



TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM DC PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

2023 Report

Written By

*Georgetown University Students:
Sylvie Buckalew, Thalia Zuniga Davila,
and Helen Rucker with EmpowerEd*

INTRODUCTION

As teacher turnover rates continue to rise in DC's public school system, teacher evaluation and feedback systems have become the subject of heightened scrutiny—seemingly a contributing factor to teacher turnover within these schools. According to the results of a 2021 all-teacher survey conducted by the DC State Board of Education, the majority of DC teachers reported that they “do not believe in the fairness and credibility of teacher evaluations for the 2020–21 school year.” Intriguingly, while only 30.6 percent of DC Public Schools (DCPS) teachers agreed with the statement above, 77.8 percent of teachers from charter schools reported affirmatively. [1]

These troubling results force two main considerations:

- What is different or unique about teacher evaluation systems and their implementation at DC charter schools?
- What information collected from charter schools, namely the results of the conducted interviews below, can be translated into the DCPS system?

DCPS' IMPACT System

DCPS currently employs a system for evaluation and feedback known as IMPACT, which measures teachers across four main thematic areas: instructional practice, student achievement, instructional culture, and collaboration. As part of the evaluation process and in order to measure these thematic categories, DCPS utilizes their Essential Practices (EP) Observation Rubric, which outlines five essential practices:

EP 1: Cultivate a responsive learning community

EP 2: Challenge students with rigorous content


EP 3: Lead a well-planned, purposeful learning experience

EP 4: Maximize student ownership of learning

EP 5: Respond to evidence of student learning

According to DCPS, “teachers who earn Highly Effective ratings are rewarded with bonuses up to \$25,000 and can earn up to \$3.7 million over the course of their careers through IMPACTplus—DCPS's performance-based compensation system.” [2]

This current system has faced backlash and criticism and many consider it a driving factor of high teacher turnover rates among DCPS teachers. Emerging research analyzing the presence of bias within the IMPACT system has found that, on average, white teachers score higher on their evaluations than their colleagues of color. Qualitative data collected by American University School of Education illuminates a perception amongst teachers that IMPACT cultivates a culture of fear and falls short in supporting teacher growth.[3] Further, formulaic emphasis on teachers individualized attention to students favors teachers who work in schools whose student populations come from higher socioeconomic communities. In DC's wealthiest district, Ward 3— where low income students make up only 23% of the student population— 50% of teachers earned “highly effective” scores for the 2013-14 school year. Contrastingly, of the teachers in Ward 8, which has an 88% low income student population, only 19% earned “highly effective” scores that same year. [4]



You can't teach and evaluate every kid in the same way, right? So, why do we do that to teachers? It doesn't really make sense.

-Sela PCS Director of Culture & Student Support



ABOUT OUR PROJECT

EmpowerEd-a non-profit organization in DC dedicated to amplifying diverse teacher voices-partnered with three Georgetown University students to gather qualitative data about various evaluation systems at a number of DC charter schools. This research intends to explore how these systems and the culture they foster positively contribute to high teacher retention rates across the schools. To do so, we interviewed a handful of teachers and administrators at Briya Public Charter School, Monument Academy Public Charter School, Sela Public Charter School, and DC Bilingual Public Charter School whose teacher retention rates are 86 percent, 85 percent, 90 percent, and 84 percent, respectively. The report that follows documents the narrative responses from teachers, principals, and heads of schools, illuminating five key themes across the various evaluation systems: collaboration & consistent communication; trust & transparency; sense of security; flexibility & personalization; growth-orientation. While no two evaluation systems were the same, there were consistent overtones of fairness and malleability which prioritized the strengthening of a teacher's model of instruction, without fear of retribution from his or her own administration.

5 KEY THEMES

Collaboration &
Consistent
Communication

Trust and Transparency

Sense of Security

Flexibility and
Personalization

Growth



Collaboration & Consistent Communication

"All the teachers [agreed on] 10 characteristics of an effective teacher. And that's been one of the kind of guidelines that we go by in evaluation. [...] we look at those...where our strengths were and what our weaknesses were and what we wanted to improve."

Briya English Teacher

"I see the head of our school on basically a daily basis...My direct supervisor, I see her on a regular basis as well. We have really good communication, and I know she knows what I'm doing as a teacher, as opposed to some of the other places I've taught. I didn't see the principal or my supervisor in any kind of circularity and would often wonder, did they really know what I was doing?"

