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Teacher Evaluation and the Problem of Professional Development

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During the past 10 to 15 years, nearly every state and school district across the nation has begun to dramatically overhaul their evaluation systems for teachers. Such evaluation systems are ultimately aimed at improving teachers' instructional practices. However, the evidence on the efficacy and effectiveness of these systems is weak and equivocal at best. One of the major factors associated with the lack of impact of these systems is the troublesome relationship between evaluation and professional development – the opportunities for teachers to learn and improve their practice in response to and beyond the process of evaluation itself. Policies governing teacher evaluation systems tend to make only vague and weak provisions for professional development, and they fail to ensure that these opportunities are of high quality and of value in improving practice. If states are to improve the effectiveness of their teacher evaluation systems, they should make the provision of high quality professional development to all teachers a key element of these systems. Without more attention to professional development as a key complement to evaluation, recently developed teacher evaluation systems will likely fail to improve teachers' practices in the ways theorized by their proponents.

Introduction

Educator evaluation has been undergoing extensive changes during the past 10 to 15 years in nearly every state and school district across the nation. Most states are dramatically overhauling their evaluations systems for both teachers and administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Indeed, evaluations are being developed and implemented at nearly every step of the teaching occupation, from admission to initial preparation programs, to licensure and certification, to on-the-job performance reviews, to tenure decisions, to retention and termination decisions.

The proliferation of state and local policy making in the area of educator evaluation is driven by three related forces (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Kennedy, 2010; Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013). The first is a general consensus that the practice of educator evaluation is in an ineffectual state and has been for a very long time. The second is the strong impetus from the federal level, largely through the U.S. Department of Education's *Race to the Top* initiative that has provided political and financial fuel to revamp evaluation systems. The third is a logic, a "theory-of-action," that new educator evaluation systems will serve as effective instruments for educational improvement. An outgrowth of the current standards and accountability movement, this logic generally follows that educator evaluation systems

can improve practice through a combination of “drivers.” These drivers include the specification of models of presumably efficacious practice to direct performance and the measurement of performance against those models; the incentives of high stakes, that is, tying performance to particular job-related consequences to motivate performance and improvement; and opportunities for learning and improvement for those who do not perform particularly well.

There is an intuitive sensibility to this logic that makes evaluation almost an article of faith in policy making. As Mary Kennedy (2010) observes, it seems that recently, “whenever new problems with teachers are identified, one of the solutions frequently proposed is to introduce a new assessment” (p. 4). However, the evidence on the efficacy of this logic is weak and equivocal at best. Some researchers argue that educator evaluation systems can influence educator behavior, sometimes in unintended and negative ways (Rowan, 1990; Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013). Other researchers contend that evaluation, notably teacher evaluation, has had little meaningful impact. For example, Joseph Murphy and his colleagues (2013) conclude in their review of empirical research that teacher evaluation “for most of the twentieth century had very little influence on much of anything of substance.... The newer, more substantive teacher evaluation systems of the last 15 years have not been shown to power school improvement, as defined in terms of student learning either” (p.350). Still other researchers point to the equivocal nature of the evidence, to the “uncertain” relationship of educator evaluation to quality, performance, and improvement (Kennedy, 2010). This lack of impact and “uncertainty” has been attributed to a number of different factors. One is the misalignment between the design of evaluation systems and understandings of the tasks of teaching and processes of learning to teach and the improvement of practice (Howard & Gullickson, 2010). Other factors include myriad technical shortcomings of most evaluation systems to date, implementation problems, political and legal complexities, and conflicts with the motivational structures of the teaching occupation (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Mitchell, Ortiz, & Mitchell, 1987; Rowan, 1990). One factor most consistently associated with the lack of impact is the troublesome relationship between evaluation and professional development, that is, opportunities for teachers to learn and to improve their practice in response to and beyond the process of evaluation itself.

