

CONNECTICUT'S
**TEACHERS,
PRINCIPALS**



RACE TO THE TOP

A CONN CAN ISSUE BRIEF



CONNECTICUT'S TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS & RACE TO THE TOP

AN ISSUE BRIEF BY **TORI TRUSCHEIT**

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This report was published in February 2010 by the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN).

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Introduction

Teachers are the most important factor in whether a student achieves in the classroom, so closing the achievement gap means improving the effectiveness of our teachers and their principals. But right now, no one really knows how effective our teachers are. In Connecticut, our approach to teacher evaluation does not require school districts to systematically differentiate between those who are effective at raising student achievement and those who are not. Our superstar teachers, some of whom can boost a student two grade levels forward in just one year, are not being recognized. In other classrooms, students are failing to learn because their teachers are ineffective, but a poor evaluation system prevents these teachers from getting the help they need—or exiting the profession.

The Obama administration recognizes that many states' evaluation systems are broken, and the \$4 billion *Race to the Top* competition incentivizes states to make big changes in this area. President Obama took a hard line on teacher effectiveness in a 2009 speech: “If a teacher is given a chance, or two chances, or three chances, and still does not improve, there is no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences. The stakes are too high. We can afford nothing but the best when it comes to our children’s teachers and to the schools where they teach.”¹

When nearly every teacher is considered “satisfactory,” teachers have little understanding of how to improve and great teachers go unrecognized. Principal evaluations, too, are rarely standardized or related to instructional leadership. Although the New Haven Federation of Teachers recently agreed to a bold plan to use student achievement in teacher evaluations, giving both the district and teachers a better idea of how to improve, the New Haven plan is the only one like it in the state—and every Connecticut district uses a different evaluation system.

Teacher and principal evaluation properly remains the domain of professional educators at the district level, but it is vitally important that the state ensure that every school district incorporates student achievement data into its evaluation systems for teachers and principals. Such a requirement, as has recently been adopted in states such as Illinois and Delaware, would give educators across every district the tools to significantly improve student performance—and help close Connecticut’s worst-in-the-nation achievement gap. Stronger evaluations would improve professional development, help highlight the work of our best teachers and principals, and help Connecticut win up to \$200 million in *Race to the Top* money.

Teacher and principal effectiveness dominate the *Race to the Top* criteria, making up 25 percent of the points—and “effectiveness” must be clearly based on student achievement growth. Likewise, the *Race to the Top* criteria stipulate that states’ teacher and principal evaluations include measures of student achievement. Connecticut is well-positioned

¹ “Remarks by the President to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on a Complete and Competitive American Education,” President Barack Obama, March 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-the-President-to-the-United-States-Hispanic-Chamber-of-Commerce/

to make progress in this area, win sorely-needed federal money, and raise student achievement. But to do so, we need to enact key reforms at the state level.

Teacher and Principal Evaluation Basics

In the private sector, human resource practices tend to follow a general pattern: prospective employees apply for jobs they want, and after supervisors determine who is best for the job, they hire that person. Supervisors evaluate employees, usually on an annual basis though occasionally more often, and link high performance with increased compensation. If employee performance is hurting the company's bottom line, that employee will be asked to improve or leave.

In the teaching profession, much of this process is regulated by a contract that the employee bargaining unit signs with the district. Hiring decisions, evaluations, salary increases, benefits, and firing decisions all have uniquely structured procedures, and if a district or school violates these procedures, the bargaining unit can file a grievance. Other times, disputes remain unresolved for years because the legal procedures are tied up in court. Because each district works with a different local bargaining unit and comes to a different agreement, work rules vary by district. Salaries, for example, vary according to a town's budget and focus on teacher recruitment. One town may want to lure teachers from the next town over and agree to a higher starting salary to compete for the same pool of talent. In recent years, however, many of these rules have been codified into state law, making some human resource practices consistent for all educators.

But many of these practices are not working well for students. Most teachers report that they know of at least one teacher in their building who should not be teaching. According to a 2009 report by The New Teacher Project, "43 percent of teachers say there is a tenured teacher in their school whose performance is bad enough for dismissal. What's more, the percentage of teachers and administrators who report poorly-performing teachers in their schools is even higher in schools with high-poverty student bodies. Nationally, student achievement is stagnant. Internationally, American students score far below their peers in countries like Japan and Hungary."²

² "The State of Connecticut Public Education: A 2008 Report Card for Connecticut Public Schools," ConnCAN, October 2008, available at http://www.conncan.org/sites/default/files/research/StateOfCTPubEd_2008.pdf.

