



Supporting Effective Teaching Through Teacher Evaluation

A Study of Teacher Evaluation in Five Charter Schools

Morgaen L. Donaldson with Heather G. Peske March 2010

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Teacher evaluation and charter schools feature prominently in President Barack Obama's proposals to transform our nation's public schools. To be eligible for additional educational funding from the \$4 billion Race to the Top program, for example, states must permit the use of student test scores in teacher evaluation and allow charter schools to expand and play a central role in efforts to turn around low-performing schools. In this way, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are highlighting teacher evaluation as a critical problem.

Indeed, the weaknesses of teacher evaluation systems are well known. Exerting scant influence on instruction, they tend to have little effect on student learning or achievement.¹ The consequences of a poor teacher evaluation process are two-fold: little improvement in teachers' instruction in the classroom and the continued employment of weak teachers.² Given the profound influence that teachers have on student achievement, accurately evaluating their performance is a natural leverage point for increasing teacher quality and expanding student learning.

The importance of meaningful teacher evaluation is receiving national attention from other sources as well. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, for example, recently described a need for major changes in teacher evaluation and pledged support from the national union in this endeavor.³

In addition to shining a spotlight on teacher evaluation, the Obama administration advances charter schools as a potential solution to the persistent failure of some public schools. There may be a natural link between these two policy emphases. Charter schools create their own teacher evaluation systems and are not usually constrained by school district mandates, union rules, or laws governing tenure and dismissal. This means they may tightly link appraisal to instruction, learning, and achievement and generate results with real consequences. But the operative word here is "may."

Despite the potential of charter schools to more tightly link teacher evaluation with improvements in teacher quality, there is very little published research that examines the norms, practices, and outcomes of teacher evaluation in charter schools.⁴ As a result, a number of critical questions stand unanswered:

The consequences of a poor teacher evaluation process are two-fold: little improvement in teachers' instruction in the classroom and the continued employment of weak teachers.

- Does teacher evaluation in charter schools improve instruction, enhance student learning, and raise achievement?
- Do charter school evaluation ratings exhibit wider variation than the narrow distribution of high marks commonly found in “conventional” public schools?
- Are charter school administrators able to use teacher evaluation as a means to identify and dismiss teachers who are not effective or recognize and reward those who are?

If charter schools do, in fact, differ from regular public schools on these matters, policymakers need to understand the differences. Especially important is the question of whether the absence of tenure and contract protections in many charter schools accounts for variations in teacher evaluation, or whether there are other factors, such as instructional coherence, school culture, or school size, which are more responsible for divergences in policy and practice.

This paper reports the findings from our study of teacher evaluation practices in five charter schools affiliated with three well-established charter management organizations.⁵ Based on interviews with teachers, principals, and charter management organization officials, supplemented by document analysis, our study begins to answer the three defining questions listed above. While modest in scope and scale, this study is the first of its kind. It seeks to lay an initial foundation for further inquiry regarding teacher evaluation in charter schools.

As such, it examines the practices, procedures, and norms related to teacher evaluation. The study further explores influences on and outcomes of teacher evaluation in these five charter schools. In the pages that follow, we will first briefly explore the opportunities to innovate that charter schools generally enjoy compared to many of their conventional public school counterparts. Then, we will delve directly into the findings at five charter schools run by three different charter management organizations.

We selected three CMOs, which we call West, North, and National. All three organizations are nationally recognized for the achievement of their students, many of whom come from low-income and minority families living in urban areas. All three charter management organizations focus on preparing students for college and base their work on a small number of guiding principles.

West CMO is a group of schools serving students in two of the nation’s largest urban centers. It is a network of conversion and start-up charter schools in which teachers collectively bargain. North CMO is a network of schools serving students in several medium-sized cities in the northeast. This CMO spawned in a relatively small geographic region from one successful school. National CMO includes a larger number of schools than the other two organizations and serves about three to four times as many students in some of the nation’s largest cities as well as some of its medium ones. National CMO features a more decentralized CMO structure than West or North CMO.

What we found

- Teachers in our sample report that the evaluation process they experience in these schools is more frequent and more robust than that of their former schools, whether charter or conventional public schools.
- In general, the three charter management organizations and the five schools included in this study posit that the primary purpose of teacher evaluation is to continually improve teacher performance. As a result, they focus on the performance growth function of the evaluation process rather than summative assessment of individual teachers.
- These schools seek to develop in teachers and administrators a mindset of continuous improvement rather than a checklist of appropriate teacher behaviors. In this way, evaluation in these settings seems to be focused on becoming a professional habit rather than an administrative act.
- In all five charter schools, student performance played a key role in teachers' evaluation. Yet none of these schools used value-added data in teacher evaluation. All three charter management organizations say they are considering doing so in the future, however.

Similarly, the practices and procedures at these charter schools differ from those governing teacher evaluation in many conventional schools. Specifically, these charter schools require:

- Annual summative evaluations for every teacher
- Frequent, structured observations of teachers accompanied by detailed feedback throughout the academic year
- Attention to a culture of reflection and accountability in the day-to-day work of the school
- Hiring as a crucial primary step in assessing the candidate's commitment to continuous instructional improvement
- Efforts to advance a "no surprise policy" so teachers and administrators are on the same page throughout the year about teachers' performance so that the consequences for teachers' jobs are predictable
- Substantial training for evaluators on how to observe classroom instruction and provide feedback.

In all five charter schools we researched, teachers' evaluation ratings cover a slightly broader range than that reported in conventional schools. But somewhat to our surprise, only a slightly higher proportion of teachers are dismissed from these schools than from their conventional counterparts.

In tightening the links between teacher evaluation, instructional improvement, and student learning, and then implementing consequences for teacher performance, these charter schools encounter some of the same barriers to improving teacher performance as conventional settings. In the main section that follows, we explore in depth how these charter management organizations and charter schools conduct teacher evaluation and what it may mean to education policymakers in the Obama administration, in Congress, and in state and local school districts across the country.

The promises and pitfalls of teacher evaluation in public schools

In conventional public schools, teacher evaluation follows a general pattern.⁶ Typically, provisional, nontenured teachers are evaluated at least once each year. More experienced teachers with tenure are generally evaluated less often. Teachers and administrators sometimes conduct pre- and post-observation conferences, though not always. Teachers are often required to “sign off” on their evaluations after they are conducted and written documents are completed.

In states where teachers collectively bargain, teacher evaluation is usually subject to negotiation, with the process of evaluation clearly laid out in a collective bargaining agreement or a related document. In these conventional schools, some administrators may conduct informal observations of teachers, but this depends upon the culture of the school and the provisions of the contracts.

In some circumstances, evaluation is helpful to teachers, whether they are unionized or not, but the process is often a bureaucratic necessity of little use to improving teachers’ instructional capabilities. Overall, the vast majority of summative ratings on evaluations are “satisfactory” or even more laudatory.⁷ This masks struggling teachers’ challenges and stymies efforts to identify or reward top performers.

Most importantly, this approach to teacher evaluation reduces the potential of the evaluation process to improve instruction and learning for the majority of teachers whose performance is neither poor nor outstanding. Why has teacher evaluations specifically failed to raise the level of instruction and learning in U.S. public schools? The reasons behind the limited impact of evaluation on instructional improvement are interrelated and include:⁸

- Poor evaluation instruments
- Little school district guidance on the substance of the teacher evaluations
- Lack of time for evaluators to conduct the evaluations
- Lack of skill and content knowledge among the evaluators
- Lack of will among evaluators to conduct thorough and accurate evaluations
- Absence of high-quality feedback to teachers through the evaluation process and thus few consequences, positive or negative, attached to the evaluations

The mediocrity of teacher evaluation has deep roots in public schools. Teaching has long been practiced as a private enterprise, in part due to what University of Chicago sociologist Dan Lortie termed the “egg-crate structure” of schools, where classroom teachers work in isolation, similar to eggs in an egg crate.⁹ Principals are often constrained by workloads that thwart their best intentions to provide substantive feedback on instruction. Compromises between labor and management impede efforts to link teacher evaluation to instructional improvements. Poorly conducted evaluation has left teachers skeptical that thoughtful evaluation is probable or even possible.

Charter schools: An opportunity to innovate

Charter schools may be uniquely positioned to address and mitigate the problems that plague teacher evaluation in many conventional schools.

Teacher evaluation in conventional public schools clearly is failing to improve teacher quality substantially or on a broad scale. Some education experts argue, however, that charter schools may create systems and cultivate cultures that promote more useful and consequential evaluation. Freed from many of the regulations that constrain their conventional school counterparts, charter school principals may be able to evaluate teachers more effectively, thus improving the quality of instruction.¹⁰

Indeed, these experts note that charter schools create their own teacher evaluation systems and are usually less confined by collectively bargained protections or tenure laws. Charter schools may be thus uniquely positioned to address and, potentially, mitigate the problems that plague teacher evaluation in many conventional schools. They may offer a counterexample where teacher evaluation is tightly linked to instruction, learning, and achievement.¹¹

Specifically, charter schools often enjoy greater autonomy than most conventional public schools in critical areas such as staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Charter schools generally experience greater freedom to hire who they want, evaluate them according to their own standards and procedures, and dismiss teachers in a timely fashion if they do not deliver on the school’s promise. Moreover, because charter schools can exercise discretion over teacher compensation and have the freedom to design innovative teacher career structures, they can recognize outstanding instructors with financial or other sorts of rewards.¹²

The absence of a bureaucratic superstructure around charters may further liberate these schools from some of the constraints regular public schools encounter. Some experts argue that the absence of teachers unions in many charter schools and, more specifically, the collective bargaining provisions and due process guarantees that they protect, may permit these schools to more tightly link evaluation and professional development and more readily dismiss teachers who are truly underperforming.

What's more, because states can rescind a school's charter, this may put increased pressure on these schools to tightly monitor teacher quality.¹³ Thus, charter schools may experience accountability pressures over and above those felt by conventional public schools.