The purpose of this brief is to examine the issue of professional development in educator evaluation, focusing in particular on teacher evaluation and professional development and on recent state-level teacher evaluation policy. I discuss two dimensions of the issue. The first is what might be called the “weak link problem.” The second is what might be called the “weak quality problem.” The weak link problem is that despite longstanding understanding of the importance of professional development to the efficacy of evaluation as a means of improvement, most teacher evaluation systems, including those developed within the past decade, give professional development short shrift, make vague and weak provisions for professional development, or leave it to individual teachers or their schools and school districts to make such linkages themselves. The weak quality problem is that even if evaluation systems were to stipulate links to opportunities for professional learning and development, those opportunities may be of poor quality and thus of little value in improving practice. Indeed, few if any teacher evaluation policies also attempt to address the weak

quality problem by concurrently seeking improvement in professional development. In short, the matter of evaluation and professional development is not only a problem of linking evaluation to opportunities for professional development but also a problem of the quality of the professional development opportunities to which evaluation may be linked.

The next section examines arguments and evidence of the importance of the relationship between teacher evaluation and professional development for improvement. Following that discussion, the weak link problem is explored looking at examples of recent state teacher evaluation systems as illustrations. Illinois' Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) of 2011 is used as an illustration of this problem at work. This is followed by an examination of the weak quality problem looking in particular at the state of professional development opportunities available generally to teachers. The brief concludes with several recommendations to address both the weak link and the weak quality problems.

The Importance of Professional Development to Evaluation

Evaluation as a stand-alone policy process is unlikely to have much effect. It is by itself a “weak lever” for significant and meaningful improvement of teacher performance and practice. This is the conclusion that is seen repeatedly in the literature on teacher evaluation (Mitchell, Ortiz, & Mitchell, 1987; Rowan, 1990). Why might this be the case? The answer lies in the relationship between evaluation and the related opportunities that teachers have to learn, develop, and improve.

Evaluation is seen as most effective when it is part of what Linda Darling-Hammond calls a strong “teaching and learning system” that supports continuous improvement of individual teachers, groups of teachers, and the teaching occupation as a whole (Darling-Hammond, 2013). According to Darling-Hammond (2013), such a system would bring evaluation and opportunities for teacher learning together with other elements into an integrated whole to promote teachers' performance and improvement at every stage of their careers. She writes:

[I]t is important to link both formal professional development and job-embedded learning opportunities to the evaluation system. Evaluation alone will not improve practice. Productive feedback must be accompanied by opportunities to learn. Evaluations should trigger continuous goal-setting for areas teachers want to work on, specific professional development supports and coaching, and opportunities to share expertise, as part of recognizing teachers' strengths and needs. (p. 99)

Similar arguments have been made by others to embed evaluation in a broader coherent “infrastructure” of teacher learning, improvement, and accountability across the career span (Moss, 2010; Cohen, 2010). Murphy and his colleagues conclude from their review of research on effective schools and school improvement that administrators' best “leverage” for promoting instructional improvement at the school level is to make evaluation part of several “bundles” of actions that emphasize the “facilitative” functions of leadership rather than simply the “supervisory and control” functions (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013). These bundles would include attention to providing actionable feedback, creating contexts

for collective work, and “creating systems in which teachers have the opportunity to routinely develop and refine their skills” (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013, p. 352).

The importance of linking evaluation and professional development can be seen in various national research-based guidelines and models for designing effective teacher evaluation policies and programs. For example, among the eight key components of effective comprehensive teacher evaluation models identified by the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders of the American Institutes of Research is “alignment with professional development” (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders [GTL], 2013b). In its practical guide to designing comprehensive teacher evaluation systems, the Center argues for the need to design “an aligned teacher evaluation and professional learning system” (GTL, 2013a). It concludes that “providing job-embedded, ongoing, individualized, and collaborative professional learning and support is necessary for teacher evaluation to have positive impacts on teacher practice.” We discuss the types of professional development that may be most conducive to teacher improvement later in this brief.

