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# TEACHER EVALUATION IN MICHIGAN

## The Problem

Valuable and meaningful professional feedback is one of the cornerstones of growth as a person and as a professional. In healthy workplaces, there are clear and common standards of performance. Employees are regularly evaluated against these standards and provided with timely feedback to help them improve. Not only are employees helped by this information, but so, too, are societies that use it to improve whole professions, such as doctors, scientists and professionals.

Michigan educators, parents and policymakers are being cheated out of this sort of feedback. Not only is this a disservice to thousands of individual teachers who are denied the opportunity to improve their practice, but it also hurts thousands of students in our state. A teacher's effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor controlled by school systems, including class size, school size and the quality of after-school programs – or even which school a student is attending.<sup>1</sup>

Today, there are new methods to understand how well educators are teaching their students, and what areas they need help on to grow. But in Michigan, current law and policies are unclear and unhelpful to school districts. Without greater state leadership and guidance, school districts are likely to perpetuate a useless patchwork of systems, some good, some not so good. Teachers, parents, and policymakers also will be left with no assurance that evaluation results are trustworthy or comparable. They won't know, for example, if their school district's teacher quality and classroom learning quality are better than other districts. Parents and students deserve honest, reliable and comparative information about how well their schools and teachers are educating their children.

Other states are moving forward on improving their teacher evaluation systems, using new and powerful tools to identify the strengths of individual teachers as well as the areas in which teachers need support. Since a teacher's first priority is

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<sup>1</sup> Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement," *Econometrica*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (March 2005), pages 417-458.  
<http://edpro.stanford.edu/Hanushek/admin/pages/files/uploads/teachers.econometrica.pdf>



growing student learning, states that are improving their evaluation systems are building measures of student learning growth into those systems. Often called “value-added,” these measures of student growth track how much a teacher’s students learn between the beginning and the end of a school year. Leading states, such as Colorado and Delaware, are combining value-added data with other measures of student learning growth, improved classroom observations, and—in many cases—student or parent surveys to dramatically improve their evaluation and coaching systems to improve their teaching quality.

Michigan must move quickly to take advantage of these tools and lessons. Indeed, without modernizing our state’s evaluation system, a whole host of other education reforms will be imperiled. This spring, for example, Governor Rick Snyder proposed modernizing teacher tenure and lay-off policies by basing them more on performance. However, it is unclear what measure of “performance” or “effective teaching” the state expects districts to use.

Sadly, this problem is not new. It dates back to 2009, when state legislators passed legislation that was supposed to address the issue. Instead, leaders pushed the problem on to budget-strapped local districts, many of which lack the capacity, expertise and resources to do it well. Starting Fall of 2011, districts are charged with creating their own evaluation systems.

To modernize and improve our state’s teacher evaluation system, we’ll have to acknowledge uneven capacity among our districts, and put politics and special interests aside to come together quickly around a common sense set of policy reforms that can greatly improve teaching and learning. Good teaching is too important to our children’s future to leave this to chance.

## **Fixing Michigan Law**

Here are some of Michigan’s problems with reliable teacher evaluation – and the reasons why and how Michigan law needs to be changed:

**1. Unreliable State Test:** Presently, Michigan’s state assessment is administered in the Fall, which means it measures the learning that has occurred under two different teachers – one in the previous school year and one in the new school year. That is not a good way to measure the impact of individual teachers.



***Solution:*** Michigan needs to move its Fall assessment to the Spring, which would allow it to more accurately assess what students have learned over the course of the school year. Spring testing also is a national norm today and an accepted best practice.

**2. No Definition of What Effective Teaching Is in Michigan:** Teachers and school leaders – like other professions – need clear goals to work toward, and what excellence looks like. This will advance Michigan’s teaching profession and help the public understand how challenging great teaching really is – and why it should be valued, respected and well-funded.

***Solution:*** Leading states, such as Colorado, are taking months to define what good teaching looks like. Michigan needs to do this, as well. Our teachers and students deserve this worthwhile investment.