The Problem with Evaluations in Public Schools

Nearly every aspect of human capital policies in schools has been debated in recent years, from school-based bonuses to salary increases, but at this point, most can agree that our teacher evaluation system is broken. Most districts use a binary system for rating teachers: an educator can be “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory,” with nothing in between. Great teachers are lumped in with mediocre teachers in the “satisfactory” category, and because an “unsatisfactory” rating can be contested, principals rarely assign them. Teachers looking to improve their practice will gain little insight from the word “satisfactory,” and teachers who barely earned a satisfactory rating can rest easy knowing their jobs are safe for another year.

Most parents, teachers, and older students could likely identify the strongest and weakest teachers in their school, but officially, most teachers in a school will be labeled “satisfactory.” In fact, according to a 2007 study of Chicago Public Schools, 87 percent of the district’s 600 schools did not issue a single “unsatisfactory” rating to a teacher between 2003 and 2006.³

Sadly, this isn’t an uncommon problem. The New Teacher Project determined that, in the districts surveyed, less than one percent of teachers were given unsatisfactory ratings, even in the lowest-performing schools. Three out of four teachers in the study received no specific feedback about their teaching, rendering their evaluations meaningless for professional development. In half the districts studied, no tenured teacher had been dismissed for poor performance in the last five years, and no district dismissed more than a few for poor performance. In other words, teachers are treated like “widgets”: classroom effectiveness is assumed to be the same for every teacher. The report’s authors note the system’s real, negative consequences: “In its denial of individual strengths and weaknesses, it is deeply disrespectful to teachers; in its indifference to instructional effectiveness, it gambles with the lives of students.”⁴

Evaluations in typical school districts are ineffectual, but in some cases they don’t appear to take place at all. According to The New Teacher Project, almost 10 percent of teachers in the districts “appear to have missed their most recent scheduled evaluation.”⁵ Missed observations can lead teachers to devalue the evaluation process, as well: if the principal wrote up an empty evaluation last year, a teacher is unlikely to have faith in the process this year. Indeed, many teachers seem to consider evaluations useless: across all districts surveyed by the New Teacher Project, “only 42 percent of teachers agree that evaluation allows accurate assessment of performance and only 43 percent of teachers agree that evaluation helps teachers improve.”⁶

Evaluations carry long-term significance: after a certain number of satisfactory ratings, a teacher can earn tenure, virtually guaranteeing a

³ “Human Capital in Hartford Public Schools: Rethinking How to Attract, Develop, and Retain Effective Teachers,” The National Council on Teacher Quality and ConnCAN, May 2009, available at <http://www.conncan.org/sites/default/files/research/NCTQ%20ConnCAN%20Hartford%20Report.pdf>.

⁴ “The Widget Effect.”

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

job for life. In most districts, tenure is granted after two or three years of teaching.⁷ The New Teacher Project found that while a rigorous performance evaluation process could be a vital tool for making decisions about tenure, most districts fail to use it that way: “Though the awarding of tenure status has the potential to recognize effective teaching and to transition out teachers who are unable to reach a reasonable performance standard, in practice there is no observable rigor applied to the tenure decision.”⁸ Once tenure has been granted, exiting a teacher from the system for performance-based reasons is an enormous undertaking: dismissing a teacher even for criminal activity can take years of costly legal hearings.⁹

Principal evaluations are even less standardized, despite the importance of a principal’s role in student achievement at a school. In recent years, the principal’s role in the school has expanded from building administrator to instructional leader, but processes for principal evaluation have failed to evolve. Current principal evaluations vary widely by district and tend to lack standards-based and evidence-based components.¹⁰ They also tend to ignore curriculum and instruction quality, both of which are crucial arenas of principal performance. Holding principals accountable for student achievement is much more difficult if principals are not evaluated on their ability to lead instructionally. And without professional feedback about how principals are leading their teachers in instruction, districts have no starting points for helping principals turn schools around. Standardized, reliable principal evaluations can help ensure that principals know what skills they need to become effective leaders—and, just as in teacher evaluations, can help districts recognize which principals are shining and which need additional support, or even replacement.

