HOW DO SCHOOLS RESPOND TO STATE POLICIES ON TEACHER EVALUATION?

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Overview

In 2010, the Louisiana legislature passed a bill requiring that all Louisiana public school teachers receive an annual evaluation consisting of two equally-weighted components: measures of student performance growth and observations of teaching. Regulations passed the following year allowed local districts and charter schools to either adopt the state's evaluation system and observation tool, called Compass, or submit a waiver to use their own. This study examines how eight New Orleans schools—both charter and district-run—responded to the new state policy and what organizational factors influenced their responses. We draw the following conclusions:

- The schools varied widely in their response to the teacher evaluation law. Some schools reacted by reflecting on instructional practice, while others either complied with the law or acted strategically.

- Only three of eight schools engaged primarily in reflective practice, producing and using evaluation results to think about instruction and ways to improve it.

- Schools' responses did not appear related to their governance models, authorizers, or general levels of autonomy, but other factors seemed to promote more learning-centered approaches to implementation:

  ◦ Schools that modified the state-recommended evaluation system were often more reflective in their responses, suggesting that the flexibility to modify evaluation policy may increase organizational learning, as it provided opportunities for customization and greater teacher buy-in.

  ◦ Shared leadership and structured collaboration around evaluation at the school level also appeared to promote a more reflective approach to evaluation and reduce the burden on administrators to observe, evaluate, provide feedback to, and support teachers.

As with most policies, the effects depend on policy design and implementation. Given the importance of effective instruction, implementation of teacher evaluation may be significant for driving student outcomes.

Sample and Data Sources

Sample: Eight schools, including both traditional and charter schools, both single-site and networked schools, and schools that vary by charter authorizer and grade levels served

Data: Interviews with Louisiana Department of Education and charter management organization administrators, as well as administrators and teachers from each case study school in 2015; teacher evaluation documentation from case study schools

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PAGE 1

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, there has been much debate about statewide teacher evaluation policies. Supporters of such policies argue that having a more uniform approach to evaluations encourages genuine improvement for all teachers' practice, but critics charge that local school systems and school leaders can determine the best evaluation practices for their schools and that state interference leads to less productive evaluation processes.

At the forefront of this debate are discussions on how to best evaluate teacher performance. While traditional evaluations rely heavily on classroom observations, new teacher evaluation systems that use multiple measures of effectiveness have become increasingly popular. These systems are designed to provide rigorous information about teacher performance through both classroom observations and measurements of student achievement and growth. While policymakers also debate the accuracy of various evaluation measures, less attention has been given to how evaluation systems are implemented on the ground.

Research suggests that although teachers and administrators hold generally positive views of new multiple-measure evaluation systems when compared to previous single-measure systems, they also cite strong concerns about the significant time commitment from principals required by these systems. Studies also show that some administrators may lack the preparation needed to implement evaluation systems and offer quality feedback. Despite these challenges, there is evidence that new teacher evaluation systems have the potential to encourage teachers and principals to engage in more reflective conversations about their practices.

This study seeks to build a deeper understanding of how evaluation reforms were implemented in New Orleans publicly funded schools. The city's school system exemplifies a statewide push toward the decentralization of school control, and the Louisiana legislature mandated that almost all schools in the state—including charters—use its new Compass teacher evaluation system. This standardized evaluation system, implemented in New Orleans' decentralized setting, allows us to examine the following research questions:

1. How and to what extent does the design and implementation of state-driven teacher evaluation policy vary across school settings?

2. Do certain types of schools implement teacher evaluation policy in different ways?

POLICY CONTEXT

Following the citywide evacuation and destruction of many school buildings during Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans public school system was radically reformed as a decentralized system composed mostly of independent charter schools. Within this system, however, is considerable variation in school governance and management that provides an important opportunity to study how teacher evaluation policy is implemented in different contexts.

