

Essential Voices, Part II: Engaging Students and Parents in the Implementation of a New Teacher Evaluation System

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Introduction

“It’s very important that parents and students take part [in] this. It should be fair. We are all in this for the kids.”¹

NYC Public School Parent, Brooklyn

In June 2013, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) announced a new teacher evaluation system for New York City, which is being enacted citywide in the 2013-14 school year. The implementation of a new system for evaluating the 75,000 teachers who work in New York City’s public schools is a massive undertaking – one that will change how principals use their time, how teachers direct their efforts in the classroom, and, ultimately, how students experience school. State Education Commissioner John King has said, “These evaluation plans will help principals and teachers improve their practice, and that in turn will help students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. That’s our goal in everything we do.”² As the intended beneficiaries of this major reform effort, students and their families have an enormous stake in its success. This paper makes the case that the New York City Department of Education (DOE) must include them in the policy implementation process.

Students and parents should have the opportunity to actively contribute to the policy changes that affect their lives; reforms are more likely to be successful, sustainable, and responsive to local needs when students and families are engaged as partners and supportive of such efforts. As the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) notes,

“Because parents, teachers, students, and the general public are affected by school policy, it is appropriate that they participate in its determination. We believe that such sharing of responsibility will result in greater responsiveness to student and societal needs and therefore improve the quality of educational opportunity.”³

The voices of actual New York City public school parents and students echo this desire for participation with respect to teacher evaluation policy. One New York City high school student told us,

“Since the students are the ones subjected to changes in the system (as well as the teachers) they should be allowed to have a say in what they think will benefit/hurt them. They should be able to say what they think makes their teachers effective/ineffective, and what can be done to fix any problems with the new policy.”⁴

¹ This statement and other comments from New York City parents and students were obtained in an online survey conducted in September and October 2013.

² New York State Education Department, “SED Releases 10 Model Evaluation Plans; Provides Feedback to Over 100 Districts” (August 22, 2012), available at <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/SEDReleases10ModelEvaluationPlansProvidesFeedbacktoOver100Districts.html>.

³ National PTA, “Position Statement—Shared Responsibility in Educational Decision Making,” available at <http://www.pta.org/about/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1274>.

⁴ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, October 17, 2013.

Similarly, Diana M., the parent of an eleventh grader in Queens, affirmed,

*“We have a voice, we have many concerns and as parents should be included in these new policies that are taking place...Students as well parents have ideas and we can change the school system for the better [for] students, the DOE and the parents alike...The change starts with all three parties, parent, student and educator!”*⁵

With this paper, we are calling on the DOE to include students and parents when putting the new evaluation system into practice by establishing a stakeholder advisory group to provide feedback throughout the implementation process and ensure open discussion and sharing of responsibility take place. We begin by setting forth the arguments for including parents and students in the implementation of the new policies and conclude by providing examples of structures established for this purpose in other cities and states.

⁵ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 24, 2013.

Background: Teacher evaluation in New York

“As parents, we should have a say in our children[’s] education and how their teachers are being rated.”

NYC Public School Parent, Queens

In response to federal initiatives focused on teacher and principal effectiveness, states across the country are revamping their teacher evaluation procedures. New York State passed a law requiring such an overhaul in 2010. When the New York City DOE and the teachers’ union failed to reach agreement through collective bargaining on a local evaluation system complying with the new framework, the City’s final system was imposed by State Education Commissioner John King. Under this system, forty percent of a teacher’s evaluation will be based on student outcomes, as measured by state standardized tests – or Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) for teachers whose students do not take state tests – as well as other assessments of student progress determined by school-level committees. The remaining sixty percent will be based on measures of a teacher’s instructional practice, mainly determined by classroom observations conducted using Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching. For teachers of students in grades 3 through 12, student feedback will also count for five of those sixty points starting in the 2014-15 school year, following a citywide pilot of student surveys in 2013-14.⁶

Since 2011, Advocates for Children’s Teacher Evaluation Project has been working to ensure that New York’s new teacher evaluation system includes the perspectives of students and parents and takes into consideration the distinct educational needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners. We have conducted focus groups with parents, students, teachers, and principals; reviewed existing research and interviewed experts throughout the country; identified policy priorities; and advocated for their implementation with NYSED, the DOE, and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). In June 2012, we released a policy paper entitled *Essential Voices: Including Student and Parent Input in Teacher Evaluation*, which made the case for including student and parent feedback in reviews of teacher performance in New York City and described efforts other states and districts are undertaking to incorporate such input in their own

“Students have a voice and should be heard. After all, they are the ones being educated by these teachers.”

