

Developing Professional Growth Systems: Lessons from Educators Who Reinvented Teacher Evaluation

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Introduction

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Widespread dissatisfaction with most existing systems has spurred some states, school districts, and teachers' unions to change the way teachers are evaluated. Some of the early pioneers include Montgomery County, Maryland, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Other Ohio districts like Toledo and Columbus were early pioneers in establishing peer assistance and review programs for new teachers and teachers with poor evaluations. More recently, Massachusetts introduced a new statewide educator evaluation system meant to promote professional growth. We have studied these and other efforts from across the nation. Over the past 5 years, we have looked more closely at various attempts to reinvent teacher evaluation in the California context.

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This brief draws primarily on the work of the Robla school district and its teachers' union, efforts of the San Diego and Shasta County Offices of Education, and the work of University of California at Davis's Resourcing Excellence in Education (REEd) and its partner districts. This report also encompasses recent experiences of the San Juan, Poway, and San Jose school districts and their teachers' unions. We collected data by conducting individual and group interviews with organizational officials and local educators and reviewing written, web-based, and video information specific to these programs.

Each of the educational entities featured in this brief operates in a different local context. Their experiences and the results of their work underscore that there is no one right approach, no single model of evaluation and professional growth that is appropriate to all situations. While these entities readily admit they have borrowed heavily and benefited from the experiences of others, all acknowledge that local needs and circumstances fundamentally shape the contours of their efforts.

Featured District and County Office

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Robla School District, located in Sacramento County, is a small elementary school district enrolling about 2200 students. For the past 18 months, the district and local teachers' union have worked closely with REEd on a variety of improvement efforts, including beginning to develop a professional growth system. REEd has documented this work as noted in this summary of the district and union's reflections on their progress and challenges: (https://video.ucdavis.edu/media/PanelA+Robla+School+District/0_dr2ge0qz) and the superintendent's summary of the two years of effort: (https://video.ucdavis.edu/media/Presentation/0_m806y4qw).

The Shasta County Office of Education provides a variety of programs for students including preschools, special education, career-education, and education for incarcerated, expelled, and at-risk youth. In addition to supporting local districts in Shasta County with professional learning opportunities for educators, the Shasta COE operates science and STEM programs. Given general dissatisfaction with the then-existing evaluation system for certificated staff, the Shasta COE replaced its evaluation system with a professional growth system. The new system, called the System for Teacher Evaluation and Professional Development (STEP),

was developed jointly by the Shasta County office and the local teachers' union. It features multiple observations, structured feedback and reflection opportunities, and a 3% bonus pay bump for teachers earning "distinguished" status.

This report also draws on work on San Juan (Sacramento County) and Poway (San Diego County), two school districts that have built reputations for innovation, beginning with their decades of experience establishing particularly successful peer assistance and review programs. We documented this work in the 2011 report, *Peer Assistance and Review: Getting Serious About Teacher Evaluation* (<https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/parreport-2011-final-sept6.pdf>).

More recently, the San Juan, Poway, and San Jose school districts worked to reinvent their teacher evaluation systems for all teachers, as we documented in our 2016 report, *Replacing Teacher Evaluation Systems with Systems of Professional Growth: Lessons from Three California School Districts and Their Teachers' Unions* (https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/teachereval_report.pdf_2_1.pdf). In addition, San Juan has produced a set of videos and a series of supporting documents describing their new system of professional growth and the steps they took to develop it (<http://www.sanjuan.edu/Domain/7227>).

Intermediaries

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The two intermediaries that were part of this study served a number of important functions as they assisted teams of educators to conceptualize, develop, and implement new systems of professional growth.

REEd at UC Davis's School of Education has been involved in various projects and partnerships designed to reinvent teacher evaluation since 2009. REEd supported work in the Shasta County Office of Education and Robla School District, as well as 20 other districts in Northern California. The REEd-directed Resourcing Professional Learning Systems (RPLS), conducted under a grant from the California Department of Education, has sought to encourage and assist California school districts to re-conceptualize their teacher evaluation systems. RPLS supports school district design teams composed of teachers and administrators to create new, sustainable educator evaluation systems that place professional growth at their center. REEd's model uses the Strategic Observation and Reflection (SOAR) teaching frames, research-based high leverage instructional practices, to move district-based design teams forward.

The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), a beneficiary of funding from REEd's Improving Teacher Quality grant, has led the Educator Effectiveness and Evaluation (E3) project, a model that guides district and teacher leaders through a two-year process of professional development. SDCOE has partnered with 13 Southern California school districts in three cohorts to assist district teams to develop Integrated Professional Learning Systems designed to transform traditional teacher evaluation. SDCOE relies on what it has identified as research-based "best practices" to facilitate district teams' efforts to build a common understanding and vision about how to approach evaluation and professional growth in a coherent and seamless manner.

