Teacher Evaluations and Merit Pay: An Uneasy Mix

The fairness of teacher evaluation models continues to come under fire.

By David A. Dolph, Ph.D.

Teacher evaluations are undergoing significant changes in response to demands for school reform and higher accountability. States are now including value-added data in teacher evaluations, experimenting with merit pay based on evaluations, or both. Colorado, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas are but a few states that have altered the way teachers are evaluated or that are incorporating value-added data.

Changes in evaluation practice will likely mean significant modifications in how building-level administrators evaluate teachers. Moreover, approaches to teacher salary systems are just as likely to be altered if merit pay is introduced. School business officials (SBOs) are typically not involved directly in teacher evaluation; even so, they need to understand changes in teacher evaluations because they have implications for bargaining, policy, and budgeting. Such changes

are of particular concern if evaluations are tied to merit pay.

In this article, we look at some of the teacher evaluation systems in Ohio as an example.

Changing Procedures

According to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE 2013), changes in evaluation procedures will reward teacher competence, improve instruction for students, increase student learning, and strengthen professional proficiency for teachers.

The primary motivation for the changes is the incorporation of some form of student academic growth measure into teacher evaluations. Student academic growth will be assessed through a variety of methods. Value-added scores will be used in subject areas where such scores are available. School boards may also use assessments approved by ODE in subjects if value-added scores are unavailable. Finally, local measures of student growth can be developed and used if state-designed criteria are followed.

States are now including value-added data in teacher evaluations.

Under the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), boards must have approved policies in place no later than July 1, 2013 (ODE 2013). Of course, implementation of the new model may vary because of negotiated agreements currently in place. Pursuant to OTES, teacher ratings of performance are to be determined through the use of a rubric based on Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession (ODE 2013).

Under OTES, building-level administrators must base evaluations on evidence secured through a variety of means, including observations, walk-throughs, and conferences. Observed evidence grounded on approved rubrics shall contribute to 50% of a teacher's evaluation rating. The other 50% will be based on student growth measures. Thus, teachers' summative or final performance ratings will be combinations of student growth measures and performance ratings determined through evaluations.

Inclusion of student growth or value-added measures in teacher evaluations in states such as Ohio represents a significant change. Growth measures attempt to show how much students have learned over time by demonstrating improvement on tests results. In addition, the use of student growth measures endeavors to demonstrate teacher impact on learning during specific periods.

Student Growth Measures

Value-added data are the first growth measure to consider. Value-added models (VAMs) rely on statistical methods that measure teacher impact on student academic achievement (Di Carlo 2012). Ohio uses a model known as EVAAS (Education Value-Added Assessment System) to report student growth in grades 4–8 in mathematics and language arts (ODE 2013). Supporters of VAMs note data gathered in the process provide educators with important information regarding how much impact a teacher or a school is having on student academic achievement. In addition, Hershberg (2004) reports that value-added data offer fairer comparisons of teachers rather than student test scores determined during single points in time. Critics, on the other hand, argue that VAMs are not reliable or sufficiently valid since they fail to isolate nonteacher effects sufficiently (Braun 2005).

The second method for evaluating student growth is based on ODE-approved vendor assessments. These assessments can be used in subjects and grades other than fourth- to eighth-grade mathematics and language arts and will be determined by local school boards.

The third vehicle used to assess student growth is student learning objectives (SLOs) based on decisions made by local boards when neither VAMs nor approved vendor assessments are available. SLOs developed by teachers based on criteria suggested by the ODE will be used to ascertain student academic growth and the impact that teachers and schools have on learning.

Much of the current discussion on teacher evaluation centers on the use of value-added data to assess teachers' impact on student learning. An array of variables has major influences on student learning gains beyond that of teachers. Influences of other teachers, tutors, curricula, materials, parents, peers, and class size are all possible factors affecting learning gains (Darling-Hammond et. al. 2012).

The trend is moving away from traditional models of teacher pay.

Other variables that may play a role are socioeconomic status (SES), demographics such as school location, and the number of students in a class. Proponents of VAMs argue that statistical methods control for variables such as SES and other demographic factors and accurately provide data reflecting teacher impact on student academic growth (Di Carlo 2012).

Conversely, critics believe that even though statistical techniques are used to adjust for demographic and other related variables, ratings for teacher effectiveness are compromised (Darling-Hammond et. al. 2012). It is beyond the scope of this article to take a stance either way on this issue. Still, what does seem apparent is that insofar as there is a degree of uncertainty surrounding accuracy of value-added data, policy incorporating this

information into high-stakes teacher evaluations needs to be undertaken with care.

