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## *policy brief*

Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

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## Teacher Evaluation, Development, and Dismissal in California

### Part 3 – A Model for Reform

*By Michael Kent, Dennis Li, and Chris Frank*

One of the primary goals of the education system is to promote student achievement. Given the impact teachers have on student outcomes, maintaining high-quality instructors should be a top priority for California school districts. Professional development and dismissal practices are intended to improve teacher quality but, as the results of our previous policy briefs demonstrated, a majority of principals view development programs as ineffective and the dismissal process as overly difficult.

Analysis of data from a survey we conducted yielded a significant relationship between accurate evaluations and helping struggling teachers to improve, removing habitual underperformers, and increasing student proficiency scores in language arts and mathematics. Hence, while

many administrators report that their development and dismissal practices are ineffective, those administrators that report more accurate evaluation systems have more success in developing underperforming teachers to satisfactory levels and removing larger proportions of habitual underperformers. Consequently, these schools also have larger proportions of students proficient or above in language arts and mathematics.

While the scope of our research prohibited us from proving a causal relationship between accurate teacher evaluations and effective teacher development and dismissal practices, we hypothesize that more accurate teacher performance evaluations lead to these outcomes. This is because administrators that rigorously supervise and evaluate teachers are able to identify specific areas

in need of improvement, provide teachers with frequent feedback, and document their progress. Accurate evaluation through frequent supervision also allows them to effectively tailor programs for teacher development needs and provides administrators with sufficient documentation of unsatisfactory performance to pursue dismissal of habitually underperforming teachers.

From our qualitative and quantitative data, we believe that in order to improve overall teacher quality in California, the teacher evaluation process should be reformed. In this brief, we provide a case study of a district we believe has successfully implemented a rigorous teacher evaluation system. We hope this can serve as a model for reform to other districts in the state to improve teacher quality and student achievement.

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## **A Case Study of How Reforming Teacher Evaluation Systems Has Improved Teacher Quality**

Conversation around improving teacher quality is often centered on teacher development and dismissal policies. Commonly discussed reforms include increasing statewide funding for professional development programs, streamlining the dismissal process, and lengthening the probationary period for granting new teachers permanent status. However, our research found that the effectiveness of these types of policies is correlated with the accuracy of teacher evaluation systems. For this reason, we propose devoting substantial consideration to first improving the teacher evaluation system.

Teacher evaluations play a critical role in determining teacher quality. Without accurate evaluation systems, it is impossible to identify which teachers need development and which teachers need to be dismissed. During our research, one district stood out in our survey for having more accurate evaluations, more effective mentoring, and more dismissals of habitual underperformers. In the last eight years, this district went from being a poor performing district to one that is demonstrating impressive student achievement gains. While a number of changes facilitated this turnaround, improving its teacher evaluation system was one of the centerpieces of its reform effort.

Three specific reforms that were made to the district's teacher evaluation system are now discussed.

### **Major Steps to Reform**

#### **Implement a More Granular Evaluation Rating System**

One of the most fundamental changes made to the evaluation system was the decision to make the rating system more segmented. Rather than using a binary rating system (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) as employed by many districts across the state, this district moved to a system where teachers are rated as "Meeting Standards," "Minimally Meeting Standards," or "Not Meeting Standards."

This new system allowed the district to distinguish underperforming teachers in need of professional development to become effective teachers versus underperforming teachers who were either unable or unwilling to become better teachers and should be dismissed from the district. This subtle shift in the rating system allows principals to formally identify underperforming teachers as needing improvement rather than giving them false confirmation that their performance is adequate (i.e., a satisfactory rating) or making them feel threatened by the imminent possibility of dismissal (i.e., an unsatisfactory rating).

#### **Align Administrator Roles with Evaluation**

The district also made numerous organizational changes with respect to

the evaluation system, including restructuring school administrator roles to better align with the evaluation system. Before changes were implemented, a typical school in the district was led by a principal, an assistant principal, and a number of vice principals (depending on the size of the school). The assistant principal was second in command, slated to succeed to principal, and normally in charge of school operations (security, transportation, athletics, grounds maintenance). Vice principals were given specialized roles within the school, which ranged from managing budgets to dealing with student discipline. Neither the assistant principal nor the vice principals had any official responsibilities with respect to teacher supervision or evaluation.

