

TEACHNJ:

An Evaluation of Two Years Implementation

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Abstract

The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act was adopted by the New Jersey legislature in August 2012 with the intent to raise student achievement by improving the overall quality of instruction. As a result of this act, new teacher evaluation systems are being introduced in school districts across the state in an effort to more accurately assess teacher performance. The new teacher evaluations will be based on multiple classroom observations as well as the academic achievement of their students as measured on standardized tests. In addition, professional development opportunities are likely to change under this legislation, with schools customizing professional development programs to more effectively meet the needs of their teachers. The overarching question that informs our research is what impact will TEACH NJ have on the overall value of teacher evaluations and the quality of professional development opportunities offered to teachers. Data collected through survey research presents the pre-implementation practices (2011-2012 school year) as well as one year post-implementation practices (2013-2014) taking place in school districts throughout New Jersey. The findings reflect teachers' perceptions of the value of the current teacher evaluation practices, the quality of the current professional development opportunities and the value the school administration places on teacher evaluations.

Race to the Top

The funding to support TEACHNJ comes from the federal reform initiative Race to the Top (RTT). Background on RTT provides insight as to why so many states, including New Jersey, introduced legislation to reform their teacher evaluation systems and tenure decision processes. In July 2009, the Obama administration launched its \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTT) Fund, one of the largest competitive grant programs in the history of public education in the United States. As such, it significantly altered the level of federal involvement in public education through the sheer size of its financial investment and through the articulation of specific federal priorities that were to be met through RTT funding. To secure funds, states were expected to implement legislative changes to education policy and design a blueprint for change with a focus

on four reform goals: 1) adopting standards and assessment, 2) building data systems to store student data longitudinally, 3) recruiting, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and principals and 4) turning around the lowest achieving schools. States were encouraged to submit proposals that reflected local needs and those that addressed multiple goals were more likely to receive funding.

In an effort to secure RTT funds, at a time when state budgets were eviscerated by the economic crisis, many states enacted new legislation that would reform the standards for teacher evaluations and tenure decisions. Many states rushed through hastily crafted legislation to secure federal dollars that were needed to close the revenue gap and forestall drastic cuts in personnel.

TEACHNJ

The Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey Act (TEACH NJ) was signed into law on August 6, 2012.

In 2011, after two failed rounds of competition, New Jersey was awarded \$38 million to “reform” education. According to the NJ Department of Education, RTT funds will be used to pilot and develop a new educator evaluation system, which is the foundation of the TEACH NJ tenure reform act. The TEACHNJ Act calls for a four level evaluation system of teachers that links individual student data to teachers and creates a more difficult process for teachers to earn tenure. An underlying assumption of this legislation is that there is a causal relationship between low performing teachers and underperforming schools, and by eliminating these teachers, the lowest achieving schools will turn around and academic achievement will increase.

Under the old law, tenure was awarded after three years on the job. Under the new law, teachers work for four years, with one of those years under the guidance of a mentor, before the tenure decision is made. During their first four years, new teachers must consistently earn good grades on annual performance evaluations in order to attain tenure.

TEACH NJ also targets teachers who have already earned tenure. In a major change in educational policy, tenured teachers may lose their jobs after two consecutive years of ineffective evaluations. Prior to the legislation, school districts could dismiss tenured teachers for “inefficiency,” but the process for doing so took years and could often cost districts hundreds of thousands of dollars, leading many school districts to avoid the process all together. Now, teachers will have 105 days after a school district files tenure revocation papers with the state to appeal the decision. Under the new law arbitration will take place outside of the courts and costs will be capped at \$7,500. In addition, the legal costs will be paid by the state. This reduction in administrative and financial burdens is thought to be an incentive for school districts to pursue the dismissal on ineffective teachers.

Beginning in September 2013, all of New Jersey’s teachers will be evaluated on an annual basis.

The evaluations will be based on multiple observations of classroom performance as well as student learning outcomes. Rather than relying on absolute standardized test scores, a statistical formula will determine student growth from year to year (called value-added) and compare that growth to that of their peers. Every teacher will receive a summative rating of “highly effective,” “effective,” “partially effective,” or “ineffective” which replaces the binary system that rated teachers as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory.”

