

**Revisiting The Widget Effect:  
Teacher Evaluation Reforms and the Distribution of Teacher Effectiveness**

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Abstract

In 2009, The New Teacher Project (TNTP)'s The Widget Effect documented the failure to recognize and act on differences in teacher effectiveness. We revisit these findings by compiling teacher performance ratings across 24 states that adopted major reforms to their teacher evaluation systems. In the vast majority of these states, the percentage of teachers rated Unsatisfactory remains less than 1%. However, the full distributions of ratings vary widely across states with 0.7% to 28.7% rated below Proficient and 6% to 62% rated above Proficient. We present original survey data from an urban district illustrating that evaluators perceive more than three times as many teachers in their schools to be below Proficient than they rate as such. Interviews with principals reveal several potential explanations for these patterns.

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## **Revisiting The Widget Effect: Teacher Evaluation Reforms and the Distribution of Teacher Effectiveness**

The failure of evaluation systems to provide accurate and credible information about individual teachers' instructional performance sustains and reinforces a phenomenon that we have come to call the Widget Effect. The Widget Effect describes the tendency of school districts to assume classroom effectiveness is the same from teacher to teacher. This decades-old fallacy fosters an environment in which teachers cease to be understood as individual professionals, but rather as interchangeable parts.

- *The New Teacher Project, 2009*

In 2009, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) characterized the failure of U.S. public education to recognize and respond to differences in teacher effectiveness as the “Widget Effect” (Weisberg et al., 2009). The study highlighted the discrepancy between formal teacher evaluation ratings and perceptions about the actual distribution of teacher effectiveness. The authors found that, in most districts, less than 1% of teachers were rated as Unsatisfactory, but 81% of administrators and 57% of teachers could identify a teacher in their school who was ineffective. The Widget Effect was not the first or only study to draw attention to districts' failure to differentiate among teachers (Donaldson, 2009; Toch & Rothman, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2007). For example, over a decade earlier, Tucker (1997) labeled the U.S. education system's failure to recognize “incompetent” teaching as the “Lake Wobegon Effect” – referring to Garrison Keillor's fictitious town where “all the children are above average.”

Growing recognition of the broken teacher evaluation system amplified by new research documenting the importance of teacher effectiveness (e.g. Rockoff, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005) helped to generate momentum for evaluation reforms (Donaldson & Papay, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTTT) competition and state waivers for regulations in the No Child Left Behind Act created strong incentives for states to adopt sweeping changes to their evaluation systems. Evaluation reforms replaced binary checklists

with high-stakes systems comprised of multiple measures of teacher performance including metrics based on students' performance on standardized tests.

Today, almost every state has designed and adopted new teacher evaluation systems (see Steinberg & Donaldson [2016] for a summary of new evaluation systems features and Donaldson & Papay [2015] for a survey of reform efforts). Some scholars view this focus on high-stakes evaluation systems as misplaced (Fullan, 2011; Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014; Mehta & Fine, 2015). Even those who see evaluation reforms as promising do not agree on *how* these systems should be used to improve the teacher workforce. Some argue that the primary role of evaluation should be to dismiss underperforming teachers (e.g. Edwards, 2014; Hanushek, 2009; Thomas, Wingert, Conant, & Register, 2010). Others see evaluation as central to supporting teachers' professional growth by providing teachers with individualized feedback and identifying areas for targeted professional support (Almy, 2011; Curtis & Wiener, 2012; Papay, 2012). Both of these theories of action require an evaluation system that differentiates among teachers and accurately assesses the quality of their instruction.

In this paper, we revisit The Widget Effect by examining the degree to which new teacher evaluation systems differentiate among teachers. Research on evaluation reforms has primarily focused on the properties of performance measures (e.g. Grossman, Loeb, Cohen, & Wyckoff, 2013, Kane, McCaffrey, Miller, & Staiger, 2013, and the March 2015 special issue of *Educational Researcher*), the effect evaluation systems have on teacher satisfaction (Koedel, Li, & Springer, in press) and student achievement (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015; Taylor & Tyler, 2013), and principals' use of value-added measures (Goldring et al., 2015; Rockoff, Staiger, Kane, & Taylor, 2012). Research suggests that principals are capable of distinguishing between low and high performing teachers (Harris & Sass, 2014; Jacob &

Lefgren, 2008), but that they do not always do so on high-stakes evaluation ratings (Grissom & Loeb, in press).

To date, there exists little systematic evidence about the degree to which teacher evaluation reforms have fundamentally changed the distribution of teacher performance ratings. We begin by asking, what is the distribution of teacher performance ratings in states that have adopted reforms to their teacher evaluation systems? We answer this question using new data from a comprehensive review of teacher evaluation ratings across states that have implemented teacher evaluation reforms with multiple performance categories. Policymakers assumed that the sweeping changes to evaluation system design features would result in greater differentiation, overlooking Lipsky's (2010) seminal observation that policies are ultimately made by the "street-level bureaucrats" who implement them. Instead, history shows that the success of policy initiatives depends on the will and capacity of local actors to implement reforms (Honig, 2006). This is particularly true in the decentralized U.S. education system where local practice is often decoupled from central policy (Spillane & Kenney, 2012).

Our findings reveal that the percentage of teachers rated as Unsatisfactory has not changed in the majority of states that have adopted new teacher evaluation systems. At the same time, we find considerable variation across states in the percentage of teachers rated in the category just below Proficient as well as those above. One primary hypothesis for these findings emerges from Lipsky's work that "street-level" public-sector employees "cannot do the job according to ideal conceptions of the practice because of limitations of the work structure" (2010, p. xvii). We explore this hypothesis as well as others by asking: Does the distribution of teacher performance ratings reflect evaluators' perceptions about the distribution of teacher

effectiveness? And, if not, what are evaluators' explanations for why teacher evaluation reforms have not resulted in greater differentiation in performance ratings?

We examine these questions with quantitative and qualitative data collected over the course of three years in one large urban school district. Specifically, we leverage original survey data linked to evaluation records to compare evaluators' perceptions of the distribution of teacher effectiveness with both their predictions and actual ratings. We collected and analyze these data in both the first year of district-wide implementation of the new evaluation system as well as the third year. Together, these data allow us to assess whether evaluators' perceptions and actual ratings converged as they became more familiar with the new system over time. We then discuss findings from in-depth interviews with a random sample of principals in the district that help to explain why differences existed between evaluators' perceptions, predictions, and actual performance ratings. Throughout the paper we focus much of our analyses and discussion on the percentage of performance ratings below and above Proficient given the high-stakes incentives and consequences attached to these ratings in many districts (e.g. Dee & Wyckoff, 2015). Together, these data provide new insights about the potential and pitfalls of improving the quality of the teacher workforce through teacher evaluation reforms.

## **Data and Methods**

### **State Teacher Evaluation Ratings**

We compiled data on state distributions of teacher evaluation ratings following a systematic search and outreach process. Our target sample included 38 states that had either piloted or fully implemented a new teacher evaluation system by the 2014/15 school year. We began by reviewing RTTT annual performance reports. We then searched for studies, reports, and news articles containing information on teacher evaluation ratings using Google's advanced

search features as well as academic databases such as ERIC and Academic Search Premier. Finally, we reviewed information on state education agency websites and directly contacted agency staff to request data. Our search produced data on the distribution of teacher effectiveness for 24 states including 14 RTTT winners. We provide detailed information about rating systems and source data for each state in Appendix A.

### **District Case Study of Teacher Evaluation**

Our case study focuses on teacher evaluation ratings in a large urban district in the northeast that serves over 50,000 students. Hispanic and African American students make up approximately 75% of the district student body, while the remaining 25% of students are predominantly Caucasian and Asian American. Over 70% of students in the district are eligible for free or reduced price lunch and nearly half speak a language other than English as their first language.