Sela 4th Grade Teacher

"You want to hear from your peers because sometimes your peers who are in the classrooms have the strategies that you're seeing and can offer you a little bit more support than I can. Because they may know what the students may need more in that moment," and, "I believe in giving our teachers voices."

Monument Academy Administrator

"I think one of the things that we do really well is we are in classrooms almost every day," and, "I think there's a lot of feedback given informally, that makes the formal evaluation just another kind of tool that we use."

Sela Director of Culture & Student Support

"And the coach comes in regularly and it doesn't feel scary because it's like a friend coming to your class, helping to be extra eyes, helping to give an extra hand...Can you come in my room and show me how to do it? And the coach comes in and does it. And then asks, what did you notice? What did you like? What didn't you like? How about the next time we do it together? So it's supposed to be like this very collaborative approach to supporting teachers that doesn't feel scary or intimidating."

DC Bilingual Administrator

Throughout the interviews, teachers and administrators spoke highly of the ability to collaborate and communicate both with fellow teachers and their supervisors throughout the evaluation process. Whether it be a discussion amongst teachers to come to a consensus on evaluation perimeters or open communication with administrators about expectations and feedback, interviewees generally expressed appreciation for continued conversation with their superiors around teaching style, growth, and professional goals. For many, this open communication led to an assurance that their works were recognized and valued in a way that cultivated atmospheres of trust and support. Importantly, almost every interviewee remarked on the vitality of collaboration amongst teachers on what works and what can be improved. Many evaluation systems had components of both self and peer assessment that effectively circumvents hierarchies of power within the administrative structure. Further, consistent informal communication and observations throughout the year prepared teachers for the formal assessments and served to relinquish the pressure around evaluations commonly felt by teachers.

Trust and Transparency

"We're looking at four components: What is your preparation like? And once you're in the lesson, how is that going? We're looking at classroom evaluation, or professionalism...and then we're also looking at how do you reflect on your craft," and, "I have informal observations that are conducted by me where I'll go in, sometimes announced, sometimes unannounced. They're no longer than 15 minutes. And this is me going in and saying I'm looking to see something that you're doing really well."

Monument Academy Principal

"It is very supportive. You know, between the principal and head of school, they come in and they give us feedback, and it's a much more supportive environment. It doesn't seem like you have to be scared about it, which was the feeling I had when I was working in New York City public schools."

Monument Special Education Teacher

"They're not allowing one evaluation to determine, you know, how good we are at teaching students."

Sela Teacher

"And also the other thing that's really important is that it's really important that teacher if, if good coaching is happening, teachers can self identify where they're falling on all of these strands in all of these levels. So like the evaluation should never be a surprise to the teachers. Like, it should never feel like out of the blue, the teacher's being told she needs to work on her student engagement."

DC Bilingual Principal

The interviews revealed that these charter schools valued transparency toward their teachers to cultivate reciprocal trust. When a teacher is well-informed of the asks being made of them, the evaluation—especially as it increases in formality—does not stoke feelings of fear or concern. In the case of Monument Academy, the administration employs their own system coined MATE, built from the Danielsen model (employed also at Sela), which is divided into four domains: Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities. When these four domains and their specific criteria are explained in detail to the teaching bodies of these schools, there exists little room for guessing at what one is being evaluated on. In a similar vein, when supervisors bridge the gap between the administrative space and the classroom, through the use of frequent, informal observations, the system is consistently, non-threateningly, reinforced. The formal evaluations, then, which tend to happen at the conclusion of the schooling year, are run-through with the teachers themselves, so they aren't caught off guard in an evaluation easily considered to be the most daunting. The acknowledgment that it is not an end-all, be-all kind of assessment, dictating something other than a teacher's progress over the course of that year, allows for the strengthening of trust. And so, teachers are able to orient themselves strictly toward their teaching for their benefit and that of their scholars.

Sense of Security

"We don't want teachers to have the impression that if there's something bad in that evaluation, that that is the thing that their livelihood hangs on...We know that there is not going to be some sort of reactionary move that impacts your career if your evaluation isn't great...I think there's just an atmosphere and environment that we've built and a level of independence we give teachers that make them want to stay...There's some room for innovative teaching when there is some room for non punitive feedback."

Sela Director of Culture & Student Support

"I think as both a teacher and as a supervisor, I could see that what was really confusing for people was how that affected our pay. How much of our pay was or was not dependent on our performance review. And so, Briya has now clarified that our pay will not be affected by our performance review...I personally have always felt supported by observations instead of criticized and critiqued and all the the constructive criticism that I've gotten is helpful and delivered in a sensitive way."