Teacher Evaluations

In theory, a teacher evaluation system should measure a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses through an accurate and consistent process that provides timely and useful feedback. The evaluation and feedback should inform instruction and professional development opportunities to improve classroom instruction and educational outcomes (Marzano, 2012). According to Kelley and Maslow (2005), “Teacher evaluation systems ideally should foster improvement in both professional development opportunities and teaching practices” (p.1). However, in the real world theory often fails to inform practice. Marshall (2005) demonstrated that “the theory of action behind supervision and evaluation is flawed and the conventional process rarely changes what teachers do in the classrooms” (p.274).

Inadequate assessments are all too common, which means poor performance is not addressed, teaching excellence goes unrecognized, new teachers do not receive the feedback they need, and professional development is not aligned with areas of need. The evaluation process can play an important role in developing teachers’ instructional capacity, which in turn contributes to the academic achievement of students (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 2002), however teacher evaluations, as currently conducted, fall short. Overall, teacher observations are brief and infrequent and they fail to differentiate among teachers. “Excellent teachers cannot be recognized or rewarded, chronically low-performing teachers languish, and the wide majority of teachers performing at moderate levels do not get the differentiated support and development they need to improve as professionals” (Weisburg et al, 2009, p. 6).

Proponents of education reform rightfully argue that the current teacher evaluation systems are inadequate (Danielson 2001, Marzano 2012, Weisburg et al 2009). Often, these evaluations involve a short “walk through” visit by the principal or other administrator. The evaluators rely on a rubric that serves as a checklist of what they observe in the classroom. These rubrics tend to focus on trivial items that can be measured and have little to do with learning outcomes, school improvement efforts or professional development opportunities (Donaldson, 2008; Varlas, 2009).

Decades of research show there is a significant relationship between teacher effectiveness and student learning (Danielson, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Weiss and Klein, 1999; Tucker and Stronge, 2005). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), the “effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement can be stronger than the influences of student background factors, such as poverty, language background, and minority status” (p. 39). And yet, existing teacher

evaluation systems often illustrate no relationship between teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. On paper, almost every teacher is a good teacher, even at schools where student outcomes are dismal. In New York City, a school system with 89,000 teachers, only 1.8 percent of teachers were rated unsatisfactory (Brill, 2009) and in Chicago, where roughly 25 percent of high school students do not graduate on time, and 33 percent of fourth graders are not reading at grade level, 99.7 percent of teachers are evaluated as satisfactory to distinguished (Rich, 2012). Weisburg and his colleagues (2009) conducted research on the rigor of teacher evaluations of 12 school districts in four different states and found “less than one percent of surveyed teachers received a negative rating on their most recent evaluations (p.10).”

According to Morgaen Donaldson (2009) “Multiple factors, often working in tandem, produce this effect. External constraints decrease evaluators’ inclination to evaluate rigorously – vague district standards, poor evaluation instruments, overly restrictive collective bargaining agreements, and a lack of time all contribute to this problem” (p.2). Internal constraints including a school culture that discourages negative ratings and a district culture that offers little oversight and few incentives contribute to the inflated teacher ratings.

The American Federation for Teachers (AFT, 2010) and the National Education Association (NEA, 2010) have acknowledged the need to reform teacher evaluation systems as the existing systems are inadequate. Both associations highlight the importance of using multiple measures to assess teacher effectiveness such as classroom observations and district wide assessments as well as additional opportunities for feedback. They also emphasize the importance of targeted professional development.

