

MEANS
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A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING
Teacher Evaluation Systems that
Support Growth and Development

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Introduction and Summary

Teacher evaluation has emerged as a key strategy for improving student outcomes in public education. The rationale is compelling: teachers vary widely in their effectiveness, and evaluation systems need to identify and address this variation. Performance evaluations have historically been largely perfunctory: no meaningful feedback is provided, no improvement expectations are established, and no positive or negative consequences flow from high or low ratings.

In the last two years, most states have adopted new policies governing teacher evaluations, including requirements to factor student achievement gains into individual teacher evaluations. The field is consumed with implementing these policies, moving quickly from design to pilot to full-scale implementation. This guide is designed as a practical toolkit for organizing the process, elevating important issues, and elucidating the tensions and trade-offs that need to be resolved.

To fulfill its potential to contribute to educational improvement, teacher evaluation must be done right. Public education is littered with initiatives that promised transformative change only to be undone by poor planning, weak execution, and the centrifugal force of the status quo. Moreover, current efforts at improving evaluation are complicated by two other dynamics:

- ▶ Simultaneous efforts to implement the new Common Core State Standards, which include implications for instruction that are not yet well integrated into teaching expectations, and
- ▶ Several years of declining funding for public education, which have meant reductions in force at the state departments and school district offices that are charged with leading and coordinating this work.

These dynamics make it even more critical to have a deliberate planning effort that coordinates with other initiatives and builds continuous improvement into the design of the system.

The Key: Supporting Growth and Development

Powerful evaluations provide actionable information to teachers and cultivate cultures of continuous improvement. This guide is designed to support school systems that decide a primary goal of their evaluation system is to support teacher growth and development. If that goal is not high on your list, you may not find this guide helpful.

Much of the current conversation about teacher evaluation focuses on the mechanics of giving every teacher a rating and holding individuals accountable for their performance. Teachers are sorted into rating categories; high performers are recognized while persistently poor performers are pursued for dismissal. This focus is both necessary and insufficient. It is a predictable, technical response to what has been a historic, widespread failure to hold teachers to high standards and confront performance that undermines student learning. As the pendulum has swung to accountability and extrinsic rewards for performance (for which there is little support in research or experience), though, the larger purpose of evaluation — supporting improvement — has gotten short shrift.

The problem with a heavy focus on accountability is that an evaluation system built primarily for accountability often isn't well designed for supporting improvement. Even under the most rigorous systems, the overwhelming majority of teachers fall in the middle range of performance evaluations. They are not so bad that they

are in danger of being fired, but they are not so good that they don't need to improve. The real tragedy of current evaluations is that the lack of meaningful support for improvement forces school systems to tolerate mediocrity instead of striving for excellence.

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Many systems assume that providing teachers with ratings and feedback on their performance will drive widespread, sustained improvement in instructional practices and student learning. This assumption is wrong. Several systems that are at the vanguard of designing new teacher evaluations have realized that they did not consider professional growth and support adequately during the design phase. For these reasons, the rest of this guide is organized to help school systems develop evaluation systems that foster professional growth and improved teacher practice. Meeting this goal cannot be done at the expense of accountability or other goals, but it is done with the understanding that supporting teacher growth and development is the primary purpose to which other goals must align.

➔ Focusing on Continuous Improvement

This guide is intended to assist those in districts and state departments of education who already have launched their evaluation systems as much as those who are beginning to plan theirs. Meaningful evaluation is built on an expectation of continuous improvement, and this principle needs to be applied to the system for evaluation, too. Wherever you are in the process, it is essential to set aside time to consider the principles that undergird

the system, examine whether the system is adhering to its core values and making progress against its stated goals, and make mid-course corrections. For systems that are beginning to develop an evaluation system, the guide will support a thoughtful and thorough step-by-step process. Systems already engaged in the evaluation work will find the guide a helpful tool for assessing and refining their work.

➔ Steps to Design, Assess, and Refine Your Evaluation System

This guide outlines nine steps to be used by states and school districts in designing new evaluation systems and assessing and refining existing systems. Each step in the process outlined below builds on the previous steps, helping to ensure coherence, alignment with the system's core values, and coordination with other important initiatives. Templates provided at the end of each section will facilitate the work of each step.

