

Carpe Diem: Implementing Our New Teacher Evaluation Regulations

By Jon Saphier

Introduction

The new Massachusetts educator evaluation regulations have inevitably triggered questions about what is expected and what is needed for compliance. There are also legitimate questions about the impact of new requirements on time, paperwork, and relationships. Many are wondering how it will be possible to gather data in required areas not included before: teacher impact on student growth; relations with families and community; and contribution to professional culture. Every state is facing similar issues since upgrading teacher evaluation has landed on the national landscape following a torrent of articles and reports such as “The Widget Effect” (Weisberg et. al., 2009).

Teacher evaluation is only one of many levers we have for improving teaching and learning, and by itself it is not the most powerful one. However, the evaluation regulations contain opportunities not to be missed. Our main focal points need to be improving teaching and learning in every classroom and

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strengthening the adult professional culture in the workplace. New state regulations open a number of doors to better supervision and evaluation, eliminate some significant obstacles, and avoid the mistake of playing numbers games with student achievement in the rating of teachers. Most helpful (and also most challenging), the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has avoided unreasonable and unjustifiable use of ratings, and it has given us a quality foundation rubric to do the real work ahead.

The act of coming up with a comprehensive, clear, and common set of images of good teaching in all its complexity can be a more decisive vehicle for improving practice than the evaluation and rating of teachers. Once we have those definitions, images, and exemplars, they will guide professional develop-

ment, new teacher induction, and the feedback of instructional coaches to teachers. Thus, getting the foundation in place for meaningful and productive evaluation will profoundly influence all future improvement efforts. Fortunately, we do have a solid, research-validated knowledge base to rely on for accomplishing that work.

What is Good About the New Regulations?

We will all now be required to pay attention to certain kinds of expertise that really are legitimate parts of the skill set of a high-functioning teacher, but which were not included before in many evaluation systems.

First, the regulations add several new categories that represent a positive change. They recognize the importance of a teacher’s ability to work towards establishing healthy relations with parents and community, to contribute to a professional culture, to develop cultural proficiency, and to understand and implement the use of data to reach students who are struggling. These important areas of performance now become part of our common definition of what a professional teacher does.

Second, in the Massachusetts system, student results are included in a responsible way; teacher ratings are not arbitrarily pegged to student test scores. With no weighted percentage attached, we can use multiple measures to show the teacher effect.

Third, obstacles to unannounced observations have been removed, making it possible for evaluators to get a more genuine look at teachers in action and over time. Dismissal for teaching that is unsatisfactory for a person who has received intensive assistance is expedited to one year.

Finally, teachers are now more actively involved in the evaluation process. Self-evaluation is a substantive part of the process. Every teacher has to make a growth plan that makes him or her accountable for one goal related to improving a specific professional practice and one goal related to student learning. Teacher teams gather and submit their own evidence of student growth. Individual teachers are encouraged to set team goals for which they are jointly accountable with other team members, leading to increased collaboration. All of these features in the new system create an opportunity, if properly handled at the local level, to make teacher evaluation a true growth-oriented process and not a judging and ranking operation. Nonetheless, unless these newly identified procedures are implemented well, teachers may feel loaded up with new and meaningless paperwork and procedures.

Although the new regulations, rubrics, and support materials aim to make teacher evaluation a better process with a

positive impact on teaching expertise and on the experience of children, expecting regulations and structures alone to improve teaching is like expecting the Civil Rights Laws of the 1960s to eliminate racism. Our new regulations are a big push in the right direction, but the work of making evaluation more valuable and of improving teaching practice across the board is up to us in the districts—teachers, teacher leaders, building administrators, and central office leaders.


Pitfalls and Compensations

One pitfall is that rubrics can lead to superficial evaluation, especially if they are tied to hand-held data devices and used as a portable checklist. Conversely, the DESE rubrics are not intended to be used as an observation instrument and could not be used as such with any validity. Rather, by providing a uniform foundation for defining good teaching and learning, the DESE rubric is intended as a guide for teachers in their self-evaluation. It should also help to remind evaluators about the range of things to look for, thereby enhancing reliability across evaluators. Further, it can serve as a potential map for choosing professional development topics.

A few nitty-gritty points to remember: For summary evaluation at the end of an evaluation cycle, we are only required to fill out five lines, one for each standard and one as a final summary. Teachers do not have to be rated on each of the 16 “indicators” or on each of the 33 “elements,” only on the four standards and the overall summary rating. This gives us quite a bit of flexibility in designing local systems.

MA Teacher Evaluation Rubric -- Simplified - 5 Items --

	Unsatisfactory	Needs Improvement	Proficient	Exemplary
Standard I: Curriculum, Planning, and Assessment				
Standard II: Teaching All Students				
Standard III: Family and Community Engagement				
Standard IV: Professional Culture				
Overall Summary Evaluation				

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However, if a district decides to rate teachers at the next level of detail—the “indicators” level in the state rubric—we *do* have to use *those* 16 indicators and use their language. We cannot make up different indicators. If, in addition, we want to have rubrics and ratings at the “element” level, we do NOT have to use the state’s elements, but we have to put whatever elements we create under the appropriate indicator of the state’s 16.