The reform initiatives currently underway in many states are intended to address the inherent weaknesses in the existing teacher evaluation systems. As states move forward to transform the existing practice the goals of the reform should be clearly understood. An evaluation system designed to reward and develop teachers is different than a system designed to punish and sanction teachers. Measuring teacher performance is complicated and there is no formula for what makes a good teacher which means there is no formula for what should be included in the evaluation. Evaluation systems have multiple purposes. Danielson (2012) believes that teacher evaluations should focus on accountability and improvement while Marzano (2012) identifies the dual purpose of teacher evaluations as measurement and development. Both experts agree that one system of evaluation cannot effectively serve both purposes. “Although efforts to move quickly in designing and implementing more effective teacher evaluations systems are laudable, we need to acknowledge a crucial issue – that measuring teachers and developing teachers are different purposes with different implications. An evaluation system designed primarily for measurement will look quite different from a system designed primarily for development” (Marzano, 2012 p. 15).

Professional Development

Research demonstrates that professional development opportunities, when properly designed and developed, have the potential to enhance classroom practices and ultimately improve student learning outcomes (Fullan et al, 2006; Guskey, 2002). The key is providing professional development that is timely, relevant and effectively delivered. Professional development that is provided in an effective way can have a measurable impact on school improvement and student achievement (Schmoker, 2006; Mathers, Olivia & Lane, 2008)

However, research indicates that professional development practices have failed to deliver. While a lot of good things are happening under the name professional development, “ a lot of rotten things” happen as well (Guskey, 2002, p. 51). Thirteen years ago, Guskey (1999) warned against the one size fits all approach to professional development. At that time he argued that in order to be effective professional development should be designed, implemented and evaluated to meet the specific needs of teachers in a particular setting.

Historically, professional development programs were developed with little input from teachers. Research shows that when professional development programs are mandated, and there is a “pre-determined political agenda for instructional change and teachers’ perspectives are not valued during professional learning” little professional development takes place (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013, p. 403). When teachers have the opportunity to inform the professional development training agenda, positive learning outcomes are realized and the transfer of knowledge is more effective (Alderman, 2004; Gregoire, 2003).

Moore (2002) conducted a study of 224 teachers and 23 administrators to assess their perception of the New Jersey Professional Development Initiative. The findings highlighted “considerable disjuncture between what teachers value and what they do in the area of professional development” (p. 156). According to Moore, professional development was a “compliance vehicle” (p. 158) with teachers attending random workshops to accumulate the mandatory 100 hours of professional development required by the initiative. The focus was compliance, not on professional or personal growth.

A recent report by McKinsey & Company (2012) found that most school districts tend to offer the same set of training courses each year without reflecting on what worked and what did not. The study team researched school systems at the national, state and local levels, as well as leading educational institutions and non-profit organizations and highlight what they refer to as five “promising ideas (1) base the professional development on a vision of effective teaching; (2) segment teachers and deliver professional development strategically; (3) make coaching the centerpiece of professional development; (4) move from “push” to “pull,” so that teachers get what they want, when they want it; and (5) only offer professional development with demonstrated impact” (p. 2).

Chappuis et al (2009) find “it’s essential to emphasize the long-term, ongoing nature of professional development as opposed to a short-term, commercially promised quick fixes” (p. 57). A one-time professional development seminar for hundreds of teachers is not as effective as ongoing and personalized professional development that is found in professional learning communities and realized through peer coaching (Rhodes and Beneicke 2002). Research demonstrates that professional development is most effective when it is offered on-site, is job embedded, sustained over time, centers on active learning, and focuses on student outcomes (Chappuis et al, 2009); Sparks, 2003). Robbins (1995) describes peer coaching where “professional colleagues work together to reflect upon current practices; expand, refine and build new skills; share ideas; conduct action research; teach one another, or problem solve within the workplace” (p. 227). Research on the impact of coaching finds that immediate feedback, self-reflection, and the encouragement and support of colleagues can create positive school cultures and improved professional practices (Beatty 2000, Rhodes and Beneicke 2002).

While there is a substantial body of research on professional development that identifies the essential characteristics of professional development, there is growing evidence that only a small percentage of what is known to work is actually being implemented (Hawley & Valli, 2000; Spicer, 2008).

