State of the States' Teacher Evaluation and Support Systems:

A PERSPECTIVE FROM EXEMPLARY TEACHERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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State of the States' Teacher Evaluation and Support Systems: A Perspective From Exemplary Teachers

Executive Summary

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As states reconsider their current evaluation systems, stakeholders are offering their views about what revisions should be made to existing measures and processes. This paper offers a unique perspective to these conversations by capturing and synthesizing the views of some of America's exemplary teachers: State Teachers of the Year (STOYs) and STOY finalists from every part of the country (hereafter referred to as STOYs). Given their recognition as effective practitioners and advocates, their involvement in policy-oriented discussions at various levels, and their overall impact on their respective educational environments, the experiences of STOYs with teacher evaluation and professional support systems provide a unique look into the myriad systems that are now being scrutinized. Accordingly, their insights and recommendations should serve to inform state and local discussions.

Recommendations

Based on survey and focus group responses from 266 STOYs, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by national, state, district, and school education leaders, focused on strengthening mechanisms for evaluating and supporting teachers:

- Focus more on targeted feedback for professional growth and improving instruction, with less emphasis on the evaluation "score."
- Provide training for teachers to help them understand the evaluation tools, as well as training for all evaluators to promote accuracy and consistency in results, independent of who conducts the evaluation.
- Provide time and resources for informal peer observation and discussion.
- Provide opportunities for formative observations and feedback from exemplary educators or support specialists with recent classroom experience in the grade level or content area.
- Ensure that a formal, structured system is in place to provide support and opportunities for professional growth to all teachers—not just novice or struggling teachers.
- Do away with one-size-fits-all professional development in favor of a system focused on differentiated and individualized professional development opportunities, taking advantage of online self-paced study opportunities, watching/discussion videos of excellent teaching with colleagues, and collaborating with teachers who have similar interests and needs for professional growth.
- Prioritize time for teachers to work together to improve their craft through professional learning communities, opportunities to observe/be observed, and time to discuss and reflect on practice with teachers from the same content or grade level.
- Consider ways to measure teachers' contributions to student growth that more accurately reflect students' progress on important learning goals throughout the year, rather than focusing on results from a single standardized test.

- Use student assessment data as a trigger to identify areas in which further attention and support may be needed, rather than as a weighted percentage of the evaluation score.
- If standardized test scores are included in teacher evaluation, consider how to ensure fairness and accuracy as well as how much impact test scores should have in a teacher's overall evaluation score.
- Reconsider the fairness and accuracy of the current approach of using the school-wide average for tested subjects as the student-growth part of evaluation scores for teachers in nontested subjects.
- When student learning objectives or student growth objectives are used, ensure that evaluators are trained in the processes involved so they can provide guidance during the process and accurately assess outcomes.

State Teachers of the Year Responses to Survey and Focus Group Questions

Responses were collected through a survey of STOYs and focus group discussions with a subset of survey respondents. A total of 266 valid survey responses were collected, and 29 respondents participated in the focus groups (sample details are available in the full report). From the survey we found that:

- Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents perceived their evaluation system as focused primarily on "getting a score or rating" rather than on professional growth.
- Respondents were least confident (less than 20%) in the fairness of the use of standardized test scores and school-wide averages based on those scores as a component of their evaluation.
- Classroom observations were judged to be fair by 63% of survey respondents.
- Student learning objectives or other local assessment data was perceived as fair by 43% of respondents.
- Only 29% of respondents with recent classroom experience indicated that they received timely and relevant feedback that helps them meet the needs of students.
- Fewer than half of respondents (49%) indicated that their observers were well-trained in conducting classroom observations.
- Forty-four percent (44%) of respondents believed evaluators could meaningfully assess their teaching practice.
- Forty-six percent (46%) of respondents thought evaluators could provide useful feedback on their teaching practice.
- About half of the respondents never received feedback on lesson planning.
- Approximately two fifths of the respondents never received feedback on teaching specific to their content/subject matter.
- Seventy-seven percent (77%) of respondents indicated that they had opportunities to identify what they wanted to learn for professional growth.
- Only 31% of respondents reported that professional development opportunities are differentiated by teacher expertise or experience.

As part of the survey, several open-ended questions were presented which focused on what STOYs believed should stay the same or change for evaluation and support systems. These

themes were then further explored during the focus group discussions. From these data, several key findings emerged:

- There is a need to maintain or provide access to peers, coaches, and mentors for informal observations and feedback.
- STOYs requested more frequent opportunities to work with others teaching the same content or grade level through observing, being observed, and having focused discussions.
- There is a desire for greater opportunities to shape and structure professional learning activities, reducing the dependence on a one-size-fits-all professional development approach.
- There is a strong desire to remove the use of standardized test scores from the evaluation process, and to explore other mechanisms for determining teachers' contributions to student learning growth

The full report is available on the Wiley Online Library at
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ets2.12156/full

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RESEARCH REPORT

State of the States' Teacher Evaluation and Support Systems: A Perspective From Exemplary Teachers

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As states reconsider their current evaluation systems, stakeholders are offering their views about what revisions should be made to existing measures and processes. This report offers a unique perspective to these conversations by capturing and synthesizing the views of some of America's exemplary teachers: State Teachers of the Year (STOYs) and STOY finalists from every part of the country (hereafter referred to as STOYs). Given their recognition as effective practitioners and advocates, their involvement in policy-oriented discussions at various levels, and their overall impact on their respective educational environments, the experiences of STOYs with teacher evaluation and professional support systems provide a unique look into the myriad systems that are now being scrutinized. Accordingly, their insights and recommendations should serve to inform state and local discussions. An executive summary is available at https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-17-30_Executive_Summary.pdf.

Keywords Teacher evaluation; teacher support; teacher professional development; teacher evaluation measures; teacher observations; test scores in teacher evaluation; teacher evaluation policy

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is changing the landscape around teacher professional development and evaluation. Focused on giving states greater autonomy in determining accountability, assessment, teacher evaluation, and other education priorities, ESSA has created a window of opportunity for states to change aspects of their education systems to better suit local preferences. By reducing the federal role in how teacher evaluation is conducted, states will have an opportunity to reconsider their current teacher evaluation systems, including controversial aspects of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver system, such as a requirement to use student assessment results for teacher evaluation. Under ESSA, states are no longer required to consider student outcomes in teacher evaluation. As a part of ESSA, states will have opportunities to receive funding for ongoing professional opportunities for teachers. In this report, we consider what systems of support for teachers might look like and how professional opportunities could be aligned with evaluation systems.

Researchers and policy makers are also focusing on evaluation systems and considering aspects of these systems that may need to be adjusted. For example, the results of teacher evaluation processes are an area of continued discussion. Should evaluations be used primarily for supporting personnel decisions? Sartain and Steinberg (2016) found that a result of new evaluation systems may be to encourage the exit of teachers who received lower evaluation scores through self-selection. Similarly, Master (2014) found that mid-year evaluations were good predictors of subsequent end-of-year decisions on dismissal. Conversely, should evaluations be focused on teacher growth? Smylie (2014) contended that evaluation should be a mechanism for providing teachers with opportunities to improve their practice in response to evaluation processes. Perhaps evaluation systems should serve both purposes, as described by Hill and Herlihy (2011): "Reforms to the current quite cursory teacher evaluation system, if done well, have the potential to remove the worst-performing teachers and, even more important, to assist the majority in improving their craft" (p. 1).

In addition, it is not only teachers who have concerns about teacher evaluation. For example, a qualitative study of principals in the southeast focused on concerns and perceptions of the implementation of a new evaluation system (Derrington & Campbell, 2015). The principals in the study shared many of the same concerns as teachers have about

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evaluations, including how to balance the need to implement the evaluation processes with fidelity while managing their other responsibilities.

In the study reported herein, we asked the teachers who have been determined by their schools, districts, and states to be among the very best in their profession to weigh in on the purposes and processes of evaluation and support systems. For our questions, we chose to focus on the roles of, and intersections between, evaluation and professional learning and improvement. We also explored the measures and processes associated with both evaluation and professional support, including elements that are embraced by teachers and those that raised concerns. Their comments, and ultimately their recommendations, should be noted as states decide how — or whether — to rethink their current evaluation systems.

Council of Chief State School Officers Principles for Teacher Support Evaluation Systems

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2016) Principles for Teacher Support Evaluation Systems offered a framework to guide the revision of evaluation practices and provided direction for many of the questions posed for this report. The CCSSO Principles are organized into three domains: (a) integrate teacher support and evaluation into broader efforts to develop teaching practice and improve student learning; (b) drive continuous improvement of teaching practice; and (c) ensure the system is fair, credible, and transparent. Discussing and reflecting on the CCSSO Principles may be useful to states and stakeholders as they determine the future of their evaluation systems. Table 1 shows the domains with their related principles. In constructing the instruments and processes to capture views about teacher evaluation and support systems, we kept these principles in mind.

Exemplary Teachers

For this report, the nation's exemplary teachers were asked to share their views about teacher evaluation and support systems. The National Teacher of the Year (NTOY) program, run by CCSSO since 1952, recognizes and honors excellence in teaching. The NTOY is chosen from among the State Teachers of the Year (STOY) by a National Selection Committee consisting of representatives from major national education organizations. STOYs are selected in each of the 50 states, five U.S. extrastate jurisdictions, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. While the

Table 1 Council of Chief State School Officers Principles for Teacher Support and Evaluation Systems

Domain	Principle
1. Integrate teacher support and evaluation into broader efforts to develop teaching practice and improve student learning.	1A. Regularly communicate the purpose of teacher support and evaluation. 1B. Build teacher support and evaluation systems on clearly articulated standards for effective teaching practice. 1C. Connect teacher support and evaluation to all components of talent management, from preparation to career advancement. 1D. Align support and evaluation processes to student standards, curricula, and assessments. 1E. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of states, districts, and schools with regard to teacher support and evaluation systems.
2. Drive continuous improvement of teaching practice.	2A. Ensure support and evaluation is an ongoing process of providing teachers with frequent, action-oriented feedback connected to professional learning resources. 2B. Create structures for teachers to work in teams with school leaders to collaboratively set goals, create and/or select measures, and reflect on the progress towards goals. 2C. Build the skills of leaders to effectively implement teacher support and evaluation. 2D. Differentiate and tailor support and evaluation based on challenges teachers face in meeting the needs of students.
3. Ensure the system is fair, credible, and transparent.	3A. Engage educators in the development of the support and evaluation systems and in its continuous improvement. 3B. Use multiple, high-quality measures to create a comprehensive view of teaching practice, and balance those measures with professional judgment when assigning summative ratings. 3C. Ensure consistency and accuracy of evaluation data.

selection processes vary across states to identify each respective STOY, there is a thorough, rigorous selection procedure in place. All 57 of the STOYs participate in a year of professional learning opportunities through CCSSO to support their ability to be well-informed, well-spoken advocates for students across the nation.[1]

The National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) is a network of exemplary teachers that supports both those recognized as STOYs and those who are state-level finalists. The number of finalists varies by state. With the finalists having been recognized for excellence in teaching, NNSTOY provides opportunities for them to be trained in policy and advocacy. As such, this organization represents an important group of teacher leaders whose voices need to be heard regarding issues and practices around teacher evaluation and support.

