



**TO:** Beth Berlin, Acting Commissioner; Kae Wagner, Senior Deputy Commissioner; Julia Rafal-Baer, Assistant Commissioner – State Education Department

**FROM:** TNTP

**DATE:** May 13, 2015

**RE:** Section 3012-d: Implementation of Independent Evaluators

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## Introduction

On March 31, 2015, new requirements for the evaluation of teachers and principals were passed as part of the 2015-16 New York State Budget, which added a new section, 3012-d, to the existing education law. Under the new requirements, teachers will continue to be observed by their building administrators, but they will also be observed by impartial, independent evaluators.

TNTP supports the decision to include multiple observers in evaluation as one strategy to combat the inflated ratings distributions across the state and to provide additional, important feedback regarding teacher practice. In a study of the peer evaluator system in Hillsborough County, MET researchers found that increasing the number of observers more than doubles the reliability of a teacher's rating compared to increasing the number of observations performed by the same observer.<sup>1</sup> If implemented well by districts, independent evaluators have the potential to provide an important, non-biased perspective on teacher performance that, when used in combination with principal observations, can lead to more accurate ratings.

This memo presents key considerations for the implementation of independent evaluators in teacher evaluation and examines five school districts which have implemented independent evaluators in recent years.

## Key Considerations

The following considerations are based on the multiple evaluator systems we looked at in Washington DC, New Haven, Newark, Denver, and Hillsborough and best practices we have identified from designing and implementing teacher evaluation systems across the county. With the exception of Hillsborough, which was featured in the Gates MET study, to our knowledge, none of the other programs have been formally studied so as to provide conclusive evidence of their effectiveness. Because of this, and because of the many considerations listed below that are specific to local context, we recommend that the SED set some broad criteria, while leaving the majority of design and implementation decisions around independent evaluators to districts.

1. While the primary rationale for implementing an independent evaluator system may be to bolster the reliability of observation ratings, independent evaluators can also serve as an important source of content-specific feedback for teachers. In all five of the districts examined, administrators cite reliability as a key driver behind the formation of a peer/third party evaluator system. However, in at least three of the districts

a strong teacher does not mean that someone will automatically be a strong independent observer or deliver high-quality feedback.

3. The average caseload for an independent evaluator appears to be around 100 teachers or fewer depending on the level of support and development that they are expected to provide to teachers. In three of the districts below, caseload of teachers per independent evaluator hovers around 100 or just below. Keeping caseloads at a manageable size allows evaluators to provide higher quality feedback and support to teachers in the field and, thus, improve teacher practice across the district. Real-time feedback is a crucial element to improving teacher practice, which is why we recommend that evaluator caseloads be kept small enough to support this type of immediate feedback loop. Districts who consider such a caseload to be unmanageable or unaffordable should consider the use of video observations.
4. Ensuring that independent evaluators are normed correctly is time intensive and crucial to the reliability and success of these programs. Based on our own experiences, training and norming evaluators well takes a large upfront investment in district time and resources, as well as regular, ongoing norming sessions throughout the year. All five districts cited in the case studies below required their evaluators to engage in comprehensive training and norming practices, with DCPS's six week summer orientation standing out as the most extensive. In addition, four out of the five districts contracted with an outside consultant to assist in the creation, implementation and management of these training programs.
5. There are some commonly applied cost-saving strategies for districts implementing these programs. Districts should be provided with flexibility in how they implement this component in order to reduce costs. For example, in the MET study in Hillsborough, video observations were frequently used to provide multiple evaluators access to the same lesson without evaluators having to travel to schools. Additionally, many systems have chosen to reduce costs by only having a subset of teachers observed by independent evaluators. We recommend districts consider this specifically for more novice or probationary teachers, teachers at the high or low end of the performance spectrum, or a rotating sample of teachers.
6. When included as a weighted measure in a teacher's evaluation, independent observations typically count for between 10-30% of a teacher's rating. When setting a weight for any evaluation component it is important to consider its overall reliability and value as well as the other components included in the system. It will also be important to consider the frequency and duration of independent evaluator observations. We believe that the weight of independent evaluator observations should not exceed the weight of principal observations. If principals are to be the instructional leaders and talent managers in their schools, their determination of teacher performance should hold considerable weight. Based on our experience, weighting the independent evaluator component at 10-15% should be substantial enough to affect the final rating and begin to change practice.



## Case Studies

Please note that the information below was gathered via public documentation on each system, as available. Although we attempted to include the most recent information on each system, some public documents date back to the initial years of program implementation, and thus, may not include details that have changed over time.

### DCPS's Master Educator Program

Background:





## Hillsborough's Peer/Mentor Evaluation Program

**Background:** The Peer/Mentor Evaluation Program was implemented in Hillsborough Public Schools (HPS) in 2011 as part of a larger strategy to change the evaluation and compensation structure in the district and create a teacher career ladder. There are currently about 100-200 Peer and Mentor Evaluators working in HPS.

**Role of the Evaluator:** Peer Evaluators (PEs) and Mentor Evaluators (MEs) are former HPS teachers who have agreed to leave their schools to serve a two to three-year term as a full-time evaluator before returning to the classroom. PEs are assigned to experienced teachers in HPS based on aligned content-area and are responsible for conducting between two and eight formal observations (depending on the teacher's prior rating and level of performance) each year, along with pre- and post-observation conferences. MEs are generalists assigned to novice teachers in HPS and are responsible for meeting with new teachers weekly, providing targeted support, and conducting evaluations for novice teachers outside of those that they mentor directly. While PEs have a higher caseload of approximately 100 teachers, MEs carry a lighter caseload of 15 teachers to provide them with more time for thoughtful feedback and coaching.<sup>xxi</sup> Peer evaluations now comprise 25% of a teacher's overall rating.

**Selection and Training:** PEs and MEs are chosen by a selection committee from a pool of teachers with strong evaluations and at least five years of experience. The initial screening committee is comprised of a teacher, an administrator, a curriculum and/or instructional specialist, and the Director of the Peer/Mentor Evaluation Program, but there is a secondary committee consisting of a large and diverse group of teachers, administrators, and representatives from the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association to further narrow down the applicant pool prior to the interview stage. The selection process consists of submitting a resume, cover letter, and essay-style application and then if screened through, an in-person interview and simulation activity. Before assuming their new roles, PEs and MEs complete a six-hour prerequisite online course followed by a week of in-person training which includes rubric calibration and norming, classroom observations and practicing delivering teacher feedback. In the

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iii DC Public Schools. (2015). Master educator position overview. Retrieved from

<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Career+Opportunities/Lead+Our+Schools/Master+Educators/Position+Overview>

iv DC Public Schools. (2015). Application process. Retrieved from

<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Career+Opportunities/Lead+Our+Schools/Master+Educators/Application+Process>

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