

Communications and Engagement

Building Educators' Support for New Evaluations

5 of 6 in the series

When DC Public Schools (DCPS) rolled out IMPACT—a new evaluation and support system—in 2009, teachers reacted with skepticism at best and alarm at worst. Their concerns arose from uncertainty about how they would fare under IMPACT. In response to these concerns, the district ramped up its efforts to communicate the purpose of IMPACT and engage teachers in improving evaluation policies for the future. When DCPS heard from teachers and principals that the district's value-added data did not provide a complete picture of student achievement, it responded by reducing the weight of value-added data as a component in a teacher's overall evaluation rating. Teachers also asked for safeguards to accommodate for the fact that even the best teachers can have an off day, so the district decided to drop a teacher's lowest observation score if it was at least a full point lower than his or her average observation score. Over time, the district hopes that its engagement efforts contribute to stronger teacher buy-in to IMPACT and continued student academic gains. How can other states and districts learn from the experience in DCPS? Why do states and districts need to engage and communicate with teachers about new evaluation and support systems?

DCPS continues to engage and communicate with educators about IMPACT. To date, DCPS has responded to over 2,100 emails and 2,700 phone calls about the system and holds recurring focus groups with educators to discuss ways IMPACT can be more meaningful. In all states and districts, communications and educator engagement are critical to the success of evaluation and support policies for the following reasons:

- ⇒ Involving educators in the design and implementation of evaluation systems helps ensure that policies are fair and feasible.
- ⇒ Engaging teachers establishes a common language and understanding about what effective teaching looks like.
- ⇒ Communication helps teachers and principals understand the new evaluation system so that they can implement it effectively.
- ⇒ States and districts that communicate the goals and rationale of their evaluation policies are more likely to abate criticism and misunderstanding.
- ⇒ Having a cadre of knowledgeable teachers and principals who can explain the new evaluation system to their peers is critical; having the right messengers is just as important as having the right messages.

In short, having a strong engagement and communications plan can make or break a new evaluation and support system. This brief explains how states and districts can engage educators to develop new evaluation policies and communicate with teachers about how those policies will improve teaching and learning.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a purposeful educator engagement strategy.

Having an engagement strategy is critical, but where should states and districts start? To create an engagement plan, think from the perspective of an educator. What do teachers and principals need to know about new evaluation and support systems? The Reform Support Network (RSN) developed a [framework](#) to help states and districts engage teachers and principals when designing and implementing new evaluation and support systems. The framework identifies four domains of educator engagement; over time, states and districts engage teachers in more substantive ways as they move from one domain to another. The framework also can help states and districts identify the specific strategies they will use to engage teachers and principals.

- ➔ **Domain 1: I Know.** Teachers know the evaluation system and how it guides their professional growth. Raise educators' awareness of a new evaluation and support system by creating guidebooks ([DCPS](#)), FAQs, myths/facts sheets, websites ([Hillsborough County Public Schools \[HCPS\]](#) and [Pittsburgh Public Schools](#)), newsletters, emails ([Tennessee Department of Education \[TDOE\]](#)), information sessions and webinars. Once teachers understand the evaluation system, they can engage in more substantive ways.
- ➔ **Domain 2: I Apply.** Teachers apply the feedback they receive from evaluations to improve their practice and raise student achievement. Create support structures that help teachers follow through on the feedback they get from their evaluations, such as online portals where teachers can identify available supports aligned with areas for growth ([Denver Public Schools \[DPS\]](#)) or video libraries that model exemplary practice ([DCPS](#)). (For more information on linking evaluation data to professional development, see the [Professional Learning and Support brief](#) in this series.)
- ➔ **Domain 3: I Participate.** Teachers help implement and refine evaluation systems by participating in committees, data teams, study groups and other forums. For example, DPS established teacher communications teams to support their evaluation system, and [Baltimore City Public Schools \(BCPS\)](#) appointed school-based Student Learning Objective (SLO) Ambassadors to support their peers in the process of writing SLOs.
- ➔ **Domain 4: I Lead.** Teacher leaders emerge and mentor their peers by opening their classrooms to model effective teaching practices. Teachers also develop evaluation policies by serving on joint labor/management committees and visit school sites to build the capacity of other educators. BCPS and [TDOE](#) established advisory committees of teachers and principals to advise district and state leaders on evaluation and support policies.