Focus of This Report

Two primary questions of interest provide the focus for this report:

1. From the perspective of exemplary teachers (STOYs and finalists), what is the current state of the states with respect to teacher evaluation and support as viewed through the lens of the CCSSO Principles?
2. What examples of practice can we collect from the STOYs and finalists that exemplify the CCSSO Principles?

In the following sections, we first discuss the development and distribution of the survey, describe how the survey data were analyzed, and present the survey results. Then we describe the development of the themes for the focus groups, how those data were collected and analyzed, and the focus group results.

State Teacher of the Year Survey

Survey Development and Data Collection

Data collection was completed in several phases. During the first phase, the authors attended NTOY program meetings in January 2016 and May 2016 with the 2016 cohort of Teachers of the Year to discuss broadly teachers' experiences with teacher evaluation and support. At that time, the CCSSO Principles for Teacher Support and Evaluation Systems were shared with the 2016 STOYs and questions related to the principles were asked. Notes taken during the discussion were reviewed to help shape a set of survey questions. The survey had 6 background questions, 12 multiple-choice and Likert items, and 4 open-ended questions.

Subsequently, an online survey was shared with STOYs and finalists through two pathways. First, CCSSO sent it to the 56 STOYs for 2016 and followed up with two weekly reminders during the 3 weeks that the survey was open. Second, NNSTOY also sent out the survey and weekly reminders to its membership list, which includes STOYs and finalists from 1952 to 2015, totaling approximately 1,200 educators.

Survey Respondents

The survey data file contained 298 responses, which was a response rate of 24%. Thirty-two responses were blank beyond some very basic demographic information, leaving 266 valid responses. Our primary focus was on the respondents' commonality: their status as a current or former STOY. Therefore we did not ask respondents about their race/ethnicity, the number of years they had been teaching, their level of education, or information specific to their schools (e.g., poverty levels, rural or urban setting).

Of the 266 valid responses, 208 (78%) came from STOYs or NTOYs, and 58 (22%) came from finalists. All 50 states were represented by at least one respondent, together with three of the five U.S. extrastate jurisdictions, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. The earliest year in which a respondent was recognized as a STOY or a finalist was 1971, and more than half the respondents were recognized in the last 5 years. Table A1 in the Appendix provides the distribution of survey respondents by year of recognition. Respondents were asked to indicate the level at which they taught when they were recognized as a finalist or STOY, with the largest group being high school teachers (44%) and the smallest group being middle school teachers. Table A2 provides the details.

Given that the survey focused on teacher evaluation and professional support, which has undergone profound changes in most states in the past few years, we asked teachers about their most recent year of teaching experience. The majority of the valid survey responses (84%) came from teachers who have been in the classroom within the last 3 years (see Table

A3 for details). The 42 teachers (16%) who had not been teaching since 2012–2013 or earlier were routed to a subset of the survey questions. Given the focus of the survey on capturing teacher experiences with current systems of evaluation and professional support, we focus in what follows on results from the 224 responses provided by teachers who have had recent classroom experience (within 3 years). Such teachers have witnessed, and been affected by, changes in teacher evaluation and professional support systems over the years and are perhaps best positioned to provide feedback on this aspect of their professional experience. The survey respondents were assured of anonymity. All survey data are reported in the aggregate with the exception of quotations from open-ended responses, which are reported anonymously.

Survey Analysis

For the majority of survey questions, frequencies for each reporting category were calculated. Some of the questions required respondents to respond using a 5-point Likert scale. For analysis of these questions, we combined ratings 1 and 2 to report *negative* reactions to a question and ratings 4 and 5 to report *positive* reactions to a question, and we reported the percentages in each category.

The survey also contained four open-ended questions. Responses were reviewed and coded by one author, and then potential themes were reviewed and revised by the other authors. Both NVivo (qualitative software) and Excel (spreadsheet) were used for organizing and coding data. Multiple themes that emerged were sorted and eventually combined. For example, six different variants on "mentoring" were identified and coded in the open-ended responses for the question about what teachers would like to change in their evaluation systems. Five of these variants focused on the "use of mentors" were combined for purposes of summarizing responses. The sixth coded response focused on *supporting* mentors, which did not fit with the other variants. Also counted were the numbers of times statements were made that fit particular codes, and those with the largest counts are discussed in this report.

Survey Results

Results as reported in the following sections follow the order in which questions were asked on the survey, focusing first on teacher evaluation and then on professional support opportunities. Finally, we summarize the results to the four-opened questions that address what should be changed and what should stay the same, both in teacher evaluation and support systems.

Teacher Evaluation

Results regarding teacher evaluation processes across states are summarized from the 224 respondents who had recent classroom experience. Principle 3B (CCSSO, 2016) notes the importance of using multiple measures in an evaluation system, including evidence of student learning. Because of ESEA waiver requirements, most states included measures of student learning in their evaluation systems. From the original discussions conducted with the 2016 STOY cohort, there was a sense that the use of standardized test scores for purposes of evaluating teacher performance is of concern to most teachers.

The survey respondents were asked about the use of standardized test scores in their evaluation systems. For the group of 224 respondents who had taught within the last 3 years,

- 91 (41%) teach grade levels or subjects for which student scores on the state-level accountability assessment are used to determine value-added or student growth percentile scores as part of their teacher evaluation system
- 90 (40%) do not teach grade levels or subjects for which student scores on the state-level accountability assessment are used to determine value-added or student growth percentile scores as part of their teacher evaluation system
- 43 (19%) are in a state where student scores are not used as part of the accountability system

To understand what multiple measures are used, respondents were asked to indicate which components are part of their state teacher evaluation system, as shown in Table 2. Almost every respondent (96%) reported that his or her evaluation system includes a classroom observation component, with measures of teacher professionalism being the second most frequently reported component (81%). It should be noted that because a number of states permit districts some leeway in selecting evaluation systems and weighting components of those systems, rather than using a statewide system, it is possible that not all teachers are using (or are familiar with) every component.

Table 2 Components of Teacher Evaluation Systems

Component	*N*	%
Scores on state-level accountability assessments that are taken by all students in a grade/subject (usually mathematics and English language arts/reading)	110	49
Evidence of student growth, such as results from student learning objectives, student growth objectives, essential learning outcomes, or learning targets	152	68
School-wide average of student results on tested subjects used for teachers in nontested subjects	60	27
Classroom observations	215	96
Measures of teacher professionalism (e.g., contributions to the effectiveness of peers, engaging with parents, participating in professional growth activities)	182	81
Parent/guardian feedback (surveys or other)	29	13
Student feedback (surveys or other)	42	19
Measures of student social–emotional development	8	4
Other	27	12

If respondents selected other, they were asked to describe that component. A range of other measures were included, including the use of portfolios and district-wide assessments. The most frequent comment in other (9 of the 27 comments) pertained to teachers being able to set their own professional or learning goals and demonstrating that they met those goals.

Principle 3B (CCSSO, 2016) also specifies that multiple measures should be valid and reliable. For each component that was used in their state-level teacher evaluation system, we asked respondents to indicate their level of confidence in the fairness of the component, where we defined *fairness* to mean that the component accurately captured an important aspect of teaching. Respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 5 (*very confident*). In our analysis, we combined ratings 1 and 2 to report *lack of confidence* in a component and ratings 4 and 5 to report *confidence* in each component as shown in Figure 1, ordered by the measure with the least to greatest level of confidence. Note that the percentages are based on the number of responses for each component as shown in Table 2.

As shown in Figure 1, respondents were *least confident* in the fairness of standardized test scores and school-wide averages based on those scores. While there was most confidence in the fairness of classroom observations in accountability systems, even this received only 63% *confidence* among respondents.

We wanted to drill down further to explore teacher attitudes toward the use of standardized test data, regardless of whether and how such data are currently used in teacher evaluation across states. We also asked about the use of student survey data (i.e., surveys in which students are asked to "rate" their teachers on their classroom

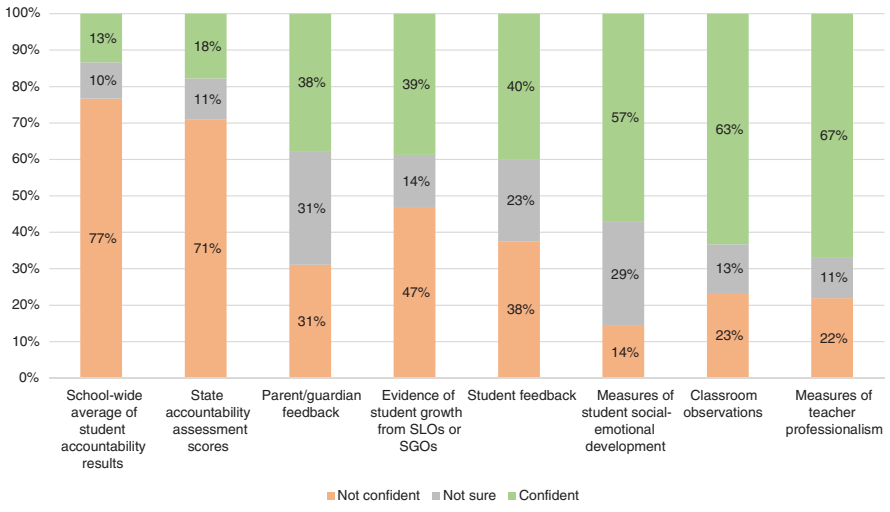

Figure 1 Confidence in the fairness of components of teacher evaluation systems.