These potential facilitators of teacher evaluation at charter schools are little understood because there is currently little research that examines the practices, norms, and outcomes of teacher evaluation in these settings. Most studies of charter schools analyze their student composition or achievement. Indeed, we identified only two studies to date that have examined how charter schools as a group approach teacher evaluation.¹⁴

In the most recent study, in 2008 by California principal Marie Morelock, Morelock found that two charter schools placed teacher evaluation within their schools' larger professional development systems. One of these schools was affiliated with a charter management organization—Aspire Public Schools—and one with a teachers union—the United Teachers of Los Angeles. Morelock found that the two schools faced challenges similar to those encountered by conventional public schools. The presence of a teachers union in one of the schools was not perceived to be a barrier to high-quality teacher evaluation.¹⁵

In the other study, conducted in 2001, professors Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky surveyed a sample of 132 charter schools in seven states and compared their responses to various questions to those responses for conventional public schools. Almost half of the charter schools in this sample reported factoring teachers' performance into their subsequent salaries.¹⁶ More than 40 percent considered student achievement in evaluating teachers' performance, though it is not clear from the study how achievement factored into the appraisal.¹⁷

Other studies on charter schools provide important contextual information for this investigation. In a study of all of California's charter schools, RAND Corporation researchers found that charter school principals felt that they had more control over hiring and dismissals than those in matched conventional schools.¹⁸ One study of teacher turnover nationwide determined that involuntary attrition was significantly higher in charter schools than conventional public schools.¹⁹

Other studies suggest that innovations at charter schools occur that address related aspects of human resource development while not directly speaking to evaluation. There is some evidence, for example, that charter schools hire innovatively by screening for teachers whose philosophy aligns with the school's mission.²⁰

In sum, there is evidence that charter schools may integrate evaluation and professional development more robustly, may include student achievement results, and may give principals more control over personnel evaluation than in conventional public schools. But the evidence is thin and, in some cases, may be outdated or constrained by geography. This is where the study reported here is important.

Our study

Given the paucity of research on teacher evaluation in charter schools, this study explores this process in a small sample of charter settings. These schools have demonstrated strong academic results with students and are affiliated with well-established and well-regarded charter management organizations. As such, this study seeks to inform future larger-scale studies of teacher evaluation in such settings.

In this research, we studied charter schools that operate within a charter management organization much like a smaller version of conventional schools within a district. We selected three CMOs, which we call West, North, and National. Each CMO has earned a national reputation for achieving excellent results while serving high numbers of minority and low-income students in some of the nation's poorest urban centers. Each focuses on preparing students for college and bases its work on a small number of guiding principles.

The first, the Western charter school network or West CMO, is a group of approximately 20 schools serving students in two of the nation's largest urban centers. The schools in the network draw mostly students of color from low-income families. This CMO is composed of so-called conversion schools that were formerly conventional schools and converted to charter schools and start-up or newly created schools. All of the teachers in West CMO schools collectively bargain.

The second group is a network of approximately 15 schools serving approximately 5000 students in several urban communities in the northern United States. It also educates mostly the children of low-income and minority families. This CMO, which we'll call the Northern charter school network or North CMO, grew from one seed school into this network. The teachers in the Northern charter school network are not unionized.

A national charter school network with about 75 schools serving approximately 20,000 students across the country, National CMO got its start from one successful school in a major city. Now the network serves high numbers of minority and low-income students in some of the nation's poorest cities. This CMO network features a more decentralized CMO structure in which the schools operate more independently from each other and from the charter management organizations than in the other two networks.

We conducted interviews with administrators in each of these charter management organizations as well as teachers and principals in some of the schools within each of the

CMO networks (see Table 1).²¹ In each school, we interviewed at least two teachers and at least one administrator. The teachers with whom we spoke had a range of experience levels. Most had taught previously in other schools; a few had entered teaching at the school in which we interviewed them.

The findings of our study

We divide the findings of our research into three categories in order to better understand the influence of teacher evaluation at these charter schools. Specifically, we examine:

- The philosophy, practices, and procedures of evaluation
- The influence of evaluation on teacher quality
- The reasons for the influence of these evaluations

In the pages that follow, we'll consider each of these findings in more detail.

TABLE 1
Participants in our study of charter schools

Key information about the three charter management organizations and their schools

Level	Enrollment	African American or Latino	Free and reduced lunch	# evaluators	# teachers
Western charter school network, or West CMO					
1 High school	550	95%	80%	2	29
2 High school	530	100%	70%	2	26
Northern charter school network, or North CMO					
1 Middle	215	99%	70%	3	18
2 Elementary	265	98%	60%	2	18
National charter school network, or National CMO					
1 Middle	350	80%	90%	4	27 ²²

Source: All information is from 2008-09 school year except for the number of teachers and evaluators, which describes 2009-10 conditions. Note: Numbers are approximate to preserve confidentiality.

Philosophy, practices, and procedures of evaluation

Across the board, teachers in these charter schools report that the evaluations they experience are more frequent and more robust than that of their former schools, where observation happened only a few times per year. Reflecting the majority of the sample of teachers, one teacher in the Northern charter school network said that teacher evaluations at her charter school were “vastly, vastly different” from her prior public school.

Teachers report that evaluation practiced in their schools differs not only from prior public schools in which they worked but also from other charter school settings not affiliated with the high-performing charter networks identified here. Several participants said they could not remember being evaluated at their previous charter schools. One teacher simply stated, “Evaluation was not a priority at that school.”

Our research finds that these three CMOs and their schools in this study evaluate teachers differently from how the research suggests that many public schools conduct evaluations. Specifically, these charter schools have teacher evaluation processes that:

- Are designed to improve teacher performance
- Attain knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of teachers
- Link evaluation to professional development
- Focus on results

Each of these characteristics will now be explored in more detail.

Teacher evaluation designed to improve teacher performance

So how do these schools conceive of teacher evaluation? Overall, the three charter school networks conceive of teacher evaluation similarly. All of the school administrators and teachers we interviewed say that the primary purpose of teacher evaluation is to continually improve teacher performance. In fact, in many of the interviews, administrators and teachers were puzzled by our use of the term “evaluator” and “evaluation” and preferred to emphasize the developmental aspects of this work and the goal of continuous improvement rather than a final, summative assessment at one point in time.

Reflecting this emphasis, several of the schools call individuals who observe and assess teaching performance “coaches.” And as a result of this approach, all three charter school networks focus on opportunities to improve teacher effectiveness throughout the school year rather than emphasizing a summative evaluation. The implication: The charter schools in this study focus on frequent observations and prioritize in-the-moment and sustained feedback.²³

School leaders and teachers agree this approach allowed evaluation to have a greater impact on instruction and provide a fair course of support for teachers who struggled.

Using the results from teacher evaluation to fulfill the purposes described above enables these three charter school networks to focus on improving teacher performance, according to the schools’ administrators and teachers alike. Here’s how.

Improving teachers’ performance

Leaders within the three charter management organizations and their schools describe similar purposes regarding teacher evaluation: gauging and improving teachers’ instructional skills, informing one-on-one coaching and schoolwide professional development, and identifying struggling teachers for intensive intervention and potentially dismissal, with emphasis on improving teacher performance. All three CMOs emphasize ongoing observation over summative evaluation sessions.

These purposes stand in contrast to conventional purposes of evaluation at most traditional schools. Unlike many conventional schools, where evaluation yields a summative rating with little influence on performance, these schools used the results of observations in various efforts to improve teaching throughout the school.

Attaining knowledge of strengths and weaknesses

All of the respondents in our research describe an evaluation process designed to engage teachers in critically reviewing their own instructional practice and assessing strengths and areas for improvement. Here’s how the human resources director at the Western charter school network describes the purpose of evaluation in his schools:

To assess where teachers are and to evaluate if they’ve made progress since their last evaluation. Are they moving closer towards getting all fours on the standards? And it’s also to identify where are some development areas for individual teachers?

At this organization, a “four” was the highest score one could receive on a teaching standard.

Similarly, a principal at one of the schools in the Northern charter school network describes how evaluation at her school is closely connected to one-on-one coaching. She explains that her network favors ongoing informal assessments tightly linked to coaching sessions in contrast to a summative evaluation process. This principal, who had previously been a management consultant, finds this evaluation system to be “really exciting.” She explains that when she first entered education, she was struck by:

... A huge disconnect that teachers are only evaluated in a 45 minute snapshot versus a holistic development and big picture goals based on the sum of multiple performances. That was something I found really motivating at my consulting company and seemed to be a glaring missing piece in the world of education. So I was excited... to see that the roots of a professional growth system were there, which was very similar to what I was accustomed to at my former company. And the mentorship model is also set up to support that so that people have someone actively invested in evaluating and coaching them in their development goal for that year.

Linking evaluation to professional development

Another purpose was to inform schoolwide professional development. In schools in North and National CMOs, weekly observations directly informed weekly schoolwide professional development as well as one-on-one coaching sessions.

The human resources director of the Western charter management organization described the process by which the professional development committee, composed of teachers and administrators, “will see an aggregate of its teacher evaluation ratings so they can look at it and say, ‘Okay where are the areas that, based on the evaluation, that we need to get better or that we need to improve?’ and then they’ll incorporate that into the professional development schedule.”

Public and collaborative teacher evaluations focused on results

Teachers and principals in the charter schools we researched describe a culture of accountability and a results-driven focus. Unlike the “egg-crate” structure in many schools, where teachers work in isolation with little or no feedback from others, teachers and administrators in these schools described working in an intensely collaborative enterprise. Here, teaching is public work and the vehicle by which to achieve results. Consequently, discussion of teaching and results—from administrator performance to teacher performance to student performance—is almost second nature.