Research on school improvement and improvement of classroom instruction draws similar conclusions (Smylie & Perry, 1998). Most often, individual and organizational improvement is best accomplished through strategic combinations of multiple “levers” or mechanisms of change, combinations that are best suited to improvement objectives and to the persons and contexts involved. These levers include incentives, accountability controls such as standards and evaluations, and opportunities for learning and development. For example, in their review of research on major school improvement designs, Mark Smylie and George Perry (1998) found that those that were the most successful embodied combinations of these levers and notably each included opportunities for learning and development. In a subsequent study of school improvement in Chicago elementary schools, Smylie and his colleagues found that schools that were the most successful in initiating and sustaining improvement at the organizational and classroom levels employed at least two if not three of these types of levers in strategic combination (Smylie, Wenzel, & Fendt, 2003). Schools that relied on only one, whether it be accountability or development, failed to make meaning improvement. If improvement was triggered it did not last very long without additional levers, particularly development levers.

The Weak Link Problem

According to Howard and Gullickson (2013), one of the primary “threats” to the potential of teacher evaluation to improve teaching is the lack of connection to professional development. This is, as described in the introduction, the weak link problem.

It is difficult to determine the extent of the weak link problem. There are few studies of the specifics of teacher evaluation policies and practices and teachers’ experiences with them. One such study, a national survey of more than 1,000 teachers across the country, found that only a quarter of teachers considered their most recent formal evaluations useful and effective (Duffet, Farkas, Rotherham, & Silva, 2008). A primary reason for such dissatisfaction is provided by another study of experiences of a group of teachers associated

with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards with their districts' teacher evaluation policies (Accomplished California Teachers, 2010, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2013). These teachers reported that these policies focused little on how to improve classroom practice. They observed that these policies were rarely used to help teachers access opportunities for professional learning development to address their particular needs.

In general, provisions for learning and development in teacher education policy, beyond the learning that might occur through the specification of standards and models of instruction embodied therein, include: provisions that are narrowly focused on improving poorly performing teachers; feedback to these teachers in the forms of scores and reports, post-observation conferencing, and coaching; and professional development plans developed with a teacher's supervisor. While such plans could be shaped in any number of ways, they are generally tailored to address weaknesses identified by the evaluation. However, there are several potential problems and limitations of such provisions. By focusing mostly on teachers who perform poorly on an evaluation, these provisions do not aim professional development opportunities on the large and remaining group of teachers who have performed at least "well enough." As a result, this latter group of teachers is left out of potential professional development. By focusing on individual teachers who perform poorly, the provisions also fail to support collective learning among teachers. The provisions accordingly contribute more to individual teacher improvement than school-wide improvement. Moreover, potential problems with the quality and accuracy of evaluation reports weaken their potential as a source of teacher information and learning. Similarly, supervisors responding to teacher evaluations may have limited capabilities, commitments, time, and preparation to engage in post-conferencing and coaching effectively.

Illinois' PERA concretely illustrates the weak link problem (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011). PERA includes provisions for professional development only for teachers rated as "needing improvement" or "unsatisfactory." A district is required to develop and commence a 90-school day remediation plan designed to correct deficiencies for any teacher with an unsatisfactory rating. Moreover, school districts are provided with the discretion, but not required, to attach personal growth plans to their own locally-development evaluation plans. While professional development/remediation plans can last for up to two school years, there is no required duration of a plan.¹ Indeed, professional development is only weakly tied to teacher evaluation under PERA, and it is targeted only at individual teachers who have failed to perform adequately. Moreover, the law says very little about the quality of the professional development opportunities available to teacher that follow from evaluations, which is characterized as the weak quality problem.

