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DCPS Teacher Evaluation System – Comparison with Montgomery County

As a parent of a DCPS student from Pre-K to now an 11th grader, an education policy analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, but most importantly as someone who helped to create the teacher evaluation system in Montgomery County, I have been a keen observer of DCPS' efforts to create a new teacher evaluation system. I was a high school teacher and then the elected teachers' union president in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) between 1997 and 2003. I was one of the architects of the MCPS professional growth system, including a new teacher evaluation system and Peer Assistance and Review program. MCPS has been recognized as one of the best teacher evaluation programs in the nation.

Contrasting Approaches

On the surface, there are similarities between MCPS and the new DC IMPACT model. Some of the verbiage used in IMPACT and the Teaching and Learning Framework is borrowed from other models like that used in Montgomery County. Both have Master Educators play a significant role, with a second opinion to that of principals. In MCPS we call them Consulting Teachers. Both include a rubric as a short-cut list of descriptors of accomplished versus sub-standard teaching. But in how the two systems are perceived by teachers and principals, and the culture they create around teaching and learning, DCPS and MCPS could hardly be more different.

The first thing to understand is that ***One of the most important tasks of a teacher evaluation system is that it be respected as a process by the teaching workforce and the principals and others who must implement it. If it doesn't have credibility as a process, if teachers don't respect the approach and what they learn from it, if it is perceived as arbitrary or unfair, it fails.***

I want to focus on four ways that the DCPS and MCPS systems couldn't be more different and as a result cause ours in DCPS to have lost the credibility it needs with the workforce. In summary these are:

- Joint design of the whole system – In MCPS the union is a partner in the design, implementation and evaluation from start to finish
- Training of all teachers and deep training of all evaluators – Research for Better Teaching was our partner in MCPS.
- A high degree of credibility for those tasked with providing assistance and judging teaching, our master educators – In MCPS “consulting teachers” are well respected peers and the role carefully designed and overseen
- Checks on the system to ensure that it is evaluating teachers fairly – MCPS builds due process into the system at many levels with ultimate decisions made by an independent panel

1. The union in Montgomery County co-chaired the steering process during the design stage, co-manages the peer review process, and co-chairs the evaluation process for the whole professional growth system. This is one reason the approach taken has so much credibility with the workforce. The Peer Assistance and Review program is run by the PAR Panel, made up of teacher and principal representatives, selected by their unions. The superintendent can overrule the PAR panel, but never has. And the PAR Panel members are selected by their organizations to have maximum credibility as teachers, principals and spokespeople for the profession.
2. In MCPS the heart of the system is the training that principals, consulting teachers and all classroom teachers receive. There is a theory about what constitutes good teaching that underlies the whole system. Designed by "Research for Better Teaching," the book *The Skillful Teacher* is read by all teachers and administrators. It communicates a language for how we talk about the knowledge base, and the craft of teaching is respected and studied.

Teachers in MCPS rest assured that there's no cookie cutter approach. RBT's Jon Saphier, who trained us, points out that there are 50 ways to teach the same group of students well. We just have to be able to describe what is good and what is missing in the professional judgments each teacher chooses on any given day. Saphier does an exercise with principals and teachers in which he provides three cases, one, a teacher with high student test scores and awful teaching practices, one with low student scores and wonderful teaching strategies, and one somewhere in between. The point is that there is no shortcut to judging teaching competence – no specific practices everyone must use, and test scores must be considered in context.

So in MCPS, no one presumes to pass judgment on the professional expertise of a teacher without mastering that common theory and language. Teaching is rocket-science and in MCPS teachers feel that the craft is respected by the system designed to critique it.

3. Consulting teachers are all selected from within the school district in Montgomery County. They are known by teachers and principals as exemplary, and they have all received at least 12 credit hours in studying skillful teaching and observing and analyzing teaching. They become master communicators about the craft. They may only serve for three years and then must go back to a teaching position. They are selected by the Peer Assistance and Review panel, are evaluated by it, and they approach the work as teachers, helping other teachers. In DCPS, the opposite approach was taken. Master Educators were hired primarily from outside DCPS. They come to the schools as representatives of downtown. They received very little training, were assumed to know good teaching when they saw it, and use the simple rubric as their guide for matching teaching practice with a numeric grade.