Indeed, one fourth-year teacher in the National charter school network explained that everyone in the school, whether administrator or teacher, holds him or herself account-

able for results. Administrators model self-critical approaches to their performance and establish structures for teachers to be equally self-critical and to receive feedback and support to improve their performance. After each week’s professional development session, for example, administrators distribute questionnaires inviting teachers to evaluate the usefulness of the professional development.²⁴

This culture of accountability encourages self-critique and continuous evaluation where one is always seeking ways to improve, explains an administrator at the National charter school network: “All of our schools have a strong culture of accountability and a results-driven focus, as well as open-door policies which encourage teachers to collaborate and learn from each other, and constantly improve.”

Educators in Western CMO schools described a similar collaborative enterprise. One teacher said, “our principal and vice principal and other teachers are pretty good at supporting you in teaching practices ... that’s separate from the evaluation process, that’s just how we are as a school.”

Likewise, educators in North CMO stressed the teamwork and accountability expected of them in their schools. One teacher described, “Once a week we sit down with our principal in a small team and we talk about just where we are, what our goals are for the next week, and how we’re going to accomplish them.” She noted that this results in “the constant sharing of best practices amongst the team.”

The key procedures and practices for organizing teacher evaluations

At all the charter schools where we conducted our research, one of the most striking contrasts with conventional schools is that every teacher participates in an annual, summative review of his or her performance. In many conventional schools, tenured teachers can be evaluated only once every third or fourth year.²⁵ Moreover, in these three charter management organizations, teachers were asked to reflect on their practice, in some cases quite extensively, and set goals as a central piece of evaluation. Procedures and practices related to teacher evaluation and development include:

- Completing annual summative evaluation for every teacher
- Conducting frequent, structured observations of teachers accompanied by detailed feedback throughout the academic year
- Cultivating a culture of reflection and accountability in the day-to-day work of the school
- Using hiring as a crucial primary step in evaluating teacher performance by assessing the candidate’s commitment to continuous improvement
- Ensuring a “no surprise policy” for evaluation so teachers and administrators are on the same page throughout the year about individual performance and the consequences for teachers’ jobs are predictable

A culture of accountability encourages self-critique and continuous evaluation where one is always seeking ways to improve.

Notably, much of the evaluation in many conventional schools is formal: Specific procedures govern how evaluation proceeds and how results can be used. Most of the effort and resources in many conventional schools is focused on summative judgments about teacher performance in the form of annual evaluation for provisional teachers and less frequent evaluation for teachers already accorded tenure.²⁶

In contrast, at the three charter management organizations we examined, evaluation combined formal processes and informal practices and is intimately linked to a system of teacher professional learning and continuous improvement. In two of the three CMOs, “formal” observations did not exist. All observations, whether brief or long, scheduled or unscheduled, structured or unstructured, provided information that could contribute to a teacher’s summative evaluation. Let’s look a little deeper at each of these formal and informal, scheduled and unscheduled sets of evaluations.

Annual summative evaluation for every teacher

Administrators in all three CMOs and their schools conduct annual summative evaluation of all teachers in their schools. But there are slight differences in how these proceeded: In the Western charter school network—the only one with teachers who are unionized—summative evaluation is governed by tight timelines and structures. In the Northern and National charter school networks, administrators annually conduct summative evaluation of teachers but the emphasis of teacher evaluation is on the weekly observation and debriefing sessions and accompanying professional development. In fact, administrators and teachers we interviewed describe these sessions as the heart of improving instruction, while they speak of summative evaluation as an opportunity for more macro discussions of their teaching, such as revisiting annual goals.

In these two CMOs, the details of weekly observations and debriefing sessions were included in summative evaluations, which occurred at midyear. Administrators viewed the summative evaluation as “more truly a midyear review.” One administrator described the review as “primarily a discussion of areas of strength and areas to improve.”

Student performance plays a key role in evaluations. The inclusion of student performance data in teacher evaluation is unusual—but not unheard of—in conventional public schools. In these schools, this generally took the form of teachers’ and evaluators’ reflections on the performance of students on schoolwide and charter school network-wide assessments. Thus, student test scores contribute to evaluations, but in a qualitative manner. At the time of data collection, none of these CMOs used student achievement data to calculate so-called “value-added” metrics in teachers’ evaluations although several had obtained grants to begin to explore this possibility and incorporate such data.²⁷

Currently, evaluation in the three CMOs focuses on defined teacher standards. In the Western charter school network, for example, all teachers create goals early in the school

year related to their state’s teaching standards. In consultation with their evaluators, the teachers then revise their goals. In their first two years of teaching in the organization, teachers receive two formal evaluations per year. Their counterparts with more longevity in the organization and who have met expectations on prior evaluations receive one formal evaluation in the fall and complete an action research project in the spring.

For both groups of teachers at the Western charter schools, each formal evaluation is preceded by two informal observations. Every observation, formal or informal, is followed by a debrief conversation. Outside of the evaluation system, department heads are expected to observe and provide feedback to all teachers and peers are encouraged to watch each other teach.

Because the teachers are unionized, a strict timeline, similar to that in most conventional public schools, governs when observations and debriefs occur. All processes and procedures related to evaluation have been bargained with the teachers union and approved by its membership, including the process for addressing poor performance on the part of teachers.

Teachers whose performance is judged to be lacking are placed on a 45-day program where they receive support orchestrated by administrators. If their practice does not improve, they are placed on a second 45-day course of support. If their instruction still does not improve, they may be released from their job immediately or nonrenewed for the subsequent school year.

Frequent structured observations and detailed feedback throughout the year

The approach taken by the Northern charter school network is a little different. Administrators in this organization place even more emphasis on informal observation and formative feedback. Teachers receive weekly or biweekly coaching one-on-one sessions from their evaluator year round and a summative evaluation midyear.

For this summative appraisal, evaluators and teachers complete the same five-page document, structured upon the organization’s basics of instruction. Their comments are not constrained to a short period of “formal observation” as is the case in some evaluation systems. Instead, the document is meant to prompt reflection on the part of the teacher and evaluator regarding the entire body of work the teacher has done up to that point in the year.

Consequently, evaluators may draw on all of their observations of the teacher—whether inside or outside the classroom—and brief or sustained. Importantly, this includes not only classroom instruction but also the teacher’s noninstructional contributions to various teams on which she sits and the school as a whole. Teachers reported spending three to five hours reflecting on their practice and preparing the document and approximately two hours debriefing with their evaluator.

The emphasis is less on summative evaluation and more on regular, formative assessment of teacher performance and results throughout the school year.

In the National charter school network, teachers and administrators describe a similar approach to evaluation. There are regular, weekly meetings between all teachers and an administrator assigned to coach them. There is frequent feedback provided on their teaching. And there are weekly professional development seminars for all teachers to improve their instruction and performance.

The emphasis is less on summative evaluation and more on regular, formative assessment of teacher performance and results throughout the school year. In fact, in each interview when we asked teachers and administrators to describe teacher evaluation, respondents immediately described a system of observation and debriefing meetings before any description of summative evaluation.

Hiring: The first opportunity for teacher evaluation

In several of the charter schools we researched, administrators describe the hiring process as linked to teacher evaluation—specifically, administrators say they seek individuals to work in their schools who are results driven, self-reflective, and highly analytic—characteristics that will be needed for the school’s evaluation procedures. All three CMOs pre-screened and selected individuals who they believe already bring a propensity for, and interest in, constructive feedback. They want people who will fit the culture of the schools.

Notably, prospective teachers are carefully scrutinized from the moment they apply for their potential match to the schools and the CMOs. From the beginning of the school and candidate relationship, the prospective teachers know their employers are committed to continuous improvement of instruction and improving student learning.²⁸

Indeed, education researchers say the importance of “fit” in hiring and finding a match between the individual’s strengths and experiences and the culture and expectations of the school is paramount.²⁹ The stronger the match or the “fit” between individual interests and school expectations, the higher the likelihood that an individual will be successful in a school and will elect to remain. This relationship seems particularly strong in the charter schools we examined—indeed, strong “fit” between candidates and the schools is something the school administrators sought.

In the schools we studied, some of the administrators explain that by being careful about the teachers hired and attempting to complete a good match between the school and the teacher, they hope to find teachers who view evaluation as an essential part of improving performance and results for students. But hiring is always a gamble. One administrator in the National charter school network says, “We strive every year to get better at hiring the best candidates. Still, no hiring process is 100 percent, and we usually have people that end up not being good fits that we do not want to retain.” This is where the evaluation process comes in.

Evaluation: A “no surprises” policy

By conducting frequent observations, charter school leaders we interviewed made it a point to know each teacher’s strengths and weaknesses. This emphasis on regular observations also reinforced these school leaders’ dedication to fairly assessing and supporting teachers with whom they worked. At all three charter school networks, principals and charter management organization leaders voice a strong commitment to conducting fair evaluation of teachers, maintaining that summative ratings and accompanying feedback should never catch a teacher unaware.

A regional director for the Western CMO explains that two informal observations were required to precede the formal observation in his organization. The reason: Observations and evaluation were “not coming as a surprise.” And a principal at a Northern charter school we studied speaks for almost all the leaders we interviewed when he says: “What I never like is a surprise conversation. Having the ongoing coaching [means that] nothing serious should ever really come out in an evaluation that hasn’t already come out in ongoing evaluation.”

He explains that his school and charter management organization “want people to be open and to be honest and humble and own the things that they need to do to grow.” He says that unexpected, critical feedback can undercut this goal. When one evaluator gave a teacher such feedback and a lower-than-expected rating last year, this principal notes, it “caused a big rift” and the teacher “was very frustrated and upset.”

The principal reflects, “She was right, we shouldn’t have done that. So we said, ‘That was an error.’ I said, ‘Let’s rebuild up and anything that comes up, we’ll let you know.’ It was good, we had a very frank conversation about it.”

Influence of evaluation on teacher quality

According to teachers interviewed for this study, evaluation at their current schools contributes considerably to their instructional growth.