The Weak Quality Problem

Just as some state teacher evaluation policies include some type of link to professional development, some policies also attempt to address the weak quality problem. However,

¹ In some cases, the length of professional development plans may be capped at less than two years if restricted by local collective bargaining agreements.

these efforts are rather narrow and pertain primarily to particular provisions in the evaluation policies themselves. For example, some plans require that evaluators or supervisors who will conduct evaluations receive training in conveying evaluation results, helping poorly performing teachers develop professional development or remediation plans, and perhaps in providing coaching to beginning teachers or to poorly performing veteran teachers to address weaknesses identified in their evaluations. This is generally how far current state evaluation policies go to address the weak quality problem. Beyond such provisions, poorly performing teachers and beginning teachers who may be specifically identified in evaluation policies as subject to post-evaluation professional development are left with opportunities for professional learning and improvement that are routinely available in their schools and school districts. So too are all other teachers who seek to relate evaluation to professional learning and improvement.

The condition of such professional development opportunities is not good. Historically, professional development has been characterized as a “waster of time,” “ill-conceived,” “ineffective,” and an exercise that often leaves teachers more cynical and no more knowledgeable or committed than before (Smylie, Allensworth, Greenberg, Harris, & Luppescu, 2001, p.7-8). This critique is reflected in surveys of teachers on their experiences with professional development, who report in large proportions that professional development opportunities provided by their schools and school districts are among their least valuable sources of learning and not particularly useful for addressing classroom problems (Smylie, 1989; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Recent surveys of the professional development activities experienced by teachers show them to be a “patchwork of opportunities—formal and informal, mandatory and voluntary, serendipitous and planned” (Drury & Baer, 2011, p. 273). Although most teachers participate in some kind of professional development each year, most of what they experience is not designed for “powerful professional learning” (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 60). Most professional development opportunities that teachers experience consist of formal short-term or one-shot workshops, conferences, and training sessions. Intensity and duration of learning experiences are low. Very few teachers have the opportunity to study any aspect of teaching for more than a day or two. Summing up their study of professional development, Darling-Hammond and her colleagues conclude: “Short workshops of the sort found to trigger little change in practice are the most common learning opportunity for U.S. teachers” (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009, p. 102).

We have known better for a long time. There is a long-standing body of research and a related consensus view that identifies the qualities and characteristics of effective professional development for teachers and that can guide policy and practice. These qualities and characteristics can be seen in guidelines for effective professional development presented more than 55 years ago by the National Society for the Study of Education (Parker, 1957). As more recently summarized by Ruth Wei and her colleagues, research contains lessons about the content, processes, and contexts for effective professional learning that can improve teaching practice and student learning (Wei et al., 2009, pp. 3, 6, 9, 13; see also Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001).

1. Content of professional development should focus on concrete tasks of teaching rather than abstract discussions of teaching, on specific pedagogical skills, and on how to teach specific kinds of content to learners.
2. Processes of professional development should be designed to according to how teachers learn. Particularly effective processes include modeling, constructing opportunities for practice, and reflection on new practices. Active learning around real problems of practice is key. Learning experiences are best when sustained and intensive and focused on the work of teaching. Continuous dialog in professional community and examination of teaching practice and student performance can also be effective in developing and enacting more effective practices.
3. Professional development is most effective if it is a coherent part of a larger school improvement effort. Curriculum, student assessments, standards, and teacher professional development should be linked into a coherent system of learning and improvement. The best learning occurs in job-embedded, collaborative community contexts, rather than simply in formal events (e.g., courses, workshops, conferences, etc.). These professional community contexts exist both within the school and beyond it.

This research has been translated into national standards for high quality professional development. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) issued standards in 1994 and 1995 for middle level educators and elementary school educators respectively and reissued a combined set of standards in 2001 (National Staff Development Council, 1994, 1995, 2001). In 2011, Learning Forward, the renamed NSDC, issued a third iteration of the standards (Learning Forward, 2011). An outline of these standards appears in Appendix 1. Yet, despite the research evidence and its translation into national standards to guide design and implementation, the practice of professional development, by all counts, remains generally ineffectual and particularly inadequate as a follow-up to evaluation.