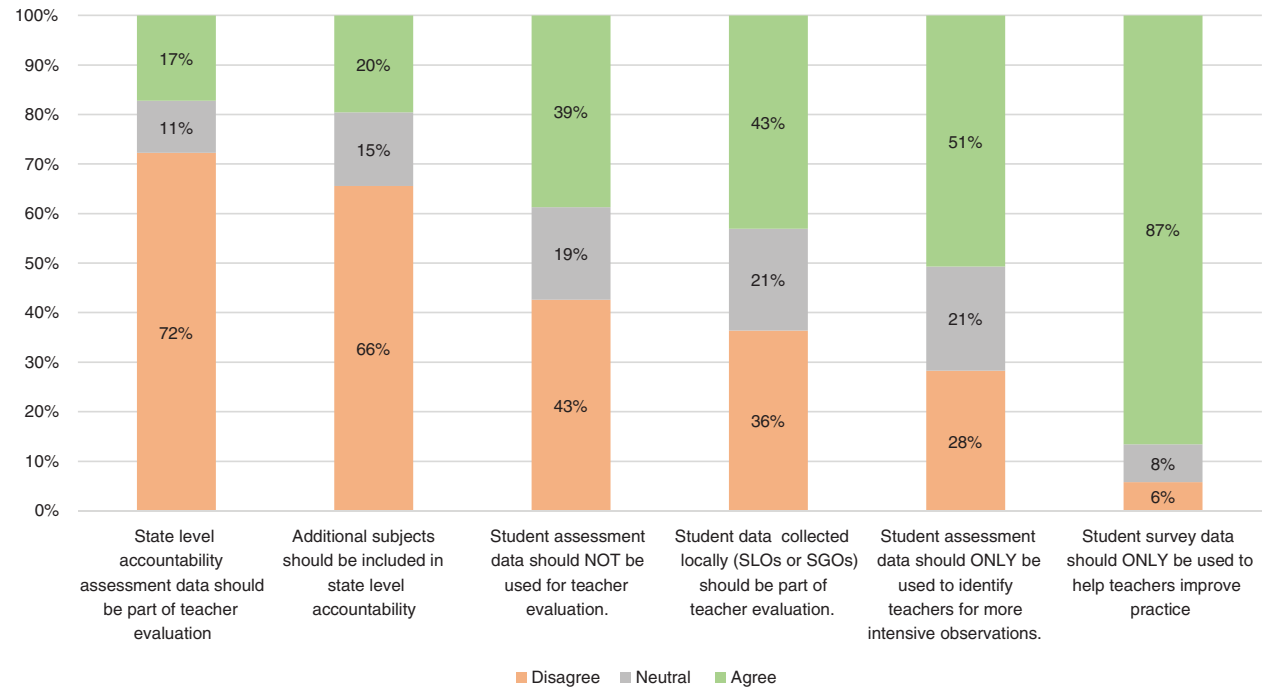

Figure 2 Teacher perceptions of the role of student data in teacher evaluation systems.

practices). Teachers responded again via a Likert scale to indicate agreement or disagreement with the following six statements:

- Student assessment data on state-level accountability assessments should be a part of teacher evaluation (for grades/content areas that are currently tested).
- Additional subjects should be included in student state-level accountability assessments so that the data can be used for more teachers' evaluations.
- Student data that are collected locally with student learning objectives (SLOs) or student growth objectives (SGOs; or other local approaches—different terms may be used) should be a part of teacher evaluation.
- Student assessment data should only be used as part of a trigger or signal to identify teachers for more intensive observations.
- Student assessment data should not be used in any way as part of teacher evaluation.
- If student survey data are collected, the information should be used to help teachers improve practice, not as part of teachers' evaluation scores.

The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In our analysis, we combined ratings of 1 or 2 to report *disagreement* with a statement and ratings of 4 or 5 to report *agreement* with each of the statements as shown in Figure 2.

Although the CCSSO Principles emphasize the importance of using evidence of student learning, there is not overwhelming support for ways in which this principle has been enacted in evaluation systems. While fewer than 20% of the respondents agreed with the use of results from student accountability assessments, more than twice that number (43%) agreed with the use of student data in the form of SLOs or other local assessment data. This suggests that although teachers surveyed are generally not in favor of standardized assessments as a component of their evaluation, they feel that other indicators of performance may be acceptable to demonstrate teachers' impact on student learning growth.

Just over half the respondents agreed that student data should only be used as a trigger for a more intensive set of observations of a teacher. The most strongly endorsed statement (80% agreement) was for the use of student *surveys* only for the purpose of helping teachers to improve practice.

Table 3 Comparisons of How Teacher Evaluation Data Are and Should Be Used

Area potentially impacted by teacher evaluation results	Currently used (%)	Should be used (%)
Identify individual teachers in need of coaching/support	72	97
Inform my understanding of my own professional learning needs	59	97
Inform district-wide and/or school-wide professional learning needs	42	92
Influence decisions about teaching assignments	39	76
Influence tenure decisions	48	67
Influence career advancement	33	71
Influence teacher leadership opportunities	36	81

Note. $N = 206$.

Table 4 Teacher Perceptions of the Purpose of Their Evaluation System

Purpose	*n*	%
To provide information to support teachers' professional growth	44	21
To generate a score or rating rather than emphasize professional learning	87	42
To focus on both professional growth and on determining a final score or rating	75	36

Note. $N = 206$.

One aspect of Principle 1E (CCSSO, 2016) addresses the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities in regard to teacher evaluation. From the survey, in terms of the *processes and procedures* used for teacher evaluation, 96% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were familiar with these aspects of their respective evaluation systems, 78% agreed or strongly agreed that their colleagues were familiar with them, and 82% agreed or strongly agreed that their principal (or others involved with evaluation) was familiar with them.

Principle 1C notes that teacher evaluation and support should be connected to all components of talent management. We wanted to better understand both how teacher evaluation information is currently used in school systems and how teachers think it should be used. Table 3 shows how the 206 teachers responded to these two questions.

Of particular interest in Table 3 is the gap for every area between how data are currently used and how respondents think they should be used, with a strong endorsement for each of the use options presented. For example, whereas one third of the respondents indicated that teacher evaluation data are used to influence career advancement, more than 70% endorsed the idea that teacher evaluation data *should* be used for this purpose.

Another question on the survey approached the issue of current data use by asking respondents to select which one of the three options best described the focus of their teacher evaluation systems. Table 4 summarizes the responses for the 206 respondents who answered this question.

It is encouraging to note from Table 4 that for 57% of respondents, their perception was that the purpose of the evaluation system was primarily (21%) or partly (36%) to support their professional growth. However, for the 42% who indicate that it is primarily about the generation of a score or rating, there is work to be done to make the process more meaningful.

Teacher Support Systems

The second section of the survey focused on the teacher support systems, which we defined as the range of professional support offered to teachers by a school and/or district, including coaching, mentoring, and all professional development or professional learning opportunities, which can include informal observations that result in formative feedback to the teacher. Principle 2D (CCSSO, 2016) in part addresses the importance of having teacher support that is differentiated and tailored to teacher needs. We wanted to understand how teacher evaluation was related to teacher support and learning opportunities and the degree to which it was differentiated and tailored. We asked first which kinds of opportunities were available to teachers in their schools (selecting all that applied), as reported in Table 5.

As expected, school-wide and district-organized professional development opportunities were the most common. The "Other" category included a range of school- or district-specific offerings, although new teacher mentoring/induction programs and book studies were listed by five and two respondents, respectively.

We wanted to understand how both the teacher evaluation and support systems help teachers understand best practices and how they measure up against those practices. We asked respondents via a Likert scale to indicate agreement or disagreement with the following three statements:

- The teacher *evaluation* system in my school/district helps teachers understand the kinds of best practices expected in the classroom.
- The teacher *support* system in my school/district helps teachers understand and implement best practices in the classroom.
- I receive relevant and timely feedback from the teacher support and evaluation system that helps me better meet the needs of students.

The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In our analysis, we combined ratings of 1 or 2 to report *disagreement* with a statement and ratings of 4 or 5 to report *agreement* with each of the statements, as shown in Figure 3.

Approximately one third of the respondents endorsed each of these three statements (shown in Figure 3), which focus on what should be communicated through the evaluation and support systems. These results echo the earlier finding that only 21% of respondents indicated their perception was that the focus of teacher evaluation was to provide information to support teachers' professional growth. The result that only 29% of respondents indicated that they received timely and relevant feedback is concerning. This finding may indicate that evaluation and support systems, as commonly implemented, often are not used in a manner that provides meaningful information to teachers to improve their practice and professional growth. As noted through the survey results, the challenges of time, resources, and overall capacity

Table 5 Types of Professional Development Opportunities Available

	n	%
Coaching	101	49
Professional learning community	138	67
Department or grade-level team organized	132	64
School-wide organized	174	84
District organized	175	85
Independent or self-directed	112	54
Lesson study	20	10
Informal classroom observations/feedback	95	46
Peer observations	71	34
Online professional learning curated or created by external provider	58	28
Other	15	7

Note. $N = 206$.

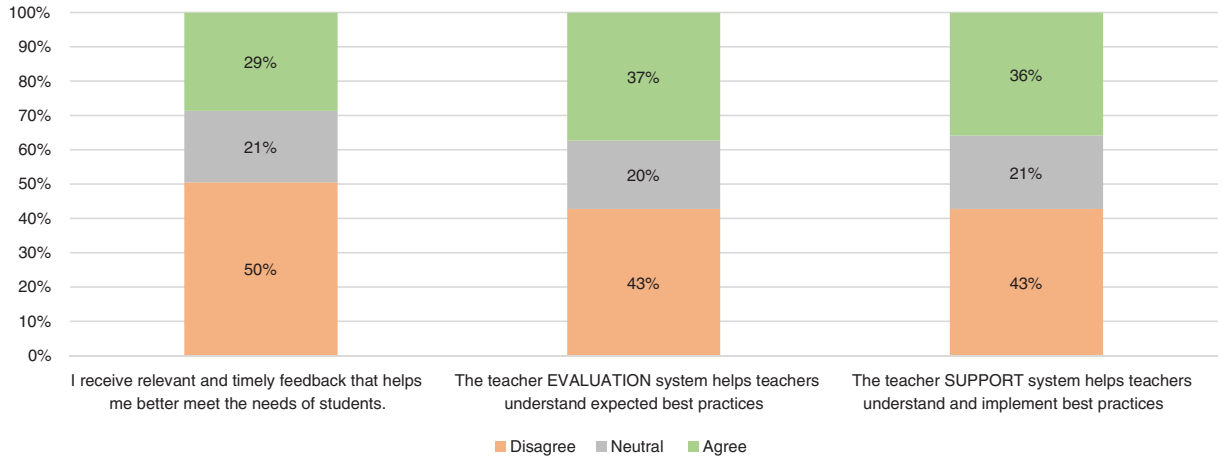

Figure 3 Perceptions of the impact of teacher evaluation and support.