The evidence has been mounting for a decade that individual teachers can make a major difference in student learning.³⁰ In current education reform efforts, there are increasing calls for using teacher evaluation to improve individual teachers' performance and increase teacher quality.³¹ As discussed, however, there is little evidence that evaluation as it is usually conducted improves teachers' instruction in most conventional public schools. The reasons for evaluations' generally anemic effects are numerous and include the infrequency of observation and evaluation and the paucity and vagueness of feedback that teachers receive through this process.³²

According to teachers interviewed for this study, however, evaluation at their current schools contributes considerably to their instructional growth. Teachers across varying experience levels describe specific ways in which evaluation in their schools pushed them to become better teachers. Teachers say that the professional development linked to evaluation, whether one-on-one coaching sessions or schoolwide professional development, was critical to their instructional improvement.

A primary reason for this utility, teachers explain, is because they view evaluators as instructional experts with deep content and pedagogical knowledge that allows them to provide excellent feedback on the teachers' instruction. Again, this stands in sharp contrast to conventional schools where administrators may not have had substantial previous teaching experience, very rarely (if ever) have a background in the subject area of all teachers they evaluate, and are not always viewed by teachers as instructional experts. Our specific findings on teacher evaluation and teacher quality at the three charter school networks only underscored these observations.

Evaluation contributed to growth

Newer teachers at the CMOs we investigated often note the key ways in which observation and feedback shaped their instructional approach. One second-year teacher in a school within the Northern CMO network says that evaluation provided her with "recommendations of things to work on, three tangible things." This allows her to make changes in her classroom that resulted in "my kids learning and my becoming more confident as a teacher."

Veteran teachers in the study are also positive about the role of evaluation in their instructional improvement. In every case in our interviews, veterans emphasize the value of evaluation in their current school, in contrast to their previous teaching settings. An experienced teacher explains that evaluation had helped her identify instructional areas to hone: “The more time you spend [at her charter school in North CMO], the more you realize you don’t really know and the more you want to try to better that and do better at that. The school has allowed me to look at things more specifically and be able to really continue to raise the bar and not just stagnate.” In contrast, at her former conventional school, she said:

I remember getting a satisfactory or unsatisfactory. It just had an “S” on it. [laughs] And there were no specifics, like—were my lessons aim-based? Did I have “aim sequences” to my lessons plans? Did I have good classroom management? Did I have one hundred percent of my students engaged in my lessons? Did I have student achievement? Was there mastery in skills? ... There was no breaking down of anything. It was just sort of like, “You showed up every day. Here’s your paper, here’s your S, sign for it.”

She elaborated: “I never looked closely enough to see if my students were actually mastering skills.”

Aligned professional development critical to improvement

Overall, the teachers we interviewed emphasized the role of coaching sessions in linking evaluation with instructional improvement. Feedback sessions, according to one teacher in the Northern charter school network, lasted 40 minutes, with 5 minutes of feedback and 35 minutes of planning “what will you have done by next time we meet.” The teacher commented, “This is good. It forces me to think forward and think how to change my instruction and [also] be held accountable.”

Many of the schools also integrate video into their ongoing coaching sessions. In one school in the Western charter school network, teachers’ formal and informal observations are videotaped and teachers and evaluators watch the videos together. In a school in the Northern charter school network, teachers are videotaped four times a year and assess their own practice with their coach using what the principal called a “slimmed down” version of the evaluation instrument.

Teachers and administrators agreed that using video helped them have more productive conversations about teaching and learning. Similarly, schools in the National charter school network use videotape in their weekly professional development with teachers.

Evaluators viewed as instructional experts with high-quality feedback

Teachers we interviewed also stressed the high-quality feedback they received from evaluators, whom they saw as instructional experts. One teacher in the Western charter school network speaks about her school's administrators:

I know they were really successful teachers in the classroom and they're good instructional leaders so they understand what our needs are in the classroom and they can anticipate needs we're going to have to address and if I ask 'Is this a rigorous standard?' ... they can give me really valid feedback as opposed to having an administrator who is either ... out of touch with the classroom or wasn't really in the classroom or wasn't a very successful teacher is not going to be able to push you to reflect on and set standards that help you grow as a teacher.

This sentiment is reinforced in the Northern school network, where every administrator teaches one class. One teacher said that she and her colleagues believed her principal's feedback was credible because, "we know and see her teaching."

Evaluating teachers across a spectrum of performance ratings

Research suggests that teacher evaluation in most conventional school settings yields little variation in teachers' summative ratings. The vast majority of teachers, across a variety of settings, are judged to teach satisfactorily.³³ Consequently, in our research we set out to discover whether these charter schools, freed from many of the constraints of regular public schools, use the full distribution of teacher performance ratings when conducting teacher evaluations. Are the results of summative evaluation in these charter schools varied across a wide range of performance, or are teachers receiving generally the same ratings on summative evaluations?

Although the three charter management organizations we studied do not collect organization-wide data on summative ratings, principals and some CMO-level officials offered their sense of the range of scores. Interestingly, none of these organizations has an evaluation system that yields one summative rating for a teacher. Instead, teachers receive summative ratings for each teaching standard on which they are evaluated.

Although evaluators have the freedom to assign different ratings for different aspects of a teacher's instruction, participants in our study indicate that most teachers in these settings were judged to meet expectations on most teaching standards. According to a regional director in the Western CMO, 70 percent to 80 percent of teachers received at least a "meets standard" rating on their evaluation in the majority of categories in recent years. This figure is much lower than the percentage of teachers rated satisfactory in many public school districts, where as many as 99 percent of teachers are rated satisfactory.³⁴

Some of the administrators in West CMO thought this rate was too high. One regional director commented that to rate 70 percent to 80 percent of his organization's teachers as satisfactory "is probably much higher than it should be." Principals echoed this observation. "We have a very strong staff," said one, but then acknowledged that "it's not easy [because] there is lots of subjectivity. We are not close to where we need to be," he added, referring to assessing teachers' instruction accurately.

Principals in the Northern charter school network say the distribution of teachers' performance ratings varied annually, but year-to-year estimates are similar to those in the Western charter school network. And in both networks, schools judge only a small number of teachers to exceed expectations. In one North CMO school, according to its principal, "three or four people [out of 20] were at the much higher end of exceeding expectations on almost all categories." Another principal in West CMO says that she and the assistant principal reserve "exemplary" for "the upper echelon of teachers." A teacher confirmed that it was difficult to achieve the highest rating in this school. Again, this is different than conventional schools, where research suggests that most teachers receive the highest evaluation rating possible.³⁵

Overall, there were similarities in teachers' strengths and weaknesses as identified through evaluation at the schools we studied in these CMOs. Teachers tended to receive high ratings on noninstructional categories such as contributing to one's grade-level team. By contrast, principals note that teachers received lower scores on standards related to more technical skills. In one Western charter school, for example, teachers struggled the most with the "assessment" category, according to the school's principal.

Principals whose schools employed more inexperienced teachers discuss how this condition affected evaluation. One principal in the Northern charter school network describes hiring more skilled candidates this year than last, causing the principal to comment: "Where I see myself now in terms of talent and performance is significantly different than last year. And this year, I think I will have a good number that are really excelling."

Considering individuals' performance on the summative evaluation, the principal estimates that "a quarter to a fifth are doing very, very, very well. And then another good chunk that are doing pretty well and then I would say just maybe one or two or three that need to make some big improvements. But I believe firmly that they will do it."

Evaluation and dismissal of underperforming teachers

One of the main critiques of current teacher evaluation systems in conventional schools is that they do not distinguish among levels of performance and rarely result in dismissal of teachers.³⁶ Evaluation is viewed as a "rubber stamp" process that does not provide concrete and actionable information about teacher performance. This is particularly the case

when teachers are persistently low performing and, worse, when they are assigned to teach students in the highest-poverty schools.

Without the requirements of collective bargaining provisions and due process, charter schools are often described as more flexible in their capacity to retain or release teachers. Teachers in two of the three charter school networks in this study were considered “at-will” employees and do not hold contracts; either the teachers or the administrators can decide they should leave their positions or their jobs be “non-renewed” at any point in time. Overall, in terms of dismissal in these CMOs and schools, we found:

- Dismissals on the basis of evaluation results vary by CMO and by year.
- All three CMOs had processes to support struggling teachers and provide sufficient time and assistance before a teacher was dismissed for performance.
- Teachers are granted frequent opportunities to improve before they are dismissed.
- Administrators emphasized the influence of noninstructional factors in their decisions about whether to retain or relinquish a teacher.
- The proportion of dismissals in each site was lower than we had expected, given the charter schools’ freedom to dismiss teachers compared to conventional schools.
- The culture of ongoing, honest feedback on teacher performance may lead some teachers to leave the schools of their own accord, however.³⁷

Let’s look at each of these findings in turn.

Varied dismissal statistics by year and by charter school network

Dismissals on the basis of evaluation results vary by year and CMO. According to the human resource director at the Western charter management organization, very few teachers are dismissed, despite the organization’s ability to do so:

I don’t know if the principals utilize the ability to perhaps not retain low-performing teachers... Two years ago we had two teachers that were not renewed through this process and last year, just one out of 350 or so teachers. So it’s really not utilized much.

Principals working for the Northern charter management organization reported slightly higher ratios, telling us that one to two of 18 to 20 teachers, or approximately 5 to 10 percent of the staff, had been dismissed annually in recent years. Notably, this figure is higher than dismissal rates reported by conventional public school districts where few teachers are dismissed for performance. Nationally, on average, only 1.4 percent of tenured teachers and 0.7 percent of probationary teachers are dismissed for poor performance.³⁸

One charter school in the National charter school network reports similar results. Between one and three teachers of 27 total (between 4 percent and 11 percent) were dismissed in each of the past three years. In this charter school, one school administrator

explains that the goal is “to retain 100 percent of the good teachers for as long as possible.” Further, before a teacher is dismissed, the administrator says, “Generally, we want to make sure that a teacher has had every opportunity to improve... We make a decision by mid-March on whether teachers will be fired, because we want them to have enough notice to find another job for the next year.”³⁹

Process and perception of dismissal: Focus on support

All three charter management organizations have processes for supporting struggling teachers. All provided teachers in danger of dismissal with substantial time and assistance before this decision was made. The intervention plan at the Western network is detailed in its collective bargaining agreement with teachers. It includes two 45-day cycles of intensive support and observation. In some cases, principals pulled struggling teachers out of their classrooms for several consecutive days to enable them to observe the instruction of effective colleagues.

