhaps more telling, an average of 20 percent of teachers overall said they never received useful suggestions for professional development following classroom observations (with a range

across districts from 13 percent to 33 percent). These results indicate that while some districts are using evaluations constructively to advance teachers' knowledge, others are struggling to establish systems that can realize the vision of teacher growth outlined in ESSA.

Principals could also do a better job of giving teachers concrete ideas for improvement based on their formal evaluations. An average of 92 percent of principals reported that they and their leadership teams were either somewhat or very successful at using formal evaluations to give teachers suggestions about how to improve their performance. However, teachers found these suggestions somewhat less useful. On average, only 69 percent of teachers reported receiving constructive criticism from evaluations either most or all of the time, substantially fewer than principals' ratings of their administrations would suggest. Although this percentage still means that a majority of teachers were getting useful suggestions from their evaluation processes, it indicates that there is room for improvement. It is important to ensure that

principals are well equipped for this task, because there is evidence to suggest when principals are trained to provide suggestions to teachers based on structured observations, students do better.¹¹

LOOKING AHEAD

Overall, this survey of secondary school principals and teachers suggests that these districts have achieved the evaluation goals established over the last several years by a variety of education policies. They do have robust evaluation systems in place and the majority of administrators feel prepared to use them. However, they are not necessarily making full use of teacher evaluations as opportunities for teachers to grow. Districts could do more to build on their existing systems and to use evaluations to guide teachers' professional development, fostering a cycle of continual improvement like that envisioned by ESSA. Specifically, districts could provide additional assistance to school leaders to ensure that evaluations yield concrete suggestions for how teachers can improve their practice. In addition, districts should ensure that school leaders are well equipped to identify areas where teachers can grow, and are prepared to connect teachers with learning opportunities that are appropriate to their needs.

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