Table 6 Role of Classroom Observations

	n	%
Never observed teaching	2	1
Not all teachers observed—depends on demonstrated proficiency level and/or tenure	12	6
Only observed for evaluation purposes	122	59
Only observed for professional development purposes	2	1
Observed for *both* evaluation and professional development purposes	68	33

Note. $N = 206$.

Table 7 Perceptions of Observers

	Only evaluation component[a] (%)			Professional development component[b] (%)		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Has experience in classroom teaching	17	8	76	4	4	91
Has teaching experience in my content area	71	7	22	64	9	28
Seems well trained in classroom observation	36	24	40	12	20	68
Meaningfully assesses my teaching practice	49	18	34	16	17	67
Distinguishes between stronger and weaker practice	39	21	40	9	17	74
Provides useful feedback regarding teaching content	65	16	19	32	19	49
Provides useful feedback regarding teaching practices	48	17	35	19	13	68
Identifies resources to support my professional growth	62	19	18	30	16	54

[a] $n = 119$. [b] $n = 69$.

of evaluators limit teachers' opportunity to receive information about their performance that can help them improve their craft.

We wanted to understand the role of classroom observation and the degree to which it was used for teacher support beyond teacher evaluation. Note from Table 2 that 96% of respondents indicated that observation was part of their evaluation. The results in Table 6 indicate that the majority of respondents (59%) are *only* observed for evaluation purposes and not for professional development.

Of the 122 respondents who reported in Table 6 being observed only for evaluation purposes, 119 provided information about their perceptions of their observers and feedback they received, as shown in on the left side of Table 7. Of the 70 respondents who indicated that they were *only* observed for professional development purposes, or for both evaluation and professional development, 69 responded to the question about their perceptions of their observers and feedback, as shown on the right side of Table 7.

For every row in Table 7, the subgroup of 69 who had a professional development component to observations responded more favorably than those who did not. From the data, we cannot tell whether creating the situation where the classroom observation has an explicit professional development component resulted in observers being viewed as more suited to the task (i.e., somewhat better trained and experienced in teaching similar grade/subject), and their feedback being then viewed as more useful, or whether having the explicit professional development component resulted in school or district administrators identifying more suitable observers and training them better, which led to better feedback. In other words, the causal mechanism of the results in Table 7 is not clear. Note, however, that there is a professional development component for only approximately one third of the respondents. Figure 4 illustrates the contrasting agreement rates for the two groups.

Notably, fewer than one third of respondents indicated that they received feedback from someone who had teaching experience in their content area, which implies that feedback may necessarily focus on general instructional strategies and classroom management rather than on more focused pedagogical supports specific to a particular content area. This issue is further explored in Table 9.

In most states, only principals and assistant principals are authorized to conduct formal evaluations, but in many states, formative feedback may be provided by a broader range of school and district staff as well as by parents and students. In the survey, we also asked about feedback more generally to understand who else in school communities provided teachers with feedback that could go beyond observations, as reported in Table 8.

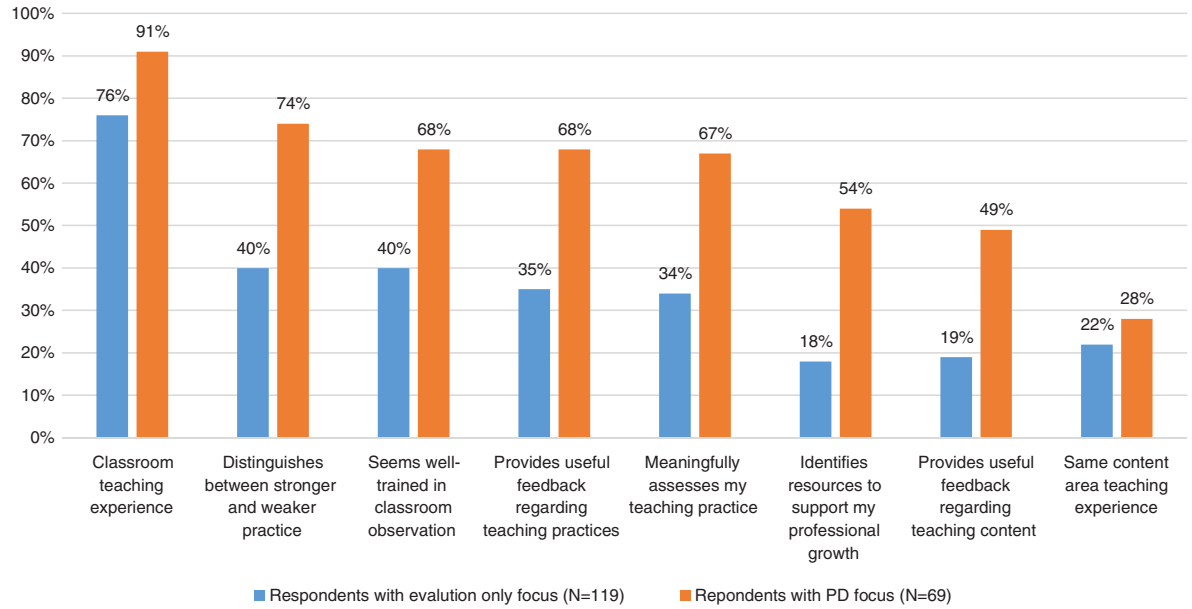

Figure 4 Contrasting agreement rates for respondents whose observations only had an evaluation focus ($n = 119$) and those for whom classroom observations contain a professional development (PD) component ($n = 69$).

Table 8 Providers of Feedback

Source of feedback	*n*	%
Principal/assistant principal	170	85
Department chair	29	15
Grade-level team lead	12	6
Instructional coach	32	16
Mentor	12	6
Teacher peer	66	33
Students	77	39
Parents	5	3
Others	14	7

Note. $N = 199$.

Table 9 Focus and Frequency of Feedback

	Never		1–2 times/year		3–4 times/year		At least monthly		At least weekly	
Feedback type	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Lesson planning	104	52	61	30	17	8	15	7	4	2
Classroom management	41	20	114	57	32	16	13	6	1	0
Teaching practices	31	15	107	53	43	21	19	9	1	0
Content/subject knowledge	84	42	72	36	26	13	16	8	3	1
Communication with parents/guardians	66	33	88	44	31	15	14	7	2	1

Note. $N = 201$.

As expected, Table 8 illustrates that the most common providers of feedback are principals and assistant principals. One third of respondents, however, indicated that they get feedback from teacher peers, which was more than the proportion who get feedback from either department chairs (15%) or instructional coaches (16%). It is interesting that the second most common source of feedback was students, as indicated by 39% of respondents.

We also wanted to understand the focus and frequency of evaluation feedback, as shown in Table 9. Approximately half the respondents never received feedback on lesson planning, and approximately two fifths never received feedback on their content/subject knowledge.

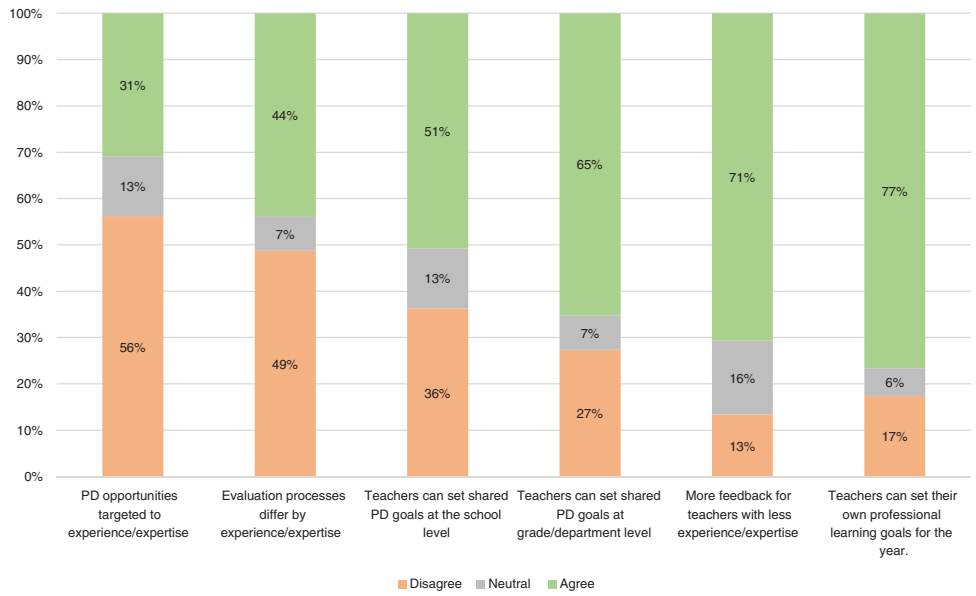

Figure 5 Teachers' perceptions of differentiation for feedback, professional development, and teacher evaluations.

As Table 9 shows, regardless of the focus of the feedback, respondents were most likely to get feedback one to two times per year rather than more frequently, with fewer than 10% of respondents getting feedback on any topic more frequently than monthly. On the basis of these results, it appears that there are many challenges inherent in implementing a teacher support system that is professionally valuable and meaningful to practitioners.

The final question in this section of the survey focused on teachers' responses to a series of statements about how feedback, professional development, and evaluation are conducted in their schools. They were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the following statements:

- Teachers with less experience/expertise tend to get more feedback than more experienced/expert teachers.
- Professional development/teacher support opportunities are targeted for teachers with differing levels of experience/expertise.
- Teacher evaluation processes differ for teachers according to teachers' levels of experience/expertise.
- Teachers have the opportunities to set their own professional learning goals for the year.
- Teachers have the opportunities to set shared professional learning goals with their colleagues at the grade or department level for the year.
- Teachers have the opportunities to set/inform shared professional learning goals with their colleagues at the school level for the year.

The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In our analysis, we combined ratings of 1 or 2 to report *disagreement* with a statement and ratings of 4 or 5 to report *agreement* with each of the statements, as shown in Figure 5.

Results shown in Figure 5 suggest some of the struggles for schools around teacher professional development. Figure 5 suggests that teachers are having greater opportunities to identify *what* they want to learn, whether on their own (77%), at the grade/department level (65%), or at the school level (51%). The goal-setting practices, however, may not be fully translating to implementations that support those goals, because only 31% of respondents agreed that the professional development opportunities are differentiated by teacher expertise and/or experience.

Open-Ended Responses

In the survey, teachers were given an opportunity to respond to four open-ended questions about what they would like to see changed in their current teacher *evaluation* systems and what they would like to see stay the same. They were also asked what they would like to see changed in their teacher *support* systems and what they would like to see stay the same.

