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Teacher Evaluation in CPS: REACH Ratings and Teacher Mobility

UCHICAGO Consortium
on School Research

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States and school districts across the country have dramatically changed teacher evaluation systems in the past decade, with the goal of improving student learning and outcomes. Historically, evaluations have been simple—some as simple as a checklist—and almost all teachers received high ratings. Now evaluations are more robust and typically include a combination of teacher practice and student performance measures.

Responding to an Illinois law that took effect in 2010, the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA), Chicago Public Schools (CPS) created and implemented the REACH (Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago's Students) educator evaluation and support system. REACH was piloted in 2012–13. It is still being implemented as of the 2019–20 school year, and will continue to be implemented through June 2024, per the teachers' contract agreed upon in fall 2019. The evaluation system includes classroom observation ratings of teacher practice, as well as up to two student growth measures.

The stated goal of REACH is to provide valuable feedback to improve educators' professional practice and increase student learning. As with any professional evaluation system, a secondary use of REACH is to inform personnel decisions, such as classroom assignments, retention, tenure, remediation plans, and dismissal processes.

In line with nationwide trends, almost all teachers in CPS received high evaluation ratings prior to REACH, and there was concern that such high levels of teacher performance were not translating into high levels of student learning. There was the

potential that a more accurate rating system could make it easier to recognize and retain strong teachers while encouraging low-performing teachers to improve or exit. In light of this context, this brief answers the following research questions:

- **What proportion of teachers received high and low ratings under REACH, and how did that change over time?**
- **How many low-rated teachers exited CPS or switched schools under REACH, compared to high-rated teachers?**
- **How have classroom assignments within the school changed under REACH?**

This brief is one in a series of three that extend previous research from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) on early REACH implementation¹ and investigate the REACH evaluation system five years after the 2012–13 rollout. The other two briefs address questions about **teacher and principal perceptions of REACH** and **evaluator feedback and teachers' instructional change.**²

1 See <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/teach-eval> for the full body of Consortium research on REACH and other previous teacher evaluations in Chicago and Illinois.

2 See <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/teacher-evaluation-in-CPS-REACH-five-years-in> for all three briefs in this series.

REACH: Overall Ratings and Performance-Based Sanctions

The REACH system consists of a teacher practice measure that uses a classroom observations and feedback frameworks adapted from the Danielson Framework for Teaching,³ and two student learning measures: 1) performance tasks (student growth on a district-developed assessment) and 2) value-added measures (or “VAMs:” student growth on the NWEA assessment with statistical adjustments for student characteristics, which are available for reading and/or math teachers in grades 3–8). Performance on these three measures are combined into a final, summative evaluation rating: Unsatisfactory, Developing, Proficient, or Excellent. The teacher practice measure, based on classroom observations, is weighted most heavily in the summative rating.

Teachers who receive an Unsatisfactory rating are subject to several sanctions:

- Non-tenured teachers with Unsatisfactory ratings are subject to performance-based layoffs, do not make progress toward tenure, and do not receive formal supports like specialized attention from an instructional coach.
- Tenured teachers with Unsatisfactory ratings are placed on a remediation plan where they receive supports, including weekly meetings with a consulting teacher. They have 90 days to demonstrate proficiency before being subject to dismissal.

Additionally, there are stakes for teachers receiving a Developing rating:

- Non-tenured teachers are subject to performance-based layoffs and may be recommended for non-renewal the following year.
- Tenured teachers are required to have a Professional Development Plan (PDP) for the following school year.
 - If tenured teachers receive ratings for two consecutive years within the Developing Emerging range (a low-end category of Developing), they receive an Unsatisfactory rating and are subject to the stakes outlined above.

For more details on REACH implementation, starting with the 2012-13 pilot year, see related brief in this series, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: Perceptions of REACH Implementation, 5 Years In*.

Data Used In This Brief

The findings in this brief are based on:

- CPS personnel data, including the teacher’s school of employment, which allowed us to track teacher mobility from 2012-13 through 2017-18
- CPS REACH data, including summative ratings, classroom observation ratings, and student growth measures, from 2012-13 through 2016-17

³ Danielson (2009). This framework is used as a guide for coaching and mentoring teachers in schools nationwide.

