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Teacher Evaluation in CPS: Perceptions of REACH Implementation, Five Years In

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.

This brief addresses the research question:

What are teachers' and administrators' perceptions and opinions of REACH after five years of implementation? It draws from teacher

and administrator survey reports of whether REACH influenced instructional change and student learning, the intended end goals of the policy.

A series of three briefs 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 1) **evaluator feedback and teachers' instructional change** and 2) **evaluation ratings and teacher mobility.**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.

Teacher Evaluation In CPS: A Brief History

Going back to the 1970s, CPS teachers were evaluated based on a checklist of classroom practices (see Figure 1). There were concerns that teachers needed more meaningful feedback in order to improve practice and therefore would benefit from greater administrator presence in classrooms. In 2008, CPS implemented the Excellence in Teaching Pilot (EITP) with approximately 40 elementary schools. The pilot required administrators to conduct classroom observations using a structured rubric—including pre- and post-observation conferences—and also included rigorous training for principals. Studies showed that the pilot program improved student test scores and increased exit of previously low-rated teachers.³

Shortly after EITP was implemented, CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) created REACH to comply with state legislation passed in 2010 (PERA). REACH includes two main components:

1. A teacher practice measure, using classroom observations and feedback frameworks adapted from the Danielson Framework for Teaching⁴
2. Student learning measures
 - Performance tasks: student growth on district-developed, content-specific assessments that

teachers administer to their students and grade themselves

- Available for all teachers
- Teacher-level value-added measures (or “VAMs”): constructed from student growth on the NWEA assessment, with statistical adjustments for student characteristics
 - 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.

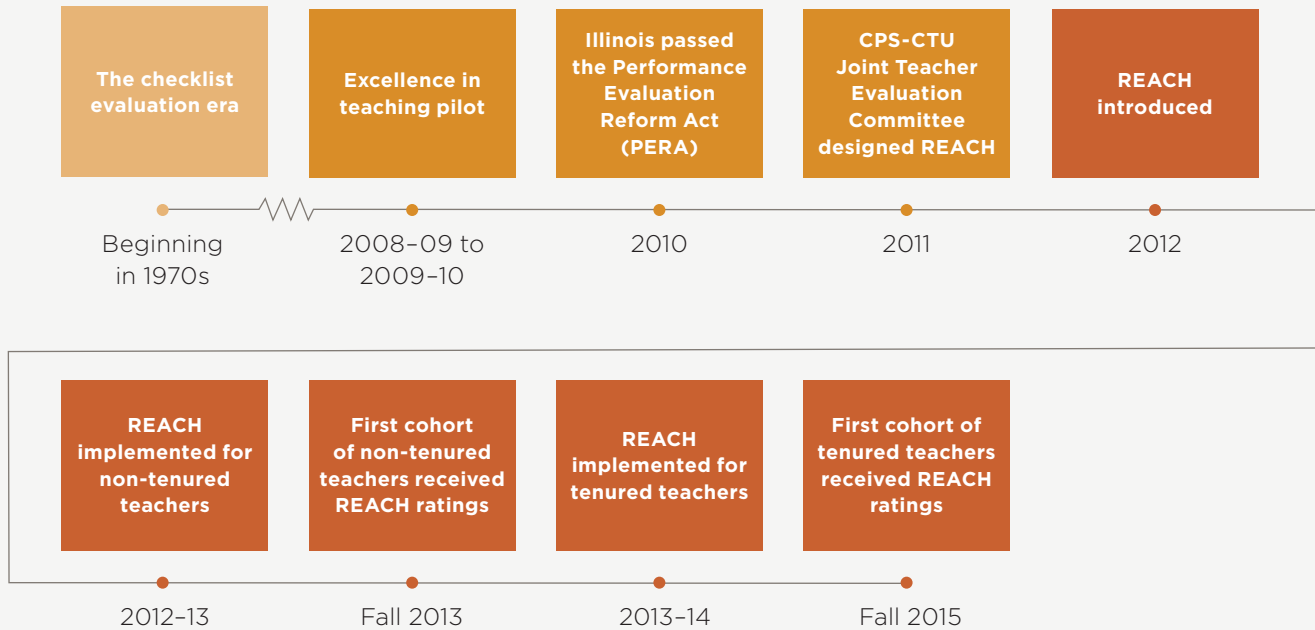
REACH was first piloted, with all non-tenured teachers, during the 2012–13 school year. In the fall of 2013, all non-tenured teachers received summative evaluation ratings. Non-tenured teachers in CPS are formally evaluated annually, while tenured teachers are typically on two-year evaluation cycles. Over the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years, tenured teachers participated in their first formal REACH observations. Because of the two-year evaluation cycles, most tenured teachers were notified of their first summative evaluation ratings in the fall of 2015.