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The California Context

For more than four decades, the Stull Act has shaped teacher evaluation in California. This 1971 state law views evaluation through the nearly singular prism of high stakes decisions. Who will earn tenure (permanence)? Who will be considered for dismissal? Teacher support and development come little into play.

The Stull Act provides the framework for teacher evaluation. The law essentially establishes the what of evaluation. The how, the procedures for appraising teacher performance, is left to bargaining between each school district and its local teacher union or association. Despite this seeming flexibility to shape local systems, evaluation looks just about the same from one district to the next and has changed little since the first contract was negotiated in the late 1970s. Various described as “static,” “narrow,” and “outdated,” almost no one has a good word to say about how we do teacher evaluation in California. Moreover, what has become an insufficient cookie cutter approach increasingly is at odds with the state’s general shift in policy direction.

When California enacted the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013, the new state law signaled much more than just a revamped education finance system. The LCFF represents a seismic swing in policy direction, shifting major decisions about dollars and governance from the state to local districts. Framing this new policy approach is an expectation that districts will take advantage of their expanded flexibility to shape systems of continuous improvement that are sensitive to local needs.

This newly emerging dual ethos of local decision-making and continuous improvement opens the door to new thinking about teacher evaluation, in particular, new systems that embrace professional growth as integral to continuous improvement. It gives districts and their teacher representatives a tacit policy boost, permission if you will, to move beyond long-established parameters as they develop systems nested in local needs and focused on continuously improving teachers’ professional skills.

Findings

The work of transforming conventional teacher evaluation systems to systems of professional growth is complex, intellectually challenging, and context-specific. As we learned from studying our focus organizations, doing this work well requires time, patience, and a commitment to getting it right. As REEd Director Susan O’Hara noted, “The project is short and the work is long.”

The data from this study revealed a number of findings. Districts that seek to overhaul their evaluation systems and put professional growth of all teachers as the primary purpose would be wise to learn from the experience of the educators who contributed to our research.

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CULTURE CHANGE

The culture of an educational entity—a district or county office of education—is a product of typically longstanding beliefs, attitudes, customs, and behaviors. Changing that culture to introduce new ideas or new ways of doing business roils the usual order.

Changing the standard conception of evaluation from a rote process, what one education official we interviewed called “hoop jumping,” to a process of continuous improvement requires unlearning old habits and learning new ones. Both teachers and administrators in the districts and county offices engaged in reinventing educator evaluation frequently talk about “culture change” and creating “a different mindset.” Breaking long-held patterns and replacing them with new ones can be a vexing challenge. As one SDCOE official noted, “The status quo is comfortable and given time, people figure out how to make any process work for them.”

All of the entities that were part of this study adopted as an article of faith that their own organizational culture that sustained the old evaluation system needed to be replaced by a new set of consensually held ideas that viewed teacher evaluation as expansive, focused on growth, development, and continuous improvement. For each, the path to culture change was situational. Each began from a different place, with a different history and different context.

As we note in the section on Reshaping Labor-Management Relations, the interactions between the school district and the local teachers’ union proved key to reshaping culture. Both the district and the union entered this work with a common recognition that the existing evaluation system was not effective. It was neither rigorous nor did it help teachers improve their practice but it had been part of the culture for so long, that while everyone agreed something different needed to replace it, determining what that something different might be proved challenging. Teams began with long discussions, and even a few heated arguments, about what good teaching and learning looked like for them. These discussions led to two seminal realizations that began to break old patterns and change norms: (1) Tweaking the old evaluation system was not enough. If their goal was to make better, continuously improving teaching part of the new culture, then much more radical change was necessary. As one teacher told us, “This is not just about evaluation, it is about how everything we do leads to good teaching.” (2) If the new system they were forging was all about improving teaching and, of course, by extension, improving student learning, then the purpose of evaluation must change. “Evaluation,” the periodic one-shot review of teaching, must be replaced by the much more encompassing notion of continuous professional growth. Working on teaching, constantly finding ways to make it better, caring about the quality of classroom practice, our focus sites determined, needed to infuse everything they did. Changing the evaluation system meant changing the culture in which district team members had worked for many years.

One of the central elements of changing the culture around evaluation became rebranding the evaluation system itself. As previous research has shown, many teachers have negative views of systems called “evaluation.” In one survey of teachers in the early years of the federal Teacher Incentive Fund, only 29 percent reported that their evaluation system did a good job distinguishing effective from ineffective teachers.¹ Similarly, in a statewide survey of teachers engaged in Massachusetts’ new evaluation system, just 29 percent of teachers reported that

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¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, Teacher Incentive Fund: Final Report on the Implementation of Performance Pay Systems by the First and Second Cohorts of Grantees, Washington, D.C., 2016.