For many years in the district, evaluation consisted of administrators completing binary checklists. Evaluations were infrequent and many teachers went unevaluated. For example, 83% of non-tenured teachers and 77% of tenured teachers were not evaluated in 2008/09. In 2012/13, the district implemented a new evaluation system that was adapted from the state's new framework for evaluation. Under the new system, nearly all teachers are required to be evaluated annually. Principals and select members of their administrative teams (e.g. Assistant Principals, Directors of Instruction) are responsible for conducting formative and summative teacher evaluations. Formative evaluations are conducted midway through an evaluation cycle, primarily in January, while summative evaluations are typically conducted in April or May. For both formative and summative ratings, evaluators consider evidence from classroom observation ratings on the district rubric as well as artifacts and progress towards teacher-defined Student

Learning Goals. They then assign teachers an overall performance rating on a four-category rating scale based on their holistic assessment of the evidence rather than a weighted sum of multiple measures. Performance measures based on standardized tests such as value-added scores or student growth percentiles were not calculated or incorporated into the evaluation system at the time of this study. Throughout the paper we focus on the overall summative (and formative) ratings evaluators assigned to teachers rather than any specific rating component on the district rubric.

Teachers rated as Proficient or Exemplary proceed on either a one or two-year evaluation cycle of self-directed growth with one unannounced observation. Teachers who are rated as Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory are placed on 120 day or year-long structured improvement plans requiring detailed prescriptions from evaluators along with two to four unannounced observations. Teachers who do not improve after being placed on a more structured plan are moved to a 30, 60 or 90 day improvement plan. Receiving a rating below Proficient while on an improvement plan triggers the dismissal process. Compared to the previous system which required multiple years of unsatisfactory ratings and a long sequence of confusing administrative steps with strict deadlines and documentation requirements, the new system provided a clear and accelerated pathway for terminating the contracts of consistently low-performing teachers. Several principals we spoke with had used the new system to move a teacher towards dismissal but suggested teachers often leave their school voluntarily before the process concludes. There are no formal incentives in place for receiving an exemplary rating similar to systems in many other states and districts (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016; see Kraft & Gilmour, [2016] for a more detailed description of the evaluation system). The distribution of performance ratings in the district is broadly similar to the state's distribution but slightly skewed

upward with several percentage points fewer teachers rated as Proficient and more rated as Exemplary.

**Evaluator surveys.** We worked with district officials to administer a survey to evaluators in the summer/early fall of 2012. Two questions on the survey are central to this study. These questions asked evaluators (1) to rate the percentage of teachers in their school that *in their judgment* were in each of the four performance categories and (2) to predict the percentage of teachers in their school that *will receive* overall summative evaluation ratings at each of these levels (see Appendix B for survey items). District officials administered paper copies of the survey at district-wide meetings and followed up with an email link for completing the survey on-line. We collected survey responses from a total of 161 of the 340 evaluators in 2012/13. We re-administered these same two questions to 177 evaluators randomly assigned to participate in a training program during the fall/winter of 2014/15. Ninety-seven percent of these evaluators completed the survey (172). Thirty-eight evaluators completed the survey in both years.

We linked evaluators' survey responses with the actual distribution of performance ratings in their schools calculated from individual teacher evaluation records. We restricted our final analytic dataset to those evaluators whose survey responses totaled to 100% and were successfully linked to schools with valid evaluation data.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in an analytic sample of 107 evaluators across 58 schools in 2012/13 and 157 evaluators across 66 schools in 2014/15. Although we cannot rule out the possibility of differential selection into the survey sample across years, in supplemental analyses available upon request we find that the patterns we report below remain the same when we restrict our data to include only the 34 schools for which we have survey responses in both years.



**Principal interviews.** In the summer of 2013, we conducted interviews with a stratified random sample of principals in the district to understand their experiences implementing the new teacher evaluation system. We created six strata based on school size and level. Twenty-four out of the 46 principals we contacted agreed to be interviewed. These principals worked at a range of small and large elementary, middle, and high schools, and were diverse in both demographic characteristics and administrative experience. We find no statistically significant differences in the demographic and school characteristics for those principals in the district we interviewed and those we did not (for full details see Kraft & Gilmour, 2016).

We interviewed each principal for 45-60 minutes using a semi-structured interview protocol. We audio-recorded and transcribed each interview and then drafted thematic summaries to identify potential codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We developed and refined our codes using an iterative process that built on both the scholarly literature and themes that emerged from our data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each author coded two transcripts, reviewed the other author's codes, and discussed discrepancies. After reaching coding agreement and developing the final codebook, we coded each interview transcript and then analyzed these data by organizing codes around broad themes.

## **Findings**

### **Distribution of Teacher Evaluation Ratings**

In Figure 1, we present the percentage of teachers in the ratings categories that fall below Proficient/Effective among the 24 states in our analytic sample. The median percentage of teachers rated below Proficient is 3.05% while the weighted average across these states is 4.13% (5.18% unweighted) where weights are based on the number of public school teachers in each state in 2013/14 (Glander, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates how the percentage of teachers rated as

below Proficient varies substantially across states. Across all states, the weighted average of teachers rated Unsatisfactory/Ineffective is 0.48% (0.64% unweighted); only two states, Maryland and New Mexico, rated more than 1% of teachers in the lowest category.

We present the corresponding percentage of teachers rated in the performance category (or categories) above Proficient in Figure 2. The median percentage of teachers rated above Proficient is 38.7% (with a weighted and unweighted average of 36.85% and 36.20%), but varies considerably from 6% in Georgia to 62% in Tennessee. In fact, a majority of teachers are rated above Proficient in five states, while less than 20% of teachers are rated above Proficient in five other states.

In Figures 3A and 3B, we present the full distributions of teacher evaluation ratings for states with four and five performance categories, respectively. For states with four rating categories, the primary differentiation among teachers is between the two highest performance categories (i.e. Proficient vs. Exemplary). Teacher evaluation ratings in states with five rating categories appear to differentiate slightly more by distributing teachers across the three top rating categories. We exclude Maryland from these figures because the state has three rating categories. Ninety-seven percent of teachers in Maryland are rated as Proficient or above Proficient.

Overall, these data show that some new teacher evaluation systems do differentiate among teachers, but most only do so at the top of the ratings spectrum. These findings suggest that new evaluation systems that include multiple rating categories have not necessarily resulted in more differentiated ratings. Although states with five performance categories tend to rate more teachers as top performers, more rating categories does not appear to translate into greater differentiation at the lower end of the rating scale.

### **Evaluators' Perceptions of the Distribution of Teacher Quality**

We next present data from our district case study on the degree to which evaluators' perceptions of the effectiveness of teachers in their schools aligned with the actual performance ratings they assigned. On average, the evaluators who participated in our survey in 2012/13 estimated that 27.1 percent of all teachers in their schools were performing at a level below Proficient. As shown in Figure 4A, this estimate is more than four times the percentage of teachers who were actually rated below Proficient. Figure 4A also demonstrates that evaluators anticipated that fewer teachers would be rated below Proficient than they thought were performing at these levels (27.1% perceived vs. 23.6% predicted below Proficient). However, these same evaluators substantially underestimated the degree to which their actual ratings would be inflated upwards (6.6% actual below Proficient).<sup>2</sup>

Evaluators may not have fully anticipated the challenges associated with rating teachers below Proficient in 2012/13, the first year of district-wide implementation of a new teacher evaluation system. We examine this possibility with survey data from 2014/15, the third year of the new evaluation system. Again, we find similar patterns as shown in Figure 4B where evaluators perceived over three times as many teachers as below Proficient than they rated as such (19.1% perceived vs. 6.3% actual below Proficient). Evaluators again overestimated the proportion of teachers they would rate in one of the two lowest performance categories (13.0% predicted), but less so than in 2012/13. In both years, evaluators rated substantially more teachers in their schools as Proficient than they perceived there to be. The number of teachers given summative ratings of Proficient was 17.1 percentage points higher than evaluators' perceptions in 2012/13 and 11.6 percentage points higher in 2014/2015.