Teacher Ratings Across CPS

Nearly 9 in 10 CPS Teachers Received One of the Top Two Evaluation Ratings in 2016-17

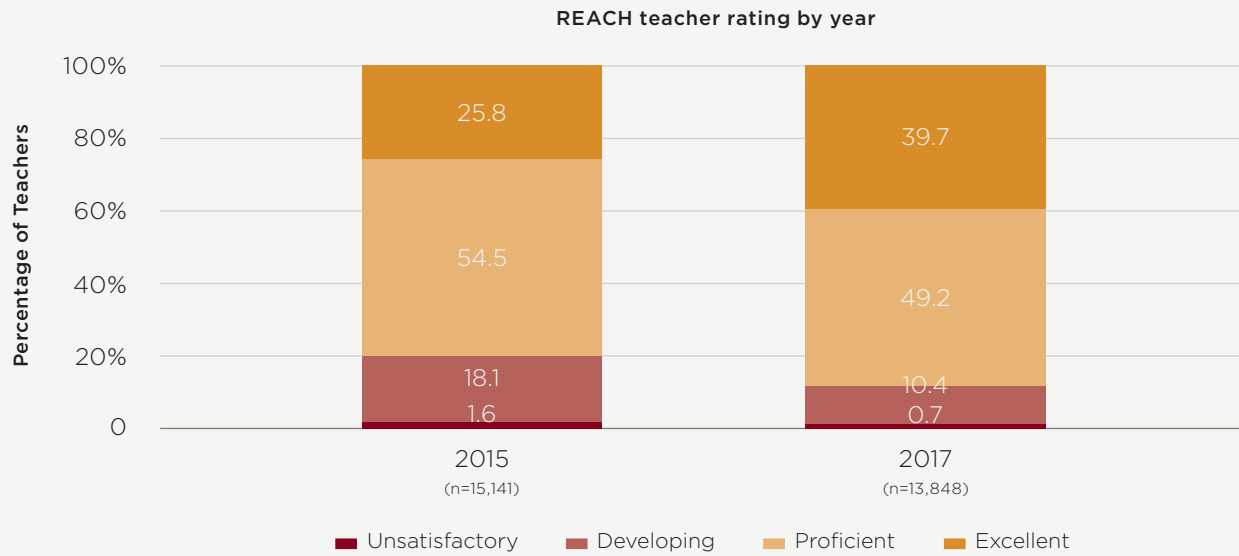
Across the nation, education reformers hoped that redesigned teacher evaluation ratings would reliably identify lower-performing and higher-performing teachers, so that principals and district leaders would know who was persistently performing at very low levels and needed removal. National attention has been paid to the fact that, even after widescale reforms to teacher evaluation systems, in most states fewer than 1 percent of teachers received the lowest evaluation rating.⁴ In this Chicago-focused study, we found:

- In fall 2017, most teachers received ratings in the top two categories: Proficient (49 percent) or Excellent (40 percent) (see Figure 1).
 - Very few teachers received ratings in the lowest category, Unsatisfactory (0.7 percent; N=97 teachers). These teachers were subject to sanctions, including dismissals or improvement plans.
- About 10 percent received Developing ratings. Tenured teachers with this rating received additional professional development support from the district, whereas non-tenured teachers with this rating were subject to dismissal.
- REACH evaluation ratings in CPS increased over time. In the first year that all teachers received a rating (2014-15), 26 percent of teachers received the highest rating; two years later (2016-17), 40 percent did (see Figure 1).
 - The trend of increased ratings was observed across all types of schools (e.g., those with high test scores and those with low test scores) and all types of teachers (e.g., those with less experience and those with more experience).