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they believed the system was fair.² Teachers interviewed in our sample California districts echoed these views of their existing evaluation systems.

Thus, changing the purpose and form of evaluation for many districts came also to include changing the name. Many rebranded their systems, dropping the word “evaluation” and typically replacing it with “growth” or “improvement.” As a SDCOE official told us, “We’re purging ‘evaluation.’” To be sure, changing the name does not change the system. But, we found, rebranding evaluation as districts shift to systems centered on professional growth begins to alter educators’ perceptions of what the new system is and what it is meant to accomplish. It begins to change the culture of evaluation.

Enabling districts to develop systems based on professional growth turned out to be quite freeing. As districts began to shed preconceptions about evaluation and embrace the possibility of entirely new ways of focusing on teaching and learning, they became more self-assured about developing new systems that truly were their own. As a Shasta COE team member told us, “When we started we didn’t realize the importance of developing our own tools and process rather than being handed something. We have ownership now.”

CAPACITY BUILDING

“We’re building a system for the 98 percent of teachers, not for those who need to find another profession,” a SDCOE official told us. Transforming a conventional evaluation system that rarely focuses on the 98 percent to one based on professional growth meant to support all teachers, requires that districts take stock of their capacity to reach this ambitious goal and sustain the new system that emerges from the work.

Developing and implementing these new systems typically requires districts to fundamentally rethink the strategic use and distribution of both human and fiscal resources as educators alter long-existing practices and assume new roles. For our focus districts, capacity issues involved boosting and redistributing resources on both the front and back ends.

On the front end, in the development phase, intermediaries often supplied the expertise and the neutral perspective of an outsider to help guide the work of the districts. Intermediaries also sometimes provided funds necessary to pay, for example, for district and union leadership to attend meetings and retreats. REEd’s capacity-building framework was designed expressly to help districts rethink the allocation of their resources, including how dollars and people could be deployed more efficiently and effectively to accomplish new system goals. (For more information on the role of intermediaries, see that section of this report.)

Focus districts used the opportunity for resource distribution to signal the critical importance of the work in which they were engaged. Some, like Robla, used existing dollars to create daily planning time for teachers to work together in their schools, thus concretely illustrating to teachers that the district was serious about changing the status quo.

On the back end, as implementation began, each of the focus districts found it needed to confront the problem of garnering adequate resources for an ongoing robust professional

² SRI International, Abt Associates, Brigham & Associates, J Koppich & Associates, (July 2015) *Implementation of Educator Evaluation: Summary Report*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

growth system. Simply adding more responsibilities to the already over-stretched principals and other administrators to conduct more observations or spend more time providing support was not a viable option. Districts typically solved this dilemma by drawing on the expertise of accomplished teachers, having them assume responsibility for working with their peers on professional growth efforts or supplementing the work of the principals by sharing responsibility for conducting classroom observations and providing timely feedback. Drawing on the significant and underutilized capacity of accomplished teachers required a commitment of resources to allow them the time to do this work. Several of our focus districts viewed this investment as a part of the overall professional development budget and made it a priority.

Part of the work of capacity building was equipping districts with the skills to enable them to continue to hone their systems, recognizing that as circumstances change, the system might need to adapt. Districts were not developing systems forever and all time. Systems are always developmental and evolutionary. As SDCOE's Chris Reising said, "We want districts to be confident and comfortable with the concept of building to learn, not to last."

RESHAPING LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

As we noted in the section on Culture Change, building new evaluation systems with professional growth at the center often requires districts and their unions to reshape their labor-management relations. As we learned from our study of Poway, San Juan, and San Jose, collaborative labor-management creation, based on a foundation of trust, was a hallmark of these new systems.

Some of our focus districts had enjoyed long-time collaborative labor-management relations that survived leadership changes and contentious contract negotiations. Others had checkered labor-management histories, often characterized by poor relations and little trust. Despite the different circumstances and challenges facing the districts and unions, they found that developing trust and working collaboratively were essential to creating new professional growth systems.

Trust and collaboration were built by working on a substantive and hard topic. "We [didn't] do any [stand-alone] trust building activities. We [did] concrete things," said SDCOE's Chris Reising. REEd officials agreed that this approach mirrored their own. Work focused on developing systems of professional growth allowed local teams to have productive conversations away from the bargaining table, to talk about teaching and learning, the common goals team members shared, and where different perspectives might create different expectations. Said a member of the Shasta COE team, "The unexpected consequence [of this work] for us was the value of learning-focused conversations." As Robla Superintendent Ruben Reyes noted, "I think what we learned ... was the power of being collaborative and bringing a variety of voices to the table."