NYC Public School Parent,
Brooklyn

⁶ A New York City Department of Education PowerPoint presentation explaining the new system in more detail is available at <http://gothamschools.org/2013/06/06/city-translates-241-page-evaluation-plan-into-a-colorful-webinar/>. The full teacher evaluation plan imposed by State Education Commissioner John King is available at <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/teachers-leaders/plans/docs/new-york-city-appr-plan.pdf>. The Danielson Framework is available at <http://www.danielsongroup.org/userfiles/files/downloads/2013EvaluationInstrument.pdf>.

evaluation frameworks.⁷ In September and October 2013, we gathered additional thoughts and feedback from more than fifty New York City parents, students, and other stakeholders via an online survey.⁸ We also spoke to administrators, parents, and students from around the country who have been involved in shaping or providing feedback on the evaluation process in their own states or districts.

“We as parents are [a] big part of our kids’ educational life too... We also should take a role in this policy.”

NYC Public School Parent,
Brooklyn

“The future belongs to our children and parents need to have a much better voice.”

NYC Public School Parent,
Manhattan

Up to this point, students and their families have not been given a voice in the development of teacher evaluation policy in New York. The 63-member Regents Task Force on Teacher and Principal Effectiveness, which made recommendations to the Board of Regents on the development and implementation of a new teacher evaluation framework for the State, did not include a single student or parent representative. In New York City, negotiations between the DOE and the UFT on the details of the local system took place behind closed doors, with no opportunity for students and parents to provide their input and perspectives. Before determining the final system, Commissioner King reviewed position papers by both the DOE and the union but did not solicit opinions from other stakeholders. It is time for New York City to bring students and their families into this important policy effort in an advisory role.

⁷ Our policy priorities and *Essential Voices* are available at http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/policy_and_initiatives/teacher_evaluation.

⁸ The survey was distributed to a number of 2011 focus group participants and via AFC’s email listserv and social media pages. While parents of children at every grade level (Pre-K through 12) and from every borough participated, this was by no means a representative sample.

The case for an advisory group including parents and students

I. Building stakeholder buy-in

In order for the new teacher evaluation system to be effective and sustainable, there must be buy-in from all affected parties. As the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality has noted,

“Evaluation systems are much more likely to be accepted, successfully implemented, and sustained if stakeholders are included in the design process. Stakeholder involvement throughout the design, implementation, assessment, and revision of teacher evaluation systems increases the likelihood that the system is perceived as responsive, useful, and fair.”⁹

In addition to teachers and principals, parents and students are key stakeholders whose trust and understanding are essential for the new evaluation system’s continuation and success. As Rachel P., the parent of two elementary school students in Queens, told us, “Our children are the ones affected...[The] DOE needs to have transparency.”¹⁰

All parents want excellent teachers and schools for their children, and many parents told us that they want to be part of the conversation on how the evaluation process can help improve the quality of teaching. In our focus groups and our survey, we heard from many parents who have questions about how this policy change will play out and concerns about how it will affect their children and their children’s teachers. For example, Rachel B., a Queens parent of a seventh grader and a tenth grader, told us,

“I worry that teachers will be pressured to change the way they teach for the worse by teaching to the test, rather than focusing on what is best for the kids. I don’t want to see good teachers get punished by an unreasonable evaluation system...I think the DOE should know my opinion and those of other parents.”¹¹

Parents of children with disabilities and other high-needs students particularly want to ensure that the system does not provide disincentives for teachers to work with these populations. Lorri G., the parent of an eighth grader in Brooklyn, said,

⁹ National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, “A Practical Guide to Designing Comprehensive Teacher Evaluation Systems: A Tool to Assist in the Development of Teacher Evaluation Systems” (May 2011), available at <http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/docs/practicalGuideEvalSystems.pdf>.

¹⁰ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 22, 2013.

¹¹ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 19, 2013.