The Northern CMO uses a formal improvement plan to assist struggling teachers in improving their skills. One administrator there explains that “principals and coaches identify specific goals for the teacher and review progress toward goals on a weekly basis. This goal setting and intensive review ensures teachers understand how they are performing and exactly how they need to improve.”

On the other side of the improvement process, a principal describes his approach to dismissing teachers: “We want to support you to get to where you need to go. We’re all trying to achieve the same things. So [we] give as much support as we can to help you get to where you need, to where you want to go, and leverage everything we have. Then, if it’s not working out, I think it’s just dismissal... We don’t cut people’s pay, we don’t do other things like that... You are either making it or not making it.”

He further explains, “I think we care about all the people that work here, the people who are struggling as well as the people who are doing great. Sometimes we end up just having a conversation about, is this the right fit, both in terms of this place or in terms of this career.”

Although this is a substantial amount of work for them, principals welcome the presence of intervention plans coupled with ample administrator support for struggling teachers. One principal in the Western charter school network emphasizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the processes. Recalling his own experience with capricious administrators, he argues that “it’s fair” to let teachers know how well they are doing and he “would hate for teachers to be let go at a whim.”

A union representative working in the same school as this principal describes the intervention process similarly. She reports that she had guided a teacher through intervention and found it “a positive process,” noting that the teacher responded “positively because of the

really good supports” offered by the administrators. Overall, the tone had been, in her words, “rather than a ‘Hey, we’re watching you,’ it’s ‘We’re there for you.’”

A teacher in the Northern charter school network who had struggled and received sub-standard evaluation ratings last year speaks similarly about how her evaluator had provided feedback. She says feedback and meetings were governed by a spirit of “Let’s work together to see what you can do next.” She further describes the evaluation process as “upfront” and recounts that her evaluator said “point blank: your scores aren’t improving. Are you invested in this? If not, it’s not worth either of our time.” She summarizes the process this way: “Both parties were really considering whether it was the right fit.” Ultimately school leaders decided to offer to renew her contract and she decided to continue to work at the school.

In the National charter school network, administrators give teachers frequent opportunities to improve before they are released from the school. All new teachers are observed every one to two weeks and veteran staff is observed less frequently. When a teacher is not making the improvements the administrators wanted to see, administrators try “to be more and more direct with them,” according to one administrator. At the midyear summative evaluation, if a staff member’s job is in jeopardy, then an administrator says that it “should be made totally clear what needs to improve and [the teacher is] given suggestions how to do that ... we come right out and tell them that their job is in danger.”

There were a number of interventions provided to the teacher depending upon the area of struggle, according to one administrator, for example by “pointing them in the direction of resources, encouraging/mandating them to observe specific veteran teachers, or sitting down with them to plan units or lessons together.” The administrators notify the teachers of their ultimate decision in mid-March. At that time, the teacher could decide whether to be fired or resign.

If the individual finished the year “as productively as possible,” according to the administrator, then they offered to write letters of reference for that individual. Generally, at schools in this charter school network and the others, teachers were not asked to leave before the end of the school year unless they presented a serious threat to the students or the school culture.

The influence of noninstructional factors on job decisions

Interestingly, principals at these charter schools emphasize the influence of noninstructional qualities in their decisions about dismissing teachers. Teamwork and teaching as a public enterprise are strongly valued. So is the importance of preserving the school’s culture. One principal notes that the majority of “people are dismissed because they are not on the same page as the rest of the team. They put in less effort or [are] in conflict with the goals and norms of the school.” Teachers generally agree that, in one’s words, “Dismissal is more about not being a team player.”

A principal in the Northern charter school network highlights her school's commitment to teamwork and collaborative teaching. These factors were heavily weighted in dismissal decisions. She says that "if that's too stressful for you and you want to have a closed door, leave me alone kind of policy, there's definitely a lot of schools out there willing to do that, but ... that's not what we do together here."

An administrator in a school in the National charter management organization explains that the reasons teachers were released were not all performance related. Again, the importance of teamwork surfaced. If a teacher is "not demonstrating a willingness or ability to work hard at getting better," then she or he would be released, explains one administrator. "We are so built on [being] positive, kid centered ... We are people who don't want any [baloney], so when you have a teacher who is manipulating things for their own gain or creating controversy ... you have to make a call about worth in building." One teacher—whose students posted the highest reading scores in the school on standardized assessments—was released for being a "culture killer," a person whose presence in the school was detrimental to the collaborative work and mission of the school.

Teachers are dismissed less frequently than anticipated

Several factors explained why, despite the relative freedom to dismiss teachers that these schools enjoyed, the percentage of dismissals was not higher. Reasons included the burden placed on administrators' time, a tight market for replacement teachers, and the negative cultural impact of dismissing teachers whose instruction was mediocre but whose noninstructional contribution was considerable.

School leaders in the Western charter management organization said that the burden placed on administrators by the intervention process deterred them from carrying it out, thus constraining their ability to dismiss teachers. This organization's human resources director observes:

It's a lot of work to go through an intervention plan and all of the commitment that the principal makes as a part of that process. And I think some of them look at this and say, 'This person is not terrible. I can live with them. They're not great, but I can live with them.' And so they don't follow through on the process.

Principals in this organization concur. One principal explains she had never placed more than two teachers on either of the intervention phases because it is "not manageable" to support more than this number through the process.

Administrators in the other two charter school networks did not voice this sentiment. Perhaps it arose in the Western organization because principals in this network carry a much larger evaluation load. It also may have surfaced because collective bargaining makes

the dismissal process more regulated in this organization. According to one principal, union influence made the process to dismiss poor performers more lengthy, thus reducing the likelihood that principals would engage in it.

A second main reason for principals' reluctance to dismiss teachers was the absence of viable replacement teachers. This is particularly striking given the considerable time and effort that these charter schools spend on recruiting the right people for their classrooms. One principal in North CMO explains:

It's one of the hardest things in our job. Should I settle and try to develop this person or should I wait and just hope that something else comes along? ... I mean, I would love to say that because we're a strong charter school network that we have lots of people banging down the doors. We do have people banging down the doors, but they are not the right people. And so we have hundreds of applicants and we see very few people.

When asked if teacher supply issues made him more reluctant to dismiss shortage-area teachers such as those in mathematics, this principal describes a heightened dilemma. In a year when (despite heavy recruitment) "we did not see one math teacher" whom the leadership team wanted to hire, he describes how he puzzled over whether to dismiss one current employee:

Do we cut this teacher and pray that we're going to find somebody decent when we haven't seen anyone? Or do we keep this person who has some assets, who is a fair instructor, but will bring other things as well?

Layered onto this dilemma is some principals' uncertainty regarding how much time and support to give to new teachers, of whom there were many in these schools, before evaluating them out of their positions. One principal in the Western network said she struggles when evaluating new teachers to "project potential" and determine how much room for growth is acceptable.

A third barrier to greater dismissal rates is genuine reluctance by principals to dismiss higher numbers of teachers.⁴⁰ The human resources director at the Western charter management organization says the organization tries to encourage principals to non-renew more struggling teachers:

We're trying to change our mindset, [but]... we don't want to get it to the point where we're looking like a Jack Welch approach where we're going to get rid of the bottom 10 percent every year. But you need to identify who are those teachers that are not performing and what are you doing about it. Are you just letting them continue to not perform well? That's certainly a disservice to our students.

The human resources director, however, reports some recent improvements in this area. “I saw more being placed on plans at the end of last year, which then carried over to this year than I had seen in the past,” she says. “So I think they are starting to get it, but it’s a gradual process, though.”

Similarly, the Northern charter management organization strives to retain and develop top performing teachers. One principal, whom a CMO-level official calls “an exemplar of effective hiring and talent development,” says, “I’m hoping that this year we have a 100 percent retention.”

In sum, teacher evaluation in these settings seems to contribute to improvements in teachers’ instruction while yielding slight variation in teachers’ summative ratings and some dismissals. What explains these findings? To this we now turn.

Explaining the influence of teacher evaluations

Overall, the evaluation process that occurs in these three charter school networks differs in several notable ways from that which, according to prior research, occurs in many conventional public schools. Most obvious is the increased frequency of evaluators' informal observations of and feedback on teachers' instruction. As one teacher in the Northern charter school network noted, "We constantly receive feedback." Another teacher said of her school's principal, "You can't get her out of your classroom!"

This feedback is the result of weekly or biweekly observations on the part of evaluators in both the Northern and National charter management organizations. The Western CMO evaluators do not provide teachers with as much observation and feedback, but the organization has created structures to facilitate observation by department heads who visit colleagues' classrooms and provide nonevaluative feedback to every teacher in their department twice per month.

There are more specific consequences of these charter schools' teacher evaluation processes, among them:

- Considerable administrator time devoted to observation
- Ongoing feedback through coaching
- Increased professional development for administrators
- Evaluation spurring sustained teacher reflection

All four of these findings are worth a more detailed examination.

Considerable administrator time devoted to observation

The charter schools we examined are taking steps toward organizing the work of administrators to enable them to spend considerable time observing classroom instruction and coaching teachers in how to improve their teaching. In the Northern and National charter schools there is an effort to enable principals to give regular feedback by trying to keep ratios of teachers to evaluators quite low. As displayed in Table 1 on page 9, the Northern network's schools maintain ratios of teachers to evaluators of 6-to-1 and 9-to-1. Schools in the National network maintain ratios of teachers to evaluators at approximately 7-to-1, while those in the Western network are between 13-to-1 and 18-to-1.⁴¹

In addition to investing in multiple evaluators, the Northern network strategically allots resources at the school level so that principals may focus on instruction. This includes having an operations team to handle facilities management, budgeting, certification, and ordering, a dean of students to manage student behavior challenges, an intervention coordinator to organize schoolwide data and testing and, in some cases, an executive assistant to coordinate activities with teachers and students and fill in where extra help was needed.