We extend these analyses by comparing the distributions of formative and summative performance ratings across the schools included in our survey sample. As shown in Figure 5,

evaluators appear more likely to assign lower formative ratings. Twice as many teachers received formative Needs Improvement ratings compared to summative ratings. Nearly twice as many teachers received summative Exemplary ratings compared to formative ratings. For Unsatisfactory and Proficient ratings, principals were more consistent across formative and summative ratings. The difference between the percentage of teachers rated Needs Improvement and Exemplary on formative versus summative ratings could be due, in part, to improvement in teacher practice over the course of the year. However, our interviews with principals suggest that the large differences in the distributions of formative versus summative ratings is primarily the result of the higher stakes attached to summative ratings.

Together, these findings suggest that evaluators are constrained by what Lipsky referred to as “limitations of the work structure” in ways they both anticipate and do not foresee. We see that in both years, evaluators who were responsible for assigning overall summative ratings in their schools predicted that they would assign fewer teachers below Proficient ratings than they perceived were warranted. Further, comparing survey results across both years suggests evaluators became more aware that the performance ratings they would eventually assign would not accurately reflect their perceptions of teachers’ performance. This suggests that persistent implementation challenges and the competing tradeoffs that arise when evaluators enact evaluation policies at the “street-level” are more likely to explain these patterns than short-term difficulties associated with adopting a new evaluation system.

### **Why Few Teachers Receive Below Proficient Ratings**

In-depth interviews with principals reveal the realities and complex incentives evaluators must navigate when assessing teachers. Principals’ framing of these challenges illustrates the coping and rationalizing behaviors that apply, and explain why so few teachers receive below

Proficient ratings as well as why ratings did not reflect perceptions of teachers' actual performance in the district we studied.

**Time constraints.** Fourteen principals told us that a lack of time was the most frequent reason for not giving a teacher a low rating. Rating a teacher as below Proficient required intensive amounts of time to document their performance and to provide support for their professional growth. Several principals questioned whether they could collect sufficient evidence in a few observations to justify a rating below Proficient. As a middle school principal with nine years of experience put it, "I just feel like sometimes you have to have a lot of detail before you can give somebody a Needs Improvement." A high school principal explained that both observations and support were major constraints, "When you have an unsatisfactory teacher, it takes a lot of time to observe that teacher, to give true honest-to-goodness feedback."

Several principals felt as if it was unfair to rate teachers as below Proficient if they did not have the capacity to provide these teachers with support. A middle school principal described this tension as follows:

It's not possible for an administrator to carry through on ten Unsatisfactories simultaneously. I mean once somebody is identified as Unsatisfactory, the amount of work, the amount of observation, the amount of time and attention that it requires to support them can become overwhelming. There is a threshold... otherwise I'm not providing that person with the quality coaching and feedback that they need to improve. The increased requirements on evaluators of writing detailed improvement plans and conducting up to four unannounced formal observations for teachers whom they rated as Unsatisfactory led some principals to use low ratings selectively. An elementary school principal explained:

There were some areas that they could have been needs improvement. Because I was focusing on two or three other teachers who really needed needs improvement. I gave them Proficient in those areas. I did it because I couldn't tackle that many teachers at the same time as far as writing prescriptions and then following through on the work that I would need to do.

This principal took a triage approach to evaluating and supporting teachers. He reserved Needs Improvement ratings for those teachers that needed the most help because of the increased workloads these ratings would trigger.

**Teachers' potential and motivation.** Principals reported that they sometimes factored in teachers' potential when assigning an evaluation rating. For example, one principal spoke about giving new teachers more leeway:

A first year teacher, I tend to give a little more the benefit of doubt. Like, give you a little time, the opportunity to improve, here are some suggestions... Sometimes someone who's fairly new teaching in the building, they are more apt to accept that feedback.

Principals felt that new teachers were still learning and that it was unfair to rate new teachers as below Proficient if they were working to improve their practice. A principal from a large high school said he wanted "to give people opportunities, give people chances." Other principals used this approach for teachers they viewed as just below Proficient. "They're not bad teachers. They need a little more time to develop and become better," explained a high school principal. They were "good enough." Assigning a Proficient rating was seen as a way to recognize teachers' efforts to improve.

Many of these principals felt that giving a low rating to a potentially good teacher could be counterproductive to a teacher's development. For example, one middle school principal said

he “will give [teachers] a Proficient rating to keep them on board and to keep them moving in a direction,” rather than risk losing a potentially good teacher. An experienced elementary school principal described how low ratings could cause teachers to become less receptive to feedback:

There's one teacher who I probably should have given an overall 'does not meets' ... Instead, I gave her a subcategory.... I think she's somebody that I could support into being a stronger teacher. I don't think I can do that as well if I give an overall 'Unsatisfactory,' get the union involved, and get the teacher taking my feedback in a very different way.

Principals sometimes shied away from using the lowest ratings for summative evaluations because it caused teachers to shift their focus from what they could do to improve to the consequences of the rating itself.

**Personal discomfort.** Six principals touched on how difficult it was to have conversations with teachers whom they rated as below Proficient. One experienced principal nearing retirement articulated this view clearly:

The most difficult part of the job is probably to deliver those difficult messages, and not everyone is capable of that. That's where administrators actually fall down is when they're unable to deliver those type of messages.

Principals spoke about how there was “definitely emotion” involved in assigning below Proficient ratings. A middle school principal told us, “I was pretty communicative and still people would be crying, or, ‘I can't believe you think that.’” In his experience, some teachers reacted poorly to their low ratings despite his efforts to be transparent throughout the evaluation process.

Principals were keenly aware that an Unsatisfactory rating could lead to teachers losing their jobs. Many principals saw this as an unfortunate but important responsibility, while others were less comfortable with initiating the dismissal process. A first year high school principal said:

The last thing I think I want do as a human being is to watch another human being walk out with their head down; dejected, because they just lost their job because they couldn't do it. This is something that they wanted to do. That's a little bit harsh, you know?

This new principal did not want to expose teachers to the consequences of low ratings. Not surprisingly, neither this principal nor any other said they had personally chosen to rate a teacher as Proficient in order to avoid a challenging conversation or to shield a teacher from the threat of dismissal. But on more than one occasion principals, such as an experience middle school principal, stated bluntly that “People shy away from difficult conversations.” Relatedly, three principals mentioned concerns that a disproportionate number of non-White teachers would receive low ratings. An experienced elementary school principal told us that evaluation “became a racial issue, and it was huge.” Some principals may have been willing to give slightly higher ratings to those teachers on the margin to avoid the discomfort of discussing a low rating or addressing the underlying causes of inequitable performance ratings along racial lines.

**The challenges of removing and replacing teachers.** Several principals mentioned that they also sought to avoid the “long, laborious, legal, draining process” of evaluating out a teacher. Although the evaluation reforms implemented by the district aimed to streamline the dismissal process, it is unclear whether these principals’ perceptions were accurate or a



justification for not utilizing the new process. Two principals found it easier to remove teachers outside of the evaluation process. As one principal stated frankly:

I didn't give her a negative evaluation in certain terms of then having to evaluate her out. That would've meant that she would have to stay in my school for another year and I had to go through the whole long process thing. She was clearly not going to work out anyway and she was going to leave. She agreed to leave.

Here, it was more expedient for the principal to trade a Proficient evaluation for a teacher's voluntary departure.

Two principals expressed their hesitancy to initiate dismissals due to fear of having to hire an even lower-quality replacement from the districts' excess pool of tenured teachers in need of school-site placements. A secondary school principal's initial experience with dismissing teachers led her to be wary of assigning low ratings:

If there's someone who's bad, you can evaluate them out, but you risk getting someone who's worse. When I first started, that happened to me twice with the same position. I had a math teacher who was terrible, I evaluated her out, I got one actually worse.

An experienced high school principal described how she chose to rehire a low-performing teacher:

He's a problem, but he's my problem, and he's one that I can really work with. Relative to the problems that were ringing my doorbell, I thought, "I haven't begun to see how low it can go."

This principal explained that she wanted to avoid the possibility that human resources would assign her a teacher from the excess pool at all costs. In her words, "The one you know is better than the one you don't."