Briya Teacher

"Honestly, since we're in a charter school, [evaluations are] a lot less detrimental, right? Because if we were working in DCPS, the evaluation is basically your raise and whether or not you're going to have a job next year. That's how important that evaluations are in public schools, but being in a charter school, it's not as detrimental."

Sela 3rd Grade Teacher

In contrast to the IMPACT model, teacher evaluations at these charter schools are completely removed from a teacher's pay or job security. Because livelihoods do not depend on the evaluation system, teachers feel confident in the feedback they receive and are more receptive to suggestions and constructive criticism. Without the punitive element that exists in DCPS, teachers can embrace innovation and experiment with creative new teaching styles. These sentiments were highlighted by teachers and administrators alike. From the administrative side, there was an understanding that if teachers feel a sense of security- that an anomaly in their performance does not jeopardize their job- this will foster an environment most conducive to effective teaching and learning from students.

Flexibility and Personalization

"You can't teach and evaluate every kid in the same way, right? So, why do we do that to teachers? It doesn't really make sense."

Sela Director of Culture & Student Support

"In terms of evaluations often being very formulaic, unless you're in the classroom, and you have a sense of what I'm doing as an educator on a regular basis. You can't pop in two or three times a year and really know what someone is doing."

Sela 4th Grade Teacher

"I'm just gonna teach how I teach in the way that my students best understand and if that's not the standard, if that's not going to get me a 4, I don't know what is."

Sela 3rd Grade teacher

"My direct supervisor, she understands me completely. She knows my teaching style. I feel like if someone else was to come in and observe, it might be a different story if they don't know me...So even she appreciates my teaching style. Like she's like, oh yeah. You're outstanding. You're amazing. I feel like the evaluations and all of the lesson planning- the things that may seem to make great teachers- those aren't the things that make great teachers to me."

Sela 3rd Grade teacher

Because teachers are often thoroughly involved in their evaluations, so far as they are made aware specifically of what they are being evaluated on, elements of flexibility and personalization build their way into the teacher's evaluative experience. When evaluations are just formulaic, with little classroom observation, an administrator likely cannot understand the teaching style and success of an individual teacher. Frequent informal observations then, detailed in the last section on Trust and Transparency, give teachers an ability to cultivate a personalized plan for evaluation—the ability to say, in layman's terms, "How can I be evaluated in a way that speaks to my strengths as an educator and flexibly nudges improvements in those areas I may struggle in?" These charter schools appear to promote creativity in this way—or at least professional experimentation that, while not putting scholars at risk, redefines what it means to be a successful, growing educator. To be able to teach in the way one, for example, finds culturally conscious and relevant, improves both the teaching and then also the learning experience, because the classroom is uniquely personalized.

Growth

"They create smart goals for what they want to get really good at during the year. Those are their measurable goals that's part of their evaluation system."

DC Bilingual Principal

"We also make goals each year and in the fall, about three goals for the year. And that can be both in our instruction or in what we want to learn like in our PD. We'd also talk about that at the end of the year, like the progress we've made towards those goals."

Briya Teacher

"One of the things that I should say is that everybody at the school gets a diagnostic meeting at the beginning of the year, and that's when they meet with their coach, and they talk about their hopes and dreams. So it's basically like, here we are starting a new year. You're in this new role, what are your hopes and dreams for the year? What is it that you would like to get better at? What do you want to nail as an employee here? And how can I help you as your coach to get there? So that's a really important conversation and sets the tone for the way they're going to be working together."

DC Bilingual Principal

"So many of our teachers again, if they come to DC Bilingual, they may teach for 1 year, 2 years, not be quite highly effective yet. They get a ton of coaching and support, and then they get to 'highly effective' and eventually they have the opportunity to either stay in the classroom or become an instructional specialist or coach to other teachers."

DC Bilingual Principal

In the interviews, teachers and principals alike spoke of the benefits of a growth-centered approach to teaching and evaluation. Beyond flexibility and understanding of varying teaching styles, creating goals individualized to each teacher from the perspective of both administrators and teachers is essential for proper visualization and mapping of possible areas of improvement. There was one specific model, by DC Bilingual, that highlighted coaching as one of the most positive efforts from the school in terms of retention and effectiveness. DC Bilingual has "supervisor"-style roles that will take in their supervisees as mentees, and not only facilitate a healthy connection between teachers and administrators which then creates positive cultures around evaluations, but also ways to have feedback-loops beyond evaluations. Coaches take individual teachers and highlight their strengths and weaknesses, diminishing the evaluations' inherent anxiety-inducing factors and allowing for more areas of improvement. Additionally, not placing an emphasis on being perfect at all times during an evaluation, but rather having a continual conversation about possible improvements and the achievement of "smaller" goals, provides teachers with greater depth and breadth of their own teaching styles and how to improve.