Since state requirements do not mandate narrative write-ups for every observation, that could save some time, but evaluators do need to be able to produce convincing, evidence-based write-ups, especially if the rating is unsatisfactory. The supervisor must be able to show clear connections between the claims, the evidence gathered to support those claims, and the impact of the teacher’s performance on students. To back up the ratings, evaluators must master the skill of gathering evidence that is accurate, credible, and convincing.

This emphasis on evidence can actually reduce paperwork and increase the quality and frequency of conversations with teachers. However, in order to be effective, evaluators will need four essential skills: a clear understanding of the standards and indicators, the ability to recognize what they look like and sound like in action, techniques for gathering and recording evidence about these indicators, and time management strategies to allow for adequate time in classes with teachers.

Staffing and budget limitations make it difficult to provide the personnel necessary to ensure frequent evaluation of teachers. Yet, schools can use the new state guidelines to design a system that maximizes feedback to teachers and minimizes paperwork and formal procedures. One option is to increase the frequency of informal fifteen-minute observations. In addition, long-term investment in professional development for evaluators and support for them to be in classes daily will help to ensure quality teacher feedback.

Of course, teachers will have concerns about time as well. Teachers will now be asked to do self-evaluation; set a goal for improving some aspect of practice and some aspect of student results; assemble data on student gains; and make a plan of action to accomplish these goals. If administrators cannot honestly justify the time spent and unless they avoid creating meaningless procedures and unnecessary meetings, the promise offered by the new regulations will be wasted.

Rubrics: From Abstract to Common, Concrete Images

A closer look at one item will demonstrate the process of drawing a concrete image from the rubric’s abstractions. Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation Rubric, II D 2 reads: “Effectively models and reinforces ways that students can master challenging material through effective effort, rather than having to depend on innate ability.” How do we interpret this rubric, and what teacher behaviors exemplify its meaning? The rubric requires that teachers assure students that effective effort is more important than innate ability in determining academic growth.

Skilled teachers might spend class time explicitly teaching students strategies for studying more effectively and create interactions of pairs and small groups in class to practice strategies. For further reinforcement, teachers could give frequent self-corrected quizzes, ask students to reflect on desired out-

comes for themselves and for one another, and, finally, have them set goals about what study strategies they will use to continue to improve. Teaching students directly about Carol Dweck's (2007) concept of "malleable ability" can help them truly believe in their ability to achieve.

Language can also subtly encourage effective effort: "Well, you got the first three right, and this one is like them, but with one additional step." Using such language gradually imbues students with confidence and belief in their own capability, even if they are not yet fully proficient in content knowledge or skills. Effective teachers also offer re-teaching loops where events are created for small groups of students who did not "get it" the first time around, and where the material is taught in a different way. Such teachers always frame the re-teaching positively. Finally, they are persistent, without impatience or blame, in following up with students who do not do their work or who perform below standards. Teachers who are successful at building confidence in low-performing students may not use all of these practices, but they certainly will try as many of them as necessary.

Developing skill at recognizing effective and appropriate use of these strategies will require extensive study and long-term commitment by evaluators. Teaching is unquestionably among the most complicated human endeavors imaginable. Unless evaluators earnestly invest in developing the capacity to analyze teaching deeply, they will have failed to provide useful and productive feedback for teachers.

What Training and Development Do Evaluators Need?

Studies indicate that teachers, especially those of the younger generation, are looking for more and better feedback (Coggshall et al., 2011). In order to generate frequent high-quality feedback, schools and districts need more evaluators visiting classes. In addition, focused professional development should begin with a thorough understanding of the knowledge base of teaching and then focus on an array of specific skills. These skills include evidence-collecting and reporting, classroom observation techniques, analyzing the quality of student tasks, and conducting useful, positive teacher conferences.

Heart of the Work

Because this systematic training is absent in most districts, when a random sample of evaluators rate the same video or the same observed class, they generate quite different ratings and often ratings that go from the top to the bottom of the spectrum. Lack of confidence in evaluator ability to be consistent and competent has, with frequent justification, made teacher evaluation ineffective. The heart of the work is developing common, concrete images that illustrate proficiency.

Achieving this goal will require professional development for evaluators, evaluation of the evaluators by their central office, and eventually, performance-based certification of evaluators statewide to ensure uniform high standards.