At the time of the interviews, the Western CMO was also moving in this direction. Its human resource director says of these efforts: “we’re trying to get the principals to move away from the operations of the school and focus more on the academic or the learning portion of their job.” And a regional director elaborated on these changes, recounting that the organization worked on centralizing tasks related to state reporting requirements, facility procurement, technology troubleshooting, and transportation and food service matters in an effort to free up school leaders to focus on “knowledge management.”

Ongoing feedback through coaching

The investment by the Northern charter management organization in multiple evaluators is also an investment in multiple coaches. These include principals and deans assigned to various areas such as academics or students. Although only principals and assistant principals evaluate in the Western charter school network’s schools, this organization also encourages more frequent coaching of teachers by department chairs. In schools within both organizations, evaluation and coaching sessions deliberately focus on one or two major issues a teacher needs to focus on and are anchored in student data, often the charter management organization-wide benchmark assessments.

In fact, all three charter management organizations place an emphasis on coaching throughout their organizations. In the Northern CMO, every employee, from teacher to director of operations, is paired with a coach. One principal explains that this coaching orientation reinforces a “completely egoless approach to learning and feedback” based on the premise that “everybody has got ways to get better and so if you’re excited about that, you should come work here.”

Similarly, principals and assistant principals in the Western charter school network are coached by regional directors. One principal notes that “I call my director 10 times a day.” These individuals hold biweekly coaching sessions with the school-level leaders to look at school data, observe and provide feedback on professional development led by the principal or assistant principal, or co-observe teachers’ instruction. These meetings typically last two to two-and-a-half hours and, according to one regional director, are increasingly focused on calibrating assessments of classroom instruction.

The human resource director for the Western charter management organization described the role of the regional directors this way:

The charter schools we examined are taking steps toward organizing the work of administrators to enable them to spend considerable time observing classroom instruction and coaching teachers in how to improve their teaching.

They oversee five to eight schools and they work very closely with the principal, they observe them running their professional development, they observe them actually observing teachers and giving feedback to teachers. So there's a lot of coaching that goes into that for those principals.

Regional directors also read evaluations written by principals and assistant principals and provide feedback on them.

Increased professional development for administrators

All three of the charter school networks made substantial investments in providing professional development to evaluators in how to assess instructional quality. According to the principals in the Western organization, some of their monthly, day-long professional development sessions focused on assessing instruction. One principal recounts that “about 35 percent” of the sessions she attended, which brought together every principal or assistant principal in the charter management organization, centered on watching live or videotaped instruction, assessing it using the organization’s evaluation instrument, and then role playing the postobservation debrief conference.

The Northern charter management organization also invests considerably in developing evaluators’ capacity to evaluate accurately and consistently and provide high-quality feedback. It gathers school leaders frequently, approximately every five weeks, to examine instruction and discuss how to assess it. These sessions are reinforced by coaching sessions that (as one principal describes it) focus on “probably the biggest two skills that I need to do my job—to have difficult conversations and be able to evaluate instruction.” In contrast, when she did her administrator internship in a regular public school, she noted “there was no feedback on anything... it was like an office meeting rather than feedback on real practice in real time.”

A key part of professional development in her organization focuses on training teachers and leaders to have difficult conversations, which sometimes occur during evaluation debriefs. One principal explains that her school adopts explicit norms—procedures and mores that guide these evaluation conversations—based on those at another charter school, such as “staying on your side of the net and not stepping over and making claims on the other person.” This helped to “depersonalize” disagreements. A principal at a different school describes receiving professional development on “open communication and direct feedback” as a school leader and then sharing those lessons with teachers in her building:

I gave some specific professional developments this year and last year about how to give and take feedback, how to have difficult conversations. And then as any situations still come up, because people still disagree, there will still be things that happen that aren't optimal in how we operate together. We tackle each one of those. And so I prioritize

talking to the people involved in whatever thing it is and helping them to talk about it directly... and pushing people to reflect on that and how do we do it better next time. I think it's skill building, too. It's hard to have tough conversations... The more practice you have of it, the easier it becomes.

Principals also suggest that building a culture of feedback required them to actively solicit feedback from teachers on their performance. By inviting honest feedback from teachers on their work as leaders, principals feel they laid the groundwork for a productive exchange of constructive criticism. Principals at the Western charter network, for example, distribute biannual surveys to teachers and parents/guardians. The results of these surveys are included in their evaluations.

As a result of these efforts, the concrete, direct feedback teachers receive on their practice enables them to improve it. One teacher in one of the Northern charter network's school says that evaluation debriefs provide "an honest assessment" of practice and give her "concrete action steps" to take. Another observes that this culture of feedback caught on in her school: "Teachers are always asking for feedback, teachers are expecting feedback, teachers know that feedback is something that is going to make them better. That's a North CMO culture-wide thing... The mindset that feedback is a gift."

The National charter management organization is working on developing and implementing performance management tools and templates for all employees to understand employee strengths and weaknesses. The organization is in the process of implementing these processes with principal training and evaluation, but hopes that the processes will also influence teachers.

At the National CMO school we studied, administrators and teachers were working with a national expert in teacher observation, evaluation, and development. This training is ongoing for administrators and focuses on sharpening skills to observe as well as support teachers in developing their repertoire of knowledge and skills. One administrator explains that the school engaged this national expert for assistance because, "We're really young. There is a lot of intelligence and grit and not a whole lot of wisdom. We brought [the expert] in to do development for principals."

Evaluation efforts spur and sustain teacher reflection

By some accounts, the evaluation write up also plays a different role than in conventional public schools. First, the process of preparing the evaluation document in the Northern CMO's charter schools is, in the words of several teachers, "time consuming." Teachers report spending approximately an hour to three hours to reflect and evaluate themselves on the teaching standards of their CMO. They then meet for two hours with their coach, who shares with them an evaluation based on those standards. One teacher described this

Several educators, both principals and teachers, describe the evaluation report as a "living document" that frequently served as a reference point for coaching sessions.

as “a two-way conversation” between coach and teacher. Although the entire process is “long and time consuming,” this teacher believes “it’s totally worthwhile.”

Teachers at the Western charter school network also spend considerable time self-reflecting for their evaluations. These teachers are required to set performance goals related to each of the state standards on which their evaluation rests. Evaluators then meet with each teacher and provide feedback that informs their revision of the goals. Several educators, both principals and teachers, describe the evaluation report as a “living document” that frequently served as a reference point for coaching sessions.

It is clear that the form and influence of evaluation in these charter schools differs in notable ways from that found in many public schools. Yet these charter schools struggle with some of the same challenges experienced by most public schools.

The challenges faced by charter schools

Although the three charter school networks we examined appear to leverage teacher evaluation to improve instruction in ways different from conventional public schools, administrators and teachers reported some of the same challenges faced by their public school counterparts. Nearly every participant in our study, for example, acknowledges weaknesses in the design and implementation of teacher evaluation within their organization.

“We don’t have a magic bullet,” explains the human resources director at the Western charter management organization, but “we’re making progress.” Similarly, one teacher at a charter school run by the Northern charter management organization says “it’s not perfect. Sometimes you fall off, backslide. You don’t talk about or forget about your evaluation goals.”

A number of weaknesses were mentioned by multiple participants. Among them were lack of time to conduct the evaluations, lack of recognition for outstanding performance, and the difficulty of coming to common agreement on high-quality instruction.

Lack of time

Finding the time to spend on the evaluation process was a common impediment to high-quality evaluation. As one teacher at one of the Northern CMO’s charter schools explains, the whole evaluation and coaching system is “a huge strain of time” for all involved. According to this teacher, “Coaches are strained and teachers have little time.”

As much of the research on teacher evaluation and principals suggests, principals in our study note that they sometimes have a hard time making time for evaluations. “Our system is cumbersome,” laments one principal at a charter school run by the Western charter management organization. He adds that it is difficult to attend to completing the evaluation in a timely manner when “principals are expected to do everything to keep the ship afloat.” Even though his organization includes timely completion of teacher evaluation in a bonus incentive for principals, several participants note that the incentive is not substantial enough to encourage them to complete the evaluation on time.

When we asked one principal how she would change her organization’s evaluation system to increase its impact on instruction and student achievement, she replied that having

another administrator would help improve the process. She evaluates 14 teachers, the majority of whom are quite new, making the effort even more time consuming.

At the same time, the charter school teachers we interviewed express a desire for more observations and feedback. This is especially the case in the Western organization, where teacher-to-evaluator ratios are higher.

Lack of recognition for outstanding performance

As in most conventional public school settings, teachers who perform exceptionally well on evaluation in the three charter school networks we examined do not receive recognition or rewards within the school.⁴² Evaluation ratings and results were not public and, according to several principals, the only reward for performing well is leaving the classroom for an administrative role.

In the National charter school network, teachers are eligible for a national award for their teaching among all the teachers in the organization, but it is unclear how connected this award is to evaluation results. The Northern charter school network plans to institute a rewards system, but at the time of data collection it was still in development. West CMO did not have a rewards system.

One principal in the Northern charter school network decries the absence of recognition and rewards for good teaching, arguing that his organization needs “people who just want to be great teachers and not move into leadership.” This principal adds that “I think we have young, super smart people who are ambitious and want to do other things... Every year we hire a new teacher that I see as having that potential so the question is how can we make teaching a highly valued and prestigious role?”

Teachers in these organizations agree. Across the board, they express a desire for more explicit recognition and rewards for excellent teaching that will allow them to remain in the classroom. But one teacher in the Northern charter school network admits to the conundrum this can create. She told us she had received outstanding ratings the previous year and shared the news with her parents but not with any other teachers in her school. “I didn’t want to seem like I was bragging,” the teacher explains.