Methodology

This research explores the current teacher evaluation and professional development practices in the state of New Jersey. The survey we administered was designed to ascertain teacher perceptions of 1) the evaluation system in their school, 2) the level of communication between teachers and administrators, and 3) the availability, frequency and effectiveness of professional development opportunities. Of particular interest was the level of professional development available and the perceived usefulness of the professional development opportunities offered. We asked participants about both formal and informal (mentoring/coaching) professional development. In addition, we wanted to ascertain if teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development activities as a result of their evaluations.

The survey was pre-tested with a random sample (N=50) of New Jersey schoolteachers. Based on the feedback from the pre-test phase, the survey was revised and administered to a random sample (N=1235) of New Jersey schoolteachers and yielded a 21% response rate (254 completed surveys).¹ Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents were female and 34 percent were male. An overwhelming majority (94%) of the respondents worked in public school districts, and over half (54%) worked in a school district that was participating in the state pilot system². Thirty percent of the teachers worked in high schools, while 21 percent were elementary school teachers (K-8), and 19 percent represented other (K-2, K-4, 5-8). In terms of tenure, 72 percent of the respondents were tenured teachers, while 28 percent were untenured.

¹ The researchers did not include data from partially completed surveys.

² New Jersey piloted the new teacher evaluation system in eleven school districts during school year 2012-13.

Our intent was to gather baseline data for the 2012-13 school year; the year prior to the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system across all of the state’s districts. This baseline data will be compared with data collected over the next five years to determine whether significant changes occur in the teacher evaluation systems and to determine if any changes take place pertaining to the frequency and quality of professional development.

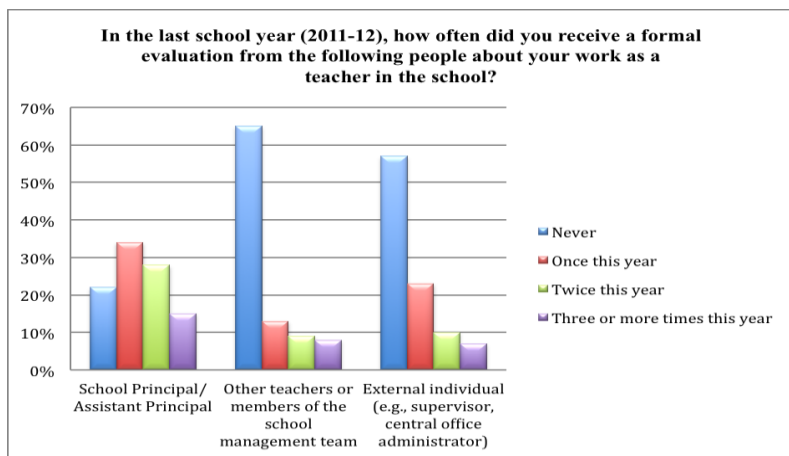
Findings³

After analyzing the data we categorized the responses into four themes: “formal evaluation process,” “impact of evaluation on teaching practice,” “perceived administrative value” and “professional development needs.”

Formal Evaluation Process

We asked our respondents to indicate how often they received a formal evaluation by their school principal or assistant principal, other teachers or members of the school management team, or from an external individual such as a supervisor from central office (See Figure 1). Twenty one percent of respondents indicated having never been evaluated by their principal or assistant principal during the school year; while only 15 percent indicated having been evaluated three or more times. Over fifty percent of respondents indicated having never been evaluated by other teachers or members of the school management team or an external evaluator. Only 23 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that the evaluation was a fair assessment of the quality of their work, while 14 percent strongly agreed the evaluation was helpful.

Figure 1: Formal Evaluation Process



Impact of Evaluation on Teaching Practice

We asked the respondents to what extent the formal evaluation they received led to changes in teaching children with special needs, raising student test scores, handling student discipline,