## **Conclusion & Policy Implications**

Recent reforms to teacher evaluation systems have changed the ways in which teachers are evaluated in U.S. public schools fundamentally. In most states, observations are more frequent and focused on instruction, student achievement results are considered, and teachers are rated on scales with multiple performance categories (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). Importantly, these changes have increasingly focused educators' attention on classroom instruction. New evaluation systems, however, have not consistently resulted in greater differentiation among teacher performance ratings. Just as TNTP found in 2009, only a "fraction of a percentage" of teachers are rated Unsatisfactory. At the same time, significantly more teachers are now rated in categories below Proficient than in the past.

The wide variability in teacher ratings across states suggests that system design features as well as local norms and implementation practices play large roles in shaping ratings distributions. Differences in underlying teacher effectiveness alone cannot account for why 1% or fewer teachers are below Proficient in Hawaii but 28.7% are below Proficient in New Mexico, or why only 6% of teachers in Georgia and 9% of teachers in Massachusetts are above Proficient but 62% meet this higher standard in Tennessee. This variation across states reflects what Lipsky (2010) characterized as the "street-level bureaucracy" of public-sector work where policies are ultimately made by the people who implement them rather than the policymakers who design them. Policymakers and district administrators shape the evaluation system parameters, but it is the aggregation of individual decisions by evaluators navigating complex realities in schools that determine the percentage of teachers rated in each performance category.

The limitations of the present study point to several areas for future research. Important questions remain about how the design features of evaluation systems such as the performance

measures, choice of evaluators and training provided, weights and thresholds used to aggregate measures and assign ratings, as well as the sanctions and rewards associated with performance categories affect the distribution of evaluation ratings. Recent work has shown that systems that place greater weight on normative measures such as value-added scores rather than criterion-reference measures such as observations have fewer teachers rated proficient, all else equal (Steinberg & Kraft, 2016). Incentives such as merit pay may limit the number of teachers who can be rated as top performers given budget constraints.

Our data provide a snapshot in time rather than a longitudinal trend or a causal framework for analyzing how evaluation reforms have affected the distribution of performance ratings. While our single district case study helps to illustrate how incentives shape evaluators' decisions at the micro level as they navigate implementation challenges, competing interests, unintended consequences, and high-stakes decisions, it also limits the generalizability of our findings. Evaluators' perceptions of the true distribution of teacher performance in this district are not necessarily reflective of state-wide distributions. Large urban districts often draw from different labor markets and serve different student populations than non-urban districts. Furthermore, evaluators assigned summative performance ratings based on their overall assessment of teachers' multiple performance measures rather than more common designs where a weighted average of performance measures is mapped onto a summative rating category based on pre-determined rating thresholds. Future surveys attempting to capture perceptions about the true distribution of teacher effectiveness would benefit from examining perspectives across multiple district contexts and, when possible, asking educators to rate individual teachers rather than estimating the full ratings distribution.

There are a variety of approaches policymakers and administrators might take to address the challenges principals described in aligning assigned ratings with their actual assessments. With strong labor-management partnerships and sustained financial investments, districts can reduce principals' roles in the evaluation process by developing a new evaluator role for expert teachers such as the Peer Assistance and Review system (Johnson et al., N.D.). When relieving principals of responsibilities for observations is not practical or preferred, districts should focus on reducing disincentives to assigning lower ratings. Adopting mutual consent hiring instead of filling vacancies first through the forced placement of tenured teachers from the excess pool would likely change principals' calculus on whether they are likely to find a more effective replacement for a teacher they rate as Unsatisfactory. Providing teachers rated below Proficient with a centralized professional development support and resource center would reduce the disincentive for principals to restrict the number of teachers they rate as low-performing because of their limited ability to offer support. Finally, districts could invest in training for principals focused around how to navigate difficult conversations about sub-standard performance with individual teachers and their entire staff.

Ultimately, districts will have to grapple with their priorities for the evaluation process and the inherent tension within a high-stakes evaluation system. Identifying teachers' weaknesses is a key step in supporting their improvement but also brings with it the possibility of job loss. For some teachers, a low rating may motivate them to invest in their own professional growth or pressure them to work harder. For others, it may cause them to be less receptive to feedback on how to improve by undercutting relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). How districts frame the category above Unsatisfactory and below Proficient may influence the number of teachers who receive this rating and how teachers respond to this rating. If this category

characterizes teachers as “Developing” and provides them with additional professional training principals may use this category, and teachers may respond to this category, as a positive opportunity for growth. Labeling teachers as “Needs Improvement”, a rating that may result in additional supervision and the increased threat of dismissal, may cause teachers to respond defensively and diminish the opportunities for development.

Moving away from the current focus on a single summative performance rating toward a more multi-dimensional approach may also allow for principals to rate teachers who struggle in certain areas of practice more accurately. Systems that ask, “How is a teacher effective?” rather than “How effective is a teacher?” would recognize the full range of teachers’ strengths and weaknesses and, in doing so, provide a more precise picture of teacher effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

1. For principals whose responses total to within plus or minus 1 percentage point of 100 we round up their estimates in the top ratings category to reduce data loss due to minor computational error. Evaluation data is not available for several schools in the district that are not required to use the district designed evaluation system.
2. The unweighted exact statistic for the average percent of teachers rated below proficient in these schools is 6.7% in 2012/13 and 5.7% in 2014/15.
3. We thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggesting the language used in this sentence.

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## Figures

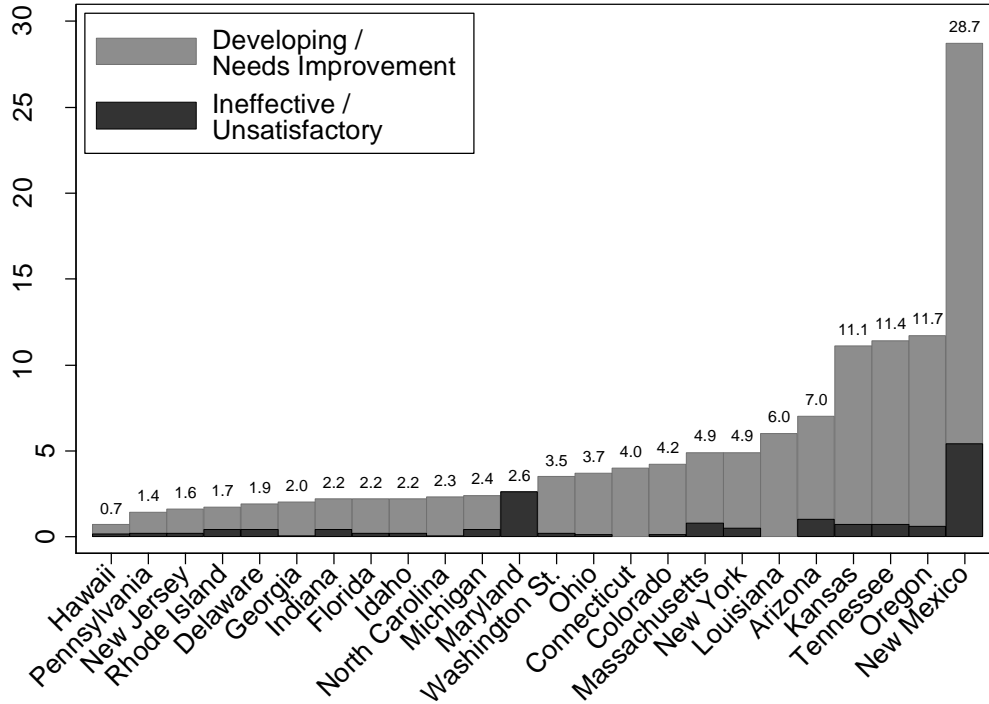


Figure 1: The percentage of teachers rated below Proficient across 24 state evaluation systems.