Still, she argued in favor of more recognition for excellent performance. “It would be exciting if we applauded the teachers here a little bit more for some of their high performances,” she says. “I don’t think we do that a lot, not, at least, as a whole group.”

In fact, her organization is currently designing a formal recognition for excellent teachers with funding from a foundation and assistance from a national expert. According to a national-level administrator, this is a “major organizational priority”.

Coming to agreement on high-quality instruction

A third challenge was the lack of a consistent, shared understanding of good teaching. Although all charter management organizations and their school leaders say this is a goal of their organizations, many participants in our study suggest the schools need to work more to develop these common conceptions. One relatively inexperienced teacher in one of the Northern charter networks' schools says she believes the more experienced teachers in her school did not fully agree on what constitutes good teaching.

Indeed, she believes this makes them resist some feedback from their evaluators. But she adds that she agrees with her evaluator's feedback, saying, "It feels right to me."

West CMO teachers said they wished their schools focused more on what makes for high-quality instruction. Asked if her school's professional development explored what constituted effective teaching, she said:

Sometimes. Last year we talked a lot about formative and summative assessments and how to create a unit and connect essential questions and understandings—and that helped me a lot in terms of understanding how to create a curriculum. But not—not weekly, that's for sure—maybe occasionally it'll get thrown in.

At the school in national CMO, there is a strong effort to work toward a shared understanding of what effective teaching looks like and to develop a shared mindset about the characteristics of effective teaching. Much of this work occurs on a weekly basis during weekly professional development sessions as well as in consultation with a national expert who is helping administrators and teachers in the school to refine their skills at studying and discussing teaching.

Lack of consistency in evaluations

Principals at all three charter school networks also express a desire for more consistency among evaluators. Across the board, they argue that calibration among evaluators takes time within and among schools.

Case in point: One principal in the Western CMO network feels that principals and assistant principals have "decent professional development" but spend too little time calibrating evaluation and discussing how to carry out formal evaluations. This principal's human resources director, however, notes that "we've set up a decent process" but "it's up to the principals" to carry it out.

Leaders in the Western and Northern charter management organizations report that the quality of evaluation conducted by administrators varied. For example, one North CMO

principal said that in a recent year administrators, some of whom were new, had taken on an unusually large number of teachers to evaluate. This resulted in the scenario, discussed above, in which one teacher received “surprise” negative feedback on her summative evaluation. An official in this CMO noted that administrators with more experience tended to evaluate more effectively. She said the CMO had instituted “more training and tools to ensure that all coaches are prepared to effectively evaluate and coach teachers.”

Variation in use of evaluation results

Within each charter management organization we studied, participants cast summative evaluation as “living documents,” meaning they are seen as affecting teachers’ planning and instruction on a daily basis. Several North CMO teachers noted that their summative evaluations played a consistent role in their preparation with coaches and teachers regularly reviewing the teacher’s progress toward his or her goals during coaching meetings, but other teachers note that the focus on these reports is not always sustained. Although one teacher referred to her reports during previous years, she says of her most recent report: “I have mine in a file somewhere but haven’t looked at it since the beginning of the year.”

Teachers in West CMO also said that evaluation results did not always factor heavily into their daily instruction. One teacher said of her evaluation feedback, “[It] kind of gets lost.”

I feel like it's [evaluation results] pretty disconnected from the day-to-day. It's good in that I sit and have those bigger idea conversations with my vice principal—it's a time that you get to reflect upon where your teaching is and what you want to do to get better. But I feel like they don't give me tools or time—really, that's the most important part—to actually implement my goals and see that they are working on the day-to-day,” she explained. She noted that “at a charter school, I have so many things that I’m in charge of or responsible for that I don't feel like I have time to get to those bigger idea kind of things.

Conclusion

In our study of these three charter management organizations and their schools, we find that teacher evaluation appears to influence teachers' instructional capabilities in a positive way. At the same time, evaluation in these schools does not generate a markedly broad range of summative ratings in all schools or a notably elevated rate of dismissals. Importantly, though, dismissal rates are somewhat higher than those of conventional schools.

What's more, these charter schools seem to achieve a tighter link between evaluation and instructional improvement due to several notable, interrelated practices. These schools deploy personnel strategically to increase the amount of informal observation and feedback teachers receive. To varying degrees, the schools and their charter management organizations achieve this by increasing the number of administrators in buildings and promoting observations by teacher leaders and peers.

We also see that these organizations and the schools within them are constantly working to improve their teacher development and evaluation systems.⁴³ Moreover, their work to improve evaluation is linked to larger efforts in these schools to do away with the "egg-crate" practice of teaching. Indeed, common assessments across all three charter management organizations prompted discussions about teaching and learning that break down traditional barriers among teachers. Teachers in the schools examine each other's teaching through videotaped lessons and peer observation. And this system of observation is linked to efforts in these schools to increase individuals' capacity to give and receive critical feedback.

To varying degrees, these schools promote the belief that, in the words of one teacher, "feedback is a gift." Efforts to train employees, school leaders, and teachers alike in how to frame and interpret constructive criticism are ongoing at several of these schools. Moreover, efforts to make feedback reciprocal, with teachers providing feedback to administrators as well as receiving it from them, appears to play a key role in increasing everyone's receptivity to critique.

Yet we also find fewer instances of dismissals and, according to principals' reports, a more narrow range of performance ratings than we anticipated when we began the study. But we caution readers that principals' descriptions of the extent to which they use the range of ratings when assessing teachers was more impressionist than quantitative.

These charter schools seem to achieve a tighter link between evaluation and instructional improvement due to several notable, interrelated practices.

Compression of the ratings on the positive end of the scale may mask the underperformance of some teachers, although interviews with principals and teachers suggested that they focus more on the substantive feedback than on the ratings themselves. In other words, teachers whose performances were suffering knew they might be dismissed and, just as importantly, knew what they needed to do to improve their performance and receive a contract for the next year. Similarly, teachers whose instruction was adequate but not stellar received concrete and specific feedback about what they needed to do to improve.

It is debatable whether the low proportion of teacher dismissals in these schools is cause for concern. If these schools and their charter management organizations are recruiting broadly and hiring carefully, they may be selecting high-quality teachers from the applicant pool.⁴⁴ Importantly, we selected these organizations for our study because of their strong student performance data and then learned that in their hiring processes, administrators specifically screen for high-performing teachers or new teachers who demonstrate the potential to quickly become high performing.

In short, hiring is the first stage of evaluation. If this is the case, as several principals told us, then a low proportion of teacher dismissals may be appropriate. If this is not the case, as other participants implied, then these schools are not using their freedom to dismiss underperforming teachers to increase instructional quality. If so, then it appears that some of these schools are constrained by cultural and market forces similar to those that hinder public schools' efforts to dismiss truly underperforming teachers. Notably, these constraints existed for both the unionized and nonunionized charter schools in our study.

Although our study is small and in many ways preliminary, it does point to some key questions that policymakers and educational leaders would be wise to consider. It is clear these charter schools focus sharply on instructional improvement and open up classrooms and encourage ongoing feedback on teaching and learning. It is less clear that they use teacher evaluation—at least formal and summative evaluations—as a mechanism to officially and publicly differentiate among teachers or identify substantial numbers of teachers to dismiss.

Yet the evaluation processes in all three charter management organizations we studied are designed more to improve teachers' instruction and effectiveness on an ongoing basis than to provide a summative assessment. The systems used and the results-oriented culture—from hiring to evaluation to professional development to job decisions—seem to promote deep and lasting improvements in teachers' instruction.

So perhaps in searching for greater numbers of low summative ratings or dismissals, we are looking at the wrong solution to the problem of low teacher quality. The charter school teachers and administrators in this study describe a continuous, tight link between teacher evaluation and enhanced teaching and learning. Certainly, the administrators make difficult decisions about which teachers stay in the school and which teachers are dismissed.

It is less clear that charter schools use teacher evaluation as a mechanism to officially and publicly differentiate among teachers or identify substantial numbers of teachers to dismiss.

But their focus is on instructional improvement and increased teacher efficacy on a weekly, and even daily, basis. Evaluation is embedded in the everyday practices of the schools and the constant work of enhancing student learning.

In the words of one administrator, they are developing a “mindset” rather than completing a “check list” of teacher behaviors. It may be that in developing a mindset of constant reflection and improvement, evaluating teachers’ instructional capabilities becomes a habit rather than an administrative act. It may be that policies that focus on assessing and improving teacher practice over time may, in the end, be stronger mechanisms to improve teacher quality than tinkering with summative teacher evaluation.

Appendix 1: Methodology

We first selected three charter management organizations, labeled here as the Western, Northern, and National CMOs, that have national reputations for achieving excellent results while serving high numbers of minority and low-income students in some of the nation's poorest urban centers. Throughout the research and reporting, we maintained the confidentiality of the respondents at the national and school level. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of this study, we wanted to ensure that respondents could provide us with accurate and candid data and be protected from any negative consequence in so doing.

Although similar in their favorable reputations, the three charter management organizations differ. The Western CMO is a network of conversion and start-up charter schools in which teachers collectively bargain. The Northern CMO is a network of start-up charter schools that spawned in a relatively small geographic region from one very successful school. The National CMO is similar to the Northern CMO in its growth from one successful seed school, but currently operates schools across the country and features a more decentralized organizational structure.

To conduct the research, we first approached the senior managers responsible for teacher quality at the charter management organization level to gain permission to conduct this study within their schools. With their assistance, we then selected two schools in which to gather detailed data about how teacher evaluation plays out at the school level. In the National CMO we were given access to only one school. Sample characteristics are included in Table 1 on page 9.

After principals consented to participate, we asked them to recommend teachers of varying experience levels within their school. From this pool of teachers, our investigators selected one from within the least experienced sub-pool and one teacher from the most experienced sub-pool. Investigators and/or administrators informed teachers that their principals had recommended them.