All comments to these questions were reviewed and analyzed, regardless of when respondents had most recently taught. There were comments from 234 respondents, 84% ($n = 197$) of whom had taught within the last 3 years. Following are the summaries of the main ideas that emerged from the review of these data. On the basis of a review of the surveys submitted during the first week that the survey was open, themes that were most often stated by teachers then became the key areas that were probed during the focus groups.

It is worth noting that the respondents wrote almost twice as much in response to the two questions about what should be changed in current systems (17,224 words) compared to what should stay the same (8,228 words).

Aspects of Current Practice in Teacher Evaluation and Support That Should Stay the Same

There were 234 comments in response to the two questions that focused on what should be kept the same in the respondents' current teacher evaluation systems and current teacher support systems. Emerging themes overlapped across the two questions, so themes are reported for them together rather than separately. Of this set of comments, approximately 7% indicated either that teachers were unsure or that there was nothing or very little about their current systems that should stay the same. Other teachers indicated a specific aspect of practice that they thought was important, while also indicating that it was the *only* aspect of practice that they wanted to see stay the same. Six key ideas were identified in this set of responses, but it is worth noting that no respondent mentioned all the themes in his or her answers: (a) classroom observations; (b) the role of peers, coaches, and mentors; (c) personalization; (d) standards and rubrics; (e) school-based professional learning communities; and (f) student assessment. The themes are described in the following sections.

Classroom Observations

The most frequently coded category focused on the importance of continuing classroom observations, for both teacher evaluation and professional development, with a total of 67 comments. Both formal and informal observations and walk-throughs were mentioned, and often in conjunction with the value of the conversations and feedback associated with those observations. Many of the comments addressed the frequency of observations, with most expressing a desire for more, particularly informal observations and walk-throughs. One teacher noted,

> I do like being observed and getting feedback. I just wish it was more frequent rather than a "snapshot" of my teaching. Currently, observations feel analogous to "Snapchat" where you see a very small sample that somehow is supposed to represent the breadth of my teaching ability, style, etc.

Tightly tied to the importance of feedback was the idea that these observations were valuable when they were informal and that nonevaluative coaches or peers were involved. As one respondent noted, "more and more teachers are opening up their classrooms and practices to colleagues so they can learn and grow with each other."

Even so, there were some concerns about how the observation process plays out in practice, either with respect to time or training of the evaluators. One respondent noted the challenge of the assistant principal having so many observations to conduct that the process was becoming meaningless:

> [W]ith so many teachers and increased observations, the [assistant principals] don't have the time or take the time to understand how it is to be done. All teachers get the same or similar comments … . It does not appear to be applied evenly.

One respondent mentioned the level of training that evaluators in their state completed, but this seemed to be an exception rather than a rule:

> Currently, an evaluator must complete a 3-day training, pass a credentialing assessment, and renew that credential every 2 years. I think this training and calibration is important so that the evaluations are done with fidelity.

The Role of Peers, Coaches, and Mentors

A significant number of comments ($n = 39$) were provided from the respondents about the importance of having access to coaches, mentors, and peers for feedback and support. Whereas some of the comments concerned the kind of professional

support provided for new teachers in their schools, many were focused on the respondents' desire for continued growth and development through these resources, particularly peer observation. One specific model provided was that of "in-house literacy coaching done by a colleague who teaches half time and coaches half time."

Personalization

The importance of personalization came up in two distinct contexts with a total of 36 comments. Thirty comments were related to setting personalized goals as part of evaluation, at both the individual and departmental levels. Across the board this was valued, but no specific concerns were mentioned. Personalization was also mentioned (although only six times) in relation to professional development and the ability to tailor or customize learning opportunities. Although few details were provided, personalization is clearly valued. Judging by the limited number of comments, however, personalization is also underutilized.

Standards and Rubrics

There were 32 comments from the respondents about the ways in which they appreciated the use of standards or rubrics that helped them understand what high-quality teaching practice looked like. Although there were multiple references to both the Danielson framework and the Marzano teacher evaluation model, state-specific standards and frameworks were also mentioned. Respondents appreciated the role of the various standards and rubrics "that can be used to identify areas of strength and growth" and how "it opens up many conversations."

School-Based Professional Learning Communities

Thirty respondents commented on the importance of their school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) as a mechanism for providing support and feedback on instructional practices and other aspects of their work. The PLCs are viewed as an opportunity to provide collegiality and as a way in which a group of teachers can personalize their learning. In some instances, learning communities have been created without school or district support to fill a specific need. As one respondent noted, "teachers helping teachers has arose [*sic*] due to the vacuum of any other real support, and it has been authentic and beneficial." Even with school or district support, PLCs and efforts to foster greater teacher collaboration often come with time and logistical challenges. As one teacher indicated, PLC work cannot always be "jammed into a late start Wednesday." Once time has been set aside, another challenge is to protect that time:

> The move to PLCs was positive but we were never given adequate time to meet our goals. Instead, admin cut into our PLC time with faculty updates, meetings, and extraneous details that prevented us from fully realizing the allotted time for [professional development].

Overall, comments from participants suggest that while PLCs are being used in many places, they may be underused or poorly structured, with potential still to be realized. To emphasize this sentiment, one respondent commented, "The power of teachers together, with time? It's mind-blowing and worth every penny."

Student Assessment

The smallest theme identified (with 15 comments) focused on the role of student assessment, primarily in the context of the use of SLOs or SGOs as part of the teacher evaluation system. One respondent, however, commented on the use of common student assessments as fodder for discussion in his PLCs. One concern identified was the weight that the SLO carried within the overall teacher evaluation, whereas another respondent noted that she still needed additional support to have "better developed and realistic" SLOs.

Aspects of Current Practice in Teacher Evaluation That Should Change

In the survey, we asked teachers, "What do you think should be changed about your teacher evaluation system?" We received 234 responses, out of which 4 responded that nothing should be changed, and the same number were nonresponsive or unclear. The survey responses were sorted and analyzed, yielding several key themes.

Standardized Test Scores Should Not Be Used in Teacher Evaluation

The most frequent response to the question of what needed to change, from 48 respondents, focused on the use of test scores in teacher evaluation. As one teacher, focusing on the validity of their use, stated, "using any state or professionally developed standardized testing as part of teacher evaluation, in either a direct or indirect manner, should change, since these tests were not designed to evaluate teachers and are therefore not a valid measure." Another teacher offered a different take on test scores:

> I love the idea of state testing being used merely as information (with no penalty attached) that aids administrators in focusing on teachers who appear to need more professional development and on teachers who demonstrate excellence and potential leadership. Of course, even then, those scores are only one chapter in the book … not the whole story.

Focus on Professional Growth and Improving Practice

The second most common response, from 45 respondents, indicated that growth rather than the evaluation "score" should be the focus of the evaluation. One teacher stated simply, "Teachers should be evaluated based upon their personal and professional growth." Another noted, "I would like the opportunity to pick my own learning targets and show personal growth toward that goal."

Improved Administrator Training

This third theme was expressed by 37 respondents. They expressed concerns that their evaluators (usually principals or assistant principals) were not as knowledgeable about the evaluation system as they should be and lacked recent and relevant classroom teaching experience. Respondents stated that "evaluators should have been expert teachers [themselves]." Furthermore, respondents raised the issue of observers having insufficient knowledge to provide feedback across a range of grade levels, noting that "the majority of administrators do not have the experience or knowledge to evaluate differing grade levels." One teacher commented, "The best and most meaningful observation I've ever had came from a district supervisor who could offer feedback and perspective on content as well as pedagogy."

Meaningful Feedback From Observations

Thirty-four respondents provided comments related to feedback. Teachers want feedback that will help them make adjustments to their practice or help them determine areas for growth, and they especially want feedback from those conducting their evaluations. One teacher noted, "Our observations need to provide the opportunity for targeted, constructive conversations and opportunities to grow in our practice." Teachers also welcome feedback from other stakeholders in the education process: "We need more feedback from colleagues, students, parents." Time to engage in conversations, however, may limit the opportunity to receive feedback: "I believe my principal has the skills to provide high-quality feedback, but is not able due to time constraints."

Peer Observations and Formative Feedback

The value of peers for providing formative feedback was raised by 27 respondents. Teachers were not necessarily suggesting that these observations should be part of their evaluation score and several times explicitly said that it should not be part of the evaluation process. Instead, they were focused on what they could learn from their peers. A teacher noted, "There should be peer observations or observations done by trained mentors so that helpful feedback can be provided to teachers about their practice and their content." Another teacher would like to see "[a]dditional nonevaluative opportunities for observation, feedback, and opportunity to enhance practice without the pressure of evaluation."

Other Categories

Other areas for change that were mentioned in responses by 10 or more teachers include the following:

- Evaluation systems take too much of principals' time, and the paperwork and processes may be a burden on both principals and teachers (17 responses).

- Observations should be more frequent and accompanied by feedback (16 responses).
- Evaluation processes should be differentiated for experienced or accomplished teachers and new or struggling teaches (12 responses).
- Evaluation systems should not be punitive (11 responses).

Responses from multiple teachers, but fewer than 10, included the following:

- A 360-degree evaluation should be conducted which includes multiple observers (including peers and coaches) and input from parents and students (nine responses).
- Evaluators are not always sufficiently calibrated (in agreement) about scoring, resulting in different results, depending on which evaluator conducts the observation (eight responses).

Aspects of Current Practice in Teacher Support That Should Change

In the survey, we asked teachers, "What do you think should be changed about your teacher support system?" We received 234 responses, out of which 10 responded that nothing should be changed and 30 were nonresponsive, off topic, or unclear. The high number of off-topic responses fall mostly into two areas: (a) responses that are focused on the teacher *evaluation* system rather than the *support* system and (b) responses that appear to result from limited understanding of what a teacher *support* system is. This is supported to some extent by the surprising number of teachers ($n = 13$) who indicated that they had *no* teacher support system in their school/district.

Relevant, Differentiated, and Individualized Professional Development

The most frequent comments (59 respondents) focused on professional development. As one teacher put it, "move away from building/district level one-size-fits-all staff development and have support systems tailored to my individual needs." Another teacher stated, "Each discipline should be able to plan the professional development that they feel would benefit them the most." Teachers were generally critical of professional development offerings, feeling that they were not always relevant to their practice. As one teacher put it, "often [teachers] must sit through PD that is perceived as totally irrelevant to anything that they do as a teacher."

