

STRENGTHENING MICHIGAN'S TEACHER FORCE

How a new teacher evaluation system will better equip Michigan educators to improve student achievement



The Education Trust-Midwest

TO THE POINT

- ▶ Smart teacher evaluation is a starting point for good professional development and feedback for teachers.
- ▶ Despite new laws designed to change educator evaluation in Michigan, little has changed in how our teachers are assessed and supported.
- ▶ Michigan's failure to build high-quality diagnostic and professional evaluation systems is shortchanging our teachers and our students.

Michigan now
ranks near the bottom
of states on national
assessments, yet more
than 99 percent of
Michigan teachers in
our study were rated
either “effective”
or “highly effective.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Michigan teachers have one of the most important roles in our state’s and children’s future. Yet as a state, we have neglected to build strong feedback and support systems that our teachers need to improve their practice. Instead, we treat our teachers as if they are interchangeable.

Michigan’s schools aren’t performing well, and our children’s performance is slipping relative to children in other states. But instead of facing our problems honestly and working to help educators improve their effectiveness, we tell them they are all doing just fine. Indeed, our analysis of new data from 10 of Michigan’s largest school districts shows that 99.4 percent of teachers were rated as “effective” or “highly effective” in the 2011-12 school year. Less than 1 percent were rated “ineffective” or “minimally effective,” with just 0.2 percent in the “ineffective” category. These results are even starker than those contained in a highly influential national study done in 2009 called “The Widget Effect.”

If all serious improvement efforts start with an honest look in the mirror, these new numbers reflect a foreboding image. What we see doesn’t bode well for Michigan’s children, who need our schools to step up. Nor does it bode well for Michigan’s teachers, who need honest feedback and individualized professional development to be the best they can be. Michigan has more than 70,000 teachers, and many will be teaching our students for years — if not decades. If we are to restore effectively students’ ability to compete for jobs in a 21st-century knowledge economy, we must invest in smart and meaningful teacher development and evaluation.

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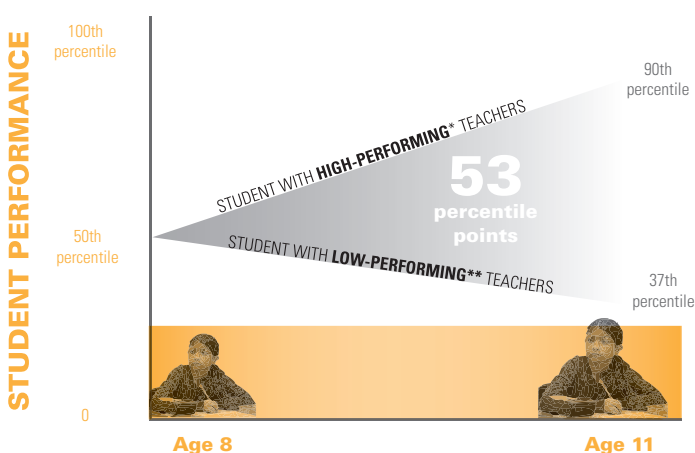
How a new teacher evaluation system will better equip Michigan educators to improve student achievement

BY SARAH LENHOFF

INTRODUCTION: MICHIGAN'S CHALLENGE

All parents with school-age children are familiar with the anxiety surrounding who will teach their children in the fall. Parents have known for decades what researchers are now confirming: a teacher's effectiveness is the most important in-school factor in improving student achievement. It's more important than class size, more important than where a school is located, more important even than the overall performance of the school.¹ Great teachers can actually alter the life trajectory of their students. Effective teachers can help close gaps for students who come to school far behind; they can influence whether their students attend college after high school; they can even significantly impact the future salaries of their students, years before they enter the workforce.²

Chart 1. The Effect of Teacher Quality³



Analysis of test data from Tennessee showed that teacher quality affected student performance more than any other variable; on average, two students with average performance (50th percentile) would diverge by more than 50 percentile points over a three-year period depending on the teacher they were assigned. *High-performing teachers are those rated in the top 20 percent. **Low-performing teachers are those rated in the bottom 20 percent.