As we mentioned previously, dissatisfaction with the current evaluation system created much of the impetus for labor-management collaboration. The Shasta COE team told us, "No one defended the old system. It didn't provide for growth or feedback [and didn't] value good

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– Chris Reising
San Diego County
Office of Education

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educators.” The Robla team echoed this sentiment: “Teachers and administrators would adhere to the process but it was not lending itself to teaching improvement.” Said a teacher in yet another district, “The [evaluation] system hasn’t changed in 30 years but education has.”

Collaborative work required both the district and the union to step outside their comfort zones. Relationships evolved over time. Said an official in one focus district, “We’re [now] getting to a place where we... can suggest scary things and work through disagreements.” Labor-management collaboration allowed Robla to realize what was at stake in the work: “We had this moment as a team where we all just looked at each other and said, ‘This really isn’t about evaluation anymore, is it? We had this turning point of, wow, we’re talking about something completely different.’” That “aha” moment opened the door for the Robla team to think both more broadly and deeply about what kind of system they wanted to create and why. “We both [district and union] came to the same place, that [a professional growth system] was something that ... was in the best interests of our teachers. So ... it was a no brainer to be able to agree to it at the bargaining table.”

A number of districts in this study have reached negotiated agreements around new professional growth systems. Several have revised their contract language on evaluation or agreed to memoranda of understanding that have enabled the district and union to move forward on the work. Robla and at least one of the SDCOE districts agreed to suspend their regular evaluation cycles for a year while they developed their new professional growth systems. San Juan had done the same while developing its new system. Relieved of the pressure of a conventional evaluation, the district and union had breathing room to work and the space and freedom to try new approaches. Said Robla, “Our MOU provided a ‘builtin safety net.’”

FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATION

One common message from studies of districts that developed innovative new systems of professional growth and evaluation is that frequent and clear communication is a must. As districts have learned, the significance of keeping a broad range of stakeholders well informed about the developing progress of a new system cannot be under-estimated. San Juan and Poway used detailed communication plans to ensure teachers, district level administrators, principals, and others were kept apprised of the work underway. They often solicited educators for feedback on the direction of the work. Massachusetts found that insufficient communication about its new statewide evaluation system sometimes led to confusion and consternation about the program.

When we wrote the interim for report for this project, several districts had more or less set communication to the side as something to be “dealt with down the road.” One district (part of this project but not included in the interim report) thought it had tackled the communication issue when it decided to hold multiple forums, led jointly by the district and the union, to let teachers and principals know about the still-fledgling new evaluation system. When few people turned up for the forums, the district and union knew they needed to try a different approach.

In the last few months, several of the focus districts have come to understand how critical broad gauge communication is to the initial success and sustainability of their work. District

teams are beginning to confront a number of communication challenges. One of these challenges is developing a way of talking about the work so that it fits the district context and clearly explains the goals of the new system. As the Robla team notes, “We decided ... that one of the things that we needed to do was come up with some common language to define what strong teaching is about in the Robla School District.” That common language helps the Robla team communicate effectively with each other and communicate with educators who are not part of the team. Importantly, it allows team members, regardless of their position in the district or organizational affiliation, to speak with one voice so educators hear a single message about the still-evolving system. “Teachers are not wondering anymore what we’re doing.”

Robla, like other districts in this project, has taken the importance of regular communication to heart. “Communication between your teachers, between the administration, just if you’re going to make this project work, at every turn you have to be communicating what your needs are, what your wants are, what your goal is. Once we’ve thought we’ve communicated enough, we are continually saying, ‘no’, we have to communicate more.”

THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

Though they differ somewhat in approach, REEd and SDCOE view their role as intermediary through much the same lens. First, they recognize that context matters. They work assiduously to be in tune with the particular circumstances that frame the environment in each district (or, in the case of Shasta, of a county office of education). They understand that context impacts the type of system a district is likely to develop and shapes the rhythm of the work. REEd and SDCOE acknowledge that, “The work in every place begins from a different place [and that] it is our job is to take people from where they are.” As REEd officials note, “It is not up to us where districts end up. It is up to us to give them the space to talk about issues.”

REEd and SDCOE make strategic use of their knowledge and expertise while acknowledging the limits of their authority. They readily assert that while they can convene and facilitate, decisions must come from the participants. As a SDCOE official told us, “We have influence but no power.”