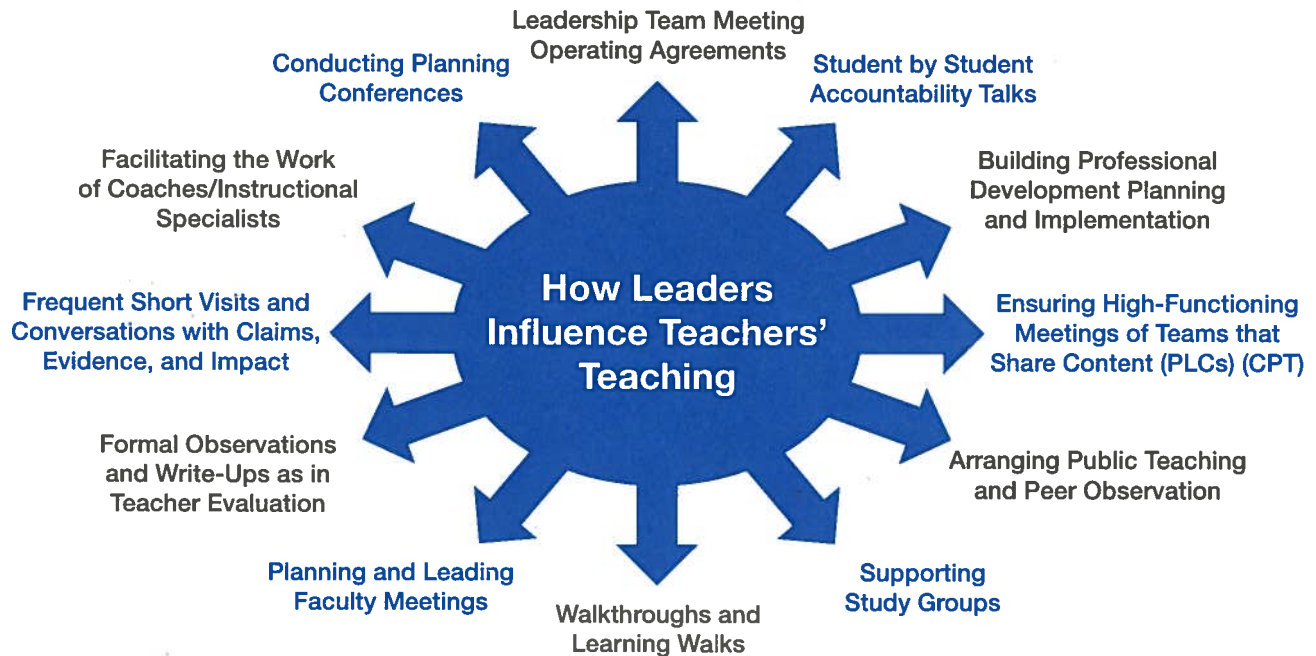
Massachusetts has made major progress toward defining good teaching and good leadership. The department has published rubrics which are realistic and reasonable, and in so doing, has provided a useful map to the big-picture categories of teaching expertise. It is important to remember that the Massachusetts rubric and the levels described in the boxes are not designed to record scores for teachers. The "elements" are pointing us in the direction of teaching skills known to be important, but we have to do our own elaboration on what they mean, creating common, concrete images and examples of what constitutes evidence that such skills are being implemented in the classroom. And so, the point is, the "elements" are pointing us in the direction of teaching skills known to be important, but the challenging and worthwhile task of giving those elements meaning is the work of districts and schools.

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Improving Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

Finally, teacher evaluation must become just one part of something much bigger—the improvement of teaching across the board for everyone, even for the most experienced teachers. Our new regulations and rubric give us the impetus and the charge to do that with care and focus over the next few years. As we develop clarity, we will use our common understanding of high-expertise teaching in all the arenas where leaders have the potential to influence the quality of teaching and learning. These contacts may occur in the classroom, but also during meetings, observations, conversations, short visits, walk-throughs, and more, such as those in the following diagram, and not just in the area of teacher evaluation.

Jonathon Saphier is the Founder and President of Research for Better Teaching, Inc., an organization dedicated to the professionalization of teaching. Dr. Saphier is a recognized consultant on supervision, evaluation, staff development, and professional culture and has authored eight books and numerous articles on those topics, including The Skillful Teacher: Building



Your Teaching Skills (with MaryAnn Haley and Robert Gower) which has sold over 300,000 copies. He can be reached at jonsaphier@comcast.net.

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Announcing MASCD Institute

The Common Core, Common Assessment, and What Is Common Across the Curriculum

Session I, October 18, 2012 and Session II, November 15, 2012

In this institute, educators will increase their understanding of the guiding principles and progression of the Common Core Standards. Participants will unpack the new frameworks, identify how standards are aligned across grade levels and across disciplines, and consider the implications of Common Core frameworks for instruction and assessment. Participants will build capacity to use common assessments and to collaboratively examine student work in order to identify what students understand and are able to do in their study of standards essential to the Common Core frameworks.

Participants will:

- Develop a framework for looking at the Common Core across disciplines;
- Identify what to assess and how to assess it;
- Align assessment foci with the standards;
- Look at student work with colleagues;
- Understand what student work reveals about student thinking;
- Return to the standards to determine the degree of alignment with assessments.

Between sessions, participants will create at least one real assessment to pilot in their classroom and will bring the resulting samples of student work to the second session of the institute. Participants will leave this workshop with next steps for their district, school, department, or team to transition to and align with the Common Core frameworks.

It is recommended that participants attend in school or district teams.
Registration for the Common Core Institute will open in August.