**3. No State-Wide Standards for Evaluating Teachers:** Michigan law is so ambiguous, it gives wide variation on what student growth is measured and how; and allows for many interpretations of what measures should be used for measuring student growth and even how to interpret what makes up a good evaluation system. School districts may use whatever evaluation that they want and set any standard they choose. Districts would have incentive to set their bars low so that their students and teachers look like they are performing well. And the state will have no comparable information about teaching quality and student learning growth – meaning students and parents won’t know how they are really being served in their schools and communities.

***Solution:*** Michigan needs a state-wide definition of what effective teaching looks like, and protocols and standards for all districts to meet if they decide to develop their own evaluation system. This ensures all students are well-served, and parents get honest information about how their schools are really doing – while preserving the tradition of local innovation for districts that want to develop their own evaluation models.

**4. No Voluntary Model for Districts that Need or Want One:** Good, reliable evaluation systems based on student growth data are costly – and they take



resources and expertise that few districts can readily access. States have the resources to pilot test evaluation models, too, to ensure they are fair and reliable. By making such a model voluntary, state policies can ensure they provide flexibility and respect for local autonomy and innovation.

***Solution:*** State leaders should work with the philanthropic and higher education community to find the resources and expertise needed to develop a sophisticated, thoughtful and reliable state-wide evaluation that can be voluntarily adopted by districts.

## **Michigan's Pathway to Strong Evaluation**

State officials must provide leadership on this critical issue. To improve teacher quality, Michigan school districts need help defining effective teaching, and creating parameters for good local evaluations, among other changes. What follows is a roadmap to assist state lawmakers, the Governor, education leaders and parent activists as they work to address this situation.

**Michigan leaders should immediately:**

**1. Establish minimum statewide requirements for local evaluation systems, including:**

- All teachers should be evaluated every year.
- Evaluations should be based upon multiple measures, including—at the very least—classroom observations by principals and/or expert peers and measures of student learning growth.
- There should be four ratings categories, such as highly effective, effective, minimally effective and ineffective.
- At least 45 percent of the rating should be based on student learning growth, and at least 40 percent on classroom observations. Up to 15 percent could be based on surveys of students and parents, professional contributions, or other important measures.



- During the initial years of the new evaluation system, while state and local leaders build better systems for measuring student growth, the weight on student growth should be phased in, expanding to 25 percent for the 2013-14 school year, and increasing to 50 percent by the 2014-15 school year.

**2. Require the State Board of Education to move its assessment date to the Spring and to establish procedures for verifying the student-teacher link.**

The current Fall testing date makes it nearly impossible to use state assessments for measuring growth at the teacher level. Moving that date to the Spring will fix that problem and bring our practice in line with that of other states. It is also critical that the Michigan Department of Education be directed to adopt procedures that allow teachers to verify that they have actually taught the students for whom they will be held accountable. This, too, will bring us in line with the practice of leading states.

**3. Establish a Governor’s Council on Educator Effectiveness to assist the Governor and the Michigan Department of Education in fulfilling their responsibilities to help districts develop and implement high quality evaluation.**

Leading states like Colorado have established statewide councils to bring together experts and stakeholders, and to iron out the details that go into creating a high-quality state evaluation framework. Michigan should appoint such a council and house it in the Governor’s office to demonstrate its importance. The council should include a balance of experts on teacher evaluation and value-added growth, and stakeholders including representatives of students, parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and business and civic leaders. It should be tasked with the following immediate goals:

- **Define standards for good teaching.** The Governor’s Council should establish a common definition of what effective teaching looks like in Michigan. This important first step in creating a collective understanding of good teaching needn’t take long. There are several good models available from other states and organizations.
- **Define the “what” and “how much” of student achievement to include.** There are a wide variety of approaches to measuring “value-added” on state assessments. The council should review these and agree on one that is best for Michigan. To supplement growth data from state assessments, the council



should provide guidance to the Michigan Department of Education—and, through them, to local school districts-- about which additional sources of student achievement data districts could use for teachers in tested subject areas and grade-levels, as well as in non-tested subjects and grade-levels. Guidance should also be provided regarding the extent to which these sources should count in the evaluation system.