4 Kraft & Gilmour (2017).

FIGURE 1

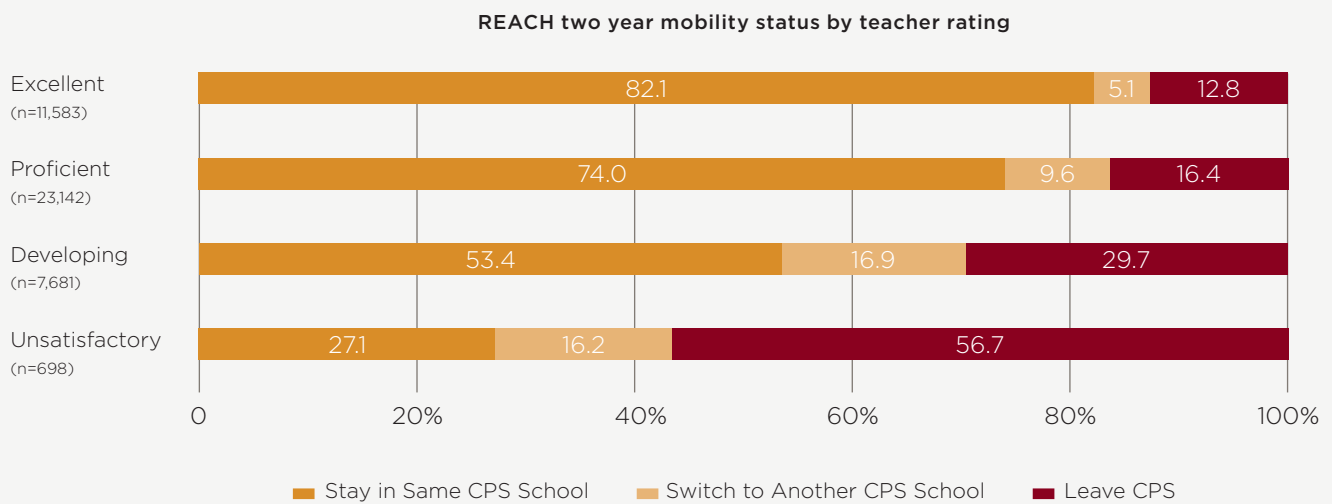
Few Teachers Received Low Evaluation Ratings, and Ratings Went Up Over Time



Note: The data are limited to teachers with final ratings in each year. Most tenured teachers are on a biennial cycle. We focused our analysis on 2015 and 2017 because all teachers were due to receive ratings in those years.

FIGURE 2

Teachers with Low Evaluation Ratings Exited the District at Higher Rates than Teachers with High Evaluation Ratings



Note: The data are limited to teachers who received final ratings in each year, from fall 2013 to fall 2017. We look at teacher exit from a school or the district at the end of the year after they received their REACH rating and after most Unsatisfactory-rated tenured teachers would have completed their 90-day remediation period.

Evaluation Ratings and Teacher Turnover

The Lower the Evaluation Rating, the More Likely Teachers were to Leave Their Schools

Evaluation systems are used to help organizational leaders identify, develop, and retain strong talent, while encouraging low-performers to improve quickly or exit their role. We examined whether CPS teacher turnover patterns differed for teachers with higher and lower REACH ratings and found:

- Over one-half (57 percent) of teachers who received Unsatisfactory ratings in the first five years of REACH exited CPS by the year after they received their rating,⁵ and an additional 16 percent switched schools within CPS.
 - Thus, about one-quarter of teachers who received the lowest REACH rating remained in their same CPS school the following year (see Figure 2).
- Nearly one-third (30 percent) of teachers who received Developing ratings in the first five years of REACH exited by the following year, and an additional 17 percent switched schools within CPS.
 - Thus, just under one-half of Developing-rated teachers left their schools, and 53 percent remained.

- The teachers who were most likely to stay in their school from one year to the next were rated Excellent (the highest category): 82 percent of teachers who received Excellent ratings remained in their school the year after they received the rating, as did 74 percent of teachers who received Proficient ratings (see Figure 2).
- Because very few teachers received an Unsatisfactory REACH rating, most teachers who exited CPS had Developing or Proficient ratings.

There are a few explanations for why a teacher with an Unsatisfactory rating might not exit the district. First, tenured teachers are given an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in their practice (this is the 90-day remediation period). If teachers show a level of improvement, they are no longer subject to dismissal. Second, some teachers may take leaves of absence, potentially extending the window in which they must demonstrate proficiency. Additionally, principals may feel that it is too difficult to find a replacement teacher if the school or teaching assignment is hard to staff. Finally, there is also an official process for teachers to appeal their ratings.

⁵ We note that teachers and, therefore, administrators, do not receive final evaluation ratings until the fall after their evaluation period ends. This means that there is an additional year between the end of the evaluation period and the exit data shown in this brief, and it is during this year that the final ratings are received.