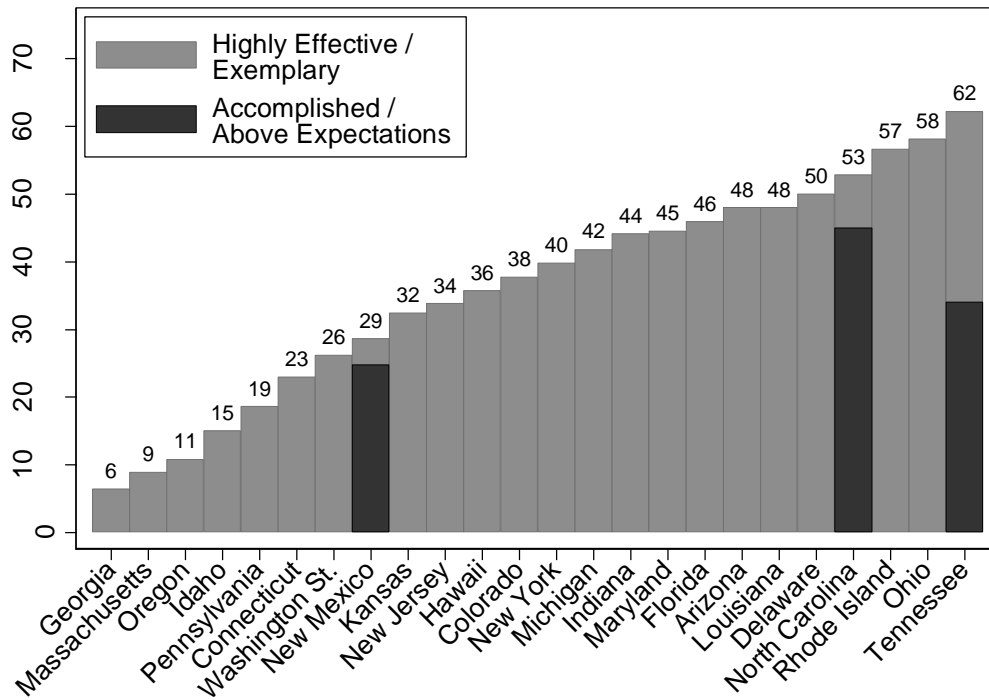
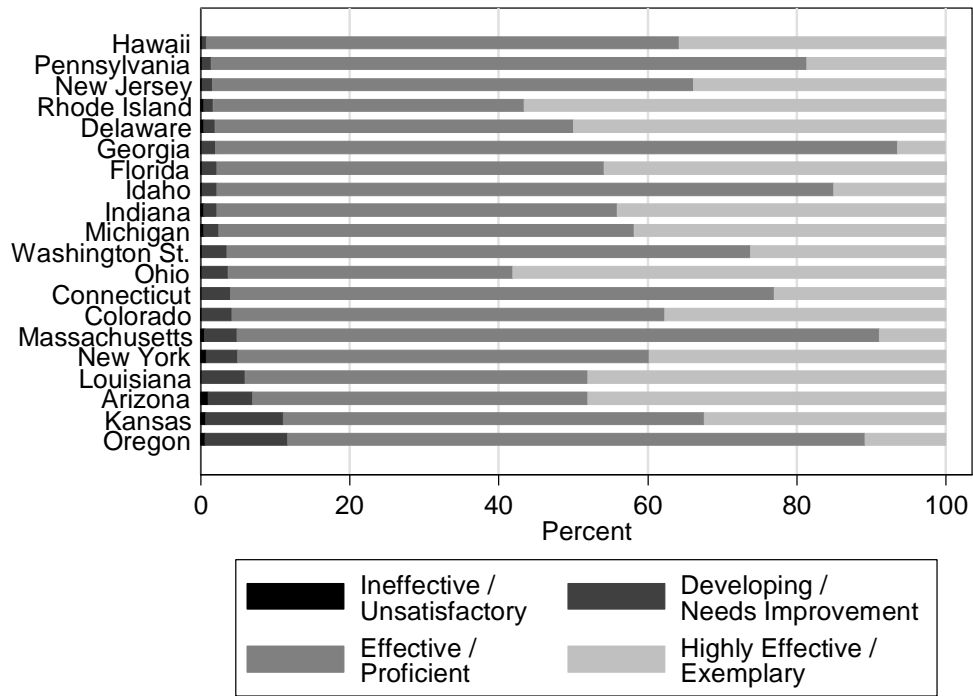


Figure 2: The percentage of teachers rated above Proficient across 24 state evaluation systems.

Panel A: States with four performance categories



Panel B: States with five performance categories

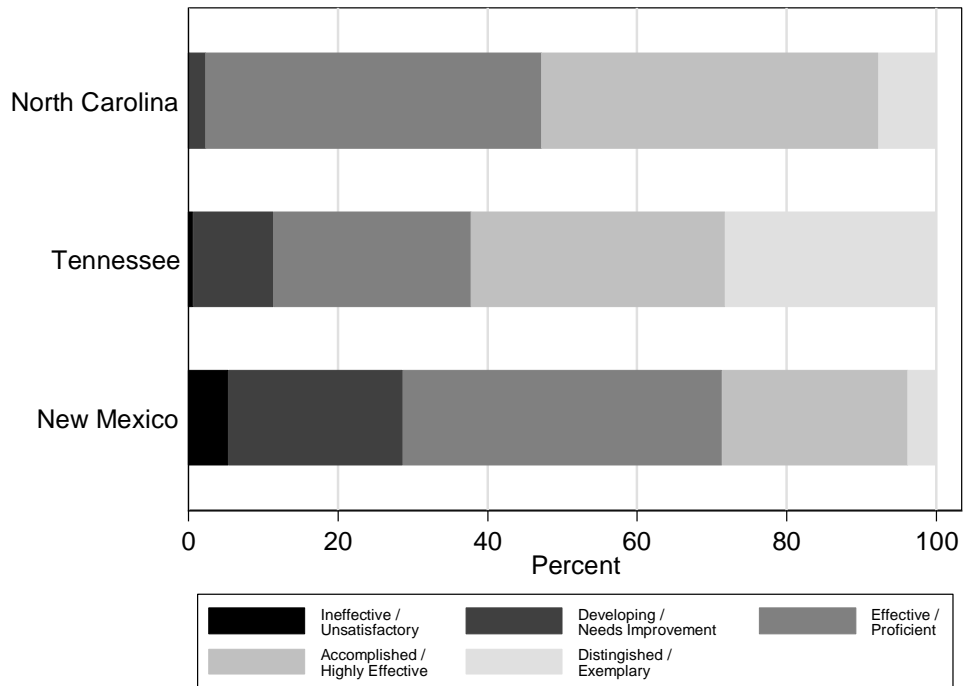


Figure 3: The distribution of teacher evaluation ratings across states with four (Panel A) and five (Panel B) rating categories.