³ Steinberg & Sartain (2015); Sartain & Steinberg (2016).

⁴ Danielson (2009). This framework is used as a guide for coaching and mentoring teachers in schools nationwide.

FIGURE 1

Timeline of Teacher Evaluation Policies and Key Events in Chicago Public Schools



In this portion of our study, we surveyed teachers and administrators about their satisfaction with REACH and about how well REACH inspired instructional improvement and informed personnel decisions, including removing low-performing teachers. Their perceptions provided insights on the first five years of REACH implementation. This study extends the previous work of the UChicago Consortium on REACH, published in 2016. At that time, REACH was relatively new and most tenured teachers had not yet experienced a full evaluation cycle nor received formal summative evaluation ratings.

Data Used In This Brief

The findings in this brief are based on districtwide surveys of CPS teachers and administrators in the spring of 2017 and 2018, along with some historical data going back to 2014. The questions asked of teachers were included on the *5Essentials* school climate survey, and the administrator responses most often came from a 2018 districtwide survey of principals and administrators. While some items remained the same over time, allowing us to compare reports of REACH implementation over time, other items changed from year to year.

In 2018, the teacher response rate was approximately 80 percent, and the administrator response rate was 63 percent.

Improved Teaching Practice and Student Learning

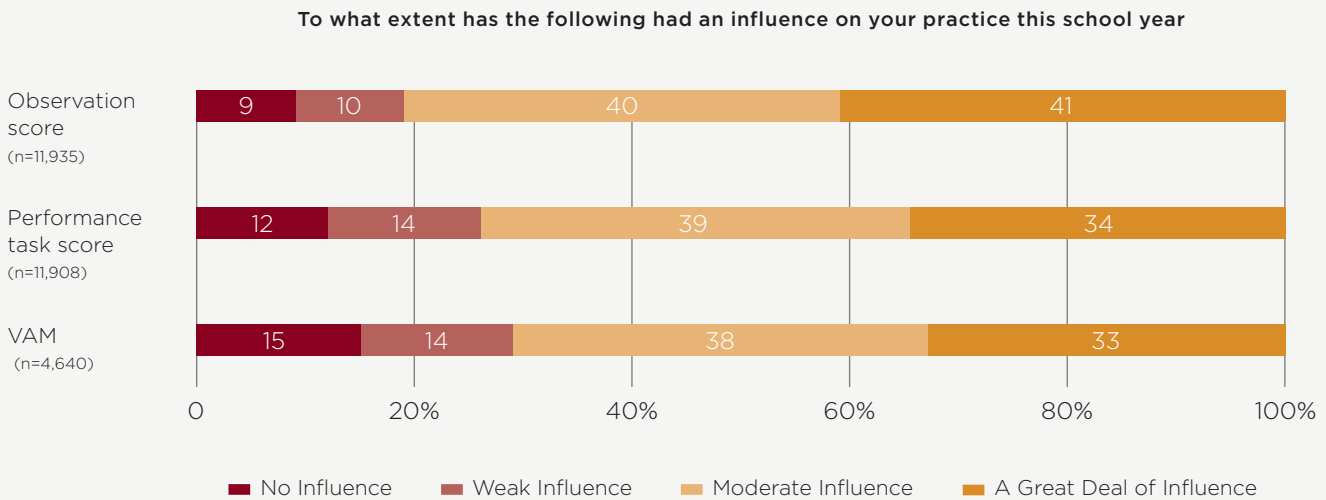
Most Teachers and Administrators Reported that REACH Improved Instructional Practice and Student Learning

The REACH evaluation system includes multiple opportunities for administrators and teachers to engage in intentional conversations about instructional practice. Teachers were partially evaluated based on their students' performance. For the subset of teachers who received a VAM score, it is notable that VAM is just a number without information about how to improve or in what areas. Performance tasks provide a bit more

information because teachers have the opportunity to learn from student responses directly. But it is through observations of their classes that teachers receive direct feedback on their teaching practice. Therefore, the classroom observation and feedback process likely has the most potential for improving teacher practice.⁵

In fact, teachers were most likely to report the observation scores as having an influence on their teaching practice. Figure 2 shows that 81 percent of teachers indicated that the observation scores had a moderate or great deal of influence on their practice. However, many teachers also reported that

FIGURE 2
Four Out of Five Teachers Reported that REACH Observation Scores had a Moderate or Great Deal of Influence on Their Practice



Note: Responses are from the teacher *5Essentials* survey administered in spring 2018. There were 11,935 respondents about observation scores, 11,908 about performance tasks, and 4,640 respondents VAMs. Only teachers who reported receiving an individual VAM were asked about VAM scores.