Recommendations for Improving the Relationship between Evaluation and Professional Development

This analysis suggests three recommendations for improving the relationship between teacher evaluation and professional development, and thus for increasing the likelihood that teacher evaluation will contribute to individual teacher improvement and indeed whole school improvement. These recommendations address both the “weak link problem” and the “weak quality problem” of the current relationship between evaluation and professional development.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen links to professional development within teacher evaluation systems.

Evaluation systems should not only be linked to student learning standards, rigorous curriculum, and efficacious models of instruction on the “front end.” Evaluation systems should also be linked to viable and efficacious means of teacher professional development on the “back end.” Together, these linkages should form a “system” of coherent procedural and

substantive relationships among the goals of evaluation (as expressed by the implementation of curricula and models of instruction in the pursuit of learning outcomes), evaluation designs and processes, and means of teacher learning and improvement.

The information generated by evaluations should drive individual teacher and whole-staff learning and improvement. All teachers, not simply beginning teachers and those who might perform poorly on evaluations, should be part of this system. Evaluation policies, as many do now, should specify intensive, individual means of support for beginning teachers and for those teachers who perform poorly (e.g., professional development and remediation plans, individual coaching, etc.). But if evaluation systems are to contribute more widely to school improvement, all teachers, regardless of how well they perform, should be required to develop professional development goals and plans for achieving them. These goals and plans could have individual components to them (e.g., areas of practice that each teacher might want or need to develop further). And they may be idiosyncratic according to teachers' particular learning and improvement needs and objectives. However, so that these individual development efforts "add up" to something greater—such as whole school improvement—individual teachers' professional development plans should be linked to and embedded within school-level improvement planning and initiatives. These links can be specified in evaluation policy and administrative regulations.

Recommendation 2. Improve the quality of professional learning and development opportunities for teachers.

This recommendation addresses the "weak quality" problem of professional development generally and professional development specifically linked to teacher evaluation. As the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders contends, states and districts must stop providing fragmented, discrete, and ultimately ineffective workshops. Instead, they should provide sustained, coherent, and meaningful professional learning opportunities for teachers; these opportunities should be aligned to teacher evaluations to provide a shared understanding of effective practices, provide evidence-based feedback to teachers, and include measures for teacher learning and collaboration throughout the evaluation process (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, 2013a). The Center also stresses that professional learning activities themselves should be evaluated for their effectiveness, moving beyond "simple evaluation" toward an ongoing analysis of quality of learning opportunities and teacher participation, support, and outcomes related to student achievement. It concludes: "Investing in the technical infrastructure to collect, link, and analyze professional development and teacher evaluation results over time may improve the overall effectiveness of professional learning efforts" (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, 2013a).

States can do a number of things to strengthen the quality of professional learning and development. Inasmuch as states have already adopted standards for student learning and professional practices of both teachers and administrators, it is a short step to also adopt and enforce standards for professional development. As discussed earlier in this brief, there is substantial agreement in research about the characteristics of effective teacher professional development, characteristics that follow from understandings of how teachers learn to teach

and how individual and organizational change occurs. Moreover, there exist recognized national standards that embody these characteristics that can readily be adopted as state and district policy and incorporated into teacher evaluation policy (Learning Forward, 2011). Indeed, as of one fairly recent count, 40 states had adopted, adapted, or endorsed the 2001 standards of the National Staff Development Council (Wei et al., 2009). The challenge has come in influencing practice to reflect the standards. This leads to the third recommendation.

Recommendation 3. Build school and district capacity, motivation, and accountability to provide high quality professional development.

It is not enough to simply strengthen links between teacher evaluation and professional development and to adopt standards to specify the qualities and characteristics of that professional development. Schools and districts must have the capabilities and the incentives to develop and enact professional development opportunities of such qualities and characteristics, in other words, to change the practice of professional development in more promising directions. And they must be held accountable for doing so.