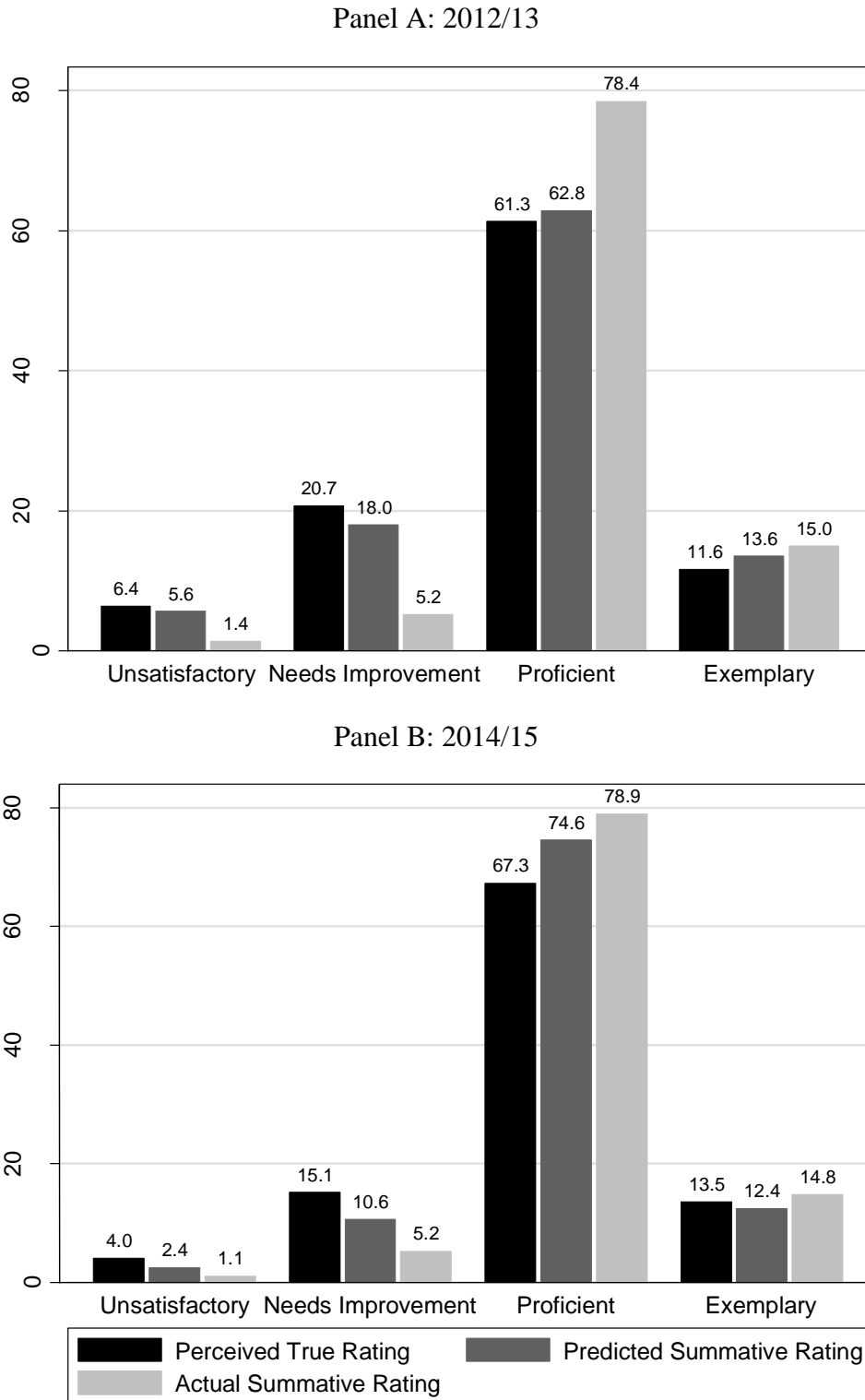
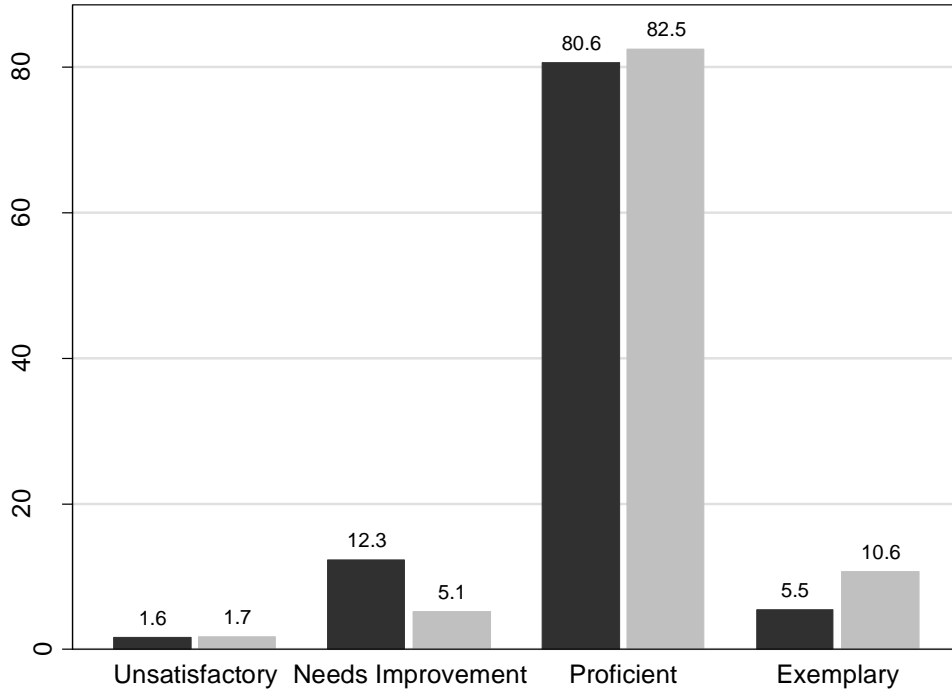


Figure 4: The perceived, predicted and actual distribution of teacher evaluation ratings in evaluators' schools in the first (Panel A) and third (Panel B) year of a new teacher evaluation system.

*Note:* Perceived true ratings are evaluators' assessments of the actual effectiveness of all classroom teachers in their school. Predicted ratings are evaluators' estimates of the summative evaluation ratings teachers in their school will receive at the end of the school year. Actual ratings are the summative evaluation ratings assigned to teachers in their school at the end of the school year. Bars for perceived and predicted ratings represent averages across all evaluators who had complete survey data and could be linked to school evaluation data. Bars for actual evaluation ratings represent a weighted average of the percentage of teacher to receive a given performance evaluation rating across the schools represented in our evaluator sample. Weights are derived based on the number of evaluators per school that completed the survey. This approach allows for a direct comparison between evaluators' average perceptions and predictions to the actual performance ratings. The samples consisted of 107 evaluators in 2012/13 and 157 evaluators in 2014/15.

Panel A: 2012/13



Panel B: 2014/15

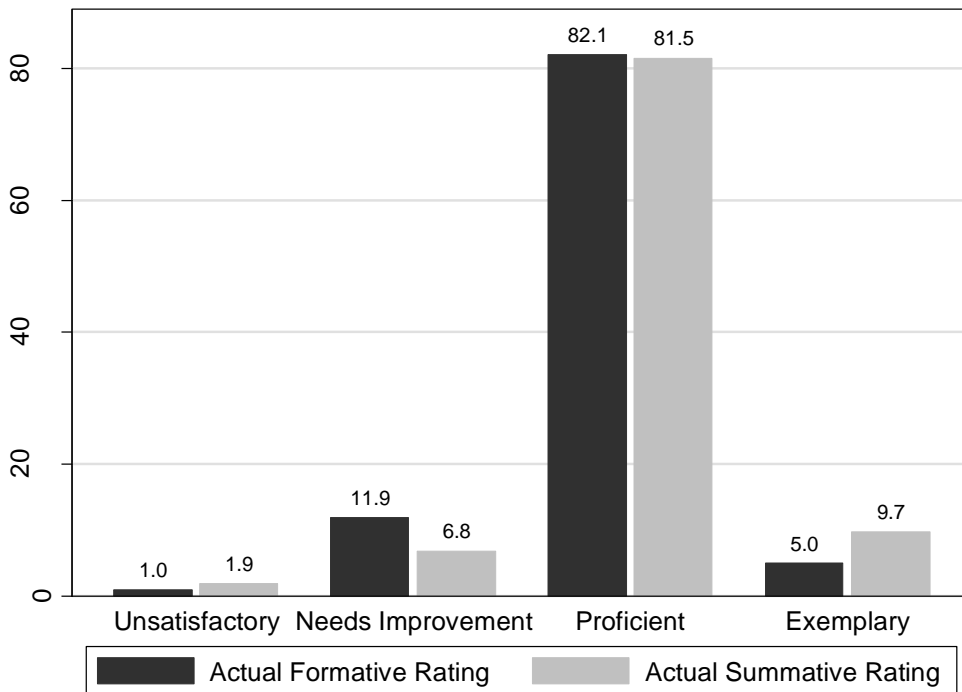


Figure 5: The actual distribution of formative and summative teacher evaluation ratings in evaluators' schools in the first (Panel A) and third (Panel B) year of a new teacher evaluation system among all teachers who received both rating.



*Note:* The distribution of summative ratings does not match in Figure 4 and Figure 5 because Figure 5 uses a restricted sample of teachers who have both formative and summative ratings. In 2012/13 79% of teachers received both formative and summative ratings. In 2014/15 only 58% of teachers received both ratings. See notes for Figure 4 for further details.