⁵ See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: What Makes Evaluator Feedback Useful?*, Table 1 for more details about the observation and feedback cycle.

performance tasks (74 percent) and VAMs (71 percent) moderately or greatly influenced their practice. We do not know if the changes to practice were major or minor, but most teachers reported that some aspect of the REACH evaluation system influenced their practice.

Further, both teachers and administrators generally agreed when asked if the evaluation process had helped them identify specific ways of improving practice: 83 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the system had pinpointed specific areas of improvement (see Figure 3a). Almost all administrators (93 percent) agreed or strongly

agreed that REACH had helped them identify areas of improvement for their teachers. Teachers also reported in interviews that receiving specific feedback and suggestions for improvement from their evaluators were key drivers of instructional change.⁶

Reports were slightly less positive about the effects of REACH on student learning than on instructional improvement. However, 71 percent of administrators and 69 percent of teachers still reported that REACH had improved student learning (see Figure 3b).

FIGURE 3a
Most Teachers and Administrators Agreed that REACH Helped Them Identify Specific Areas of Improvement

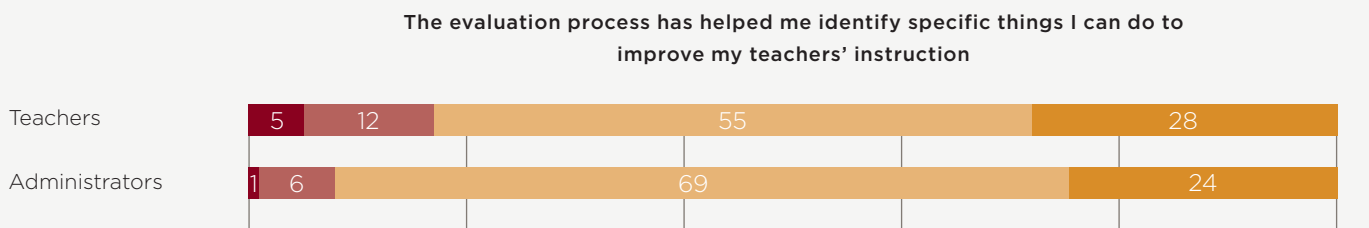
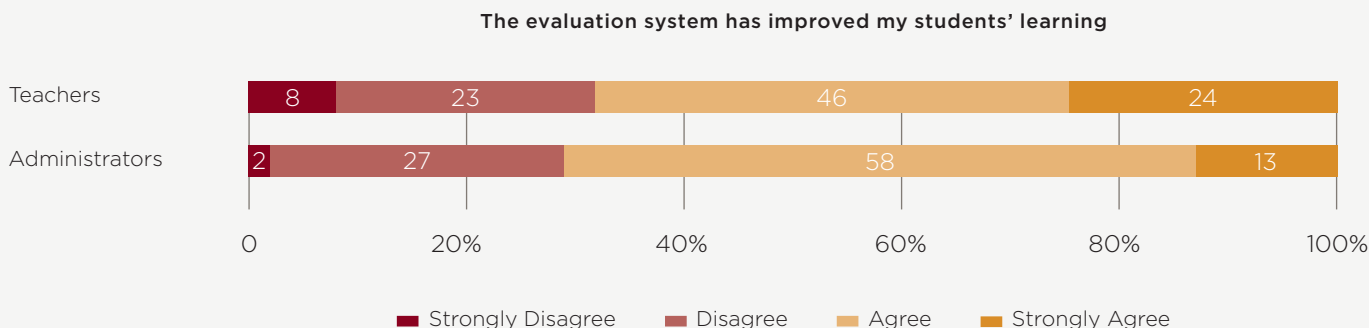


FIGURE 3b
Most Teachers and Administrators Agreed that REACH Improved Student Learning



Note: Responses are from the teacher *5Essentials* survey administered in Spring 2018 and an administrator survey also administered in spring 2018. There were approximately 12,000 teacher respondents and 664 administrator respondents.

⁶ See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: What Makes Evaluator Feedback Useful?* for further details.