4. In MCPS checks and balances are built into the system. Each teacher new to teaching or having difficulty is observed and evaluated by both their principal and a consulting teacher. The principal, the consulting teacher, or the teacher him or herself may appeal a decision. The jointly run PAR panel hears all appeals. Before the new system virtually no teachers were removed for performance reasons. Since its inception a decade ago, approaching 500 have been removed or left voluntarily under the new system.

But the point of the system is not to remove teachers. The point of the system is to improve teaching. Virtually all the time and energy are put into supporting high quality instruction. The labor intensive work between consulting teachers and their clients is one of coach and mentor. CTs are given time to help teachers improve. Every new teacher is assigned a consulting teacher, and any teacher with a negative principal's evaluation is also assigned a consulting teacher. Consulting teachers have a case load of no more than 16/1. CTs are selected by the Peer Assistance and Review Panel, are evaluated by the panel, can only serve as CTs for three years, after which they must return to the classroom for at least two years after being a CT. These are teachers who approach the work with a teacher head. They cannot use this as a stepping stone from the classroom or into an administrative role. These kinds of details are very important because they shape the feel and character of the system. It's why it has credibility. It honors teaching.

Doing the Right Thing, Wrong

When IMPACT was created the leadership of DCPS had specifically rejected the kind of focus on creating a deep understanding of teaching and learning that MCPS had taken. A staff recommendation to bring in RBT to train principals and teachers in the language of skillful teaching was rejected by Michelle Rhee as costing too much and taking too long. What the Chancellor seemed to want was a system to generate data to justify teacher dismissals and bonuses. MEs and principals were literally reprimanded for giving teachers in low performing schools exemplary ratings. IMPACT seems designed to justify personnel actions. In fact, when the Mayor's transition team recently interviewed teachers and principals about IMPACT, they repeatedly indicated that it felt like a system designed to identify teachers for firing and bonuses, not improvement. They are not wrong.

IMPACT skipped the heart of what MCPS invested in. Virtually no training of principals or Master Educators was provided in the first year. All they were given was a rubric. They went into classrooms and looked for matches for the rubric descriptors. According to principals, the primary training that principals received was large group sessions to read together the rubrics. Principals interviewed by the Mayor's transition team considered it a waste of time. Teachers received no training, except the opportunity to read the rubrics and understand the mechanics of how the system was going to be implemented. And Master educators only received significant training the summer after their first year. That training never included deep theory about how to understand what good teaching is – the kind offered by RBT, or Charlotte Danielson, or any one of a number of national consulting organizations.

The focus in training of DCPS' Master Educators right down to today has been entirely on implementation issues, not on creating the fundamental knowledge base about teaching. The idea seems to be – find good teachers from outside DCPS. Bring them in to make judgments about who the good teachers are in DCPS. We're hiring ME's who are assumed to understand what good teaching is. We're hiring and firing our way to a better system with absolutely no effort to create a culture that really understands the craft. No wonder teachers and principals have trouble respecting the IMPACT system.

In January the WTU brought approximately 500 teachers together with the Gray Transition Team and all the teachers wanted to talk about was IMPACT. The message was clear – IMPACT must be ended. Start again from scratch. The workforce was expressing a vote of no-confidence in the new evaluation system.

Poisoning the Atmosphere

Some good has come from the first two years of IMPACT. Principals have learned to be focused on instruction. They spend more time observing teaching by their faculties. Principals seem to appreciate having a tool to remove teachers who aren't teaching well. I certainly do not mean to diminish that there is some potential good in this. Also, teachers have come to understand that what goes on in their classrooms is not private, but that others will be coming in to observe.

However, the culture surrounding IMPACT is fear. I worry that bad habits have developed in the workforce. Teachers have started to view IMPACT as their enemy. Teachers argue with principals to not be assigned difficult students. Some keep model lessons in a drawer to pull out when an observer enters the room. Teachers and principals have figured out already how to game the system in simplistic ways that are bad for students, but become somehow a rational response to how they are being treated. These are bad habits that flourish in a corrupted culture.