VAM Scores and Teacher Assignments

Teachers with Low VAMs were Less Likely than Teachers with High VAMs to be Teaching in a Tested Grade/Subject the Subsequent Year

Finally, evaluation ratings have the potential to inform teaching assignments within a school. For example, a principal may notice that a teacher is struggling in a certain grade level and reassign that teacher in the following year, or teachers may request reassignment themselves. We looked to see how many teachers with relatively high or low performance in terms of student growth, as captured by VAM, returned to a tested subject/grade level in the following year.⁶ We find that teachers with low VAM scores were nearly twice as likely to teach in a non-tested subject/grade level the following year.⁷

- Most teachers with high VAMs (77 percent) or average VAMs (74 percent) were still teaching in a tested grade level/subject the following year (see Figure 3).
- Teachers with low VAMs who remained in the same school were much less likely to teach in a tested grade level/subject the subsequent year (47 percent).

We do not know exactly what principals considered when making these assignment decisions, and we cannot identify with our data whether administrators used REACH ratings to inform classroom assignments. We also do not know to what extent teacher preferences were taken into account in reassignments. Thus, a principal may have noticed low VAM scores⁸ and chosen to reassign a teacher. Or, principals could also have been making decisions based on other non-evaluative factors that were correlated with VAM, but not VAM per se—such as school-based or informal measures of student learning. Ultimately, what we do know is that teachers with lower VAMs were more likely to have different teaching assignments the next year. We also know that this finding is not unique to CPS teachers. Researchers in another large school district also found that teachers with low VAMs were more likely to experience switches to their assignments that moved them out of tested grades and subjects.⁹

6 VAM is a student growth metric constructed from student growth on the NWEA with statistical adjustments for student characteristics, which is available for reading and/or math teachers in grades 3–8.

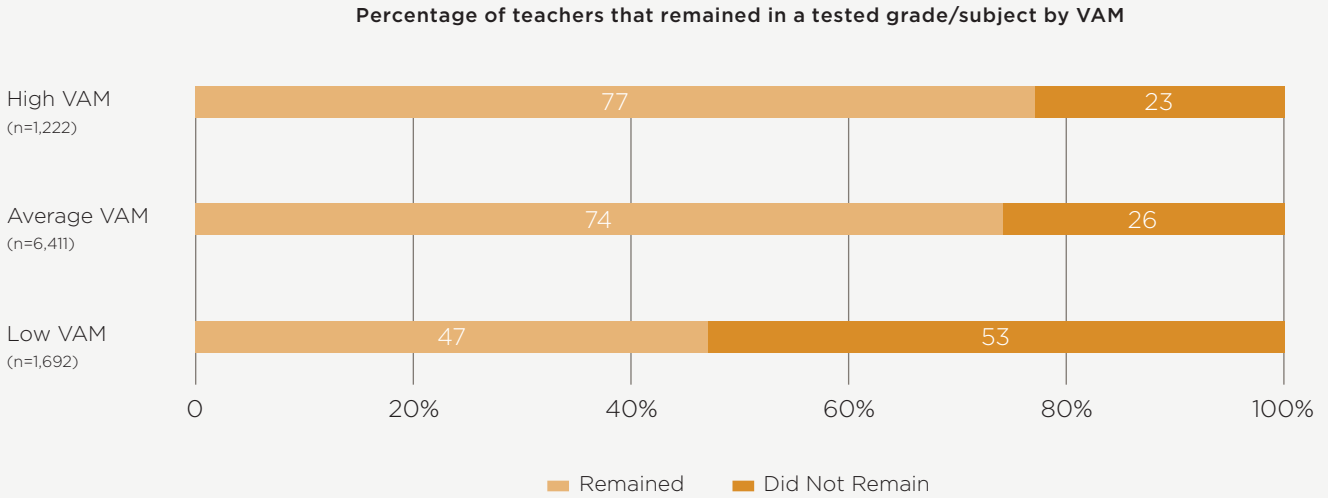
7 Due to the nature of the administrative data, we could not track whether a teacher's subject or grade-level assignment was stable over time. Therefore, we focus on VAMs because whether a teacher has a VAM from one year to the next is our best proxy for knowing who changed assignments.

8 VAM scores are reported the fall following the measured school year, a time point that is after most teacher assignments are confirmed; principals would therefore be using lagged VAM data to inform these decisions.