“Parents of children with disabilities need a voice in this process. Our children’s teachers may be penalized for being teachers of students with disabilities if they fail the ‘tests.’ ...Students need a voice too. My son had a meltdown in the 3rd grade because he cried that if he failed the state math test, his teacher would get fired. AND he loved his teacher. It was not her fault that he has a neurological disability that affects his ability to do math.”¹²

Some students have similar concerns about how the new evaluation system will change their learning experience. Primi A., a twelfth grader in Queens, told us that “it’s awfully depressing” to devote class time to assessments that reduce “our intellectual ideas and critical thinking skills down to five multiple choice answers,” and worried that the new system will “further the marginalization of impoverished, underfunded, people of color schools...[and] suppress the student’s freedom to learn without frightening exams.”¹³

“The evaluation should be fair to all...by creating an evaluation that everyone can participate in, it would improve with the communication of parents, teachers...and student[s].”

NYC Public School Parent,
Bronx

When students and their families are left in the dark, fears like these go unaddressed, and parents and students will have reservations about supporting the new evaluation system. As the Harvard Family Research Project noted in a paper summarizing the recommendations of the 2010 National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, “Excluding families from conversations exacerbates the feelings of alienation many already feel, and damages educators’ opportunities to tap into families’ abilities and willingness to partner with schools to ensure student success.”¹⁴ If students and parents feel alienated from the conversation on teacher effectiveness and view the new system as a change that has been imposed against their will, it will be extremely difficult to gain buy-in and community

support. In contrast, when school systems make a sustained, comprehensive effort to empower and build positive relationships with parents and students, they can be powerful allies.¹⁵ The previously mentioned policy forum, which was convened by the U.S. Department of Education, described family engagement as an “essential ingredient” in meaningful reform and noted in their recommendations, “as education reform initiatives are developed...family and community

¹² Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 23, 2013.

¹³ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, October 11, 2013.

¹⁴ Heather B. Weiss, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg, Harvard Family Research Project, “Bringing Families to the Table: Recommendations and Next Steps from the National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement” (November 2011), available at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/bringing-families-to-the-table-recommendations-and-next-steps-from-the-national-policy-forum-for-family-school-and-community-engagement>.

¹⁵ Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement” (2002), available at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>.

engagement must be an integral part of the reform strategy.”¹⁶ Parents and students should feel that they are working *with* the DOE to improve their schools, not being acted *upon* by policymakers who are not interested in what they have to say.¹⁷

In the case of teacher evaluation, parents want to feel confident that the new system will not negatively impact their children, but will instead ensure their teachers are well-qualified and receiving the support they need to be successful and develop as professionals. Involving parents in the implementation process will help start to build such confidence and will provide a forum for answering people’s questions. Parent support of and investment in the new evaluation system will increase the likelihood that it will be successful, as “sustainable change...is most likely to occur when it is facilitated and supported by the families and communities who have the biggest stake in the outcomes of such efforts.”¹⁸

Similarly, students must be engaged in the implementation process and feel ownership of the reform if student surveys are to reach their full potential to provide useful information to teachers about what’s working and not working in the classroom. In order to be truly meaningful, any student voice initiative must actively include students in the planning and implementation process; youth should be partners with adults, not merely informed of their role after all decisions have been made.¹⁹ With regards to teacher evaluation, students will be intimately affected by the student feedback component of the system and their participation will be integral to its success. Students must understand why they are being surveyed about their teachers and feel confident that their feedback will be taken seriously and have an impact. If students are involved in and excited about the implementation of student surveys, they are more likely to provide high-quality, constructive feedback that will be truly beneficial to teachers and will encourage their classmates to do the same. In cities such as Boston and Denver (discussed in more detail beginning on page 15), where youth organizers led campaigns to institute student feedback, students are deeply invested in the success of this initiative and are eager to collaborate with district staff and union leadership to ensure it is effective, fair, and a positive experience for both students and teachers.

“Students know what their teachers do that works, and what doesn't. So yes, of course the DOE should listen to students’ views on the evaluation system.”

NYC Public School Parent,
Queens

¹⁶ Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg, Harvard Family Research Project, “Bringing Families to the Table.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Heather B. Weiss, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg, Harvard Family Research Project, “Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform” (December 2010), available at <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/beyond-random-acts-family-school-and-community-engagement-as-an-integral-part-of-education-reform>.