Evaluation Weaknesses & Project Challenges

Potential Bias and Misconceptions

"I don't feel like it's fair for me because I thrive better being myself. And that's how my kids thrive....I feel like we're not able to switch it up during these evaluations because they're looking for a particular thing."

"One year I was told I was too sarcastic with my students and I felt like it was a cultural assessment because...I am an African American woman teaching my African American kids who understand."

Lack of Accountability

"And I think the greatest weakness... [is] a lack of accountability. Or...different supervisors might implement it in a different way."

Discrepancies in Experience and Lack of Integrative Feedback

"Teacher input as to how we evaluate is not necessarily what we're focused on... we're more focused on teacher input as to how we're going to improve growth areas."

"I also think there could be more of a role where teachers are working in partnership with the whole process of evaluation, and what the evaluation is, is part of the reason I'm not a fan of the of Danielson because I do think it's kind of it's this, you know, the book is this thick, and it has this formula and you go through these sheets, and it has this language that we don't really use no one talks like this."

"I think, as an older worker, an older, more experienced teacher, I'm fairly confident in talking to my supervisor, to the head of school, and see them as peers. [...] It's like we're all in this community together. I don't think every teacher has that same experience, and particularly newer teachers wouldn't have that kind of relationship."

The evaluation models that were presented, although flexible and comprehensive, did note particular weaknesses. One of the weaknesses of the Danielson Model is that it inherently gives experienced teachers a bit more flexibility and comfort in speaking to supervisors, leaving other teachers to rely on a complex handbook on evaluation specifics. The formulaic nature of this model complicates the personalization of teaching and gives teachers specific points that are worded to maximize efficiency rather than individual styles of teaching. Teachers complained of having little input in the evaluation system; A director of a school agreed to such sentiments and emphasized that the purpose of these evaluations is not teacher input, despite this being one of the most common sentiments expressed by teachers.

Additionally, there was an expression of a lack of accountability for teachers, as each supervisor could theoretically describe varying teaching styles as more efficient than others based on personal standards. As a result, there is a keen emphasis on the effect that bias may play in evaluations. Beyond differing teaching styles and methods, there are cultural differences in teaching and speaking that may contribute to supervisors misunderstanding a teacher, and, thus, evaluating them unfairly. There was one particular teacher who emphasized their anxieties around evaluations due to the cultural differences in the way they speak and communicate compared to their peers.



Potential Project Challenges

Our study itself consisted of a small sample size which prevented us from making stronger hypotheses and conclusions. Additionally, we studied only four charter schools so our findings are relevant only to the schools studied and do not have a broader implication about charter school evaluations more widely. Our interviews were composed of a majority of teachers who have had multiple years of experience, as well as varying teaching experiences prior to taking their role. Additionally, some of the teachers interviewed came at the recommendation of principals, head-of-schools, and community members, which may have skewed the perspectives presented.

Key Takeaways and Areas for Further Exploration

As we continued to speak with teachers and administrators, it became increasingly clear that these charter school evaluation systems stand in stark contrast from the DCPS system. We began to wonder: Is there something inherent to charter schools that make them more conducive to this type of collaborative, flexible, and growth-focused evaluation model? On the other hand, our study analyzed only a limited number of charter schools with among the highest levels of teacher retention.

While we received mixed responses, it is clear that teachers thrive in environments in which they are truly able to teach—restricted neither by excessively strict guidelines nor domineering administration with little regard for the classroom as a site of educational peculiarity. And it is not that the evaluative systems of these charter schools are perfect, because they aren't. But what we have found is that they, largely, give teachers the versatility to perform to their personal and professional potential. So that when a teacher's potential is recognized and intentionally cultivated, a sense of community is created in schools that makes teachers stay. Our hope in finalizing this project is that these qualities of potential-realization that characterize the charter evaluative systems can be channeled into the DCPS system and perhaps other charter schools. Clear but flexible guidelines, attentive to a teacher's own needs, reinforced by a continual, informal administrative presence, which do not dictate a teacher's livelihood, have been communicated to be overwhelmingly successful. We hope that this research can inform attempts at reform within DCPS so that the promise of charters as models of innovation can be fulfilled and the lessons learned can be expanded to ensure that students and teachers in every educational structure can flourish.

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