DEVELOPING A STRONG ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN FIVE STEPS

Strong engagement strategies provide educators with meaningful opportunities to reflect on their practice and help create new evaluation and support policies. These five steps can help states and districts develop strategies to engage educators in evaluation and support policies.

STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5
Identify key stakeholder groups , such as teachers, instructional coaches, principals, principal supervisors and union leaders.	Define stakeholders' roles. Clarify expectations of their engagement and their authority in decisionmaking. Possible roles may include participating in a team that designs evaluation measures and criteria, and facilitating workshops and focus groups with educators.	Develop a communications and engagement plan that addresses what stakeholders need to know or be able to do, as well as what the state or district can do to create visible change. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and DPS created communications plans that other states can use as exemplars.	Establish feedback loops —such as surveys and focus groups—to assess the effectiveness of the engagement strategy. Find out what teachers know and perceive about the evaluation system. Preserve teachers' anonymity to ensure that they share honest responses.	Share feedback with stakeholders and, if possible, address their concerns by changing evaluation policies or procedures. TDOE has released reports at the end of the first and second years of implementing a new evaluation and support system. In addition to summarizing data about teacher performance, the reports explain how the state plans to revise the evaluation system for the following school year.



Follow through on an educator engagement strategy.

An engagement plan can improve the quality of an evaluation and support system—but only if states and districts follow through on it. To maximize the impact of an engagement plan, consider the following strategies:

KEY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Looking for some tried-and-true communications strategies? States and districts have employed the strategies listed below to communicate with teachers, principals and other stakeholders about new evaluation and support systems.

1. **Clarify your goals:** Be clear on what you want to accomplish and what you want people to do.
2. **Identify your audiences and speak to them:** Differentiate messages to provide people with the information they need.
3. **Keep it simple:** Be clear, concise and easy to understand.
4. **Share what's essential:** In-the-weeds minutiae can be overwhelming and obscure the bigger picture. Avoid needless details.
5. **Use real-world examples:** Let others help tell your story by including teacher testimonials, video and case studies.
6. **Use multiple vehicles:** Develop a strategy that employs a mix of media and modes to reach the largest possible audience.
7. **Use multiple voices:** Teachers and principals respond more positively to messages they hear from their peers.
8. **Communicate early and often:** Be the first to tell educators about information that affects them.
9. **Remember your team:** Make sure your internal team is kept informed and able to answer questions.
10. **Buddy up:** Partner with like-minded organizations to add their voices, build credibility and expand your reach.

- ➔ **Provide multiple opportunities for educators to participate in feedback loops.** Announce focus groups and other engagement forums in advance and hold them at different times and locations so that teachers can attend. Administer feedback surveys at multiple points in the year and at times when teachers can reflect on the evaluation system and respond thoughtfully to questions.
- ➔ **Tap into existing educator networks to ask teachers for input on evaluation and support policies.** Reach out to teachers unions, National Board Certified Teachers, the Teacher Union Reform Network, Teach for America alumni, National State Teachers of the Year and other teacher voice groups, and enlist their support to collect feedback from educators. This strategy provides school systems with valuable feedback and teachers with leadership opportunities.
- ➔ **If you ask for feedback, use it!** Teachers and principals are busy people. If you ask them for feedback, honor their time and contributions by using that feedback to revise and improve the evaluation system. Explain, in advance, how information collected from feedback loops will be used, and then follow up with educators to let them know which policies have been changed in response to their feedback. In [Shelby County Schools](#), for example, district administrators piloted several observation rubrics before selecting one based on teacher feedback.

- ➔ **Focus on school and teacher leaders.** School and teacher leaders influence teachers' views on evaluation. Prepare leaders for conversations about teacher evaluation and support policies by equipping them with talking points, presentations, resource materials and website links. [Houston Independent School District](#) trains principals and “campus representatives” to lead discussions about evaluation policies with teachers in their buildings.
- ➔ **Make educator engagement visible.** Advertise engagement opportunities, highlight and thank teachers and school leaders who provide feedback, and publicize changes based on their input.

Communicate early and often.