¹⁹ Adam Fletcher, “Meaningful Student Involvement: Guide to Students as Partners in School Change” 2nd Ed. (2005), available at <http://www.soundout.org/MSIGuide.pdf>.

II. Improving the evaluation system

Like any major policy change, the new teacher evaluation system will not work perfectly. In the coming years, the system will need to be refined and improved based on the experiences of individual schools and any difficulties or complications that emerge as the system is implemented across the city. In addition to teachers and principals, students and families are a vital source of information about how the new system is working on the ground. They have unique perspectives and knowledge and will each be able to provide feedback not replicated by that of other stakeholders. As Luz B., the parent of an eleventh grader in Manhattan, told us, “With the children’s feedback another perspective can be viewed that might be overlooked.”²⁰ Researchers agree: the Annenberg Institute for School Reform has observed,

“Youth – the most talked about constituency in our schools – are on the front lines of school reform, which gives them the unique expertise needed to shape reform work in a meaningful way.”²¹ ... Youth leaders have proven themselves to be an invaluable asset in pinpointing the actual conditions and problems in schools and proposing solutions that adult policy-makers might not have thought of.”²²

“Students have very important points to add...it is important for everyone to have a voice.”

Parent of a Recent NYC
Public School Graduate,
Staten Island

Students will be helpful in advising administrators on how to design survey implementation most effectively, from the student perspective, as students have insights about their peers that adults do not. Furthermore, only students themselves will be able to tell us how they are experiencing the survey process and may identify both problems and potential improvements that others have not thought of. For example, students can provide important feedback on the effectiveness of the communication they receive from their schools and teachers about the purpose of the surveys, as well as on whether they find the survey language understandable, the questions relevant, and the experience of

completing the survey valuable and not overly burdensome. The Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Project – which studied the use of student surveys in over 2,500 classrooms in seven urban school districts – has noted, “Student perception survey development involves discussion

²⁰ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 24, 2013.

²¹ Keith Catone and Alexa LeBoeuf, Annenberg Institute for School Reform Commentary on Urban Education, “Student-Centered Education Starts with Student-Led Reform” (November 2012), available at <http://annenberginstitute.org/commentary/2012/11/student-centered-education-starts-student-led-reform>.

²² Deborah King and Margaret Balch-Gonzalez, Annenberg Institute for School Reform Commentary on Urban Education, “Urban Youth: Powerful Reform Partners” (January 2010), available at <http://annenberginstitute.org/commentary/2010/01/urban-youth-powerful-reform-partners>.

with students to determine if they're interpreting the items as intended."²³ Finally, students can comment on how the new system changes their experience in the classroom and their relationships with their teachers.

Likewise, parents can reflect on the changes they are seeing in their children's schools and education as a result of the new teacher evaluation system; such feedback will help inform the DOE as to whether the reform is having the desired impact or unintended consequences. One parent from Queens told us,

*"Parents should be able to voice their opinions, concerns and give their ideas about implementing this new policy...There are parents that still do not know or understand well the process of these evaluations and...what the impact on children with disabilities will be or can be."*²⁴

As communicating with families is included both in the New York State Teaching Standards and as a component of the Danielson Framework, parents can also share their perspective on if and how the system impacts family involvement at their schools.

**"Parents can give
incredibly valuable
feedback not available
from principals, and they
should be involved."**

NYC Public School Parent,
Manhattan

²³ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Asking Students about Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation" (September 2012), available at http://www.metproject.org/downloads/Asking_Students_Practitioner_Brief.pdf.

²⁴ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, September 20, 2013.

Models from other states and districts

A number of other states and districts have made an effort to engage students and/or parents on the issue of teacher evaluation, and New York City should learn from and build on their work. Three models, and examples of each, are described below: state advisory groups, district advisory groups, and collaboration with student organizers.

I. State advisory groups

Although this paper focuses on district-level policy implementation, the experiences of states with parent and student participation are useful to illustrate the possibilities. Many states have formed multi-stakeholder advisory groups to help guide the development and implementation of new teacher evaluation systems. Some such groups were tasked with making recommendations to their state board of education on the design of a model evaluation system; some made recommendations on a specific aspect of implementation, such as a student growth model; while others provided feedback during the pilot period. At least seventeen states – Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, and Washington – included parent or PTA representation on teacher evaluation plan committees and workgroups.²⁵ A smaller number of states, including Colorado, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, included students in their advisory groups. The Rhode Island and Colorado committees are described in more detail below.

RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island formed an Advisory Committee for Educator Evaluation Systems (ACEES) “to ensure that all members of the education community are deeply engaged in the development of the Rhode Island Evaluation Model System.” The ACEES committee, which met throughout the design process, included two secondary students and two parents in addition to teachers, principals, and other stakeholders.²⁶ Carmen Boucher, one of the parent representatives, reported that it was “extremely necessary” to have a parent in the process and that she was able to provide an important perspective that otherwise would have been missing. In addition, she told us that the presence of parents on the committee helped keep the work grounded in the fact that, above all else, “we’re here for the kids.” Because Carmen is very involved with parent and community groups, she was also able to share what she learned with other parents and organizations that

²⁵ Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, Online Database of State Teacher and Principal Evaluation Systems, Single Topic Comparison: Stakeholder Investment and Communication Plan, available at <http://resource.tqsource.org/stateevaldb/Compare50States.aspx>. As the teacher evaluation landscape is continually evolving, this list is not intended to be comprehensive.

²⁶ More information on Rhode Island’s new teacher evaluation system is available at <http://www.ride.ri.gov/TeachersAdministrators/EducatorEvaluation.aspx>.

otherwise would not have had much information about the State’s work – and as Carmen is herself a parent, other parents trusted her and were willing to listen. Such communication is an important step towards building buy-in.²⁷

COLORADO

Colorado has also made a sustained effort to engage stakeholders. During the design process, the Colorado Department of Education included both a student and parent member on the State Council for Educator Effectiveness (SCEE) and invited feedback from the public via email and at SCEE meetings.²⁸ Shelby Gonzales-Parker, the student who served on the State Council, says,

“Although my role as the only student on the Colorado State Council for Educator Effectiveness shouldn't have been the only opportunity for an authentic student voice, I do believe Colorado is moving in the right direction, by inviting the students to the table and giving them the chance for their voices to be heard and included in high stakes decision making.”²⁹

Colorado’s recently published “User Guide” for the model evaluation system recognizes the importance of communication, listing stakeholder involvement and collaboration as one of five key priorities for implementation:

“Change is always difficult and communication is vital. Every stakeholder from students, families, teachers, related service providers, administrators, school board members and others need to be operating with the same information and with a clear picture of what the new system is, how it will be implemented and how it will impact them. The new evaluation system and its goal of continuous learning provide opportunities to engage parents and guardians of students and the students themselves in a collaborative process to assure that every student has his or her best chance of graduating from high school and being prepared for academia or career.”³⁰

* * *

In both Colorado and Rhode Island, the participation of student and parent committee members was at times limited, as the process of designing new evaluation systems involved complex details less familiar to those who are not educators or researchers.³¹ The often complicated nature of teacher evaluation policy, however, should not invalidate the importance of including student and parent perspectives and the value to be gained by collaborating with a wide range of

²⁷ Carmen Boucher, personal communication, September 27, 2013.

²⁸ National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, “Lessons Learned on Communication and Engagement for Educator Evaluation: Colorado Case Study” (August 2012), available at http://www.gtcenter.org/sites/default/files/docs/TQ_Policy-to-PracticeBrief_CO_Case_Study.pdf.

²⁹ Shelby Gonzales-Parker, personal communication, September 30, 2013.

³⁰ Colorado Department of Education, “User’s Guide: Colorado State Model Educator Evaluation System” (August 2013), available at http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/Ed_Eval_User_Guide_V.5.pdf.

³¹ Karen Feldman, personal communication, August 7, 2013; Shelby Gonzales-Parker, personal communication, August 21, 2013.

stakeholders. Students and parents will not have expertise on growth models or the specifics of the Danielson Framework, but they are experts on what it is like to be a current public school student or parent. In addition, students and parents are able to develop as leaders when provided with support and training. Carmen Boucher in Rhode Island, for example, found it initially intimidating to be on a committee composed primarily of educators. However, she was able to grow as a participant and as a parent advocate because a number of the teachers on the committee made an effort to bring her in and mentor her throughout the process, helping her fully understand those issues with which she was less familiar.³²

II. District advisory groups

In addition to statewide task forces, some districts are required to form their own committees to guide the overhaul process on the local level. Once again, as local schools exist to serve the children and families of the local community, students and parents have an important perspective to provide.