The View from Connecticut Districts

Each district in Connecticut has its own format for evaluating teachers, so policies vary in different parts of the state. That means that teachers are held to different standards depending on where they teach, which can be one of the factors resulting in achievement gaps from district to district.

In Hartford, for non-tenured teachers, evaluations are supposed to consist of two classroom observations, student work samples that demonstrate improved student learning, and adherence to a collaboratively developed professional goals plan. Once they receive tenure, teachers are no longer required to be observed each year.¹¹ Hartford rates teachers using four categories: Accomplished, Competent, Needs Improvement, and Unsatisfactory. In 2007–2008, only one percent of non-tenured teach-

7 Specifically, among the 49 states that prescribe a length for the probationary period preceding tenure, three years is the average length. Six states prescribe longer periods; eight states prescribe periods under three years. “Teacher Turnover, Tenure Policies, and the Distribution of Teacher Quality: Can High-Poverty Schools Catch a Break?” by Raegen Miller and Robin Chait, Center for American Progress, 2008, available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/12/pdf/teacher_attrition.pdf.

8 “The Widget Effect.”

9 Take the case of a New York City public school teacher profiled in *The New Yorker*: her union-approved independent observer gave her “unsatisfactory” ratings across the board. Yet the court process for her hearing will likely take “between forty and forty-five hearing days—eight times as long as the average criminal trial in the United States [and] fifty per cent more time, from start to finish, than the O.J. trial took.” A case of that length, author Steven Brill notes, will probably cost the city and the state about four hundred thousand dollars. And, given arbitrators’ reluctance to fire teachers for incompetence, the state might keep paying that “unsatisfactory” teacher’s salary long after the hearings are over. “The Rubber Room,” Steven Brill, *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2009, available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/31/090831fa_fact_brill.

10 Shortcomings of current principal evaluation tools, recommendations for necessary components of principal evaluation, and a description of an original new evaluative instrument (VAL-ED) can be found in “The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Measuring Learning-Centered Leadership,” by Joseph F. Murphy et. al., Vanderbilt University and Discovery Education, 2007, available at http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/Documents/pdf/LSI/VALED_Measuring_Learning_Centered.pdf.

For further discussion of the lack of standardization, reliability and validity in principal evaluation systems, as well as a review of eight instruments of principal evaluation including the VAL-ED method, see “Measuring Principal Performance,” by Christopher Condon and Matthew Clifford, Learning Point Associates, 2009, available at <http://www.learningpt.org/pdfs/QSLBrief2.pdf>.

11 Hartford tenured teachers must be observed once every three years.

ers and .6 percent of tenured teachers received an Unsatisfactory rating, despite having, at that time, the lowest student achievement in the state.¹²

In a 2009 study of Hartford human capital policies, commissioned by the district as part of its turnaround efforts, the National Council on Teacher Quality summarized troubling facts about Hartford’s evaluation system: “Because evaluation ratings are the basis for awarding tenure, Hartford grants tenure to teachers without clear evidence of whether or not they are effective. There is no separate process by which the district reviews teachers’ performance to determine whether to award tenure to a probationary teacher. Any teacher with a satisfactory rating will receive tenure virtually automatically.”¹³

In New Haven, however, teachers ratified a new contract in October 2009 that allows “student progress” to be a factor in teacher evaluations. The contract, which has received national attention, establishes a committee to develop the details of how the new evaluations will work, with initial recommendations to be released in March.¹⁴ Both sides have agreed that teacher evaluations should not be binary—in other words, the evaluations should be more precise than the “satisfactory/unsatisfactory” distinction.¹⁵

Most significantly, the New Haven contract will be the first in the state to use student performance data in the evaluation system. This data will be collected by the district but not released to the public in a way that would identify individual teachers. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, lauded the contract as “a process that should be analyzed by virtually all of the public schools and charter schools in the country as a model of both process and outcome.”¹⁶ Although many details are still to be determined, including the challenging question of how to incorporate student performance data in the evaluation of teachers in non-tested subjects or grade levels, New Haven’s contract can pave the way for other Connecticut districts to improve their teacher evaluation system. New Haven teachers’ willingness to incorporate student growth into their evaluations is great progress, but state policy change is needed to ensure that students across the state benefit from this initial step forward.

The Changes Needed to be Competitive

The *Race to the Top* competition places special emphasis on teacher evaluations, immediately disqualifying any state with a law on the books that prevents student achievement data from being used in teacher evaluations. In addition, as part of their reform plans, states must create “rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and prin-

12 “Human Capital in Hartford Public Schools.”

