A pilot evaluation system in Chicago would grade teachers on a much tougher curve, according to a policy brief released Tuesday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago.

Under the new evaluation system, 8 percent of teachers included in the pilot sample received at least one unsatisfactory rating, defined as doing harm to students. To compare, just 0.3 percent of teachers in CPS had been rated as unsatisfactory under the old system.

The pilot program, called the Excellence in Teaching Project, is the proposed replacement for a checklist that has been used in CPS for 30 years. Under the checklist, nearly all teachers received one of the two highest rankings, rendering the system virtually meaningless.

CPS, which implemented its pilot evaluation program in 2008-09, has been at the forefront of a national movement to improve teacher evaluation. The movement is a response to the growing consensus that the way most states and districts evaluate teachers is unfair and ineffective. Touching on critical issues such as hiring, firing, compensation and career advancement, teacher evaluation is a controversial and complex topic. The CCSR brief, *Rethinking Teacher Evaluation: Findings from the First Year of the Excellence in Teaching Project in the Chicago Public Schools*, provides relevant, objective information for practitioners and policymakers contemplating how best to support the design and development of effective teacher evaluation systems.
This brief summarizes findings from the first year of CCSR’s multi-year study of the district’s Excellence in Teaching Project. The year-one work explores the reliability of the evaluation system, principal and teacher perceptions of the system, and how it is being implemented at the school level.

Key findings from the brief include:

**Principals had no trouble identifying unsatisfactory teaching practices. However, when using the high end of the scale, principals inflated their ratings.**

That is, principals and trained external observers agreed about unsatisfactory practice, but principals were much more likely than external observers to identify instruction as distinguished. Principals acknowledged this tendency, pointing to the need to preserve relationships with teachers who had previously received the highest possible evaluation rating.

**Just over half of the principals were highly enthusiastic about the pilot evaluation process.**

Fifty-seven percent of principals had positive attitudes about the new system, perceived teacher buy-in as high, and said they saw changes in instructional practice stem from the evaluation system. A little less than half (43 percent) of the principals were characterized by mixed to mostly negative attitudes about the new system. These principals generally said that they were “already doing” evaluation in the “right way” and were more likely to suggest that they “just knew” if teachers were good or bad. For this initiative to be successful at scale, principal buy-in will be critical.

**Overall, principals and trained experts use the rating scale consistently.**

To understand the reliability of the system (i.e. whether it can be used consistently from one observation to the next), principals and highly trained external observers conducted simultaneous classroom observations but assigned ratings independently. Considered in aggregate, there is no significant difference between the ratings given by principals and those given by external observers. This is important information for CPS as it considers whether the new system can be used fairly to make decisions about hiring, firing and promotion.

The full year-one report is available as a working paper at [http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/Joyce_TE_yr1_finaldoc.pdf](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/Joyce_TE_yr1_finaldoc.pdf).