Using student growth data gathered from vendor-approved assessments or SLOs raises questions, since these data may not be treated with the same statistical techniques as those in value-added calculations. This method could cause differences when adjusting for confounding variables, such as SES, parental involvement, or school location, thus rendering the ability to accurately determine teacher impact on student growth all the more problematic. Therefore, the same concern is raised as with value-added data; attentiveness is advised when significantly tying growth data to high-stakes teacher evaluations and merit pay.

Merit Pay in Relation to Teacher Evaluation

In addition to changes in how teachers are evaluated, school officials and teacher associations in Ohio are considering the use of evaluation results when determining teacher salary increases. Thus, merit pay, as opposed to traditional teacher salary schedules, may be on the horizon in Ohio and other states.

Education leaders must act with caution.

The trend is moving away from traditional models of teacher pay. School boards in states such as Florida, Iowa, Ohio, and Texas have explored incorporating merit pay into teacher compensation models (Buck and Greene 2011). Discussions related to merit pay inevitably bring forth arguments from both supporters and critics. Concerns related to the accuracy of data regarding student growth that's attributable to teachers may be a confounding variable regarding merit pay. Education leaders must act with caution if teacher evaluations are to be factored into merit pay because of overreliance on value-added data or statistical concerns related to reliability and validity (Di Carlo 2012).

Proponents typically raise four arguments in support of merit pay:

- Americans have traditionally valued competition as a way to achieve best results.
- Merit pay will provide incentives for teachers, resulting in better test scores.
- Some teachers are simply more effective than others and deserve to be better compensated (Weldon 2011).
- If teachers are better compensated, the education profession may attract higher-quality candidates and have more potential to retain the highly effective teachers currently in the schools.

Proponents typically raise four arguments.

Opponents of merit pay, often led by teachers unions, raise five arguments against merit pay:

- Critics contend that competition among teachers undermines cooperative climates that foster good teaching (Weldon 2011).
- Teachers may attempt to avoid teaching more challenging students or teaching in challenging school building settings.
- It's difficult to define exactly what a successful teacher is (Lewis 2013).
- High-stakes merit pay might encourage dishonest behavior on the part of teachers or administrators (Lewis 2013).
- The scope of curriculum may narrow to focus only on test results.

What Does This Mean for SBOs?

SBOs typically are not intimately involved in teacher evaluations. However, new teacher evaluation models are likely a subject of teacher–board of education negotiations. Therefore, it is imperative that SBOs be well informed about this new and potentially challenging aspect of contract negotiations.

One issue that may arise in negotiations concerns which students count in teacher evaluation ratings. Although Ohio laws provide guidance, a key issue is whether boards will use "shared distribution" toward calculating student growth data. Shared distribution refers to student growth data for all students in school buildings counting toward all teacher scores as opposed to using individual

teacher data in determining effectiveness. Although this approach may be easier to manage, it may mitigate accuracy for individual teacher scores.

A second conceivable issue for contract negotiation is who conducts teacher evaluations. Administrators are concerned about the time required to evaluate all teachers in a building—especially in large school buildings with only a principal and an assistant principal, or no assistant at all.

The OTES process is time intensive and, because it is new, has a potentially steep learning curve such that an already-challenging process will become more so. For example, use of a new rubric to rate teachers will take time to learn. One possible solution is to use third-party evaluators rather than building principals. Some boards are looking toward outside vendors to assist with teacher evaluations, thus reducing time demands for building-level administrators.

Although the use of third-party evaluators is a possible solution to time management concerns for building principals, it may not be a desirable approach for two reasons. First, this practice may relegate an essential building leadership function and responsibility to outside entities, thereby reducing building administrator control of the main activity in a building: instruction of students. Second, it is possible that allowing evaluations to be conducted by third parties may increase the chances for dispute if the evaluation is not positive.

Another concern relates to funding merit pay plans based on teacher evaluations. Two issues are related to this area. First, calculating salary commitments based on potentially constantly moving targets due to changes in teacher effectiveness ratings could be challenging. A second fear deals with how merit pay will be funded. If merit pay results in a redistribution of available resources dedicated to salary, teacher morale could be dramatically affected.

Conclusion

With the emphasis on school reform and demands for higher levels of accountability, there is a focus on how teachers are evaluated. Further, sentiment is growing in support of merit pay in some form in relation to teacher compensation. Although SBOs are usually not directly involved in teacher evaluations, it is essential that they have a clear understanding of the new teacher evaluation models, along with the potential consequences accruing from them. Going forward, policy and negotiation issues require careful and proactive thought when related to teacher evaluation.

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