Possibly more importantly, an already difficult job has been made more stressful for teachers. (Stress here is defined as having your life determined by things over which you have no control.) We are not treating our most treasured resource respectfully. My biggest fear is that we are mistreating many of our very good teachers, sending the wrong messages about what is good and not good about what they do, and there is no excuse for that. I have sat in focus groups with accomplished teachers about IMPACT and they ridicule some of the cookie-cutter feedback they have received. Good teaching is actually being de-valued by IMPACT

Value-added Modeling and Teacher Evaluation

The most complicated and controversial aspect of IMPACT is its use of student test scores to evaluate teachers. I recommend to you the recent report from the Economic Policy Institute, [Problems With the Use of Student Test Scores To Evaluate Teachers](#), that details the technical arguments against using student scores in teacher evaluation. The state of VAM is not ready for this use. The way DCPS has constructed its VAM modeling is one of the more primitive and inaccurate. We will be inaccurately identifying good and bad teachers. Researchers Sean Corcoran and Jesse Rothstein have concluded that using value added modeling, even in much better designed systems, teachers in the top quartile could

be designated in the lowest and teachers in the lowest quartile could actually be achieving results in the top quartile. It is that inaccurate. Many argue that test scores should never be used as the judgment, in and of themselves, but always have to inform human judgment. I am in that camp.

There is also a huge downside to the system in over emphasizing the narrow result of student standardized test scores in evaluating teachers. Many of the most important things teachers do and students need to learn do not get tested on these tests. Too high stakes on such a narrow instrument will skew the whole enterprise. Higher order thinking skills, for example, do not get tested on standardized tests. Much of the curriculum does not get tested. As a system, we will stop doing things not on the high-stakes test. Good teachers resent the over-emphasis on standardized tests, for good reason.

To date, few DCPS teachers have actually been evaluated using student test scores because we only test in a few grades and subjects. I would argue against devoting resources to expanding the quantity of student testing. DCPS students are tested out.

In Montgomery County all kinds of student achievement data is used in teacher evaluation, but the test scores never speak for themselves. The Superintendent and union president have taken a principled position on this, to their credit. Both have objected to the Maryland race-to-the-top application's use of student test scores and have appealed to Secretary Duncan for an exception. I would urge a fundamental re-thinking of the over-reliance on student test scores to evaluate schools, teachers, and principals in DCPS.

Looking Forward – What Is To Be Done?

To me, the fact that we have come down to this state with IMPACT in DCPS is a tragedy. The most important thing DCPS needs is a better teacher evaluation and professional growth system. I consider it the highest priority for our schools, bar none. But the architects of IMPACT seem to have learned absolutely nothing from the past two years. They have changed little in their approach. They have been roundly uninterested in offers of help from Research for Better Teaching and others who, quite frankly, know quite a bit about how to do this work of elevating the quality of teaching, right.

The fact that interim chancellor Henderson seems from all outward appearances to be wedded to continuing with the existing design of IMPACT, gives me great pause about her willingness to make the necessary mid-course corrections the system needs. I would have thought that building credibility with teachers, parents, and the majority of voters in this city would be a higher priority after they voted to end prematurely the tenure of former mayor Adrian Fenty. There is a whopping credibility gap.

What should be done? I am *not* arguing to simply end IMPACT. Something like IMPACT that focuses the attention of the system on the quality of teaching is needed. But this evaluation system needs a fundamentally different approach – not just the missing training, but a different sense of purpose, a different design, and structured ownership.

I have little confidence that the people in charge of IMPACT can re-tool it. Jason Kamras and Michael Moody seem unable and unwilling to critique their own work.

1. There needs to be a fundamental assessment of IMPACT – by outsiders not tainted by a commitment to it. These should be experts in constructing credible teacher evaluation systems, not econometricians.
2. Teachers and Principals need to be at the table to design a better system and their insights about what's wrong with the approach needs to be internalized by the system.
3. DCPS might consult with those in the Montgomery County system who designed, implemented and evaluate it, including the teachers' union and the Office of Human Resources and Development.
4. There needs to be an ongoing monitoring process of the design and implementation of the teacher evaluation and professional growth systems in DCPS. In MCPS, a joint oversight steering committee made up of representative of the stakeholders meets on a monthly basis and makes sure the design, implementation and evaluation of the effort is right. DCPS desperately needs this kind of oversight.

Thank you.