These intermediaries are clear that the work in which they engage local teams must be a collaborative effort between the district and the local teachers’ union. Both must be part of the process from the beginning. REEd and SDCOE hew to the notion that, “Everyone must be at the table and have a stake in the work.” Part of this work, they say, is helping local team members to walk in their colleagues’ shoes as they move toward a common goal, in other words, to help administrators see the work from the perspective of teachers and vice versa. (For more details on this aspect of the work, see the section on Labor-Management Relations.)

REEd and SDCOE take seriously the task of developing trust between themselves and local teams. The entities with which they work understand, and appreciate, that neither REEd nor SDCOE has an ulterior motive or hidden agenda. This transparency about purpose enables the intermediaries to encourage and prod as they strike that delicate balance between pressure and support to move teams forward. They provide feedback about ongoing work from the vantage point of a neutral third party. They listen to district teams, provide a safe space for often difficult conversations, “a safe forum to say the unsayable”, in the words of a SDCOE official, and help teams get unstuck when the process bogs down.

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– The Robla Team

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

While each of our focus entities charted a different path to reinventing their teacher evaluation systems, all benefitted from the experience of others. Learning about how other districts and unions developed systems based on professional growth helped the REED and SDCOE districts begin to imagine what their own new systems might look like.

Typically, district and union teams began their work by examining research and reports about reforming teacher evaluation in California and in other states and districts. They reviewed, for example, work in Montgomery County, Maryland and in Massachusetts and examined the recent efforts in Poway, San Juan, and San Jose. Teams collaboratively studied research such as the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study.

Reading written reports, descriptions, and studies proved helpful, but more helpful to some of our focus districts was meeting in person with other district and union leadership. Robla, for example, met with members of the San Juan team to gain a better understanding of how San Juan developed its professional growth system and what elements of that system might be relevant to Robla's work.

The timing of these consultations turned out to be important. They were the most valuable once the leadership team had been working together for some time and had established a collaborative relationship and a way of working together. Teams then were better able to suspend their skepticism — “Oh, but that will only work in...”—and get down to the business of learning what others had done that might have relevance for their own work.

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Concluding Remarks

Our work with REEd has focused on that organization's RPLS project, funded through the California Department of Education. REED has been instrumental in identifying essential conditions requisite to developing new teacher evaluation systems and supported teams of administrators and teachers as they design systems that place professional growth at the center. REEd also has financially supported the San Diego County Office of Education as it facilitated evaluation system development work.

Thanks to all of the committed educators who gave their time to tell their stories, we have learned a good deal about teacher evaluation systems. This report, then, summarizes what it takes to turn ineffective and burdensome teacher evaluation into effective systems of professional growth and improvement.

As we found, this difficult and important work is bounded by local context. There is no single path or formula. Each district has a unique history of labor-management relations, reform initiatives, and challenges. We also learned that changing the standard conception of evaluation to a process of continuous improvement requires a culture change. Rebranding teacher evaluation as professional growth and improvement turned out to be an important step in developing the new system. Districts came to recognize how critical culture change was and how much time and effort it required.

The experience of the districts in our study also suggests that the role of intermediaries to assist local efforts to reinvent teacher evaluation can be critical to making progress. Intermediaries can provide expertise and a venue to allow stakeholders to reach a consensus about how best to advance teaching and learning.

None of our sample districts reinvented their teacher evaluation systems without rethinking how they employ resources in the cause of improving teaching. This rethinking process was usually advanced by an infusion of modest investments by intermediaries or the district and teachers' union. But as each district and its union worked to change teacher evaluation, each was confronted by the limits of the investments in their existing systems. As the focus districts found, better utilizing the expertise of accomplished teachers to conduct or supplement the work of principals could go a long way toward addressing capacity issues.

In each of our sample districts, positive labor-management relations proved to be the foundation for reinventing teacher evaluation. Even when the district and its teacher union were involved in contentious contract negotiations, working collaboratively on an issue of substance, such as teacher evaluation, proved to be a vehicle for building the trust that allowed them to move forward.

In each case, districts initially underestimated the importance of communication. Despite multiple efforts to insure that teachers understood the purpose and intricacies of the developing systems of professional growth and improvement, many teachers' understanding still fell short. As districts were confronted with this challenge, they developed more comprehensive communication strategies designed to reach broader audiences of educators in their districts.

Finally, each of the districts took advantage of the experience of districts that previously had tackled the same work of building a new evaluation system. Learning from other districts seemed to be most effective once a district new to this work had had initial conversations about a new system and its collaborative team had reached some common understandings. In sum, reinventing teacher evaluation is critical to improving teaching and learning, and it is difficult work. As our focus districts have shown, it is work worth doing.

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