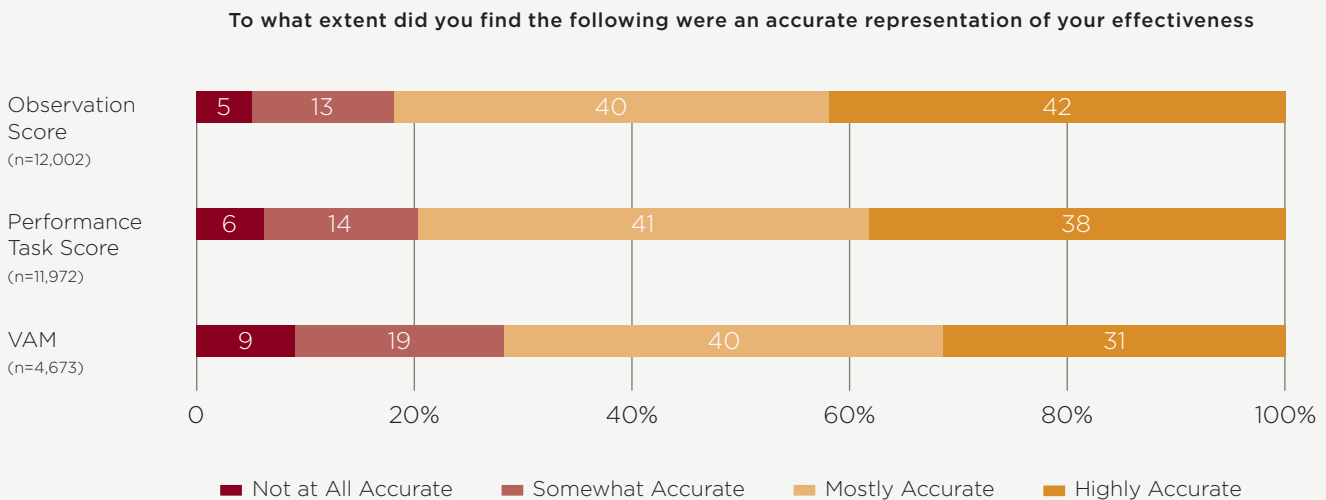
Observation Feedback Scores as Measures of Teacher Effectiveness

Of all REACH Elements, Administrators and Teachers Felt that Observation Scores Most Accurately Captured Teacher Effectiveness

Teachers were uniformly positive about the classroom observation components of the REACH system as accurate measures of teacher performance. More than 80 percent of teachers

felt the observation scores were mostly or highly accurate representations of teacher effectiveness (see Figure 4). In interviews, teachers and principals expressed their belief that observations were the “most fair” of the three components, and the best reflection of the instructional behaviors of teachers.⁷ Many teachers also indicated that performance task scores (80 percent) and VAMs (72 percent) were mostly or highly accurate.

FIGURE 4
Four Out of Five Teachers Felt Observation Scores Accurately Represented Their Effectiveness as Educators



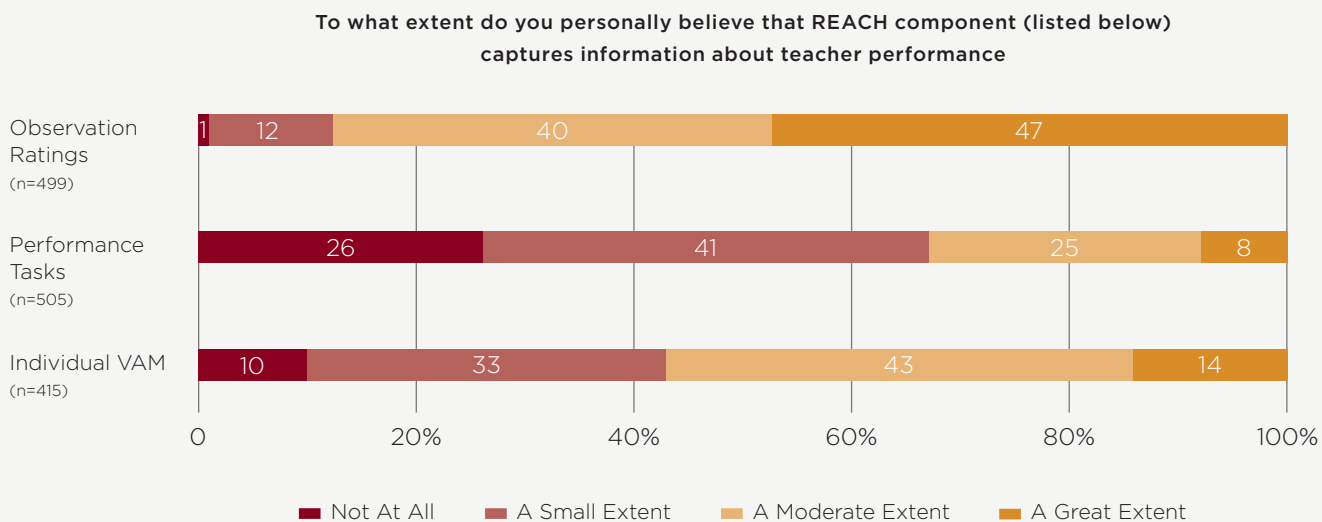
Note: Responses are from the teacher *5Essentials* survey administered in spring 2018. There were 12,002 respondents about observation scores, 11,972 about performance tasks, and 4,673 respondents about VAM scores. Only teachers who reported receiving an individual VAM were asked about VAM scores.

