Top Takeaways about Teacher Effectiveness in Pittsburgh Public Schools

On August 2, 2013, nearly 1,500 Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) teachers received no-stakes-attached preview reports that establish an unprecedented platform for professional growth.

These reports bring together for the first time three lenses on effective teaching that have been developed over four years through collaboration between PPS and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers in partnership with more than 400 PPS educators and national experts. The first lens looks at observation of teaching practice; the second lens isolates teachers and schools’ contribution to student learning and growth; and the third uses student perception surveys to tell us how students are experiencing teaching.

By bringing effective teaching into focus in this way, it provides actionable information that can support professional growth and improve outcomes for all students. It is our obligation to work together to use this information in ways that result in professional growth and ensures the District reaches its goals of accelerating student achievement, eliminating racial disparities and becoming a District of first choice.

1. **PPS is ahead of the curve.**
   Under new Pennsylvania state law, teacher evaluation must be based 50% on professional practice and 50% on student outcomes beginning in 2013-14. The law identifies four levels of teaching performance: Distinguished, Proficient, Needs Improvement and Failing. Thanks to its ground-breaking process, PPS is the only district in Pennsylvania providing its teachers with an advanced look at their results with no evaluative stakes attached. More than 50 school districts and state agencies from across the country have consulted with PPS to learn from the District's successes and challenges in developing its growth and evaluation system.

2. **Pittsburgh Public Schools believes in teachers, and knows that teachers matter.**
   Teaching is complex and our teachers are professionals. Our most effective teachers change lives in ways that are forever positive. Research shows that a teacher’s effectiveness has more impact on student learning and growth than any other factor under the control of school systems.¹

3. **Pittsburgh Public Schools is committed to helping teachers grow and develop.**
   Teachers have said time and again that the information they received in the past as part of their evaluations did not help them grow as professionals. More than 99% of teachers were rated as if they were the same. To help teachers grow, PPS needed new tools to help teachers identify strengths and growth areas.

4. **The District and Federation designed a growth and evaluation system that’s good and getting better.**
   Since 2009, the District worked alongside teachers and union leaders to design a growth and evaluation system that provides teachers with a clearer picture of their performance, offering the feedback and information they deserve. The process has improved every year based on teachers’ feedback to ensure accuracy and fairness. Along the way, teachers were provided most of the information privately and securely for their own reflection and growth. Leading research supports the tools PPS is using to understand teaching, and national experts participated at every step.

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5. **More than 85% of PPS teachers are performing at Proficient or Distinguished levels.**

In 2012-13, over 85% of PPS teachers demonstrated effective performance. In fact, within this group, 15% of PPS teachers performed at the Distinguished level, the highest level possible under the new state evaluation law. About 70% of PPS teachers performed at the Proficient level.

6. **Low-performing teachers have the time and opportunity to improve.**

Not all teachers achieved the Proficient or Distinguished levels. 5% of PPS teachers' performance was identified as Needs Improvement. 9% performed at the lowest, or Failing, level last year. They earned less than half of the possible points available to them through the evaluation process. Now they have access to intensive supports, and more than a year to improve. There are no quotas. The system is designed so that the entire workforce could be comprised of Proficient and Distinguished educators.

7. **Supports are available to help all teachers get better.**

More than 15 different types of professional learning and support opportunities are available to PPS teachers. These resources include professional development courses, workshops led by effective teachers, videos aligned to evaluation components, feedback from principals and peers, opportunities to observe other teachers, focused year-long growth projects, curriculum training, and more.

8. **The difference between effective and ineffective teaching is significant for students.**

Teachers whose performance was highly effective are experts in their practice, engage and challenge students, and build strong relationships with each student. Student behavior in their classroom is positive and well-managed. Principals recognize extraordinary aspects of their practice and students report positive experiences. Students grow academically. Evidence suggests that the difference in learning growth for a typical student with the average teacher demonstrating Distinguished performance compared to the average teacher demonstrating Failing performance is more than seven months in a single school year.² Our most effective teachers produce gains large enough that, if accumulated over several years, could close achievement gaps between black students and white students or between Pittsburgh students and statewide averages.

9. **Highly effective teaching is happening across our District.**

Highly effective teaching within our District crosses boundaries of geography, experience and more. It occurs in magnet and neighborhood schools, schools in all regions of the city, and schools of every grade configuration.

10. **Success is possible in all of our schools.**

Within our schools serving more than 95% low-income students and/or students of color, 12% of teachers are performing at the highest level of effectiveness. This is not very different than the percent of teachers reaching this level at other schools (16%). At the same time, students attending schools serving more than 95% low-income students and/or students of color are more likely to spend time with a teacher at the lowest level of performance. We must work together to increase the number of low income students and/or students of color taught by highly effective teachers.

11. **The hardest work is still in front of us. But we’ve passed a major turning point.**

With new knowledge comes responsibility. PPS administrators, principals, teachers, and staff are now obligated to use new information about teaching to advance the teaching profession in a way that is aligned with our goals for students. The entire city will benefit, and more students will be able to take advantage of the opportunity afforded them by The Pittsburgh Promise®.

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² Based on PSSA results for students in 4th through 8th grade; Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.