Step 1: Define the Vision and Goals for Your Evaluation System

The goals for the evaluation system — what you want it to do — guide both its design and implementation. They also signal to teachers and everyone else in the community what the system values.

Step 2: Articulate Your Theory of Action

Articulating a theory of action — a simple statement that says, *“If we do X, Y, and Z, then teaching will improve and student achievement will rise”* — makes explicit the implicit beliefs about how teachers improve their practice and what steps they and others in the system must take to support this improvement. A thoughtful, well-articulated theory of action provides the foundation for building a teacher evaluation system.

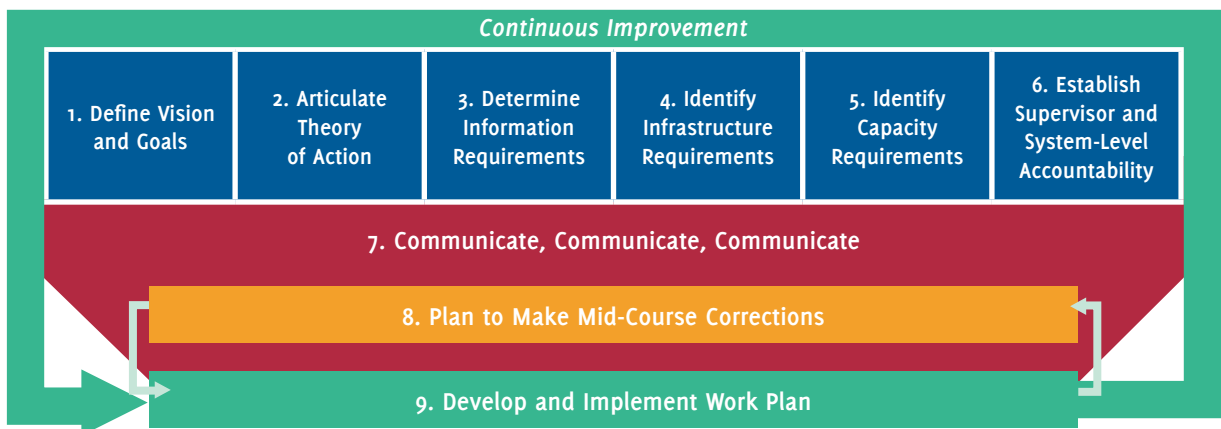
Step 3: Determine Information Requirements

Assembling the information that will be used to assess teacher performance (and the timing and presentation of it) and to guide professional growth activities is critical to ensuring a focus on teacher growth and development. Five categories of information need to be considered:

- ▶ Student outcomes;
- ▶ Teacher inputs;
- ▶ Professionalism;
- ▶ Feedback from students, parents, and peers; and
- ▶ Development of students' character and habits of mind.

Step 4: Identify Infrastructure Requirements

Using evaluation to support teacher growth and development has implications for how the school system is structured and organized. Defining the infrastructure needed to successfully implement new evaluations and developing a strategy to develop it is essential. Special attention must be given to policies and procedures, data systems, and time and job responsibilities.



Step 5: Identify Capacity Requirements

Evaluations won't affect only teachers. School leaders and their supervisors, most central office staff, and any teacher leaders/peer evaluators involved in the evaluation process are going to need significant training and ongoing support to enact the new policies. In addition to ensuring accuracy and reliability in ratings — which are hugely important and complicated challenges on their own — ensuring evaluators' capacity to translate this new information into guidance that leads to more effective instruction is paramount to ensuring the evaluation truly supports teacher growth and development.

Step 6: Establish Supervisor and System-Level Accountability for Teacher Growth and Development

Good evaluations don't merely assign ratings — they play an integral role in guiding and supporting professional growth. While the best school leaders always have embraced this responsibility, it will be new work in many schools and school systems. Establishing measures and metrics for assessing whether key players in the evaluation work are meeting their responsibilities and teachers are getting needed feedback and support will help ensure that the intentions of the evaluation system are realized.

Step 7: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

During the design and implementation of an evaluation system, communication has multiple goals:

- ▶ Conveying the system's vision, priorities, and goals;
- ▶ Soliciting input from teachers and other stakeholders;
- ▶ Building ownership;
- ▶ Ensuring clarity regarding expectations and opportunities; and
- ▶ Facilitating feedback from the front lines to guide improvement.