The state's Compass policy requires all Louisiana public school teachers to undergo an annual evaluation consisting of two equally weighted components: measures of student performance growth and observations of teaching. According to a Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) official interviewed for this study, the goal of Compass was "to make sure that we elevate the quality of teaching" and "increase student achievement as a result of this process." Enhanced feedback on teacher practice and student performance was intended to help teachers reflect on and improve instruction, and information gathered in the evaluation process was intended to inform staffing decisions, ranging from teaching assignments to termination.

> " *... the goal of Compass was 'to make sure that we elevate the quality of teaching' and 'increase student achievement as a result of this process.'* "

The policy specified that teachers' Compass ratings must include measures of student growth and classroom observations. When possible, the student growth factor in a teacher's evaluation was intended to be the state-calculated valued-added measure (VAM)

based on state standardized tests; however, this calculation method was not used in the year of our study, as schools were transitioning to a new state test. When VAMs were not used, the growth measure used Student Learning Targets (SLTs) selected and measured at the school level. The other portion of a teacher's Compass rating was derived from classroom observations conducted by principals, assistant principals, or other designees who obtained evaluator certification through training provided by the LDOE. These observations primarily measured instructional quality according to student behaviors.

The Compass system also gave local education agencies (LEAs)—including charter school operators—the option to develop or identify their own observation tools in lieu of the state-provided rubric by submitting a waiver and justification to the state. LDOE officials estimated that about one third of the state's LEAs and charter management organizations (CMOs) used an alternative observation tool at the time of this study.

> " *The Compass system also gave local education agencies the option to develop or identify their own observation tools in lieu of the state-provided rubric...* "

Not all schools had to follow all provisions. In particular, the rules about who conducts evaluations, how support is provided to teachers, and the grievance process apply to traditional public schools but do not apply to charter schools. These modifications, however, did not change the intent of the policy, which was to create a consistent teacher evaluation process across district and charter schools. This intent was confirmed in our case findings, as staff perceived the Compass policy as applying to all school types and as fully binding to charter schools.

Our sample is also unusual because these schools did not have union contracts, and teacher tenure had been essentially eliminated in 2013. This means that the entire sample of schools

already had discretion over personnel decisions and that the results of teacher evaluations were arguably higher stakes than in most schools around the country.

HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THE ANALYSIS?

The data for this study were obtained from 56 interviews with LDOE and CMO administrators, as well as school administrators and teachers from eight case study schools in 2015. Our sample of schools represents the schools in New Orleans, including Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) direct-run schools, OPSB charter schools, Recovery School District (RSD) charter schools, and RSD single-site charter schools.

At each school, we requested to speak with one principal, another school leader, four core-subject teachers, and one teacher in another grade level and subject. We analyzed all interviews to capture information on the elements of teacher evaluation, organizational characteristics, and teachers' responses to evaluation. We then drew upon the quality and quantity of individual interview data to characterize the overall school-level response as reflective, compliant, and/or strategic.

HOW DID TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION VARY ACROSS SCHOOL SETTINGS?

As expected, case schools varied in how they enacted teacher evaluation systems with some designing systems that went beyond the state's requirements. Schools designed evaluation systems that differed in five key ways: the observation rubric chosen, the number of required observations, the training provided to observers, guidelines for setting SLTs, and the incentives attached to evaluation results. For example, some schools developed training for observers, required more than two observations for teachers, and provided merit-based bonuses to high-scoring teachers.

How did educators respond to these local evaluation systems? We classified their responses into three categories: reflective, compliant, and strategic. In all schools, we found at least some examples of reflective, compliant, and strategic responses to the state law. For our purposes here, we discuss schools based on the category that had the greatest frequency, quality, and consistency of comments across interviewees' responses. If a school's

interview data primarily indicated reflective responses, then we refer to that school's implementation type as reflective, even if we saw some less pronounced responses that were compliant or strategic (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Primary Responses to Teacher Evaluation by Authorizer and School Type

Implementation Type	School Type
Reflective	🏫🏫🏠
Compliant	🏠🏠🏠
Strategic	🏠🏠

🏠 RSD Charter 🏫 OPSB Charter 🏠 OPSB Direct-Run
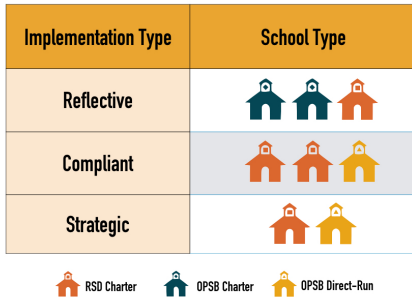
Below, we discuss in greater detail how we categorized the responses to local evaluation systems as reflective, compliant, and strategic and how we translated these individual responses in the interviews to an overall description of the school's response.