Appendix Table A1: Background Information on State Evaluation Systems

	Arizona	Colorado	Connecticut	Delaware	Florida	Georgia	Hawaii	Idaho
Year of Full Implementation	2015-2016	2015-2016	2016-2017	2012-2013	2011-2012	2014-2015	2013-2014	2013-2014
Year of Data Used	2014-2015	2014-2015	2012-2013*	2013-2014	2015-2016	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014
Evaluation System Structure	district designed w/ state criteria	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	statewide	district designed w/ state criteria	statewide	statewide	district designed w/ state criteria
Race to the Top Winner	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Number of Performance Categories	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
% Below Proficient	7.0	4.2	5.0	1.0	2.2	2.0	0.7	2.2
% Above Proficient	48.0	95.8	23.0	48.0	97.8	6.4	35.7	15.0
% in Category 1 (bottom)	1.0	0.1	<1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.2
% in Category 2	6.0	4.1	4.0	1.0	2.0	2.0	0.6	2.0
% in Category 3	45.0	58.1	73.0	51.0	52.0	91.5	63.5	82.8
% in Category 4	48.0	37.7	23.0	48.0	45.9	6.4	35.7	15.0
% in Category 5 (top)								
Name of Category 1 (bottom)	Ineffective	Ineffective	Below Standard	Ineffective	Unsatisfactory	Ineffective	Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Name of Category 2	Developing	Partially Effective	Developing	Needs Improvement	Developing / Needs Improvement	Needs Development	Marginal	Basic
Name of Category 3	Effective	Effective	Proficient	Effective	Effective	Proficient	Effective	Proficient
Name of Category 4	Highly Effective	Highly Effective	Exemplary	Highly Effective	Highly Effective	Exemplary	Highly Effective	Distinguished
Name of Category 5 (top)								

Notes: \* Represents states for which only pilot data are available. Data on evaluation system structures are from state Department of Education reports and the National Council on Teacher Quality 2015 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. See state performance evaluation data sources below for specific sources.

Appendix Table A1 Continued: Background Information on State Evaluation Systems

	Indiana	Kansas	Louisiana	Maryland	Massachusetts	Michigan	New Jersey	New Mexico
Year of Full Implementation	2012-2013	2014-2015	2012-2013	2013-2014	2013-2014	2018-2019	2013-2014	2013-2014
Year of Data Used	2014-2015	2014-2015	2014-2015	2014-2015	2014-2015	2015-2016	2014-2015	2015-2016
Evaluation System Structure	district designed w/ state criteria	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	district designed w/ state criteria	district designed w/ state criteria	district designed w/ state criteria
Race to the Top Winner	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Number of Performance Categories	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	5
% Below Proficient	2.2	11.1	7.0	2.6	4.9	2.4	1.6	28.7
% Above Proficient	44.1	32.4	48.0	44.6	8.9	41.8	33.8	28.6
% in Category 1 (bottom)	0.4	0.7	<1	2.6	0.5	0.4	0.2	5.4
% in Category 2	1.8	10.4	6.0	52.8	4.4	2.0	1.4	23.3
% in Category 3	53.7	56.5	46.0	44.6	86.2	55.8	64.6	42.7
% in Category 4	44.1	32.4	48.0		8.9	41.8	33.8	24.8
% in Category 5 (top)								3.8
Name of Category 1 (bottom)	Ineffective	Ineffective	Ineffective	Ineffective	Unsatisfactory	Ineffective	Ineffective	Ineffective
Name of Category 2	Improvement Necessary	Developing	Effective: Emerging	Effective	Needs Improvement	Minimally Effective	Partially Effective	Minimally Effective
Name of Category 3	Effective	Effective	Effective: Proficient	Highly Effective	Proficient	Effective	Effective	Effective
Name of Category 4	Highly Effective	Highly Effective	Highly Effective		Exemplary	Highly Effective	Highly Effective	Highly Effective
Name of Category 5 (top)								Exemplary

Notes: \* Represents states for which only pilot data are available. Data on evaluation system structures are from state Department of Education reports and the National Council on Teacher Quality 2015 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. See state performance evaluation data sources below for specific sources.

Appendix Table A1 Continued: Background Information on State Evaluation Systems

	New York	North Carolina	Ohio	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Rhode Island	Tennessee	Washington
Year of Full Implementation	2012-2013	2011-2012	2015-2016	2015-2016	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012	2015-2016
Year of Data Used	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014~	2013-2014	2014-2015	2014-2015*
Evaluation System Structure	district designed w/ state criteria	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	district designed w/ state criteria	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	statewide /approved alternative	statewide
Race to the Top Winner	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Number of Performance Categories	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	4
% Below Proficient	5.0	2.8	3.7	11.7	1.4	1.7	11.4	3.5
% Above Proficient	39.8	52.8	58.1	10.8	18.6	56.6	62.2	26.2
% in Category 1 (bottom)	0.8	0.5	0.1	0.6	0.2	0.4	0.7	0.2
% in Category 2	4.2	2.3	3.6	11.1	1.2	1.3	10.7	3.3
% in Category 3	55.3	44.9	38.2	77.6	80.0	41.7	26.4	70.3
% in Category 4	39.8	45.0	58.1	10.8	18.6	56.6	34.0	26.2
% in Category 5 (top)		7.7					28.2	
Name of Category 1 (bottom)	Ineffective	Not Demonstrated	Ineffective	Level 1	Failing	Ineffective	Sig. Below Expectations	Unsatisfactory
Name of Category 2	Developing	Developing	Developing	Level 2	Needs Improvement	Developing	Below Expectations	Basic
Name of Category 3	Effective	Proficient	Skilled	Level 3	Proficient	Effective	At expectations	Proficient
Name of Category 4	Highly Effective	Accomplished	Accomplished	Level 4	Distinguished	Highly Effective	Above Expectations	Distinguished
Name of Category 5 (top)		Distinguished					Sig. Above Expectations	

Notes: \* Represents states for which only pilot data are available. ~ indicates data were calculated with incomplete information. Data on evaluation system structures are from state Department of Education reports and the National Council on Teacher Quality 2015 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. See state performance evaluation data sources below for specific sources.

## Appendix A

### State Performance Evaluation Data Sources

#### Arizona

Received information from Warren Shillingburg, Education Program Specialist, through personal email correspondence on May 5, 2016. Information not publicly available.

#### Colorado

Colorado DOE. (2017). Schoolview Data Center. Staff -> Teachers -> Effectiveness. Retrieved from

[https://edx.cde.state.co.us/SchoolView/DataCenter/reports.jsp?\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_afLoop=551892207474223&\\_adf.ctrl-state=5tgksgm5\\_4](https://edx.cde.state.co.us/SchoolView/DataCenter/reports.jsp?_afWindowMode=0&_afLoop=551892207474223&_adf.ctrl-state=5tgksgm5_4)

#### Connecticut

Connecticut DOE. (2015). 2015 SEED Handbook: Connecticut's System for Educator Evaluation and Development. Retrieved from [http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015\\_SEED\\_Handbook\\_11\\_24\\_15.pdf](http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015_SEED_Handbook_11_24_15.pdf)

Donaldson, M., Cobb, C., LeChasseur, K., Gabriel, R., Gonzales, R., Woulfin, S., & Makuch, A. (2014, January 1). An Evaluation of the Pilot Implementation of Connecticut's System of Educator Evaluation and Development. *University Of Connecticut Center for Education Policy Analysis, Neag School of Education*. Retrieved from

[http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Neag\\_Final\\_SEED\\_Report\\_1-1-2014.pdf](http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Neag_Final_SEED_Report_1-1-2014.pdf)

#### Delaware

Received information from Lauren Schneider, Director of Educator Effectiveness, through personal email correspondence on Dec 15, 2016. Information not publicly available.

#### Florida

Florida DOE. (n.d.). Personnel Evaluation. 1. Retrieved from <http://www.fldoe.org/teaching/performance-evaluation/>

#### Georgia

Received information from Michele Purvis, Program Manager, through personal email correspondence on Dec 16, 2016. Information not publicly available.