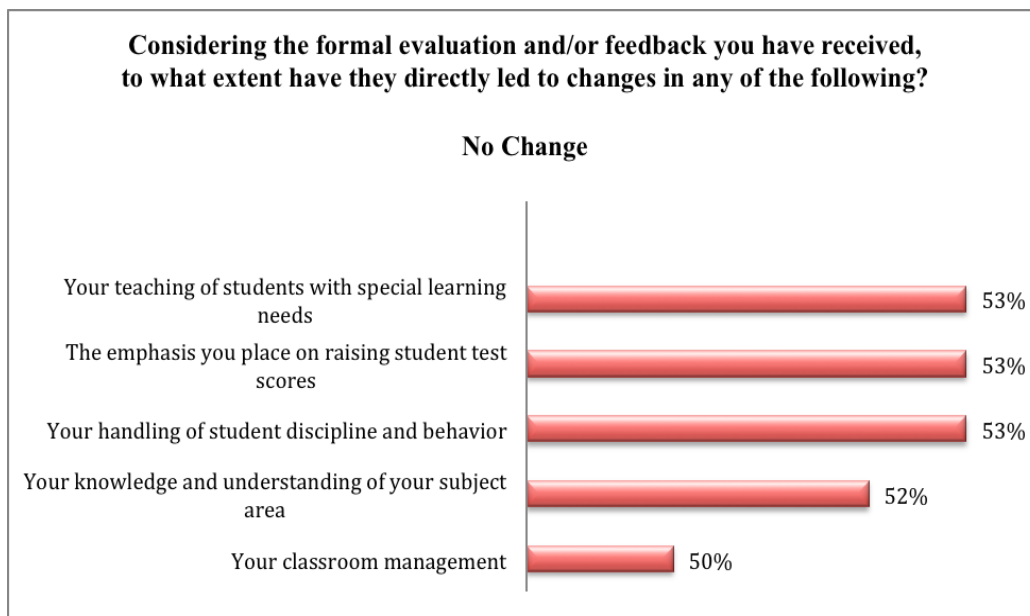
³ 2013-14 data will be available for June 7th presentation.

knowledge of subject pedagogy, and classroom management. Across all five categories, over half of the respondents felt the evaluation had no impact and resulted in no change (See Figure 2).

Interestingly, when asked about engaging in peer observations with colleagues, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (87%) felt this had a moderate to large impact on their teaching practice. Additionally, respondents were also asked to indicate whether they engaged in informal dialogue with colleagues and the impact that had on improving their teaching practice. Over half of the respondents (56%) engaged in informal dialogue and of those 66 percent felt it had an impact on their teaching effectiveness.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they agreed that the use of teacher evaluations has little effect upon the way they teach. Over half of the respondents (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that their evaluation did not have an effect on their teaching pedagogy.