Reflective Responses

Three schools responded to evaluation in primarily reflective ways. Educators in these schools perceived the evaluation data as a valid measure of teaching and reported using them to think about and improve instruction. They viewed the evaluation process as a valuable opportunity to receive feedback and discuss strategies for growth. The reflective case schools' staffs also worked together to create meaningful personal goals for all educators and students, and the leadership team was hands-on, offering frequent purposeful collaboration with the goal of continuous improvement for both teachers and students. These schools also regularly set aside time for teachers to track their progress toward goals.

Interestingly, two of these three schools not only met the Compass requirements but also supplemented their evaluations by including more observations, a more detailed rubric, and extensive coaching from mentors, master teachers, or administrators.

Compliant Responses

Three schools from our study demonstrated compliant responses to evaluation, as they appeared to go through the motions in the evaluation process. Staff in these schools often viewed the new evaluation system as a top-down reform and found the policy cumbersome and time-consuming. Many of the educators in these schools viewed observations as inconsequential and believed the basic state rubric did not accurately capture the true effectiveness of teachers. In these schools, there was little to no sign that educators changed their teaching in response to their evaluation results and feedback.

Strategic Responses

In two schools—both of which adopted the basic state evaluation model—the interviews suggested overall responses that made the teacher evaluation results invalid. By taking strategic actions to enhance their evaluation results, these schools essentially precluded reflection or improved practice.

The schools with strategic responses shared a skepticism around the validity and purpose of evaluation. Teachers believed that the rubric measures were not rigorous enough and found it was too easy to "game the system," which led some teachers to engage in certain behaviors in order to appear effective according to evaluation criteria. These behaviors included sending certain students to different classrooms during observations to avoid disruptions or setting low student learning targets to ensure that they would not be penalized if they failed to meet a rigorous target.

Overall, Figure 1 shows that the reflective and compliant approaches were most common, followed by strategic responses. In what follows, we examine how other organizational factors influenced responses to teacher evaluation.

HOW WERE SCHOOLS' ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH VARIATIONS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHER EVALUATION POLICY?

We expected to see differences in the implementation of Compass and local evaluation systems according to school authorizer, governance model, and type. Schools supported by a CMO or OPSB might have had more administrators available to support evaluation implementation, while single-site charter schools might have had greater flexibility to design a local evaluation system and waive the basic state model but possibly fewer resources to support implementation. We do not see any of these patterns, however, in our analysis.

We also looked for patterns based on teacher characteristics (gender, race, certification type, and years of experience), school characteristics (size, level, performance, and demographics), and

each school's history with evaluation, level of autonomy, and school culture. We found no clear pattern of responses by any of these categories.

We did, however, see clear patterns in school response related to two school-level organizational factors. We found that *leadership styles* and *structures for collaboration* were strongly related to the schools' response types.

> " *We found that* leadership types *and* structures for collaboration *were strongly related to the schools' response types.* "

In our reflective cases, shared leadership—the inclusion of additional administrators and teacher leaders in the management of instruction and operations—enabled schools to complete teacher evaluation in reflective ways by expanding the number of evaluators and support providers. This increased capacity granted each evaluator enough time to thoughtfully complete rubric ratings and provide coaching to teachers. Hands-on leadership—frequent communication between administrators and teachers regarding instruction—also seemed to encourage evaluators to spend time purposefully planning meetings with teachers, monitoring individual progress toward short-term goals, and implementing planned interventions.