But not all teachers are the same.

Some consistently produce large learning gains for all kinds of students. Others struggle with some or all of their students. Consequently, the nature of the assistance they need to improve varies. Some teachers need extra feedback and guidance about teaching strategies, especially those that work with certain kinds of learners. Other teachers may need to develop deeper content knowledge in their subjects, such as science. There are great teachers, too, who are perfect candidates for a “master teacher” role, in which they could demonstrate what good teaching looks like to their peers and support early career teacher development.⁴

For years, though, Michigan's school systems — like their counterparts in other states — pretended that these differences didn't exist. When it came to annual performance evaluations, if they were conducted at all, virtually all teachers were told they were doing just fine.

Recognizing the importance of more honest feedback as a building block for high-quality professional development, the Michigan Legislature passed laws in 2009 and 2011 designed to overhaul our schools' evaluation systems. Among other things, the 2011 laws require districts and charter schools to evaluate all teachers using four rating categories: ineffective, minimally effective, effective, and highly effective. (See *Chart 1 for teachers' effect on student learning.*)

The honest feedback for educators mandated by the 2011 law is terribly important, not just to teachers but also to our state's future. White, black, brown, more affluent, or low-income: No matter their background or race, Michigan students are falling behind leading states in core subject areas.

- Our fourth-graders have fallen from 27th in 2003 to 41st in 2011 on national math assessments.
- Our white fourth-graders' performance in math has also plummeted — from 13th in 2003 to 45th in 2011.
- Our low-income students' achievement has fallen from 34th to 43rd in eighth-grade math.
- Today, Michigan has the nation's second largest black-white achievement gap in fourth-grade reading — 34 points.

These devastating trends must be reversed — for our children's sakes and our state's future.

It's hard to improve those results without an honest appraisal of where we are. That includes a school assessment and accountability system that provides parents with accurate information on the performance of their children and their children's schools. The Education Trust–Midwest has been working on this issue since our founding, and we are pleased to report significant improvements in state policy, including more realistic assessments of student proficiency that hold schools to real-world standards.

But that much-needed honesty also includes an educator performance evaluation system that gives those who work

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in our schools — including teachers — good information on what they do well and where they need to improve. Michigan has more than 70,000 teachers, and many will be teaching our students for years — if not decades. If we're going to restore our students' ability to compete for jobs in a 21st-century knowledge economy, we need to invest in smart and meaningful teacher development.

THE PROBLEM WITH TEACHER EVALUATION IN MICHIGAN

So how has the 2011 law requiring more meaningful educator evaluations worked out so far? Are our teachers now benefiting from the more nuanced, detailed, and actionable feedback those policies required?

To answer these questions, the Education Trust–Midwest surveyed 30 of the state's largest districts and asked them to share data on how they rated teachers by evaluation category during the 2011-12 school year. Of those surveyed, 10 districts — with 8,654 teachers and more than 140,000 students — responded to our requests: Dearborn City School District, Farmington Public School District, Grosse Pointe Public Schools, Huron Valley Schools, Kentwood Public Schools, Lansing School District, Livonia Public Schools, Midland Public Schools, Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, and Utica Community Schools.

The results indicate that little has changed in how teachers are evaluated and supported in Michigan. Indeed, Michigan teachers continue to be treated as if they are identical, assembly-line workers and do not get the rich, individualized professional feedback and development they deserve.

Among the districts surveyed, 99.4 percent of the teachers were rated as "effective" or "highly effective." Less than 1 percent of teachers were rated "ineffective" or "minimally effective," with just 0.2 percent (or 2 in every 1,000 traditional public or charter school teachers) in the "ineffective" category.