⁷ See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: What Makes Evaluator Feedback Useful?* for findings from teacher interviews.

Most administrators felt that observations captured teacher performance: 47 percent to a great extent, and another 40 percent to a moderate extent (see Figure 5). This finding is perhaps not surprising, since administrators were the ones conducting classroom observations under the REACH system. However, administrators were less likely to report that student learning measures reflected teacher performance, and they were particularly skeptical about the

performance tasks, which teachers administered and graded themselves. More than one-quarter of administrators (26 percent) said that performance tasks did not at all reflect teacher performance, and another 41 percent said performance tasks only measured teacher performance to a small extent.

FIGURE 5
Many Administrators Reported that Student Learning Measures—Particularly Performance Tasks—Captured Little or No Information about Teacher Performance



Note: Responses are from the Consortium administrator survey administered in spring 2017. There were 505 administrator respondents, including principals and assistant principals. High school teachers do not receive individual VAM scores, so high school administrators were not surveyed about VAMs.

Evaluation Ratings and Personnel Decisions

Teachers and Administrators had Very Different Views on Whether or Not Evaluation Ratings Should Influence Personnel Decisions

In addition to providing feedback for professional development, evaluations can be used in personnel decisions, such as tenure attainment, identification of teacher leaders, or removal of persistently low-performing teachers who are not meeting district expectations.⁸ Under REACH, teachers who receive the two lowest summative ratings may be eligible for removal or assigned professional development plans.

The lowest summative rating, Unsatisfactory, is “reserved for teaching that does not convey an understanding of the concepts [of teacher practice]. Educators whose practice falls into this level of performance are doing academic harm in the classroom.” While few teachers received this rating (0.7 percent of teachers, or 97 teachers in 2017), there were certainly stakes for those who did:

- 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, 10 percent of teachers received Developing ratings in 2017. There are stakes associated with this rating, as well:

- Non-tenured teachers with Developing ratings are subject to performance-based layoffs and may be recommended for non-renewal the following year.
- Tenured teachers with Developing ratings 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.

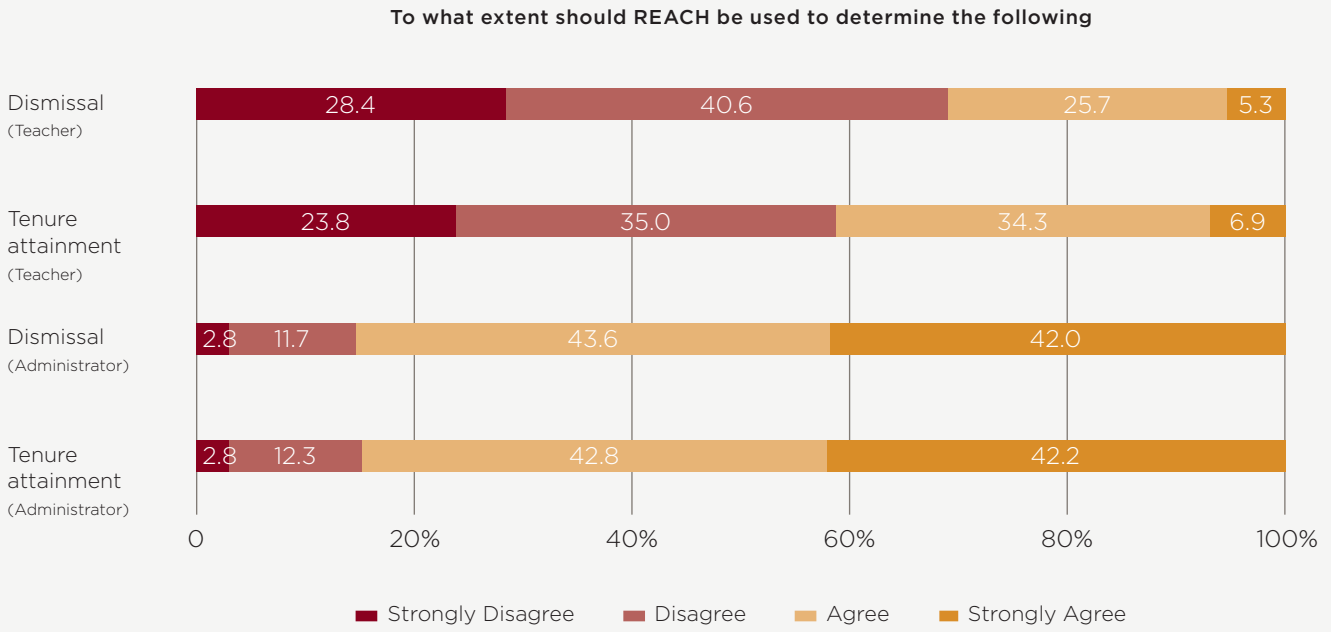
Teachers and administrators reported their views on using evaluation ratings in reference to teachers' careers, particularly tenure attainment and dismissal (see Figure 6).