Pre-existing school structures enabling collaboration also emerged as an important factor shaping evaluation. In our reflective case study schools, schedules included purposeful and consistent time for teachers to meet. Teachers and administrators often facilitated collaborative discussions, adapted existing tools to aid discussions, and communicated expectations that teachers engage in such practices regularly. Instead of merely asking teachers to meet during a specific time period, school leaders arrived at teacher collaboration meetings with an agenda, guiding questions, and procedures for examining student work and data, reflecting on practice, and brainstorming solutions. These structured, collaborative meetings provided teachers with

opportunities to regularly discuss their goals with one another, which also enhanced peer accountability.

DISCUSSION

The finding that only three of eight case study schools engaged in primarily reflective practice in response to evaluation suggests that requiring the use of multiple-measure teacher evaluation systems does not guarantee meaningful teacher improvement. This study gives rise to three sets of implications for the implementation of teacher evaluation policy in and outside of New Orleans.

First, this study suggests that reflective responses depend on organizational conditions. Therefore one way to improve responses is by improving those conditions. Shared leadership and collaborative structures appeared to promote greater learning and mitigate the burden on administrators to observe, evaluate, support, and provide feedback to teachers. Local leaders might consider ways to allocate resources to teacher leader positions, shared planning time, and tools that foster collaborative discussion tied to evaluation results. It is worth noting that many of the organizational conditions being discussed here may lead not only to better teacher evaluation but also to better schools.

Second, our analyses show that giving schools the flexibility to modify evaluations may promote greater organizational learning. As noted, schools that adapted the state model, using more detailed, expansive rubrics and additional observations, tended to exhibit more reflective responses. While we cannot prove that one caused the other in this type of analysis, the fact that state policy allowed for this flexibility certainly provided opportunities for customization and greater buy-in.

> " *... our analyses show that giving schools the flexibility to modify evaluation policy may promote greater organizational learning.* "

Finally, our study suggests policymakers consider potential tradeoffs as they design and revise the elements within teacher evaluation systems. One important choice in the Compass reform was to include only five elements in the observation rubric to ease the burden on administrators. This decision may have limited the comprehensive picture of the quality of teaching, as the selected standards focused primarily on measuring instructional quality according to student behaviors. This choice may have also encouraged strategic behavior and limited the reflection around other elements of teaching.

While it is clear that schools in a decentralized setting vary in their implementation of evaluation policy, we believe this research helps outline certain steps that policymakers can take when designing evaluation systems to encourage reflective responses, as well as steps that CMO and school leaders can take to increase the chances of meaningful teacher improvement. The path to school improvement runs through teachers, and the evaluation process can benefit teachers, administrators, and students if it is designed and implemented well.

How is this Research Related to Other ERA–New Orleans Studies?

Teacher employment and effectiveness are important topics in the conversation on education policy, in New Orleans and nationally, and a primary focus of ERA-New Orleans' research. Visit our website to read about post-Katrina changes in the New Orleans teacher labor market, including the policy brief, *Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce* (Barrett and Harris).

We recently released a report, *When Tenure Ends: Teacher Turnover in Response to Policy Changes in Louisiana*, on the substantial reduction in teacher tenure protections in Louisiana. Under the new policy, teachers' continued employment is determined almost entirely by the formal evaluations that we discuss above.

Upcoming policy briefs and technical papers will address a number of questions related to teacher policy:

- How are Louisiana's district and charter schools using salaries and bonuses to attract and retain talent in a context of diminished teacher employment protections?

- How did New Orleans teachers respond to systemic changes in the local teacher labor market including the end of union contracts, the transition to a majority charter school district, and charter school exits from the state teacher pension system?

- What do New Orleans teachers think about all these policy changes? Do pre-Katrina teachers perceive a loss of job security or changes in their job satisfaction in post-Katrina New Orleans schools?

Strategic responses to teacher evaluation may also arise in response to other elements of high-stakes accountability. This issue is addressed in several other reports.

About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce rigorous, objective, and useful research to understand the post-Katrina school reforms and their long-term effects on all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Orleans Parents' Guide, New Schools for New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website.

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