Among our findings:

- In Utica Community Schools, the second largest school district in the state, 1,517 of the district's 1,520 teachers were rated "effective." Three were rated "minimally effective."
- In the Grosse Pointe Public School District, where fewer than half of all 11th-graders are proficient in math (and only 15 percent for African-American students) on the 2012 Michigan Merit Examination, no teachers were rated "ineffective" and only 2 of 544 teachers were marked "minimally effective."
- In the Lansing School District, only 6 percent of eighth-graders perform math at grade level, and only 2 percent of African-American eighth-graders are proficient, according to the state's 2011 Michigan Educational Assessment Program exam. And yet every one of Lansing's 922 teachers were rated "effective" this past school year.
- The district that had the most variation in how it rated its teachers was Dearborn City School District. Even there, just 1.2 percent of teachers were rated "ineffective" or "minimally effective" — that's 15 of 1,231 teachers.

Failing to be honest about teacher performance prevents districts from identifying weaknesses in their classrooms and giving teachers the professional support that would make average teachers great, and help novice teachers and those who are struggling raise their game.

One example is Farmington Public School District, a suburban Detroit system with 873 teachers. Last year, 870 of those teachers were rated "effective." Three were rated "minimally effective." By labeling all its teaching staff "effective," Farmington neglects to give teachers the rich diagnostic data, feedback, and support they need to improve their practice, which, in turn, would help improve student learning.

To be fair, a few districts were able to draw sharp distinctions among teachers — but only at the high end of the rating scale. For instance, Kentwood Public Schools near Grand Rapids rated the vast majority of its 521 teachers as "effective" but also recognized 91 teachers (17.5 percent) as "highly effective." Yet Kentwood, like other districts, was timid in identifying and supporting low performers — rating only four teachers "minimally effective" and no teachers "ineffective."

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

The Michigan results are even starker than those in a highly influential 2009 national study by The New Teacher Project called "The Widget Effect," which examined teacher evaluation ratings from 12 districts in four states: Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, and Ohio.⁵ The study found that in districts using only two ratings (such as "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory"), more than 99 percent of teachers were rated "satisfactory." The study found similar results in districts that used more than two rating categories — 94 percent of teachers were rated in one of the top two categories and fewer than 1 percent were rated in the bottom category.

Some might say these findings aren't surprising, given that many districts continue to operate under collective bargaining agreements that traditionally have prevented many school districts from delivering more differentiated teacher evaluations and feedback. Lansing school leaders told us they had agreed to a request from the local teachers union, the Lansing Schools Education Association, to rate every Lansing teacher as "effective" in the 2011-12 school year. (Lansing district officials say with the arrival of a new superintendent, they expect to revamp performance evaluation practices this year.)

However, even in districts where collective bargaining agreements do not arguably constrain administrators' ability to deliver more wide-ranging feedback, school leaders still used the bottom two evaluation ratings sparingly. For example, Midland Public Schools' collective bargaining agreement does not dictate or limit evaluation practices. Still, the district rated only about 0.8 percent of its teachers as "minimally effective" or "ineffective."

These findings suggest that the challenges to building high-quality diagnostic and professional evaluation systems go far beyond collective bargaining issues. (See *Table 1 for a summary of the ratings in all districts that responded to our request.*)

Clearly, we are shortchanging our teachers and students. The vast majority of teachers are hard-working professionals who

THOUSANDS OF TEACHERS, A COMMON RESULT

The Education Trust–Midwest examined the 2011-12 performance evaluations of more than 8,600 teachers in some of Michigan’s largest public school districts. While student achievement lagged in many of these districts, this chart shows that virtually all teachers were rated as either “effective” or “highly effective” in their evaluations. Fewer than 1 percent of teachers were rated as less than effective. The results raise concerns that struggling teachers are neither being identified by districts nor given the training and support they need to improve.