Greater Access to Coaches and Mentors

The second most common response, from 53 respondents, focused on the need for coaching and mentoring. Not surprisingly, some teachers indicated that new or struggling teachers should receive mentoring, but many teachers also pointed out that teachers at every stage in their career can benefit from the formative feedback that is at the heart of the coaching and mentoring. One teacher stated that "peer coaching, instructional coaches, and a more formal mentoring program for new teachers and those in need of assistance would be a very positive addition to our school." Another teacher stated, "I would like to see a better teacher mentor program district-wide as well as more opportunities for peer observations and collaboration."

Opportunities to Participate in Peer Review

The third most common topic, from 33 respondents, indicated that teachers valued opportunities to work with their peers, learning through the process of observing their colleagues and providing feedback or being observed and receiving feedback from their peers. As one teacher noted, "the value of observing others and receiving feedback from other teachers, particularly those who may know the students directly, is unmatched. This allows all teachers, regardless of their years of experience, the opportunity to continually grow and learn." It is notable that the teacher pointed out that this professional support mechanism is appropriate for teachers at every level of experience.

Collaboration Opportunities

The fourth most common response (from 32 respondents) focused on teachers' desire to work collaboratively with peers, particularly in grade-level or content teams. Some teachers referred to these as PLCs and described them as opportunities

to learn from each other. As one teacher succinctly put it, "teachers need more opportunity to support each other through peer observation and collaboration." Another teacher stated, "I would like to have more time to engage with other teachers, observe and be observed, and in general to be respected as professionals by giving us time to plan and reflect together." Furthermore, this teacher indicated that feedback was key to growth through collaboration: "[We need] more feedback from more sources. PLCs are critical but nothing replaces the non-threatening observation and reflection from a cohort."

Roles for Teacher Leaders

Some teachers (14 respondents) expressed the view that administrators and other formal school leaders were not necessarily the most qualified and effective for providing support. Instead, teacher leaders should be given support responsibilities and provided with release time to provide support. A teacher recommended, "Let's use experienced highly skilled teachers as coaches and mentors. Create teacher leader opportunities around supporting other teachers." Another teacher commented that "support should be provided by current in-the-classroom teachers, even if this requires modifying positions to partial-day assignments with dual role responsibilities."

Other areas for change that were mentioned in multiple responses included to (a) seek teacher input to determine focus for professional development (nine responses) and to (b) consider teacher-led staff development to take advantage of in-school talent (seven responses).

Across the set of four open-ended questions, ideas expressed had significant overlap. Respondents wrote about the importance of maintaining access to peers, coaches, and mentors for informal observations and feedback if that was a feature of their current systems. They also expressed the same idea in terms of what needed to be added to systems for which peer observations and coaching were not currently features. Teachers expressed a desire to observe teachers in their content areas and/or grade levels and to be observed by them. These exchanges would allow them to get feedback from teachers who understand their grade levels or content and also to learn new ideas and strategies related to what they teach. Similarly, appreciation for personalization was echoed by requests for more opportunities to shape and structure professional learning activities. Across the responses, there appears to be a desire among teachers to reduce one-size-fits-all professional development and increase support for professional growth that focuses more on working together as peers, coaches, mentors, and colleagues. The role of student assessment data was addressed in responses to the questions both about what to change and what to keep the same. The most frequent comment about what should change focused on removing the use of standardized test scores in evaluation. In terms of what should stay the same, there was interest in continuing to use SLOs, although concerns were expressed about how they are implemented and used.

State Teacher of the Year Responses to Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Development and Data Collection

Three question area themes were identified from the open-ended survey responses and were used to guide discussion. The first question focused on ways to facilitate teachers receiving more meaningful feedback. Discussion centered on the need to create shared understandings of the purposes and processes of teacher evaluation and to maintain a focus on professional growth, not just evaluation. Respondents noted that to get feedback from knowledgeable evaluators would require setting up processes for teachers to receive formative feedback from peers and teacher leaders. There was also support for PLCs to help teachers process and learn from feedback. Finally, respondents suggested that schools and districts must invest sufficient time and resources into supporting meaningful feedback.

The second round of discussion focused on practical ways to support meaningful growth for teachers. Discussion focused on how schools can provide opportunities for teacher reflection and on the role of peers in supporting the provision of meaningful feedback. Participants recognized the importance of balancing support for teacher autonomy with the need for collaboration.

The final discussion focused on ways for teachers to demonstrate impact on student learning. There was a desire to shift from a sanctions-based approach to one that encourages the use of multiple data sources to identify challenges, followed by supports provided to remediate those areas. Similar to the trends in the survey, there was more interest in the use of localized assessment measures and a broader inclusion of feedback from other stakeholders.

Survey participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in a virtual focus group, and those who responded affirmatively were routed to a section where they could provide their names and e-mail addresses and indicate their availability for any or all of the six previously scheduled dates/times for focus group calls.

Six focus groups were conducted by the authors over a 2-week period in August 2016, scheduled for varying days and times to maximize participation across time zones and to accommodate teachers who may have already started back to school. Two authors participated in each focus group, one to ask questions and one to capture responses; the resulting notes then became the key resource for analyzing each theme. Participants in the focus groups were assured of anonymity. No participant names or states are associated with any specific responses from the focus groups.

Focus Group Respondents

A total of 112 teachers who had taught during the previous 3 school years indicated interest in participating in postsurvey focus groups and provided contact information for this purpose. For each session, those who were available and had not been previously invited to a session were identified, and nine were randomly selected to participate from this list. For some sessions, additional names were identified if not enough participants responded from initial contacts or if contacts had declined an invitation but indicated willingness to participate in a later session. Across the six sessions, 54 survey respondents were invited to participate, assuming that not everyone would be available for the session. We hoped for six participants per session to get a variety of opinions while still allowing for enough time for each participant to respond to the questions. The final pool of focus group participants included 29 teachers from all levels (11 elementary, 6 middle school, and 12 high school) from 16 states across all regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West). The participants were STOYs and finalists from 2000 through 2016.

Focus Group Analysis

Three issues were identified from the first week of responses to the open-ended questions, which resulted in three focus group questions:

1. Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what structures and supports are needed in your current evaluation and/or professional support system to ensure that teachers receive feedback that is meaningful and relevant?
2. Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what would be needed in your current evaluation and support system to ensure that teachers have what they need to pursue meaningful professional growth, based on evaluation results and/or self-reflection, either as part of the evaluation or not?
3. Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what would be a viable way to accurately show that teachers are contributing to student learning?

The responses from each of the six focus groups were organized by question, creating three separate documents. Two of the authors took the lead to review the responses to each particular question, reviewing responses across the six focus groups. They identified ideas that came up repeatedly and grouped comments by those key ideas. Their notes, together with the original set of responses for a question, were reviewed again by the other authors, and additional combining of key ideas was completed.

Focus Group Results

In the sections that follow, we present the themes identified by a review of the focus group comments for each of the three questions presented during the six focus groups.

Question 1: How Can We Ensure That Teachers Receive Meaningful and Relevant Feedback?

The first question asked in each focus group session was, "Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what structures and supports are needed in your current evaluation and/or professional support system to ensure that teachers receive feedback that is meaningful and relevant?"

The desire for more frequent and higher quality feedback came through strongly in the open-ended survey questions. Those responses also highlighted the challenges that prevented this from happening, including overburdened principals

and lack of subject-matter or grade-band expertise in their observers. In this first focus group question, we wanted to hear about respondents' experiences and ideas about how to modify structures and supports within their schools for both evaluation and professional support systems to ensure that teachers receive feedback that is meaningful and relevant. Respondents talked in detail about the importance of feedback, the role of peers, and ways to engage peers in learning together.

Before getting to specific ideas, the focus group respondents first confirmed that this was an important issue to them, and there was overwhelming consistency in the responses from these exemplary teachers as they confirmed that receiving meaningful, timely, and relevant feedback is vital to a successful evaluation and professional support plan. They also reinforced that this is very challenging to do in terms of both timing and quality. Participants in the focus groups shared examples of getting feedback late in the year as well as frustration at feedback that was either insufficiently vague or too directive. Such an approach to feedback often does not leave room for teachers to plan how to address the issues. Lack of familiarity with the evaluation system and lack of consistency between observers were also cited as critical issues. Participants then identified eight supports and structures that are needed to ensure that the feedback they receive is meaningful and relevant. Each area is discussed in turn, with supporting quotations from the focus groups.

Establish Clear Timelines in Advance

One strategy participants in the focus groups suggested was that there should be a clear, predetermined timeline that would outline each step of the process and associated time frame. The timeline would act as a summary of the process and include information on preobservation and/or postobservation conference availability as well as when feedback would be provided and discussed. The timeline was seen as a way of holding people accountable. Specific suggestions were provided, such as deliberately conducting observations of lessons that are followed by a free period to allow time for immediate feedback or the use of substitute teachers to cover the teacher's class immediately after an observation to allow for the ensuing discussion.

Teachers and Staff Must Be in Alignment on the Process

In addition to needing clear timelines, participants also suggested a need for improved communication about the evaluation process itself. One participant noted that often, "only the administrators are trained; teachers don't even know what it is. Training needs to include teachers, not just evaluators." Another suggested, "Make sure the evaluation system is well communicated to all staff and teachers. People need to know what they are being evaluated on." Given that coaches and other supporting staff also have an important role to play in providing feedback, it is also important that they have sufficient training on the observation framework. Furthermore, for those who are involved in making high-stakes judgments, it is critical that there be a process for ensuring that they are applying rubrics with fidelity after the training has been completed.

Evaluative Feedback Should Come From a Highly Trained and Knowledgeable Evaluator

Respondents again reinforced the importance of having an observer who is knowledgeable about the evaluation system and process, and particularly for new administrators to receive training. One participant stated, "We need flexible pathways for administrators to get training so that when it comes time for evaluation they aren't just checking off a list, but providing feedback that is meaningful and accurate and supports teacher growth." There was also a strong desire for administrators to be better trained in individual teachers' content areas. Although no focus group participants directly addressed the practical difficulties of having administrators be content experts in every subject area in their schools, this may explain another important theme regarding the role that peers could play in providing feedback.

Peer Involvement

Teachers also indicated an overwhelming support for peer involvement in an evaluation, growth, and development plan. One teacher suggested, "There needs to be designated release time for each and every teacher to go and observe other teachers and provide feedback and learn as well." One dilemma, however, is whether peer involvement should just be in the form of feedback and formative support for growth or also for evaluative purposes. In this regard, there was general

consensus that peer observations should not be part of a formal evaluation. As one participant expressed, "evaluation and coaching shouldn't be used together. Coaching and evaluation piece needs to be separated. [The] best coaching comes from someone who is closest to you in content and subject."

