

Teacher Performance Management in

Denver Public Schools

To dramatically improve student outcomes, Denver Public Schools must replace a meaningless teacher performance management framework with one that will accurately differentiate teachers based on their success in the classroom, provide them with the feedback and support they need to improve, and address poor instructional performance effectively and efficiently.

Introduction

In the 2008-2009 school year, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with Denver Public Schools (DPS) and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to assess the effectiveness of current teacher performance management policies and practices. DPS and the DCTA have been national leaders in their willingness to examine the difficult issues surrounding teacher performance management and to explore creative alternatives to the status quo. This project was also part of TNTP's national study of teacher performance management, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, released in June 2009. TNTP's researchers analyzed the following data in studying DPS:

- Interviews with central leadership, union leadership, principals and teachers
- Analysis of district data on teacher evaluation, non-renewal, remediation and dismissal data
- Focus groups with current principals and teachers
- Online surveys of school administrators and teachers (150 administrators and 1863 teachers responded to the surveys, for response rates of 47 percent and 68 percent, respectively)

TNTP's analysis reveals that DPS' current performance management framework is a set of largely meaningless processes that fail to differentiate teacher performance, provide teachers with adequate feedback or effective support, or address poor performance. Furthermore, school administrators have a weak understanding of performance management processes and lack essential training in this area.

Findings

DPS lacks rigorous, clearly communicated teacher performance standards and an accurate way to measure teacher performance against those standards.

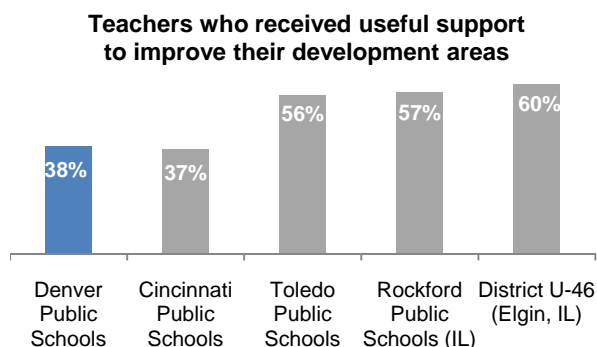
Teachers and school administrators lack confidence in the rigor of district performance standards and the accuracy of the teacher evaluation process. The failure of the evaluation process to accurately measure teacher performance against rigorous performance standards is reflected in its outcomes: 99 percent of non-probationary teachers are rated

Only 38 percent of teachers believe the evaluation process allows accurate assessment of teacher performance.

“Satisfactory,” and development areas are identified for only 40 percent of teachers. In other words, year after year, 60 percent of teachers are told that their performance is fully satisfactory and not in need of improvement in *any area*. Factors limiting the effectiveness of the evaluation process include a lack of administrator training, inconsistent use of student performance data and cursory observations.

Teachers do not receive effective feedback or support to improve their instructional practice.

DPS lags behind its peers in providing effective support that helps their teachers improve. Only 38 percent of DPS teachers who had development areas identified on their most recent evaluation said they received useful support to improve in those areas. Nearly 40 percent of teachers who had development areas identified didn’t even know what those areas were. Rather than providing meaningful feedback followed by targeted support, the evaluation process in DPS appears to be a mere formality with no follow through.



Probationary teachers are not held to a high standard of performance, and they do not receive adequate support to hone their skills as new teachers.

DPS lacks a clear and coherent strategy for utilizing the probationary period to develop new teachers’ skills and remove those who fail to meet expectations. Despite wide latitude under state law to non-renew probationary teachers whose performance does not merit the conferral of non-probationary status—which gives teachers an exceptionally high level of job security—DPS non-renewed just 3 percent of probationary teachers for performance concerns between 2003 and 2008. More than half of DPS teachers don’t believe probationary teachers have adequate support to develop the skills and knowledge that they need to excel in the classroom, and less than half of probationary teachers say they clearly understand what is required of them to earn non-probationary status.

Poor performance goes unaddressed as administrators and teachers seek to avoid ineffective remediation and lengthy dismissal processes.

Although only 1 percent of teacher evaluations in DPS result in a rating of “Unsatisfactory,” teacher and principals report that poor performance is much more widespread: 30 percent of teachers and 70 percent of principals say there is a non-probationary teacher in their school who should be dismissed for poor instructional performance. Administrators do not always give low ratings or pursue dismissal when it is warranted because they view the remediation and dismissal processes as overly cumbersome and time consuming. For their part, teachers do not view the remediation process as a legitimate opportunity to improve and see it instead as the first step toward dismissal. Indeed, fewer than one-quarter of the teachers who enter remediation complete it successfully.

Seventy percent of administrators and 30 percent of teachers say there is a non-probationary teacher in their school who should be dismissed for poor instructional performance.

Recommendations

To address these issues and increase teacher effectiveness in the district, TNTP recommends that DPS adopts the following reforms:

- **Dramatically strengthen the current evaluation system to accurately differentiate and describe teacher performance.** Replace the current binary rating scale with a multiple rating system based on expanded sources of evaluation data and transition to a system in which all teachers are evaluated annually using student performance data as the predominant factor. Incorporate evaluation data into key human capital decisions.
- **Invest in high-quality and ongoing support of administrators' performance management skills.** Shift the focus of administrator trainings away from compliance and toward thoughtful performance management, engaging administrators who have demonstrated mastery in this area in training their peers.
- **Link individual professional development with evaluation.** Align professional development offerings to the performance standards used in the evaluation, and use evaluation data to target professional development to individual teacher needs and assess the effectiveness of particular interventions.
- **Increase the rigor of the probationary period and the effectiveness of teacher development during this critical time.** Evaluate probationary teachers each semester, with the clear expectation that teachers will start out below proficient in most standards and that they must gradually build toward mastery and demonstrate adequate student learning gains to earn non-probationary status.
- **Make remediation a true support for teacher improvement, rather than the first step in the dismissal process.** Establish a joint DPS/DCTA committee to spearhead the reform of the remediation process and hold it accountable for increasing teacher confidence in the process.
- **Introduce lower stakes alternatives to dismissal that will help remove ineffective teachers from the district.** Salary freezes should be put into place for ineffective teachers and those who fail to improve should be offered multi-year unpaid sabbaticals and the opportunity to resign or retire without negative consequence for obtaining a position in another district. The dismissal process itself should be reformed to provide a one-day hearing to confirm that performance evaluation and remediation processes were followed in good faith and not to provide a third-party judgment of the teacher's performance level.

About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) works to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that although great teachers are the best solution to educational inequality, the nation's education systems do not sufficiently prioritize the goal of effective teachers for all. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers and achieve reforms that promote effective teaching in every classroom. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 37,000 teachers—mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows™ programs—benefiting an estimated 5.9 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that

affect the quality of the nation's teacher workforce, most recently including *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (2009). Today TNTP is active in more than 40 cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, among others. For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.