- Many teachers strongly disagreed or disagreed that REACH should be used to determine dismissal (69 percent) or tenure attainment (59 percent).
- Administrators, on the other hand, were more supportive of using REACH for personnel decisions. Only 15 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed with using it to determine dismissal or tenure attainment.

⁸ See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: REACH Ratings and Teacher Mobility*.

FIGURE 6

Most Teachers Reported They Did Not Believe Evaluation Ratings Should be Used for Career Decisions, But Most Administrators Did



Note: Responses are from the teacher *5Essentials* survey and the Consortium administrator survey, both administered in spring 2017. There were 17,659 teacher respondents and 505 administrator respondents, including principals and assistant principals.

Overall Satisfaction with REACH

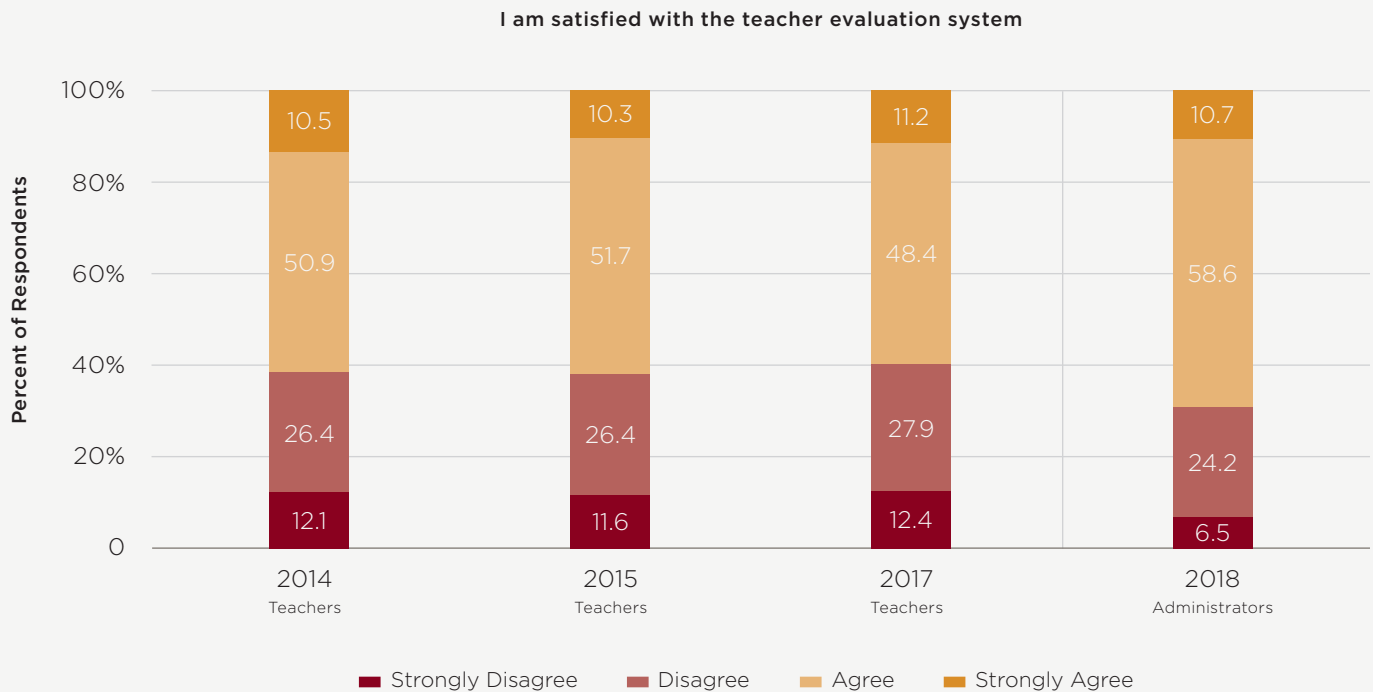
About 60 Percent of Teachers and 70 Percent of Administrators were Satisfied with the REACH Evaluation Process as a Whole