Effective Use of Teacher Leaders

Focus group participants recommended empowering teachers to become leaders who can provide professional support within their schools and districts through coaching and mentoring roles. They thought that coaches should not be in the role of evaluators but that an ideal situation would be to have an evaluator and a coach working in tandem. Creating opportunities for teachers to teach part-time and coach part-time within their grade levels would be beneficial, ensuring that the best teachers stay in the classroom and continue improving their craft. One teacher noted, "Some of the best coaching models have coaches who both team teach and model lessons instead of just observing/evaluating. Our improved test scores showed this made a difference."

Professional Learning Communities

Participants described some of the ways teachers worked together in PLCs, including projecting videos of teachers that are best at a certain practice so others can learn from example, doing curriculum mapping in preparation for standardized testing, working together to prepare for teacher evaluation, and looking at data collaboratively.

Growth, Not Just Evaluation

Respondents were clear that a teacher evaluation and development plan must focus on both evaluation *and* growth. They asserted that evaluation is supposed to be a support system and so should focus more on feedback for growth rather than on the evaluation score. Evaluation should enhance teachers' craft as well as enhance student learning. The role of administrators in providing feedback is critical, and their evaluations should provide substance to guide teachers' growth. Some participants, however, commented that principals and administrators are often overwhelmed and have little time for providing feedback to contribute to teachers' growth. One participant pointed out that he once had a principal whose main job was evaluating and providing feedback—an ideal situation.

Time

Finally, teachers indicated that a significant investment in *time*, a very precious and costly commodity, is required. The time to observe other teachers and be observed, and in turn give feedback and receive feedback, is seen as very important. Multiple focus group participants, however, noted that no time was provided for these activities. Teachers asked, "How do you embed the time in an already busy day?" Participants recommended a range of approaches, including some type of release time, particularly for those teachers who are serving as peer coaches. In fact, designated release time for each and every teacher to observe other teachers, provide feedback, and learn in a collaborative fashion would be ideal. In addition, time for teachers and evaluators to discuss observations should be built in to the evaluation schedule. Exemplary teachers clearly believe that *time* is a significant part of the solution. The question remains how to allocate it efficiently and provide the necessary financial support. This is certainly a question that policy makers who express a desire to raise teacher quality will need to answer as states contend with potential changes to teacher evaluation and support systems.

Question 2: How Can We Support Meaningful Professional Growth for Teachers?

The second question asked in each focus group session was, "Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what would be needed in your current evaluation and support system to ensure that teachers have what they need to pursue meaningful professional growth, based on evaluation results and/or self-reflection, either as part of the evaluation or not?"

Five areas were identified in this analysis: the need for opportunities for reflection, the importance of meaningful feedback, the critical role of teacher autonomy, the importance of school culture, and the role of collaboration. Each area is discussed in turn, with supporting quotations from the focus groups.

Opportunities for Reflection

Participants emphasized the significance of self-reflection as an element of evaluation and professional growth. Meaningful self-reflection, however, must be intentional and deliberate and may need to have a formalized structure. On more than one occasion, participants referred to the systematic self-reflection practices that are integral to the National Board certification process. Self-reflection can be particularly valuable if it is used to inform professional development activities. One participant reflected on the role that standards can play as one way to structure and support reflection: "Teachers need modeling and opportunities to reflect. If you have standards to reflect on and a continuum of improvement, you can chart a more accurate course for the future."

Role of Peers

Some teachers noted that when evaluators do not have content or grade-level background and expertise, observations conducted by colleagues with the same pedagogical training and experience as the teachers being observed might be helpful to support professional growth. As one teacher noted,

> Most principals don't have enough expertise in enough areas to apply that information on learning. But if teachers in same field or area could observe as you are approaching the learning, having the second pair of eyes on you, then as you look at test scores and it is not showing up — having the extra set of eyes who knows the curriculum, how to check for understanding, and more than just your evaluation because you go back the next year and teach that same content.

Focusing on formative observations with feedback may provide teachers with the content-based, grade-level-appropriate feedback that teachers desire, allowing them to focus on areas for instructional improvement.

Meaningful Feedback

As related to the previous question, an idea that was brought up in response to this question was the importance of meaningful feedback to guide and inform reflection and next steps for professional development. Often evaluation feedback is not personalized or relevant because many administrators are overwhelmed with numerous other aspects of their jobs that often preclude them from spending the necessary time and having the meaningful conversations that will contribute to the ongoing professional growth of their teachers. In other words, one of the most important components of educational leadership — offering guidance, support, advice, and encouragement and playing a significant role in the professional development of one's staff — is often undermined by the managerial elements of the job. The idea that the principal cannot be the sole provider of feedback, from both a time and expertise perspective, was echoed again in responses to this question, together with suggestions for involving others in the process:

> Having specialists in buildings to support classroom teachers can make a big difference. That would help me be successful in my professional growth. I get a score (1 – 4) tied to how my kids do based on my goals, which can penalize people for choosing lofty goals. We learn from mistakes; we need to be honored as lifelong learners to grow.

Teacher Autonomy

Not only did teachers desire opportunities for meaningful self-reflection but they also reinforced the importance in determining what professional development opportunities they would then need to build on individual self-reflection. Teacher autonomy and choice related to evaluation components and professional development activities were strong sentiments the participants expressed. These sentiments point to teachers' desire to have greater control over the evaluation process and a higher degree of autonomy when it comes to selecting the elements of their practice that best represent their performance and growth. Similarly, the desire for personalization, flexibility, and differentiation with regard to professional development, as well as teacher decision making related to components of an evaluation and professional growth system, was also expressed. In this regard, participants suggested that other types of evidence can be used to demonstrate ongoing professional learning, such as using a portfolio to gather artifacts and to facilitate self-reflection. Respondents noted that greater involvement in charting their own directions would result in more invested teachers. An important part of this

process, as one respondent simply noted, is information: "What I think would be really helpful is to have the information about what kinds of [professional development] are available to address weaknesses or to enhance strengths." In addition to understanding the opportunities available within districts, teachers also wanted to be able to develop their own plans, such as a specific study area, a portfolio, or attendance at a conference that would be meaningful to them.

School Culture

Many participants conveyed the importance of school culture as a vital element of meaningful evaluation and professional growth. With regard to teacher autonomy, trusting teachers as professionals was seen as a fundamental first step, as one teacher noted: "The best professional growth can only be built and strengthened in an environment of trust and respect." Additionally, strong lines of communication between administrators and teachers and a shared vision came across as crucial aspects of school environments conducive to positive and productive evaluation systems and professional growth opportunities.

Collaboration

Although participants expressed a desire to engage in self-directed professional development that would be more meaningful and of greater value to them individually, there also was a strong desire to engage in this work collaboratively. Participants also expressed that school settings need to have norms and structures in place that encourage collaboration, take advantage of teachers' expertise, and strategically utilize time and resources. The opportunity to learn from department, school, and district colleagues as well as finding ways to tap in to professional learning networks outside of one's professional setting (e.g., Twitter chats, online courses, unconferences[2]) were deemed important. Because lack of time is often identified as a major obstacle to meaningful professional activities and opportunities to collaborate with others, strategic allocation of time built into the school calendar rather than as an added component was another issue participants addressed. Collaborative structures and productive distribution of time and resources would act to mitigate school environments that are often isolating, particularly for newer teachers. Protecting time that has been set aside for collaboration was also raised as an ongoing issue that requires action from school leadership: "Teachers need time to collaborate in [professional development] communities, but many schools will say they have them — but net time they get to work on them is minimal because of other meetings and administrative stuff." To this end, some participants suggested that there should be more systematic ways to utilize veteran teachers' expertise to guide and mentor newer teachers. One respondent stated,

> When the teacher sets up initial goals, it's a very lonely process. They need structures with mentor teachers, department chairs who can talk about teaching, look for commonalities — like a group of teachers wanting to learn about technology could work together. Structure times together where four or five teachers work together.

In summary, there is a strong sense from listening to these teachers that they want support for developing as professionals. Rather than passive "sit-and-get" professional development, or working in isolation on personal goals, they want a range of opportunities to grow, including both collaborative and independent means of learning. Clearly they also want targeted, individualized, and differentiated professional development rather than the one-size-fits-all offerings that seem to be a source of frustration to teachers across the country. States and local education agencies will need to become more flexible in offering professional development and growth opportunities, and the first step in achieving that flexibility will be to listen to teachers — they are the ones who can best explain their needs.

Question 3: How Can We Demonstrate Impact on Student Learning?

The third question asked in each focus group session was, "Keeping in mind that we are seeking solutions, what would be a viable way to accurately show that teachers are contributing to student learning?"

The third question focused on seeking ways to accurately reflect teachers' contributions to student learning. It was very clear that participants in our focus groups (and survey respondents; see Figure 2) believe that standardized test scores provide an extremely limited glimpse into student performance and, accordingly, teacher effectiveness. We focused in this question on ways to determine teachers' impact on student learning *other than by standardized test scores*. A variety

of multiple measures were suggested, including (a) SLOs, (b) localized formative and summative assessments, (c) student portfolios, and (d) feedback from various stakeholders. Such a multipronged approach might provide a more holistic, nuanced, and context-rich appraisal of teachers' influence on student performance. Using a variety of measures to collect data might also provide more valuable and actionable information to determine students' needs at multiple points throughout the year and to target pedagogical practices, learning resources, professional learning activities, and other strategies geared toward growth. As one teacher noted, SLOs put teachers in charge of data, giving them a greater opportunity to focus on areas of greatest need: "I think SLOs in concert with understanding with administrators serve a great purpose. They are teacher driven and teachers are responsible for growth."

While a range of instruments to assess student learning and teacher performance might be time consuming and logistically challenging, participants suggested that such an approach might be more accurate, more meaningful, and less demeaning and might serve to improve teaching practice.

Localized Assessments to Show Growth

Because standardized assessments are often singular events, some participants expressed a desire to have ongoing information gathering designed to encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation. Such practices might serve to demonstrate student growth over the long term rather than with one-time, high-stakes events. One participant noted that context is crucial to understanding data: "I still think we can do a lot better in creating data that can be more usable and more reliable. The lack of the data having any context to it is also very important. We need to improve the story attached to the data." Another respondent described the ways in which the SLOs are established and how students are engaged in evaluating their own progress as part of this process:

> I set student learning objectives agreed upon with my evaluator and I use progress monitoring, portfolio of student work over time, etc. I'm transparent about what I'm doing with my students. I give practice tests to gauge progress and have students do their own self-reflection and self-evaluation throughout the year. I include that in the SLO results.