UTAH

Utah requires local districts to establish committees consisting of an equal number of parents, teachers, and administrators to revise their evaluation systems to comply with the state's new framework. The parent members are nominated by school community councils and appointed by the local school board.³³ For example, the Salt Lake City School District (SLCSD) has a Joint Educator Evaluation Committee (JEEC) that includes four parents, four teachers, and four administrators. During the 2012-13 school year, the committee made recommendations regarding the district's new system and plans for a pilot. As the system is piloted in 2013-14, the Salt Lake City JEEC will continue to meet to address issues and concerns that arise.³⁴ Logan Hall, Supervisor of Teacher Evaluation for SLCSD and the facilitator of the JEEC, reported that having parents on the committee has provided the district with perspectives and insights that they otherwise would not hear:

“Parents bring a unique set of skills and are able to look at what we do through a very special lens...I have found the parents on our Joint Educator Evaluation Committee very useful in that they help keep the group grounded in our mission, and provide a way to balance out the inherent imbalance between teachers and administrators by bringing to the forefront the fact that we are all working together for the students we serve. This is

³² Carmen Boucher, personal communication, September 27, 2013.

³³ UTAH CODE § 53A-8a-403.

³⁴ More information on Salt Lake City's Educator Evaluation Revision Project is available at <http://www.slcschools.org/departments/human-resources/Educator-Evaluation-Revision-Project.php>.

able to happen only when we are all allowed to sit at the same table with an equal voice.”³⁵

Sherri Hutten, a parent who is serving on the JEEC, agreed, noting that “there is no question” that the parents on the committee have provided important perspectives:

“I think in any process it is invaluable to have an outside, albeit invested, point of view. Many experiences and ideas have been brought to the table in our conversations...I think it has been a fabulous mix of people, opinions and perspectives that have come together for a common purpose.”³⁶

As was the case in Colorado and Rhode Island, there were certain issues on which Sherri felt she could not give “as strong an opinion as an administrator or a teacher.” However, her position as an outsider gave her unique strengths that enabled her to play an important role in the discussion:

“At times like that I can be used as a good sounding board, a devil's advocate, and the layman who requires a clear explanation free of educator's lingo. For example, I was getting so lost in some of the terminology, I had suggested that there be a glossary of terms included. I'm sure that many educators already know the terms. But what about the 1st year teacher, or the teachers from other places who might have slightly different expectations or language used in their environment? Clear definitions are always important, but particularly in an evaluative process where important expectations and goals are on the table.”³⁷

NEW JERSEY

New Jersey convened a state-level Evaluation Pilot Advisory Committee (EPAC) in September 2011 to provide feedback to the New Jersey Department of Education and make recommendations for statewide rollout based on education research and the experiences of those New Jersey districts piloting new evaluation systems.³⁸ The EPAC was composed of teachers, principals, superintendents, and other stakeholders, including one parent. In addition, much like in Utah, all school districts in New Jersey are required to form District Evaluation Advisory Committees (DEACs) that include at least one parent representative to oversee and guide the implementation of new teacher evaluation systems on the local level. During the state’s pilot phase, District Evaluation Pilot Advisory Committees (DEPACs) in the pilot districts discussed challenges and provided feedback to the statewide EPAC; such feedback helped inform the final framework and ensured that district-level concerns were heard by the State. The EPAC’s interim report on the 2011-12 pilot describes the district-level committees as “a powerful tool for successful implementation,” explaining,

³⁵ Logan Hall, personal communication, October 16, 2013.

³⁶ Sherri Hutten, personal communication, October 15, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ More information on New Jersey’s new teacher evaluation system is available at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/AchieveNJ/> and <http://www.state.nj.us/education/archive/EE4NJ/>.