#### Hawaii

Hawaii DOE. (2015). Educator Effectiveness System Manual. Retrieved from

<http://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/DOE%20Forms/Educator%20Effectivness/EESManual.pdf>

Kalani, N. (2015, October 26). Teachers' Evaluation Grade. *Star Advertiser*. Retrieved from <http://www.pressreader.com/usa/honolulu-star-advertiser/20151026/282621736573997/TextView>.

US DOE. (2015, April). Race to the Top: Hawaii Report Year 4: 2013-2014. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-report/hirttyrrpt42015.pdf>.

### **Idaho**

Corbin, C. (2015, June 12). Teachers Got Identical Evaluations Across 32 Idaho Districts, Complicating Career Ladder Pay Plan. *Idaho Statesman*. Retrieved from <http://www.idahostatesman.com/2015/06/12/3848480/teachers-got-identical-evaluations.html>.

### **Indiana**

Ritz, G. (n.d.). Staff Performance Evaluation Results 2014-2015. *Indiana Department of Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/evaluations/2014-15-er-data-presentation-sboe.pdf>

- Note: The original data presented in the DOE report included distribution percentages that included all teachers, not just ones who were evaluated. 8.64% of the teachers were not evaluated. Data in our study was adjusted to only include teachers who were evaluated.

### **Kansas**

Received information from Sarah Vanderpool, Data Compliance Officer, through personal email correspondence and data request on July 7, 2016. Information not publicly available.

- Note: Districts across Kansas use different evaluation systems with 3, 4 and 5 rating categories. The majority of districts use the four-category rating system we report. We combined the top 2 rating categories in systems with 5 rating categories.

### **Louisiana**

Louisiana DOE. (2015). *2014-2015 Compass Teacher Results by LEA* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/compass>.

- Note: These data are available if you download the spreadsheet called “2014-2015 Compass Teacher Results by LEA” Under headline “2014-2015 Compass Reports” from the link above.

### **Maryland**

Smith, J.R. (2015, October 27). Teacher and Principal Evaluation Data: Effectiveness Rating from SY 2014-2015. Retrieved from

<http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/boardagenda/10272015/Tabs-F1-F2-TeacherPrincipalEvaluationReportUpdate.pdf>.

- Note: This document is no longer available but can be access through the internet archives (.http://web.archive.org)

### **Massachusetts**

Massachusetts Department of Elementary of Secondary Education. (2015). *2014-15 Educator Evaluation Performance* [Data File]. Retrieved from

[http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state\\_report/educatorevaluationperformance.aspx](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/educatorevaluationperformance.aspx).

- Note: Under “Report Type” tab, select District. Under “Year” tab, select 2014-2015. Under “Group Type” tab, select Teachers.

## **Michigan**

Michigan DOE. (2016). *Educator Effectiveness Snapshot Statewide: 2015-2016/Teachers* [Data File]. Retrieved from

<https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/StaffingInformation/NewEducatorEffectiveness/EducatorEffectiveness.aspx>.

## **New Jersey**

New Jersey DOE. (2016). 2014 - 2015 Final Educator Evaluation Implementation Report. Retrieved from

<http://www.nj.gov/education/AchieveNJ/resources/201415AchieveNJImplementationReport.pdf>

## **New Mexico**

New Mexico Public Education Department. (2016). 2016 Teacher Evaluation Release. Retrieved from [http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/NMTeachDocs/Toolbox/2015-2016 NMTEACH Briefing.pdf](http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/NMTeachDocs/Toolbox/2015-2016%20NMTEACH%20Briefing.pdf).

## **New York**

New York State Education Department. (2015). *Teacher Evaluation Database* (Data File).

Retrieved from <http://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

- Note: Data accessed is titled “Teacher Evaluation Database.” The percentage distribution was calculated using the number of teachers in each rating category over the total number of teachers in the downloaded dataset.

## **North Carolina**

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.). *North Carolina Teacher Effectiveness Data for the 2014-2015 School Year* (Data File). Retrieved from

[http://apps.schools.nc.gov/pls/apex/f?p=155:5:1396130035911001::::P5\\_YEAR:2014-15%20School%20Year](http://apps.schools.nc.gov/pls/apex/f?p=155:5:1396130035911001::::P5_YEAR:2014-15%20School%20Year)

- Note: Evaluation ratings are presented in five standards, data in our study is taken as an average of percent scores for each of the five standards.

## **Ohio**

Received information from Maxwell Hennon, Data Manager, through personal email correspondence on December 30, 2016. Information not publicly available.

- Note: The original data presented in the DOE report included distribution percentages that included all teachers, not just ones who were evaluated. 2.56% of the teachers were not evaluated. Data in our study was adjusted to only include teachers who were evaluated.

## **Oregon**

Received information from Tim Boyd, Director of District and School Effectiveness, through personal email correspondence on May 2, 2016. Information not publicly available.

## **Pennsylvania**

Chute, E. (2015, June 15). How Qualified are Pennsylvania's Teachers? The Numbers Say Extremely. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2015/06/15/New-rating-system-finds-nearly-all-Pennsylvania-teachers-are-qualified/stories/201506080003>.

- Note: Data is for the 2013-2014 SY and may not be exact due to inconsistent reporting of percentage teachers in a category versus number of teachers in a category. The data in our spreadsheet is an estimation based on the information reported in this article.

### **Rhode Island**

Rhode Island DOE. (2014, October). RI Educator Evaluation Systems: Improving Teaching and Learning. Retrieved from [http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Evaluation/Education-Eval-Main-Page/FER\\_Year2\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Evaluation/Education-Eval-Main-Page/FER_Year2_Report_Final.pdf).

### **Tennessee**

Received information from Laura Booker through personal email correspondence on April 15, 2016. Information not publicly available.

### **Washington**

Weber, G. (2016, June 14). Examination of the School Employee Evaluation Survey. *American Institutes for Research*. 6. Retrieved from [http://www.k12.wa.us/TPEP/pubdocs/AIR\\_Analysis\\_2014-15\\_SEES\\_Data.pdf](http://www.k12.wa.us/TPEP/pubdocs/AIR_Analysis_2014-15_SEES_Data.pdf).

## **Target States for Which Data Were not Available**

### **Alaska**

The state of Alaska does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

### **Arkansas**

Arkansas is in the process of collecting data, so it is not yet publicly available.

### **Illinois**

Illinois is in the process of collecting data, so it is not yet publicly available.

### **Iowa**

The state of Iowa does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

### **Maine**

The state of Maine has not yet collected teacher evaluation data.

### **Minnesota**

The state of Minnesota does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

### **Missouri**



In Missouri, teacher evaluation systems are a local decision and while the data is collected by the state, it is not aggregated. The state has information on how many performance levels each district has and the percentage of teachers rated in each category, but the cut off score for proficiency is up to the district.

**North Dakota**

The state of North Dakota does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

**South Dakota**

The state of South Dakota does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

**Utah**

The state of Utah does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

**Virginia**

In Virginia, information is available at the district level for certain school years but is not aggregated to the state level.

**West Virginia**

While West Virginia does collect data on teacher evaluation scores from each district, the state has not yet consolidated the data on a statewide level. They are in the process of developing a dashboard to collect teacher evaluation information on a statewide level that is not ready for release.

**Wisconsin**

The state of Wisconsin does not collect or aggregate teacher evaluation data.

## Appendix B

### Evaluator Survey Items

- 1) In your opinion, what percent of teachers at your school perform at an Unsatisfactory, Needs Improvement, Proficient, or Exemplary level as defined by the XXXX rubric? Your total must add up to 100%.

Unsatisfactory	_____%
Needs Improvement	_____%
Proficient	_____%
Exemplary	_____%
Total	100%

Note: The name of the evaluation system is redacted to maintain the confidentiality of the district.

- 2) Based on your best guess, what percent of teachers at your school will receive summative performance ratings of Unsatisfactory, Needs Improvement, Proficient, or Exemplary at the end of the academic year? Your total must add up to 100%.

Unsatisfactory	_____%
Needs Improvement	_____%
Proficient	_____%
Exemplary	_____%
Total	100%