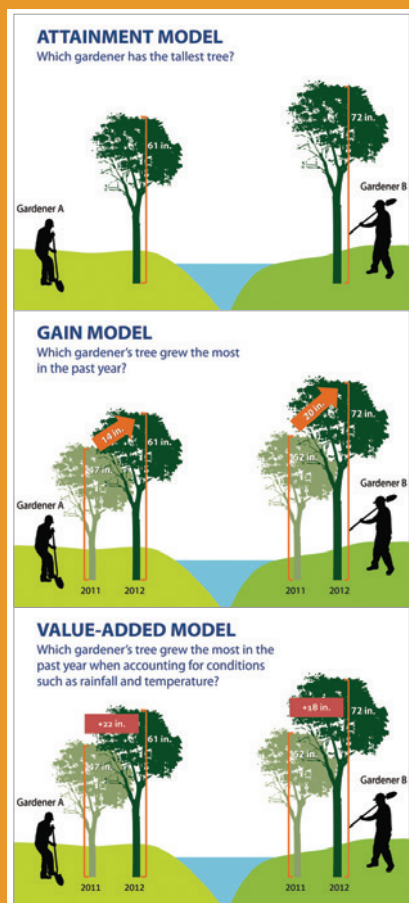
Communicating early and often can help address confusion and misinformation before they undermine evaluation systems. As HCPS Superintendent MaryEllen Elia remarked, “You can never communicate enough, and you can never be over-prepared.” The RSN has developed an [Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit](#) containing tools, strategies and resources that states and districts can use to communicate with teachers about new evaluation and support policies. States and districts should develop a formal communications plan that includes key messages about the new evaluation and support system and strategies for disseminating those messages to different stakeholders. Communications plans should be thorough: Be prepared to communicate **ten times** as much as you think is necessary to get your message across.



COMMUNICATING ABOUT VALUE-ADDED MODELS

Value-added models use complex statistical calculations to predict student performance on state standardized tests while controlling for external factors such as the student's socioeconomic status, attendance, special education status and so forth. Because of their complexity, value-added models present a challenge to states and districts: How do they explain the nuances of value-added modeling in a way that teachers will find accessible?

States, districts and research organizations have developed materials to help explain the complexities of value-added models. The [Oak Tree Analogy](#), shown here, is a short video that uses nontechnical, accessible language to describe the key features of value-added models. The [RSN Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit](#) contains additional strategies and messages that states and districts can use to communicate about value-added models.



Source: Reform Support Network. (2013). Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit. Available at <http://1.usa.gov/1kTnak4>.

⇒ Home in on a few key messages. Teachers take feedback about their practice to heart, so it's important that they hear accurate and consistent messages about new evaluation policies. Unfortunately, many teachers perceive that the purpose of evaluation is to fire teachers. To counter these perceptions, clearly communicate that the goal of this work is to support and inspire excellent practice, improve instruction and raise student achievement. The following key messages are important to emphasize:

1. Multiple measures promote fairness and recognize the many elements of a teacher's job.
2. Teaching frameworks and rubrics provide clarity about expectations for teachers and a roadmap to excellent teaching.
3. Evaluation systems ensure that supports for teachers are targeted and help them become more effective.
4. Teaching is a complex job and it will take time to build an evaluation system that reflects what teachers do.
5. We need your help to build a successful system that supports teachers and students.

⇒ Anticipate communications challenges and acknowledge limitations where they exist. Changing evaluation and support policies is hard work, and states and districts are refining their systems every day. Acknowledge the challenges of implementing new evaluation systems and communicate the need for ongoing refinement. DPS administrators have held frequent "keeping it real" conversations with teachers while implementing a new evaluation system. At the same time, anticipate communications challenges, and be prepared to answer difficult questions. The RSN Communications Toolkit identifies several communications challenges that many states and districts encounter when implementing new evaluation and support systems, including communicating about value-added models (see the sidebar at left).

CONCLUSION

An evaluation and support system, no matter how well designed, will wither on the vine if not accompanied by a robust engagement and communications plan. In the short term, teachers and principals can help improve the quality of evaluation and support systems, and in the long term, their ongoing feedback will ensure that evaluation and support policies are sustained and continue to improve instruction.