Figure 2: Perceived Effects of Formal Evaluation

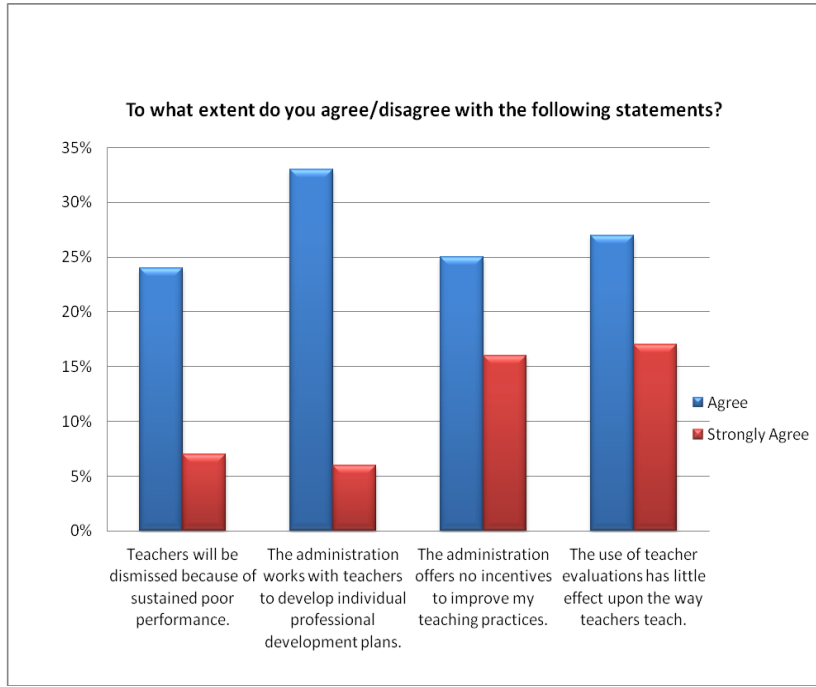


Perceived Administration Value

In an effort to develop a better understanding of the administrative value of the teacher evaluations we asked respondents to indicate how and if the outcomes of evaluations personnel decisions (See Figure 3). Only twenty-five percent of the respondents agreed that a teacher would be dismissed because of sustained poor performance. Slightly more than thirty percent agreed that administrators work with teachers to develop individual professional development

plans twenty-five percent of the respondents indicated that the administration offers no incentives for improved teaching practices.

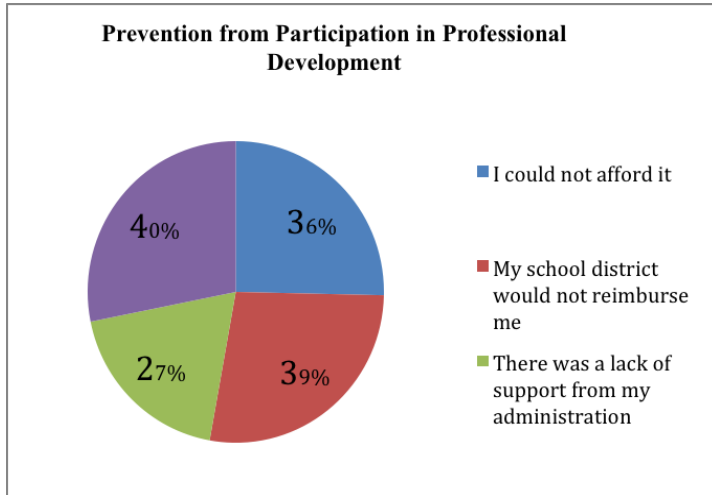
Figure 3: Perceived Administrative Value



Professional Development Needs

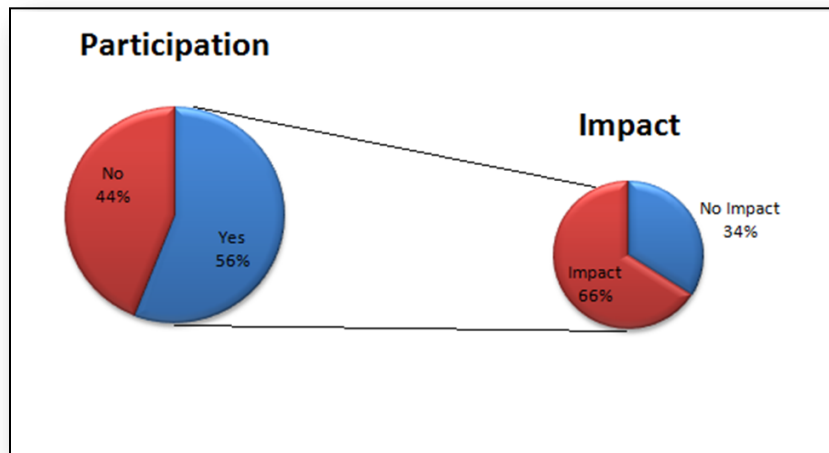
The survey asked a series of questions related to professional development. Overall, a majority of respondents (59%) indicated that they wanted more professional development but felt there were barriers that prevented them from doing so (See Figure 4). Forty percent of respondents indicated they could not participate in professional development because it conflicted with their work schedules. Additionally, 39 percent did not attend professional development because they could not afford it, and 36 percent indicated their district would not reimburse them. Twenty seven percent felt their administration did not support their participation, and only five percent agreed that their administration worked with teachers to develop appropriate professional development that matched their needs.