Evaluation systems are intended to improve employee performance and inform personnel decisions. In order to be valuable, they need to be considered worthy of the time and effort required by evaluators and employees alike.

Five years into REACH, more than one-half of teachers (59 percent) and nearly three-quarters of administrators (70 percent) who were surveyed reported that they were satisfied with the teacher evaluation system (see Figure 7). We cannot pinpoint, however, what factors teachers and administrators were weighing when reporting overall satisfaction with the system. In interviews with teachers, there were concerns that using the

FIGURE 7

In the Years of Full REACH Implementation, about Three in Five Teachers Expressed Satisfaction with the Evaluation System



Note: At the end of 2013, only non-tenured teachers had experienced the REACH evaluation system, but they had not received formal summative ratings; this first cohort of non-tenured teachers received REACH ratings in fall 2013. The first cohort of tenured teachers received REACH ratings in the fall of 2015. By the spring 2017 survey administrations, all teachers had received REACH ratings unless they were new to the district and had not completed an evaluation cycle.

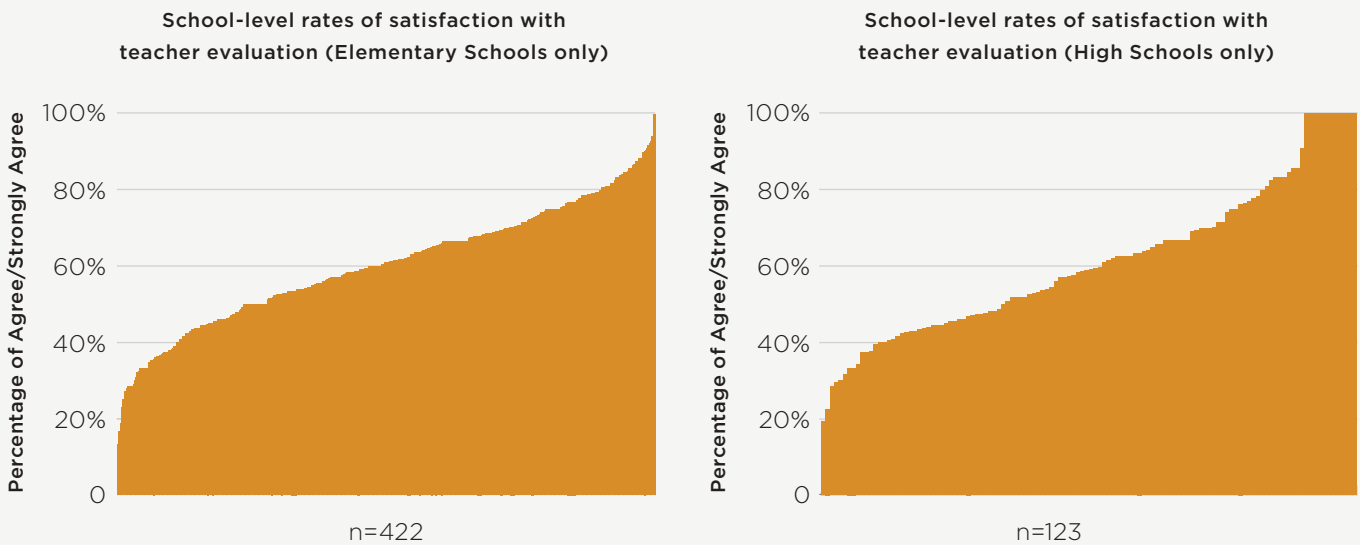
9 Sartain, Stoelinga, & Brown (2011); Sparte, Stevens, Healey, Jiang, & Hart (2013).

evaluation system for accountability purposes detracted from its potential for formative improvement of practice. In past research on REACH, administrators and teachers both described the evaluation process as time consuming.⁹ Even if the evaluations result in improved practice and student learning, administrators and teachers have limited time and many responsibilities, and they are likely weighing the costs and benefits of the system when reporting their overall satisfaction.