Table 1. Teacher Effectiveness Ratings for 2011-12

District	Ineffective 0.21%	Minimally Effective 0.44%	Effective 87.75%	Highly Effective 11.60%	Total	Collective Bargaining Agreement
Dearborn City School District	9	6	903	313	1231	Yes
Farmington Public School District	0	3	870	0	873	Yes
Grosse Pointe Public Schools	0	2	522	20	544	Yes
Huron Valley Schools	1	1	561	7	570	Yes
Kentwood Public Schools	0	4	426	91	521	Yes
Lansing School District	0	0	922	0	922	Yes
Livonia Public Schools	2	7	842	102	953	Yes
Midland Public Schools	2	2	370	98	472	No
Plymouth-Canton Community Schools	4	10	661	373	1,048	Yes
Utica Community Schools	0	3	1,517	0	1,520	Yes

Note: All districts in our sample were asked to submit their aggregated teacher effectiveness ratings for the 2011-12 school year. The same data districts were required to report to the state by June 30, 2012. The following districts did not respond to repeated requests: Bay City, Birmingham, Chippewa, Flint, Forest Hills, Grand Blanc, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, L’Anse Creuse, Port Huron, Traverse City, Troy, Walled Lake, Warren, Waterford, and Wayne-Westland. The following districts would not send us the data: Detroit, Portage, and Rochester.

crave feedback — and want to get better. When nearly all teachers are told they are doing well, expectations are lowered or remain ill-defined and teachers miss out on opportunities to help students learn. Teachers need concrete examples of what teaching looks like at different levels, paired with conversations with trained evaluators and top colleagues on where they excel and how they can improve.

The lack of detailed diagnostic information for teachers also produces another problem: real excellence often goes unrecognized. If we can’t identify our best teachers: We can’t take steps to ensure they stay in the profession, we can’t match them with the students who need help most, and we can’t leverage their expertise to help their colleagues.

Smart teacher evaluation is a starting point for good professional development and feedback for teachers. But we cannot develop such support systems without reliable diagnostic data on educators’ strengths and weaknesses.

MICHIGAN NEEDS A STATEWIDE SYSTEM

It seems clear from these data that Michigan’s new laws have not brought about the desired change in educator evaluation practices in our state. To find out why, we are digging into a set of local evaluation systems and will share what we’ve learned in another report scheduled for release this fall.

If anything is clear, though, it is this: To really bring about the kind of feedback and training that educators of all sorts need to improve, the state will have to provide greater guidance and far more support.

Education leaders in leading states — such as Tennessee, Rhode Island, Illinois and Colorado — have stepped up to design robust, statewide methods for teacher evaluation, support, and development. Putting this responsibility onto local school districts and charter schools is clearly not working in Michigan.

In the coming months, the Michigan Legislature will have an opportunity to approve a new statewide teacher evaluation, data, and support system. The proposed system is being developed by the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness, a state-appointed body of education experts.

The legislature must support and fully implement the new system. Our teachers should be supported and invested in as the valued professionals they are — not as the assembly-line workers of the past. It’s time to invest in high-quality teaching for all of Michigan’s students by supporting our most valuable education resource: our teachers. ■

NOTES

1. Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job" in *Path to Prosperity: Hamilton Project Ideas on Income Security, Education, and Taxes*, ed. Jason Furman and Jason Bordoff (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), chapter 7.
2. Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, and Jonah E. Rockoff, "The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood" (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17699, December 2011).
3. William L. Sanders and June C. Rivers. "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement" (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996).
4. In The Education Trust–West report "Learning Denied: The Case for Equitable Access to Effective Teaching in California's Largest School District," the authors show how a teacher at the 75th percentile of effectiveness can actually improve learning by six months of instruction more than a teacher at the 25th percentile. Carrie Hahnel and Orville Jackson, "Learning Denied: The Case for Equitable Access to Effective Teaching in California's Largest School District" (Oakland, Calif.: The Education Trust-West, 2012).
5. D. Weisberg, S. Sexton, J. Mulhern, and D. Keeling, "The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness" (New York: The New Teacher Project, 2009).

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST–MIDWEST

The Education Trust–Midwest works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, from pre-kindergarten through college. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement for all children, particularly those from low-income families or who are African American, Latino, or American Indian — in Michigan and beyond. As a statewide education policy and advocacy organization, we are focused first and foremost on doing what is right for Michigan students. The Education Trust–Midwest is affiliated with the national organization, The Education Trust, based in Washington, D.C. Ed Trust–Midwest is the second state office of The Education Trust.



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