“The committees gave districts a way to show that work was not just being done behind closed doors by the administration. In one district, their DEPAC fostered ‘collaboration and investment in the process.’ One district said the DEPAC was used to create ‘complete transparency’ and included ‘teachers, parents, board of education members, and administrators.’ This idea of open communication was echoed by another project director, who said that their 20-member DEPAC was sometimes unwieldy but that the size ‘created a more transparent process’ and ‘stronger buy-in to the program.’”³⁹

III. Consulting relationships with student organizers

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

In addition to creating advisory committees, other states and districts have collaborated with student organizing groups when implementing teacher evaluation systems, particularly with regard to student surveys. In Massachusetts, the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) – a citywide group of student leaders jointly administered by the non-profit Youth on Board and the Office of Family and Student Engagement of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) – has been deeply involved on the issue of student feedback on both the state and local levels.⁴⁰ In the 2007-08 school year, BSAC piloted a student survey called the Friendly Feedback Form in one public high school in Boston; following the success of this pilot, a no-stakes Constructive Feedback Form was employed in 29 BPS high schools in 2010-11. The survey tool, which gave students the opportunity to provide anonymous, constructive feedback to their teachers, was designed by BSAC students in consultation with BPS staff, the Boston Teachers Union, and researcher Dana Mitra of Pennsylvania State University. In addition, BSAC played an integral role on the school level in educating both students and teachers on the importance of student voice and the benefits both parties would gain from constructive feedback.

When the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education convened a task force (which included one student member) to revise the state’s teacher evaluation framework, BSAC led an advocacy campaign that resulted in the Board mandating the inclusion of student feedback in teacher evaluations statewide. In preparation for statewide roll-out of student feedback surveys in fall 2014, BSAC has been working with the State Department of Education as they develop an implementation plan, model survey tool, and guidance for districts on best practices. BSAC hosted a small pilot in Boston in the 2012-13 school year, which helped inform this process, and continues to serve in an advisory capacity on an additional upcoming pilot of a state-developed survey.

³⁹ New Jersey Department of Education, 2011-2012 Evaluation Pilot Advisory Committee (EPAC) Interim Report, available at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/archive/EE4NJ/presources/EPACInterim11-12.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Youth on Board is a project of the non-profit YouthBuild USA. More information on Youth on Board and BSAC is available at <https://youthonboard.org/> and <http://www.bpsfamilies.org/bsac/bsac>.

On the local level, BSAC is leading a Student Feedback Working Group with the BPS Office of Teacher Development & Advancement to advise the district on the implementation of student feedback, provide oversight, and discuss best practices. In addition to students, the working group includes parents, teachers, and district officials. BSAC has also been reaching out to other students and teachers in Boston to keep them engaged in this conversation and ensure that as many voices as possible are heard.⁴¹ The multi-stakeholder Student Feedback Working Group has helped create buy-in for the survey process; strengthened relationships between students, community members, teachers, and BPS officials; and provided a forum to address the concerns of all parties. Reflecting on the group's work thus far, Youth on Board staff told us,

“The collaboration amongst students, teachers, parents, other stakeholders and the district created true buy-in for the process and brought strong community voice into the implementation, ensuring smoother and transparent administration...The district can move forward knowing that its policies are reflective of and responsive to the community and that any grievances or concerns can be addressed in a formal setting. The students who have served on the working group have developed a real sense of ownership of the policy they created and passed.”⁴²

Ross Wilson, Assistant Superintendent for Teacher & Leadership Effectiveness, agrees:

“Our work with the Boston Student Advisory Committee has allowed the district to move forward with incorporating the voice of every student in the evaluation of our educators...It is essential that performance evaluation systems measure the impact on student learning and there is no better way to do this than to have students play a role in the evaluation process. We are fortunate to work with BSAC.”⁴³

DENVER, COLORADO

Another example comes from Colorado, where the Denver Public Schools (DPS) have been implementing a new teacher evaluation system called LEAP (Leading Effective Academic Practice), which includes a student perception survey as one of multiple measures of teacher effectiveness.⁴⁴ In the 2010-11 school year, DPS enlisted the student organizing group Project VOYCE (Voices of Youth Changing Education) to consult on the implementation of LEAP.⁴⁵ Project VOYCE youth had previously partnered with teachers at a school in Denver to co-design and implement a student feedback survey. Based on this experience as well as their other on-the-ground work with students and schools, the organization was able to provide important feedback

⁴¹ Boston Student Advisory Council, “‘We Are the Ones in the Classrooms—Ask Us!’ Student Voice in Teacher Evaluations,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82 (2012): 153-162; Boston Student Advisory Council, “How the Boston Student Advisory Council Shaped the History of Student Involvement in Teacher Evaluations in Boston and Massachusetts,” available at <http://www.studentvoicematters.org/#!/resources/c17et>; Rachel Gunther and Carlos Rojas, personal communication, August 15, 2013. More information on the Massachusetts teacher evaluation system is available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eeval/>.

