

Do More Frequent Policy-Assigned Observations Explain the Rapid Growth in Tennessee Teacher Effectiveness?

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Recent evidence suggests the last ten years of teacher evaluation reforms have not borne the fruit suggested by research or promised by policymakers (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Walsh, Joseph, Lakis, & Lubell, 2017). But, amidst these lackluster results, a new report finds Tennessee teacher effectiveness (i.e., within-teacher impact on student achievement) improved rapidly and substantially after Tennessee implemented its reformed teacher evaluation system (Papay & Laski, 2018). Moreover, Tennessee's reformed system has been hailed as successful on several fronts (Olson, 2018; Putman, Ross, & Walsh, 2018). Policymakers wishing to replicate Tennessee's successes (and avoid its pitfalls), need to know which components of the evaluation system contributed to its successes. This brief discusses the impact of a cornerstone of the Tennessee evaluation system on student achievement – increasing the number of classroom observations per teacher.

Background

Tennessee's reformed teacher observation system increased the number of policy-assigned observations, with the typical teacher receiving two per year. Observations were conducted by certified observers using standards-based rubrics (e.g., Danielson's Framework for Teaching). Structured pre- and post-observation conferences bookended observations. The Tennessee theory of action holds that by receiving more frequent post-observation feedback, teachers will improve more rapidly.

No Evidence of Positive Effects on Average Student Achievement Scores among Plurality of Teachers

A new working paper identifies the impact of more frequent formal observations on average student achievement scores in math and reading (Hunter, 2019). The study exploits a "natural experiment," in which Tennessee state

policy assigned teachers some number of observations per year. Because observations are assigned by policy, which educators cannot control, the natural experiment resembles the assignment process of a randomized control trial. The research compares the achievement scores of students taught by teachers receiving more policy-assigned observations to those teachers receiving fewer. Because most teachers are assigned two observations, the effects are largely based on the differences between two and one policy-assigned observations per year. Although teachers in the study are labeled as relatively effective on a composite measure of teacher effectiveness, approximately 70 percent of all Tennessee teachers received this label in the study period. Thus, the effects of more policy-assigned observations on the performance of these teachers capture the effects of observations on a plurality of Tennessee teachers.

There is no evidence that the receipt of an additional policy-assigned observation by teachers at the margin improves math or reading average student achievement scores in the year observations are received, or one year after receipt. More policy-assigned observations had a near-zero effect on average student reading scores. The effects on average student math scores fluctuate around zero and are imprecisely estimated, but the evidence does not suggest improvement.

Teacher survey data suggest that pre-observation conferences may have been weakly implemented and post-observation feedback was not useful, which may account for the absence of positive effects. Survey respondents reported that it was difficult to use post-observation feedback to improve their practice, and about one-third of respondents reported not taking steps to improve based on observation feedback.

Recommendations

These findings imply the growth in Tennessee teacher effectiveness was not due to the receipt of more frequent policy-assigned observations, and imply at least two courses of action. First, teacher survey data imply policymakers could invest more in observation systems to improve implementation. However, observation systems are already the costliest component of reformed teacher evaluation systems (Stecher et al., 2016). Consequently, policymakers may resist further investments.

The second course of action may be welcomed by educators and policymakers. Evidence suggests just one policy-assigned observation per year is enough for relatively effective teachers. In many systems, assigning such teachers one observation per year will reduce the number currently assigned to these teachers, freeing up several hours of administrator time. Administrators could use the time they would spend conducting observations of relatively effective teachers by

conducting observations of less effective
teachers and/or engaging in non-observational
tasks.

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