A perennial question in educator professional development is: If the characteristics and qualities of effective professional development have been known for so long, why has there been so little change in the prevailing inadequate and ineffective practice of professional development? The short answer is that states and school districts have never made sufficient investments in, developed the capabilities for, or been motivated or held accountable for making such change on a systematic basis. At least since the 1980s and certainly in the past 15 years, improving the quality and effectiveness of educator learning and development has not achieved the level of attention and imperative in education policy as specification, accountability, and control as drivers of improvement. Indeed, without a concurrent emphasis on capacity development, these drivers have failed to deliver with any consistency on their promises (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013).

There is no reason why this lack of emphasis on development needs to continue. If opportunities for teacher learning and development are a crucial part of a system of instructional and school improvement, states can create different ways to enhance the capacity, provide the incentives, and introduce the accountability mechanisms to make high quality professional development in schools and school districts both a higher priority and a reality (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

Inadequate financial resources will certainly be an issue in many schools and school districts. Additional funding from states and school districts may be warranted. High quality professional development is not without costs. And even though in total the amount of money is substantial, the proportions of budgets and the per capita amounts of money spent on teacher professional development is low in comparison to what is spent in business and industry to develop personnel (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Smylie et al., 2001). It should be noted that schools and school districts already spend substantial amounts of money on professional development activities that, as discussed earlier in this brief, are not very useful. In addition to new funding, states can encourage schools and school districts

to stop spending money on professional development activities that are unlikely to bear fruit and to reallocate funds toward more efficacious activities. This may be difficult, not only because it requires a shift in mindset about the provision of professional development, but because it may challenge strong, entrenched political and economic interests that have developed around its provision (Rowan, 2002).

Beyond allocating financial resources, one of the most efficacious things that states can do is to increase the capacity and motivation of district and school-level leadership to provide high quality professional development to teachers. There should be an investment in the development of administrative leadership to organize and lead effective professional development. This investment can come from a number of sources, including more emphasis on professional development in the preservice preparation of administrators and the certification and licensure processes for administrators. Moreover, administrator preparation programs could be held accountable for making a focus on teacher professional development a condition of accreditation. There could be several more development programs for administrators that focus on the professional development of teachers, including issues such as the creation of organizational conditions in schools conducive to effective professional development.

There are potential levers that policymakers can use outside of reforms focusing on administrators. For example, policies could be created to improve teacher leadership for designing and leading professional development, coaching, and mentoring. More attention could be devoted to preparing and managing the evaluators and supervisors who develop and administer the learning opportunities for teachers that are specified under evaluation plans. Policymakers could encourage the development of job-embedded learning opportunities in schools and districts, thereby making professional learning part of work. Furthermore, policymakers could encourage the development of professional learning communities among teachers and structure policies to encourage schools to function as organizations focused on continuous improvement. Statutory provisions could be crafted that require professional development for teachers to be a key element of the evaluation of administrators and teacher leaders, as well as evaluators and supervisors for teacher evaluation. In short, professional development should be structured as a critical complement to evaluation, not simply an afterthought.

Conclusion

Although most states are currently developing or implementing teacher evaluation systems, such systems suffer from a number of problems. The lack of attention to professional development in relation to these systems is one of the most serious problems. Policies governing teacher evaluation systems tend to make only vague and weak provisions for professional development, and they fail to ensure that these opportunities are of high quality and of value in improving practice. If states are to improve the effectiveness of their teacher evaluation systems, they should make the provision of high quality professional development to all teachers a key element of these systems. Without more attention to professional development as a key complement to evaluation, recently developed teacher evaluation

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Appendix

Standards for Professional Learning, 2011: An Outline

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students:

- Occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.
- Requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.
- Integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.
- Aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.
- Requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.
- Uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluation professional learning.
- Applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change. (Learning Forward, 2011)