⁴² Rachel Gunther and Carlos Rojas, personal communication, September 27, 2013.

⁴³ Ross Wilson, personal communication, October 7, 2013.

⁴⁴ More information on LEAP is available at <http://leap.dpsk12.org/>.

⁴⁵ More information on Project VOYCE is available at <http://projectvoyce.org/>.

to DPS on the district's pilot of student surveys. For example, the initial survey proved to be too long and burdensome for students to complete, and it was shortened and refined based in part on guidance and advice from Project VOYCE students. The organization also worked with two pilot schools, one middle school and one high school, to organize motivational assemblies to create buy-in for LEAP and ensure students understood why they were being surveyed and how their responses would be used. Shelby Gonzales-Parker, a recent graduate of the Denver Public Schools who served on the State Council for Educator Effectiveness and is currently a co-training director at Project VOYCE, says,

“Students are the first to know what is and isn't working for them. Therefore, student perception surveys – and the involvement of students in the design and implementation of those surveys – create the opportunity for teachers to work WITH their students, instead of FOR their students, in order to create the most effective and engaging learning environment possible.”⁴⁶

Finally, Project VOYCE has been collaborating with DPS teachers and students at several schools to capture “Fast Frequent Feedback.” This project, designed to strengthen student-teacher relationships while ensuring that student feedback is used for developmental and not punitive purposes, involves teachers asking their students questions about their experiences in the classroom on a weekly basis. While this project is separate from the official LEAP system, one aim is to help teachers improve their LEAP scores by providing them with feedback on an ongoing basis, rather than just once a year, so that they can continually adjust and improve their practice.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Shelby Gonzales-Parker, personal communication, September 30, 2013.

⁴⁷ Shelby Gonzales-Parker and Dayna Scott, personal communication, August 21, 2013.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“I believe that the parents and DOE are partners to support a student[’s] development in their education. It should not be only one point of view.”

NYC Public School Parent, Brooklyn

The efforts undertaken in Colorado, Massachusetts, Utah, and elsewhere demonstrate that, despite the complex nature of teacher evaluation policy, students and parents want to and should be involved in meaningful ways. As integral stakeholders in the New York City public schools, students and parents should have a voice on this policy change that will have an enormous impact on their teachers and their education. As Lucy A., the parent of a kindergartner and a sixth grader in Brooklyn, argued, “The DOE must consult with a parent panel...to get input on how to design the policies... It’s essential to the quality of the evaluations.”⁴⁸

Our recommendations for engaging students and parents in the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system are as follows:

1. **The New York City DOE should establish a citywide advisory committee to provide feedback on the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system.** Such a committee should also provide input on any proposed changes as the new system continues to evolve.
2. **Either the committee should be composed entirely of students and parents, or if it includes a broad cross-section of stakeholders, students and parents should represent at least 50 percent of the total membership.** It is essential that students and parents have a substantial – not just a token – presence; as Carmen Boucher, the parent representative in Rhode Island, emphasized, you “don’t want a parent there just to have a parent; it has to be meaningful.”⁴⁹ Students with disabilities and English Language Learners, as well as parents of students in these populations, should be included on the committee, as they have unique perspectives and distinctive needs that should be considered.
3. **The students and parents who serve on such an advisory committee should receive the support and training they need to fully and meaningfully participate.** Based on the experiences of parent and student committee members in other states, it is important that the DOE explain relevant issues in parent- and student-friendly language to ensure that all committee members have the knowledge they need to be able to give substantive feedback. Translation and interpretation must be provided for Limited English Proficient parents and students.

⁴⁸ Advocates for Children of New York online survey, October 1, 2013.

⁴⁹ Carmen Boucher, personal communication, September 27, 2013.