Figure 4: Barriers to Professional Development



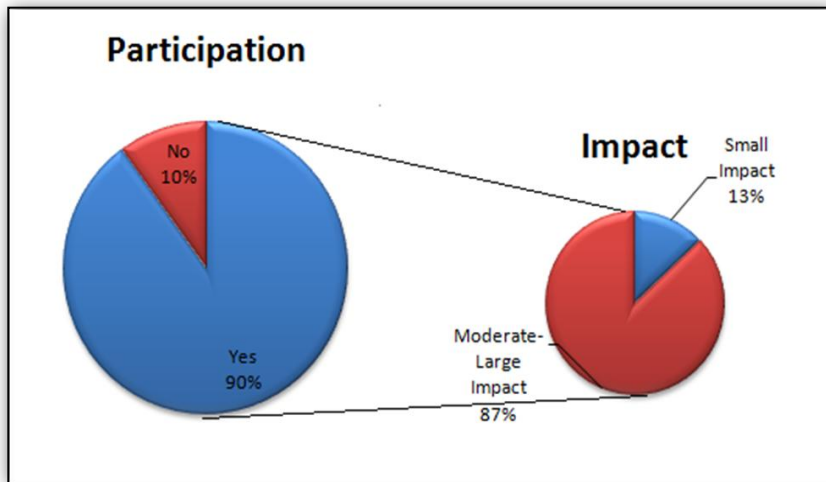
Additionally, we asked teachers if they participated professional development activities such as engaging in informal dialogue with their colleagues and/or conducting peer observations, and the perceived value these types of professional development have on their teaching pedagogy (See Figures 5 & 6). We found that over half of the respondents did participate in informal dialogue with their colleagues and over 60 percent found it had a moderate to large impact on their teaching.

Figure 5: Engaging in Informal Dialogue



When asked if teachers participate in mentoring/peer observations, over 90 percent of the teachers indicated that they did and 87 percent found it had a moderate to large impact on their professional development as a teacher.

Figure 6: Participation in Mentoring/Peer Observation



Discussion

The findings of this survey supports prior research on teacher evaluations and professional development. We found that formal evaluations are conducted infrequently with a varying degree of accuracy and impact. Nearly half of the teachers indicated the formal evaluations did not lead to improvements in their classroom as measured by five different indicators. In addition, a majority of the teachers thought the formal evaluations they received were not an accurate assessment of their teaching abilities. Some of the teachers were not observed at all and many indicated they were only observed once, and often not by a school administrator. This raises questions about the administrative burden associated with conducting teacher evaluations. With TEACH NJ the expectation is that each teacher will be observed three times a year. Many of the school districts in New Jersey are adopting the Danielson model that includes 72 criteria for each observation.

In addition, teachers questioned the administrative value of formal teacher evaluations with the majority questioning rewards and sanctions associated with the outcome of the evaluations. They agreed that the poor performers were not sanctioned nor were the effective teachers rewarded. Again, this raises questions as to the value of the evaluation system.

Clearly, the teachers perceive the greatest value from peer mentoring and observations. Nearly everyone took part in mentoring and peer observations and the majority felt the peer relationships and feedback had a moderate to large impact on their professional development as teachers. This is also consistent with prior research which indicates that districts often tend to offer the same training workshops year to year without determining which are most appropriate for their teaching faculty. Professional development is most effective when it is offered onsite, is embedded in the classroom, is continuous and sustained over time.

Conclusion

No teacher evaluation system is perfect and no performance assessment tool is purely objective. When dealing with people, politics, and personal relationships, objectivity is an elusive goal.

Teacher evaluation systems are not perfect and effective teachers are not the product of formulas. Research shows us that much of what effective teachers do cannot be measured by categorical ratings. However, that is not to say we should not attempt to define what effective teachers do and make every effort to replicate it. We need to move beyond checklists and rubrics that fail to acknowledge teaching excellence and we need to identify those professional development strategies that are most effective to improving teaching pedagogy.

As we move forward, we need to acknowledge how difficult it is to implement a teacher evaluation system that is fair, reliable and objective; based on merit and free from political and personal preferences. We need to acknowledge that teachers are the single most important factor for educational attainment and have the greatest impact on student learning and as such we should support their professional growth, not label their performance.

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