9 Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb (2017).

FIGURE 3

Fewer than Half of Teachers with Low Value-Added Measures Returned to a Tested Grade Level/Subject the Following Year



Note: High VAM indicates that a teacher had a VAM that was greater than or equal to one standard deviation above the mean. Average VAM indicates that a teacher had a VAM less than one standard deviation above the mean, but higher than one standard deviation below the mean. Low VAM indicates that a teacher had a VAM lower than or equal to one standard deviation below the mean. We restrict the analysis to teachers who are in the same school both years, because teacher assignments might naturally change with mobility across schools.

Implications

REACH was implemented with the secondary purpose of improving school leaders' ability to recognize and retain strong teachers, while encouraging low-performing teachers to improve or exit. Findings from the first five years of REACH show its impact on various personnel decisions and raise additional questions about the relationship between teacher ratings and mobility.

The vast majority of teachers were rated in the top two categories, and REACH ratings increased over time — but it remains unclear why. This could indicate that the quality of teaching is improving, which would be consistent with the main intent of REACH, as well as recent attention focused on CPS's sizable improvements in educational outcomes.¹⁰ Additionally, both administrators and teachers may have internalized the classroom observation framework and focused on improving those aspects of teaching. However, this trend could also mean that some teachers are receiving ratings that are not in line with their actual level of teaching, given that the distinguished level of classroom practice is a very high bar. In interviews with administrators, they pointed to the importance of maintaining relationships with teachers and wanting to reward teachers who had been making efforts and demonstrating improvements with higher observation ratings. But if some teachers' ratings were indeed higher than what practice warranted, they may not have received the information or targeted supports they needed to improve their practice.

Approximately 10 percent of teachers received Unsatisfactory or Developing ratings, and therefore require substantial support in order to demonstrate consistently effective, improved teaching. These teachers need high-quality feedback, resources, and support in order for their practice to improve. Unsatisfactory teaching, as outlined in the REACH evaluation handbook, is “doing academic harm in the classroom,” and Developing teacher practice is described as “limited,” displaying a “lack of awareness” or “gaps” that may include “inaccurate or incomplete” content knowledge.¹¹ While some of the teachers with low ratings may have received supports that helped them to improve their practice, others may not have had the same opportunities or may not have shown improvement. There are real implications for these teachers' students, so district and school administrators may want to monitor their progress and improvement efforts closely.

¹⁰ Allensworth, Healey, Gwynne, & Crespin (2016); Easton, Johnson, & Sartain (2017); Reardon (2017).

¹¹ Chicago Public Schools (2019-20).

Teachers with lower ratings were more likely to exit than teachers who exhibited higher levels of performance. We don't know whether REACH itself is the cause of low-rated teachers exiting the district, nor how often low-performing teachers would have exited in the absence of the evaluation system. For example, low-performing teachers may have realized that the school or the profession was not a good match and left CPS without the presence of the evaluation system or REACH data; on the other hand, REACH data may have influenced teachers' decisions. We are currently studying the role of REACH in influencing teacher exit from the district. We are also doing more work to understand how effective new teachers to the district (or a given school) are, compared to the teachers who leave. Prior research from an earlier evaluation pilot in CPS found that new teachers had, on average, higher classroom ratings than the low-performing teachers who left the previous year.¹² Our ongoing study investigates this question in the context of REACH. If the earlier finding holds, we would expect students to experience higher-quality teaching when low-rated teachers exit the district.

Finally, switching low-performing teachers out of tested grade levels/subjects but keeping them in the district has potentially negative implications for students. We do not know the exact reason why low-rated teachers were reassigned to other grade levels/subjects at higher rates. Principals may be intentionally shifting teachers with low VAM scores into teaching assignments where students do not take standardized tests. Test score growth is used for overall school accountability ratings in CPS,¹³ and principals are held accountable for those ratings. Teachers with low VAM may also feel unsuccessful or frustrated in their classroom assignments and advocate for a change. Whatever the reasons, this switching pattern has potential implications for students. A teacher with a low VAM score may not be providing consistently strong learning opportunities for students, and may need support to do so.

¹² Sartain & Steinberg (2016).

¹³ See <https://cps.edu/Performance/Pages/PerformancePolicy.aspx> for more information on School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) measures and ratings.

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