We also found considerable variation in teachers' satisfaction with the REACH evaluation system from one school to the next (see Figure 8).

This was true in both elementary and high schools. In the median elementary school, 61 percent of teachers agreed that they were satisfied with the process; at the median high school, 59 percent of teachers did. Many factors could explain these differences, including teachers' relationships with principals and assistant principals, school-wide teacher buy-in and openness to the evaluation process, and school-wide orientation around feedback and practice improvements.

FIGURE 8
Teacher Satisfaction with REACH Varied Widely Across Schools



Note: Individual schools are represented by bars of varying heights, placed next to each other to display differences and trends across schools. The height of the bar represents the percentage of teachers in the school that agreed or strongly agreed they were satisfied with the evaluation process. In elementary schools, at the 25th percentile of schools, 50 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied; and at the 75th percentile of schools, 71 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed. In high schools, at the 25th percentile of schools, 45 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied;

Implications

REACH was created with the goal of improving teacher practice and student learning. Five years into implementation, teacher and administrator reports painted a picture of how this evaluation system has taken shape in schools and classrooms across Chicago.

The classroom observation process, in particular, has provided administrators and teachers with a roadmap for instructional improvement within the evaluation system.

Because the classroom observation component of REACH is time intensive, it is notable that administrators and teachers found this element to be both the most accurate in terms of measuring educator effectiveness and the most influential on teacher practice and student learning. But important questions remain about the types of changes teachers made to their practice and whether they were small or meaningful changes.

Low administrator satisfaction with performance tasks prompt questions about whether all aspects of the evaluation system are living up to their potential to inform teacher practice decisions.

Administrators largely reported that the performance tasks did not accurately reflect teacher effectiveness. State legislation requires that all teachers be evaluated in terms of academic growth of their students, and the performance tasks are how CPS fulfills that requirement. However, the performance tasks

require considerable use of classroom instructional time, as teachers must administer the associated assessments to students two times during the school year. Further, performance task scores are very similar across all teachers, meaning that they do not differentiate among teachers in terms of effectiveness.¹⁰ On a positive note, in interviews, some teachers did report the performance tasks administered at the beginning of the year were helpful—in terms of knowing where their students needed instructional support. Taken together, these insights suggest that the district may want to consider the costs and benefits of this element of REACH, as well as how to ensure that it is a useful measure of effectiveness for both teachers and administrators.

In some schools, most teachers felt satisfied with REACH, but that was not true across the board; this variation raises questions about the necessary conditions for implementing REACH well at the school level. Teachers' overall satisfaction with the evaluation process could be driven by any number of factors, including their relationship with their evaluator, how useful they

¹⁰ Jiang & Spote (2014).

¹¹ See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: What Makes Evaluator Feedback Useful?*; See related brief in this series on REACH, *Teacher Evaluation in CPS: REACH Ratings and Teacher Mobility*.

found classroom observation feedback, and whether and how ratings drove school leadership’s personnel decisions.¹¹ From a district perspective, school-wide teacher satisfaction is most important in two ways. First, it could influence buy-in to REACH overall, and contribute to—or hinder—teachers applying the feedback they receive toward improving practice. Second, it may signal schools in which a culture of feedback is fostered—or isn’t—and could therefore inform the supports that principals receive to coach and develop teachers and to cultivate a school-wide culture around professional development.

Ultimately, any system that is used for improvement in job performance in addition to accountability purposes will likely have tension. Teachers largely reported that they valued the observation process and receiving feedback about their practice, but they did not want their REACH evaluations to be used for career decisions. This tension may explain why two in five CPS teachers were not satisfied with the evaluation system. Overall satisfaction reflects a number of considerations, including perceived usefulness, perceived accuracy, time invested, and faith in the

process. REACH was implemented in order to comply with state law around performance evaluation, but its stated goal is to provide valuable feedback to improve educators’ professional practice and increase student learning.

While compliance guidelines are clearly defined in the evaluator handbook, the work of supporting teachers to continue improving practice is complex: it is multifaceted, long-term, time-intensive, resource-intensive, highly interpersonal work that is dependent on trust and buy-in from district leadership at all levels—principals, network chiefs, and central office leadership. Gathering and sharing best practices from schools where teachers have reported REACH to be a valuable coaching and professional development tool may be a good place to start. But each teacher, school, and principal may need different supports and resources for instructional improvement. District leaders and school administrators must grapple with the question: how can they implement the teacher evaluation system in a way that best serves their teachers and, most importantly, students?

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