13 *ibid*

14 An electronic version of the New Haven teacher contract is available at http://www.edweek.org/media/newhaven_teachers_contract.pdf.

15 The teacher contract specifies that, by April 15, 2010, a Teacher Evaluation Committee will devise a “differentiated” evaluation system that includes at least four different ratings categories.

16 “City Teachers Contract Hailed as Model,” by Elizabeth Benton, *The New Haven Register*, October 27, 2009, available at http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2009/10/27/news/new_haven/a1_--_reformforum_1027.txt.

cipals.” The evaluations must be developed with teacher and principal involvement, and they must “differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account data on student growth... as a significant factor.”¹⁷ Although most districts create their own teacher evaluations, the *Race to the Top* guidelines call for a statewide policy that brings student achievement data into the process. What percent of the evaluations need to be based on student achievement data is not specified in the *Race to the Top* guidelines, but many states are enacting policies with the premise that “significant” means at least 50 percent.

But before we can incorporate student achievement data into teacher evaluations, student achievement data needs to be linked to teachers, and Connecticut has not yet completed a system to do so. To use student achievement data in evaluations across the state, teachers would need unique, anonymous identifier numbers, which would then be connected to student identifiers and student test score data. In addition to supplying the data for individual teacher evaluations (which would not be public), principals, superintendents, and the public would then have data on the effectiveness of teachers in raising student achievement over time. Although this data would not be made public in a way that personally identified individual teachers, it would allow everyone to see the distribution of effective teachers between schools and districts. Further, these linked identifiers would help hold state education schools accountable, because researchers, policymakers, and the public could see where high- and low-performing teachers and principals had been trained, as is already the case in Louisiana.

Although the State Department of Education has received grants from the Institute for Educational Sciences to link teachers with student achievement data, and has begun making progress on assigning unique identifiers to teachers, the project is still underway. Connecticut’s first-round *Race to the Top* application described the State Department of Education’s plans to build a growth model linked to teachers but did not fill in target dates for implementation across Connecticut’s school districts. *Race to the Top* guidelines require that states establish specific deadlines for implementing their growth model in addition to developing a longitudinal data system that meets the 12 requirements of the America COMPETES Act.¹⁸

A growth model that links student data to teachers is an important start, but to be truly competitive Connecticut should go a step further and change state policy to require districts to use that data in teacher evaluations. In this approach, each district would develop a plan to use student achievement data as a significant factor in teacher evaluations or use a model plan created by the State Board of Education in consultation with experts and key stakeholders.¹⁹ The State Board would develop guidelines that each district could use as they built systems that incorporated student data.

The cost of these changes would be minimal and could be covered not just by *Race to the Top* grant, if Connecticut wins but also by other federal grants that the state is already in line to receive. Indeed, it should

17 *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*, U.S. Department of Education, November 2009, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>.

18 Required elements of the America COMPETES Act are specified in the *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*.

19 The State Board would decide how much student achievement would factor into evaluations, but most analyses of the *Race to the Top* criteria have assumed that a “significant” factor means at least 50 percent of the evaluation.

be possible to move forward with these changes with essentially no fiscal impact to the state budget because the State Department of Education has already appropriated state funding to link teachers to student achievement data, and the department has also successfully applied for a third-round grant from the Institute of Educational Sciences to develop the longitudinal data system. Once a growth model is in place, districts can use the data at little cost to improve teacher evaluations—which they are already required by law to have.

Conclusion

Connecticut students need teachers and principals who can lead them to academic success. To bring Connecticut’s teachers and principals to the next level, we need evaluations that will recognize our best educators and help low-performing teachers and principals improve. Connecticut kids deserve nothing less.

About ConnCAN

The Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now is building a new movement of concerned citizens advocating to fundamentally reform our public schools through smart public policies.

In the tradition of Connecticut's great advocacy movements—from the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association to Harriet Beecher Stowe and the abolitionists—ConnCAN was founded in January 2005 on the fundamental belief that closing the achievement gap requires not only innovative educational models, but also issue-based advocacy that secures systemic change.

Today, ConnCAN has a staff of 11 employees working in offices in New Haven and Hartford and is hailed as one of the nation's leading state-level education reform organizations.

We will not rest until every Connecticut child, regardless of race or class, has access to a great public school.

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