Portfolio Assessment

A number of participants discussed the effectiveness of portfolio-based assessments or similar instruments as a way to collect artifacts, encourage reflection, and demonstrate student growth over time. Like any evaluation system, however, using portfolios to evaluate teachers requires thoughtful design and implementation, ongoing training, effective communication, and other criteria to ensure fairness, reliability, validity, and credibility. According to one respondent, there are training and logistical issues, but the effort would be worthwhile:

> I think that the best way to prove student growth is by using portfolios that includes the work at the beginning of the year, with quarterly inclusion of work. It is extremely hard to evaluate, but it would be ideal. We need something to prove that kids are making adequate progress in their studies. I think portfolios would be awesome, but it takes a lot of training and a lot of thought—but, they're time consuming and there may be a lot of bias. The other nice thing about portfolios is that you can pass them on from one grade to another. I think assessments and accountability are changing. There are a lot of factors that teachers have to deal with that are not in a system of accountability—a portfolio would help.

One respondent also acknowledged the role of technology in supporting portfolio-like efforts:

> In [my state], we are moving toward personalized learning plans (PLPs) for students. I think these would be great indicators of success. It's similar to portfolios, so you are measuring as the learning happens. The learners are setting goals with their parents, and the school, and on a personal level. So you are seeing how it's going and you have a collection of these learning plans that follow students through their school career. Because most of the PLP is essentially a digital portfolio, the things that are used are items that have already been scored using a rubric that has already been agreed upon.

Feedback From Other Stakeholders

Echoing findings from the survey for greater input from parents and students, participants also discussed the possibility of well-designed and viable methods to allow for a variety of stakeholders in public education, including students and parents themselves, to have input in teacher evaluation. Surveys, conferences, and other ways to gather information and insight might provide additional perspectives regarding teachers' influence on student learning, performance, and growth. One teacher stated,

> I've also used student surveys voluntarily, and I've found them extremely valuable for my own professional learning and growth. Because I didn't have to share the results with anyone, they were very powerful for my own self-reflection. It's a wasted opportunity to not find out what they are thinking and feeling. Once it becomes a part of an official evaluation, though, the value becomes almost zero.

Another teacher offered this suggestion: "Student and parent surveys could be part of the weighting process. I don't think it is bad to have community — student and/or parent — input." Other comments centered on broader ways of demonstrating student growth that are independent of teacher evaluation processes, as one teacher noted: "Conferencing with students, check-ups with kids, talking with parents about what the students are getting. What data is [*sic*] going to show student growth — our state assessment shouldn't be the only data."

Move Away From a Sanctions-Based Approach

Respondents spoke passionately about the ways in which education reforms have impacted teachers' professional lives and self-perceptions, often negatively. They noted that teachers often feel that public and policy-making demands for greater accountability with concomitant rewards and punishment are divisive and demeaning. Instead, teachers would like to see greater efforts to support teachers in their work and their desire to continue to enhance their expertise as practitioners. Shifting teacher evaluations beyond a heavy reliance on test scores and allowing for multiple measures might provide a more complete picture of teacher performance:

> Probably the biggest thing is going to the legislature and making sure there is a growth model in place rather than a focus on an absolute measure. Assessments and outcomes are part of the climate we live in, but we need to have policies in place that say, "We are looking at student growth." We are dealing with kids who come to us with all sorts of stuff, and to base our evaluation and efficacy on a pass/fail basis is ludicrous. So a growth model that allows us to see student growth is the biggest thing.

Teacher Driven/Autonomy

With an understanding that student test scores should not be the primary component of teacher evaluation, focus group participants nevertheless recognized the importance of various pieces of information that can be used to demonstrate student learning and overall teacher performance over the course of an academic year. Teachers believe that they should have a strong degree of input in designing and implementing evaluation systems, especially since they have a more intimate understanding of their courses, their students, and other factors that might affect student and teacher performance. One respondent noted, "Different content areas need to be evaluated differently and teachers need to be involved to ensure fairness." Many teachers are familiar with, and appreciate the significance of, SLOs or other indicators, the outcomes of which might provide a broader picture of performance and growth over the course of a school year. Teachers feel that determining SLOs in concert with well-trained and competent administrators is a vital part of the evaluation process:

> When I look at PE or music or different specialists, we need to have a component of ownership for these teachers. Specific targeted goals — what are the learning goals for their students? Student learning objectives, imbedded as part of the evidence. Goal setting reflects needs of teacher and also their students.

Another teacher stated,

> I want to see greater transparency and greater validity with the tools that are being used. If the tools and what teachers see every day align, then they would be better accepted and effectively measure what our students can and can't do. I think greater transparency is an important first step. If the tests and assessment tools are to be believed in, they need to be seen, and teachers need to be able to provide feedback.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is notable that the conclusions we are able to draw from the teacher responses and comments are closely aligned with recent statements from other organizations that have considered these topics, such as the Aspen Institute (2016), which offered the following list:

1. Prioritize principal and evaluator training and certification with a focus on professional growth.
2. Differentiate evaluation and support based on teachers' experience and past performance.
3. Allow teachers and observers to collaborate on areas of focus.
4. Allow for local discretion in accounting for student learning.
5. Respect the limitations of value-added data.
6. Support locally developed measures while pursuing improvements in their creation and use.
7. Make sure all important aspects of teaching performance are valued in evaluations.
8. Engage teachers in improving teacher evaluation systems.
9. Develop measures for testing the integrity of evaluation system design and implementation.
10. Tell stories that go beyond performance ratings.

From the responses gleaned from the survey and focus groups, we conclude that our sample of STOYs have plenty to say about what they need and want in an evaluation and support system. As states wrestle with changes in their systems, the ideas expressed by these exemplary teachers present a valuable opportunity to take teachers' voices into consideration. One salient point is that nearly all of the changes teachers asked for require an increase in, or redistribution of, resources. For example, peer observations may mean that substitutes will need to be hired to manage instruction so that teachers can observe and be observed and provide feedback to each other. Alternatively, technology solutions may help aspects of this process, but teachers still need time for various tasks, such as learning to use an online platform, reviewing lesson recordings, and developing feedback. Similarly, ensuring that feedback is provided in a timely fashion means that observers (usually principals and assistant principals) will have to be freed from other tasks to engage in meaningful pre- and postobservation dialogue about pedagogy, professional growth considerations, and other related issues. Given the limited resources many districts and states have, and given the clear priorities that teachers have expressed, there will be challenges in bringing about these changes.

On the basis of the teachers' comments, we offer suggested priorities for states and local education agencies to consider as they make adjustments to evaluation and supports systems for teachers. It should be acknowledged, however, that addressing the constraints and challenges involved in changing the culture of teacher evaluation and support is a long-term process, requiring commitment to collaboration and dialogue among those who set state and district policy with school leaders and teachers.

- Priority 1: Evaluation and feedback systems (Theme 1)
    - Focus more on targeted feedback for professional growth and improving instruction, with less emphasis on "the score."
    - Provide training for all evaluators to ensure that results are accurate and consistent and not dependent on who conducts the evaluation.
    - Provide training for teachers to ensure that they understand the tool being used for evaluation.
    - Ensure that formal observations are followed almost immediately by an opportunity for feedback and discussion.
    - Provide time and resources for informal peer observation and discussion.
- Priority 2: Support systems (Theme 2)

- Provide opportunities for formative observations and feedback from educators or support specialists who have been excellent teachers themselves, have recent classroom experience, and have taught in the grade level or content area.
- Ensure that a formal, structured system is in place to provide support and opportunities for professional growth to all teachers, not just novice or struggling teachers.
- Replace one-size-fits-all professional development in favor of a system focused on differentiated and individualized professional development opportunities.
- Prioritize time for teachers to work together to improve their craft through PLCs, opportunities to observe/be observed, and time to discuss and reflect on practice with teachers from the same content or grade level.

- Priority 3: Determining teachers' contributions to student learning (Theme 3)
  - Consider ways to measure teachers' contributions to student growth that more accurately reflect the year-long effects on important learning goals.
  - Use student assessment data as a trigger to identify areas in which further attention and support may be needed rather than as a weighted percentage of the evaluation score.
  - If standardized test scores are included in teacher evaluation, consider how to ensure fairness and accuracy in attribution of student learning as well as how much impact test scores should have in a teacher's overall evaluation score.
  - Reconsider the use of a school-wide average for tested subjects as part of evaluation scores for teachers in nontested subjects.
  - When SLOs or SGOs are used, ensure that evaluators are trained in the processes involved so they can provide guidance during the process and accurately assess outcomes.

It is important to note some limitations in the data that were collected and analyzed. First, our sample was restricted to STOYs and STOY finalists. They represent an important voice in conversations about teacher evaluation and support given their recognized status as effective practitioners. However, their views may not reflect those of *all* teachers. Second, although we used a multimethod approach with both survey and focus group data collection, we recognize that this is a complex topic with many local variations. Even with the limitations of the current study, however, we believe that there are consistencies both within the priorities that emerged from the analyses of the various data sources and between STOY recommendations and other current policy writings on this topic. Future studies could focus on a broader cross section of teachers to explore how similar or different perceptions are as compared with STOYs and STOY finalists.

The landscape of teacher evaluation and support is likely to shift in the coming years as states and local education agencies seek to refine systems in ways that will support and inspire teachers and ensure desired outcomes for the students they serve. Given the ongoing emphasis on educational accountability, the role of standardized assessments, the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention, and other pertinent issues related to teacher quality and performance, educators and policy makers will need to work together to address many of the concerns and recommendations identified here.

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Notes

1 For additional information, see http://www.ccsso.org/ntoy/About_the_Program.html.

2 *Unconference* is a term applied to a gathering or conference where the emphasis is on the informal exchange of information and ideas, while avoiding some of the more structured approaches of a conventional conference.

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Appendix

Table A1 Distribution of 266 Survey Respondents by Year of Recognition

Year of recognition	*n*	%
Between 1971 and 1975	2	1
Between 1976 and 1980	3	1
Between 1981 and 1985	2	1
Between 1986 and 1990	4	1
Between 1991 and 1995	5	2
Between 1996 and 2000	13	5
Between 2001 and 2005	19	7
2006	6	2
2007	11	4
2008	12	4
2009	11	4
2010	17	6
2011	15	6
2012	14	5
2013	28	10
2014	30	11
2015	20	7
2016	54	20

Table A2 Teaching Level When Recognized as a Finalist or State Teacher of the Year

Level when recognized	*n*	%
Elementary (including pre-K or K)	95	35
Middle	52	19
High	119	44

Table A3 Most Recent Year of Teaching Experience

Recent year of teaching	*n*	%
2015–2016	182	68
2014–2015	27	10
2013–2014	15	6
Not since 2012–2013	42	16

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