Accomplishing these goals requires consideration of the various stakeholders who need to be engaged, the best messengers, the messages themselves, and ways to ensure communication genuinely goes in both directions.

Step 8: Plan to Monitor Progress and Make Mid-Course Corrections

Only during implementation can system leaders learn what works in practice, as things inevitably arise that couldn't have been anticipated in the design phase. Building in an up-front strategy for learning rapidly from implementation is essential. Deciding what information to track and review to gain a clear sense of how things are going and to make mid-course corrections will support the overall integrity of the evaluation system.

Step 9: Develop and Implement the Work Plan

This final act of synthesis weaves together the work of each of the previous steps. It results in a concrete work plan that can be used to guide action — first in design and then in implementation — and to benchmark progress.

As you go through these steps, issues of capacity, resources, and pace of implementation become clearer. When you lay everything out and see how it looks when it's all put together, you can really assess if the timeline is manageable, if you have allocated enough resources to critical elements of the system, and if you need to make further refinements.

If evaluations are to realize their long-term potential for improving teachers' effectiveness and increasing student achievement, it is worth investing in a deliberative process that builds engagement, values perspectives of multiple stakeholders, and creates shared ownership and accountability. Meaningful evaluation and performance management confront deep-seated traditions of professional autonomy and isolation, as well as cultures in which teachers were never told they had to improve (and principals were never expected to tell them or held responsible for supporting their growth and development). This guide offers strategies for ensuring evaluation systems address these challenges and establish a culture of high expectations, shared ownership, and continuous improvement.

Templates for each step are located at the end of each section. Interactive, downloadable versions are available on-line at www.aspeninstitute.org/MeansToAnEnd_blank_templates.

Getting Started

Who Should Use This Guide?

The guide is written for people who are working to improve teacher evaluation systems. It will be useful to:

- ▶ State department of education staff who are setting evaluation policy;
- ▶ Superintendents and school boards;
- ▶ Union leadership;
- ▶ The champions charged with building the evaluation system;
- ▶ District-level leadership teams charged with oversight; and
- ▶ Central office and school leadership staff who will be integral in the work of design and implementation.

The guide is intended to be useful for systems at different stages of building an evaluation system. For systems that are in the thick of implementing an evaluation system, the guide will assist you in assessing your work-in-progress and making refinements to strengthen its impact on teacher growth and development. For school systems just embarking on this work, the guide will help you build a rigorous system that has integrity.

The most important resources in building and implementing an evaluation system are the teachers, principals, coaches, and data analysts in your system who will have to do the work or are currently doing it. Be sure to engage a broad group of stakeholders as you work through this guide to get input and insights from the front lines and build ownership for the critical work of implementation and refinement. Involve people not only in envisioning what the system can be but also in vetting specific proposals and providing feedback once work rolls into the field. At the school district level, a team that brings together people from the functions that are heavily implicated — the human resources, curriculum and instruction, professional development, research and assessment, and information management departments — needs to drive the design, implementation, and refinement work.

Be sure to engage a broad group of stakeholders as you work through this guide to get input and insights from the front lines and build ownership.

Appointing a Champion

While the design and implementation processes must engage many, a single champion must be charged with orchestrating the multiple streams of work required to get the system up and running. School systems in the forefront of this work suggest that the most important attributes of this champion are:

- ▶ Strong project management skills;
- ▶ High expectations;
- ▶ Strong interpersonal skills;
- ▶ The ability to learn quickly;
- ▶ A commitment to continuous improvement; and
- ▶ Tenacity.

Identifying a single champion for this work is a strategic decision and has symbolic significance as the reporting lines and other responsibilities (if there are any) of this person signal the organization's level of commitment to the evaluation work.

This guide is intended to serve as a trusted advisor and companion to people charged with championing teacher evaluation. In addition to providing templates to facilitate the work of each step, the guide offers examples of how school systems and state departments have responded to common challenges to provide images of the work in action. Reading the guide in its entirety initially provides a fairly detailed sense of the scope of the work. It is written for an audience that is sold on the importance of the endeavor and sees its potential to transform the quality of teaching.