

“How does the academic achievement of schools affect teachers’ IMPACT ratings more than intended?”

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Rationale

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) evaluates teachers’ performance through IMPACT, a tool that uses multiple measures to rate teachers’ performance on a four point scale. Scores range from one hundred to four hundred points and teachers are grouped into categories from minimally effective to highly effective at the end of each school year. IMPACT uses various components to give a teacher an overall score. Components include student achievement growth, instructional observations, measures of commitment to school community efforts, and for some, student surveys. These multiple measures score teachers based on how they perform on specific rubrics and the value they add to their schools. In large part, students’ academic growth, rather than grade level proficiency, is measured to ensure teachers are rated based on the value they actually add to students, taking into consideration school population and the diverse needs students come to school with. In 2019, Wards 7 and 8 saw the lowest percentage of teachers rated highly effective- 35% in Ward 8 and 36% in Ward 7. If IMPACT’s multiple measures are supposed to already account for differences in students’ backgrounds, why do teachers in Wards 7 and 8 struggle for highly effective ratings? What is the discrepancy between achievement of schools and teachers’ ratings? What are the unintended consequences of student achievement on teachers’ IMPACT ratings?

Literature Review

Studies have shown that teachers who teach students with lower academic achievement and socioeconomic backgrounds are rated more harshly during classroom observations. A 2014 report by the Brown Center of Education Policy at the Brookings Institution studied the evaluation scores of teachers in four districts. They found that teachers who taught students with stronger academic achievement in the beginning of the year were given higher observation scores, on average, than teachers with academically struggling students (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014). Through studying these teachers over time, the research found that this “...is due to bias in the observation system—when observers see a teacher leading a class with higher ability students, they judge the teacher to be better than when they see that same teacher leading a class of lower ability students” (Whitehurst et al., 2014). A 2018 study had similar findings in six large urban school districts across the United States. Campbell and Ronfeldt (2018) found that differences in teachers’ observation scores were less likely due to teacher quality, but instead, the background and demographics of the students they teach. A more recent study of teachers in Chicago found that such factors, like poverty and academic disadvantages, contributed more to teacher observation scores than actual teacher effectiveness (Steinberg and Sartain, 2020).

Research shows that teachers in high-poverty schools, that generally have lower student achievement, may not be evaluated fairly in light of student population factors. In DC, how does the academic achievement of schools affect teachers’ IMPACT ratings more than intended?

Methodology and Findings

In an online survey sent to Washington Teacher Union members, one hundred and twenty-five respondents answered questions about their experiences with IMPACT as it relates to different school settings. Respondents include DCPS teachers and related service providers from all eight wards, representing schools with a range of STAR ratings. Respondents also represent a large range of teaching experience both in DCPS and other districts, as well as a range of IMPACT ratings.

Teachers were asked, “Have you ever been told that there is, or experienced, a connection between IMPACT ratings (especially for observations/CSC) and student achievement at your school or in DCPS?” Fifty-nine percent of respondents said they had been told this and forty-eight percent reported that they have experienced a difference in the way teachers are rated in different schools, showing IMPACT ratings may be more affected by student achievement than intended. Many respondents gave detailed accounts of their experiences. One teacher wrote that she was told by a school administrator, “...getting effective and highly effective would be challenging because how can the staff be effective when students were not performing on grade level or proficient on PARCC.” Another teacher reported hearing that principals, “have been told that they should hand out fewer highly effective ratings because if the teachers were truly highly effective, then their students’ scores should be higher.”

Several teachers reported being told by their administrators that they receive “push-back” for rating too many teachers highly effective or pressure to “lower the average.” One teacher was told that her administrator believed an observation score deserved a highly effective rating, but, “They had to give me a 3 [effective] to be a part of the bell curve.”

Other teachers reported their IMPACT scores needed to match school level achievement data. One teacher explained, “I also have been told by an administrator that my PARCC scores should match my observation scores. I can’t get highly effective observation scores if my PARCC scores are not above 3.5.” Another teacher wrote that in a leadership meeting at their school, leaders were given a presentation which compared the school’s test scores and the number of teachers rated highly effective. They wrote, “The team was then told basically, ‘This can’t happen again,’ which meant that until the test scores improved, less people could get highly effective.” This same teacher reports that she received very different IMPACT ratings when teaching in two different schools with very different demographics.

There is evidence that school level administrators have shared with teachers that they are pressured to either lower components of evaluation ratings that are in their control, in order to match lower school level data, or conversely that it is easier to give highly effective ratings to teachers working at higher achieving schools. This doesn’t mean that lower achieving schools don’t have highly effective rated teachers, or that higher achieving schools do not have less than highly effective teachers. However, it shows that there is evidence that there may be more factors used in teachers’ final IMPACT ratings than are intended or explained in DCPS guidebooks for teachers and administrators.

Recommendations

In their report, Whitehurst et. al. (2014) state, “We should not tolerate a system that makes it hard for a teacher who doesn’t have top students to get a top rating.” In order to ensure all teachers are rated fairly, DCPS should:

- anonymously survey their school level administrators to look for evidence of pressure to limit the amount of highly effective teachers in lower performing schools. If such evidence is found, they should further investigate causes.
- study the role financial bonuses might play in rating teachers.
- should utilize its LIFT system to advance teachers in high poverty schools rated effective, as well as highly effective, through the highest levels, “Distinguished” and “Expert” teacher.
- statistically adjust observation scores to reflect student population factors, as we already do for standardized test scores. (Steinberg and Sartain, 2020)

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