- **Create a voluntary default evaluation model that districts may adapt or use.** That model should include all necessary classroom observation tools, methods for measuring growth, student and parent surveys, and implementation training modules.
- **Advise on coaching and other supports to help teachers bring their practice in line with Michigan’s new teaching standards.** Better evaluation doesn’t accomplish much unless it is tied to meaningful opportunities to improve. The council should provide research-based ideas and advice on how to achieve this, especially in a tight fiscal environment.

**4. Charge the State Board of Education and the Michigan Department of Education with assisting local school districts to modernize their evaluation systems.** As the council completes its recommendations, the State Board and State Department of Education should:

- Adopt new teaching standards.
- Produce teacher-level data on student growth for every teacher in tested subjects and grade levels, and provide that data to teachers, as well as to their principals and superintendents.
- Issue guidance and provide tools on other measures of achievement to supplement MEAP growth data. For example, leading states are creating banks of approved evaluation measures that districts may select from for analyzing growth in non-tested subjects.
- Provide tools for a default evaluation system to districts that wish to use it.



- Develop training for all districts in the new evaluation framework. Research shows the validity and reliability of teacher evaluation goes up significantly when evaluators—either principals or master teachers—are properly trained.

**5. Make sure that the Governor’s Council and education department officials have the resources they need to do this job—and do it right.** State leaders need to invest public dollars in this work. The business community, civic leaders and philanthropic community also can help, especially in funding the work of the Governor’s Council, as well as training for local education leaders and evaluators. The council will need at least one or two – and probably more -- full-time staff members to do its work.

**6. Require district and state officials to use the results of evaluation to improve education in our state.** Better evaluation is important in its own right: that is, employees have a right to clear standards of performance and frequent opportunities for feedback on how they are doing. Many people improve just with better feedback. But to bring about real improvements in the education of all of Michigan’s students, we will need to go further. At minimum, the legislature should insist on the following:

- **Use changes in the results over time to assure that teachers who don’t perform well get the support they need to improve.** The state can monitor this in two different but mutually reinforcing ways: by measuring differences among schools and districts in terms of whether and how much teachers are improving, and by surveying teachers on their supports. Districts should be expected to improve on these measures each year.
- **Use the results to make sure that all children have fair access to effective teachers.** Local districts should be required to work to eliminate the teacher assignment inequities commonly found within many Michigan school districts today. Schools on the more affluent side of town typically have far more effective teachers than those on the impoverished side. The legislature should ban outright the disproportionate assignment of ineffective teachers to any of the state’s lowest performing schools. In addition, the legislature should require districts to report any inequities across high- and





low-poverty and/or high- and low-minority schools. They must also show how they plan to remedy these inequities and report on their progress over time.

- **Use the evaluation results in the tenure process.** As is being considered in proposals currently under review by the legislature, new teachers should have to demonstrate effectiveness through strong evaluations before being granted tenure.
- Using the results in lay-offs and dismissals. This, too, is under consideration by the legislature.

Pilot testing of the voluntary state evaluation model could be done by the 2013-2014 school year. A full roll-out of the model – for those districts that want to opt in to use it -- should be done by the 2014-2015. We have laid out a more specific timeline and deadlines to state policymakers.

## **Conclusion**

If Michigan's leaders are serious about improving our schools, we need to do evaluation well—and we need to get moving. Leaving local school districts to figure this out for themselves will leave us with a useless patchwork of systems—some good, some terrible—and with no assurance for parents that teacher effectiveness is taken seriously. In a country that has slipped far behind other nations in student achievement, and in a state where achievement is dropping, relative to other states, Michigan's lack of action on this front is hurting our collective goal of improving the state's future. Michigan leaders need to step up, and get to work.