Within each organization, we interviewed one official with direct knowledge of teacher evaluation and other personnel practices in schools within the organization, two principals or administrators with school-level responsibility, and two to four teachers in each school affiliated with that principal or administrator. To ensure robust findings and to

identify any inconsistencies in the data, we interviewed an additional principal or charter management organization representative responsible for principal support. In all, we interviewed 20 participants within these organizations.

All interviews lasted 45-75 minutes and were digitally recorded unless participants requested otherwise. Interviews with teacher quality directors inquired into:

- Evaluation practices across the organization
- The guidance and resources provided by the charter management organization to support teacher evaluation at the school level
- Overall statistics on evaluation ratings and dismissals
- Legal frameworks pertaining to evaluation.

Principal interviews focused on their approaches to teacher evaluation, connections between evaluation and other human resource functions, and challenges to and facilitators of high-quality teacher evaluation at the school site. Teacher interviews examined their experiences with teacher evaluation, whether evaluation had affected their teaching practice, and how evaluation might be strengthened to better support growth in their practice. In addition, these areas of focus overlapped to allow us to triangulate data.

To analyze the data, we transcribed the interviews verbatim. Then we used a variety of analytic methods, including categorizing comments and drawing from themes in the relevant literature.⁴⁵ Thematic summaries, categorical matrices, and analytical memos allowed investigators to identify emerging cross-case themes and test their robustness.

Endnotes

- 1 See, Laura Goe, Courtney Bell, and Olivia Little, "Approaches to Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness: A Research Synthesis" (Washington: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2008); Morgaen Donaldson, "So Long, Lake Wobegon?: Using Teacher Evaluation to Raise Teacher Quality" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 2 The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness" (2009).
- 3 Randi Weingarten, "A New Path Forward: Four Approaches to Quality Teaching and Better Results," Speech at the National Press Club, January 12, 2010.
- 4 Marie Morelock, "Investigating Promising Practice Of Teacher Evaluation in Two California Charter Schools," Ed.D dissertation, University Of Southern California, 2008.
- 5 Throughout the report, we have used pseudonyms for the names of the charter management organizations, or CMOs, in order to protect the individual teachers and administrators who participated in this study.
- 6 See the following overviews of teacher evaluation: Chris Brandt and others, "Examining District Guidance to Schools on Teacher Evaluation Policies in the Midwest Region" (Washington: Regional Education Laboratory Program, 2007); Donaldson, "So Long, Lake Wobegon?"
- 7 The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect;" The New Teacher Project, "Hiring, Assignment, and Transfer in Chicago Public Schools" (2007).
- 8 Donaldson, "So Long, Lake Wobegon?"
- 9 Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).
- 10 See, for example, Terry Moe, "Collective Bargaining and the Performance of Public Schools," *American Journal of Political Science* 53(1) 2009: 156–174.
- 11 Thomas Toch and Robert Rothman, "Rush to Judgment: Teacher Evaluation in Public Education" (Washington: Education Sector, 2008).
- 12 Gregory Strizek and others, "Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals, and School Libraries in the United States: 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey" (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).
- 13 Joe Nathan, *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).
- 14 H. Alix Gallagher, "Vaughn Elementary's Innovative Teacher Evaluation System: Are Teacher Evaluation Scores Related to Growth in Student Achievement?" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 79(4) (2004):79-107; Eileen Kellar, "Catching Up with the Vaughn Express: Five Years of Standards-Based Teacher Evaluation and Performance Pay," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 13 (7) (2005).
- 15 In her 2008 study, Morelock analyzed teacher evaluation practices in two California charter elementary schools, one of which was affiliated with a charter management organization and the other of which had a teachers union. Overall, Morelock found that these schools placed teacher evaluation within their larger professional development systems. She further found that these schools faced challenges similar to those encountered by conventional public schools: how to provide critical feedback while maintaining productive professional relationships and how to find the time to conduct high-quality evaluations. Lastly, Morelock found that the presence of a teachers union in one of the charter schools was *not* perceived to be a barrier to high-quality evaluation by administrators or teachers at that school.
- 16 Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky, "Personnel Policy in Charter Schools" (Washington: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2001); Ballou and Podgursky also found that charter schools typically had lower student to teacher ratios and tended to employ less experienced and uncertified teachers at higher rates than in regular public schools. Moreover, they found that 63 percent of the charter schools employed teachers on one-year contracts and 33 percent of the settings employed teachers entirely "at-will." Eighty percent of the researchers' sample reported dismissing at least one teacher mid-year or at year's end for performance reasons. The researchers conclude: "While our conclusions pertain only to these states, they suggest that when given the opportunity, charter schools pursue innovative personnel policies that differ in key respects from those of traditional public schools and more closely resemble the practices of private schools."
- 17 Ballou and Podgursky, "Personnel Policy in Charter Schools," p. 24.
- 18 Ron Zimmer and others, *Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003).
- 19 David Stuit and Thomas Smith, Teacher Turnover in Charter Schools (Nashville: National Center for School Choice, 2009); Analyzing data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey, Stuit and Smith found that fifteen percent of charter school teachers who left teaching after the 2003-2004 school year did so because of a school staffing action, compared to 6 percent of conventional school teachers. However, "school staffing actions" come about for a number of reasons including school closures, re-organizations, reductions in staff, and dismissals based on lack of required certification. Thus, this measure is likely not a pure estimate of dismissals based on poor performance.
- 20 Courtney L. Malloy and Priscilla Wohlstetter, "Working Conditions in Charter Schools: What's the Appeal for Teachers?" *Education and Urban Society* 35 (2) (2003): 219-41.
- 21 In National CMO, we attempted to interview teachers and principals at other National CMO schools but were given access to only one school within the network. A representative from the national CMO reviewed the paper for accuracy and comparison to other schools within the network. She said that while some of the specific processes of teacher evaluation at the National CMO school in this paper may not be generalizable to other schools in the National CMO network, she said she "expect[s] you would find similar techniques in most of [National CMO's] schools."
- 22 The ratio of teachers to evaluators varies. For example, one administrator at the school evaluates 13 teachers, while another evaluates about eight teachers and the other two are each assigned to two teachers.
- 23 In Northern CMO and National CMO, there is no distinction between formal and informal observation. In Western CMO, there is a distinction in that only those observations designated as "formal" contribute to teachers' summative evaluations.
- 24 Schools in all CMOs reported that school administrators regularly solicited feedback on professional development from teachers and CMO-level administrators.
- 25 Chris Brandt and others, "Examining District Guidance to Schools on Teacher Evaluation Policies in the Midwest Region."
- 26 For a more thorough discussion of tenure, see Joan Baratz-Snowden, "Fixing Tenure: A Proposal for Ensuring Teacher Effectiveness and Due Process" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 27 The CMOs are currently exploring the use of value-added metrics to assess teachers' effectiveness. The CMOs are working with education researchers, supported by foundations, on this initiative.
- 28 For more information about hiring see Edward Liu and Susan Moore Johnson, "New Teachers' Experiences of Hiring: Late, Rushed, and Information-Poor," *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42 (3) (2006): 324-360.

- 29 Liu and Johnson, "New Teachers' Experiences of Hiring: Late, Rushed, and Information-Poor."
- 30 See, for example, Robert Gordon, Thomas Kane, and Douglas Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job" (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2006); Steven Rivkin, Eric Hanushek, and John Kain, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement," *Econometrica* 73 (2) (2005): 417–458; Daniel McCaffrey and others, *Evaluating Value-Added Models for Teacher Accountability* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003).
- 31 Kane, Staiger, Gordon, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job;" The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect;" U.S. Department of Education, "Race to the Top Executive Summary" (2009); Education Trust, "What States Can Do to Improve Teacher Effectiveness" (2009).
- 32 Donaldson, "So Long, Lake Wobegon?"; The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect."
- 33 The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect."
- 34 For example, The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect," reports that in districts in its sample that used binary ratings, 99 percent of teachers were rated "satisfactory." In those that used ratings scales with more than two categories, 94 percent received one of the top two ratings and 1 percent were rated "unsatisfactory."
- 35 See, for example, The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect." Researchers report that more than 70 percent of tenured teachers in their sample received the highest rating possible.
- 36 The New Teacher Project, "The Widget Effect."
- 37 This final observation about the culture of the school contributing to teachers' voluntary departure is speculative, since we did not interview teachers who had left the school and do not have data from the school about teachers who left.
- 38 National Center for Education Statistics, "Schools and Staffing Survey: Public School District Data File, 2007-08," Table 8 (Department of Education, 2009) In Patrick McGuinn, "Ring the Bell for K-12 Teacher Tenure Reform" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 39 We want to be cautious about these data, as they are data from one school and do not necessarily represent the outcomes of and approach to dismissal across all of National charter school network.
- 40 However, notably, the voluntary turnover rate in these schools might be high and could account for the hesitancy on the part of administrators to dismiss teachers. We are grateful to Edward Liu for this observation.
- 41 Across the CMOs, there is variation in the distribution of evaluation responsibilities among administrators. Some administrators have a higher number of teachers for whom they are responsible to observe, while others have fewer.
- 42 At least one other North CMO school awards bonuses of 15-20 percent above base pay for individuals who exceed expectations on evaluations.
- 43 For example, an administrator in North CMO who reviewed the paper described various updates to the evaluation system: more focused training and tools for evaluators (or "coaches"), use of videotape of coaching sessions, more clarity about expectations of regularity of reviewing progress and checking in on teachers' goals and adjusting goals. The administrator also reiterated their commitment to creating a model for identifying and recognizing excellent teachers in partnership with national researchers and with foundation support.
- 44 In fact, any school or district that attracts a large pool of applicants and conducts a rigorous hiring process could make this argument.
- 45 We used both "emic" and "etic" codes to analyze the data.

About the authors

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