Today, the assistant principal role no longer exists within the district. Instead, each school has a set of vice principals, who equally share the responsibilities covered by the assistant principal and the vice principals in the old organizational structure. In addition, each vice principal is given explicit responsibility for supervising and evaluating of a subset of the teachers at the school (i.e., first through third grade teachers, math teachers, language arts teachers). With this structure, vice principals are able to share and learn from similar experiences. Furthermore, each vice principal has an equal opportunity to succeed the current principal. Unlike the old organizational structure,



this new structure holds school administrators accountable for evaluating and providing meaningful feedback to teachers.

### Conduct and Document Frequent Observations

The district also made procedural changes with respect to the evaluation methods. Each evaluation that is conducted requires at least eight conferences between the teacher and the evaluator, at least two of which are scheduled formal observations. In this district, it is not uncommon for teachers being evaluated to have 40 unscheduled drop-ins throughout the year, which can be referenced during the evaluation process.

This district stressed the importance of both scheduled and unscheduled observations. Scheduled observations allow teachers and administrators to agree upon specific skills or techniques to observe and develop. This can assist both parties in identifying and refining particular aspects of instruction. Unscheduled observations, on the other hand, allow administrators to experience a typical day in the classroom. This district, as well as a majority of other districts we spoke with, indicated the shortcomings of solely relying on scheduled observations as teachers were purported to “stage” a high-functioning class. Thus, frequent observations, both scheduled and unscheduled, are used to evaluate, develop, and manage teachers.

## Evaluation Reform Results

### Improved Development Feedback for Teachers

Administrators in this district stress that evaluations are first and foremost geared toward improving teacher skills. In revamping its evaluation system, the district’s superintendent emphasized that professional development and accountability should be ingrained in the district’s culture. To facilitate professional development, the district tied its evaluation system to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession<sup>1</sup> (CSTP). In addition, the district invested in training programs for evaluators (i.e., principals and vice principals), so that they could provide effective feedback on evaluations that would help teachers improve. Rather than being delivered a report card rating them as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, teachers are guaranteed to meet with the evaluator face-to-face multiple times per year to discuss how they can improve their performance. The district has certainly made changes with regard to professional development, but what distinguishes this district from others is how deeply intertwined these changes have been with the district’s teacher evaluation system.

### Habitual Underperformers Are Dismissed

As detailed in our previous policy brief (*Part 2 – The*

<sup>1</sup> Developed in 2009 by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the CSTP provide “a common language and vision of the scope and complexity of the profession by which all teachers can define and develop their practice.”

### *Importance of Accurate Teacher Performance Evaluations for Teacher Development and Dismissal)*

nearly 40 percent of the principals who responded to our survey indicated that the time and effort required to collect enough evidence to dismiss an underperforming teacher was burdensome. Often, administrators do not begin collecting evidence until they suspect a teacher is underperforming or a decision to pursue a dismissal has been made. The changes this district made to its teacher evaluation system have allowed it to overcome some of the challenges typically faced by other districts.

The dismissal results speak for themselves. Before the district overhauled its evaluation system, roughly 2 or 3 teachers were formally dismissed each year. After overhauling the evaluation system and setting a goal that any teacher rated as “Not Meeting Standards” for two consecutive years would no longer teach in the district, the number of teachers dismissed from the district rose sharply. In the last three school years, the district averaged roughly 59 dismissals per year. Administrators report that they are currently at 95% of the goal they set for removing teachers rated as “Not Meeting Standards.”

The increase in dismissals is possible because the reformed evaluation system tracks teacher progress (or lack thereof) in a thorough and detailed fashion. If a dismissal is pursued, the district can rely on the evaluations as evidence to

show that a teacher is unable or unwilling to modify his/her instruction. Despite the dramatic increase in dismissals, the district maintains that it is focused on development. The district is not proud of its rate of dismissal, but it recognizes that in some cases it is the best outcome for students.

### Improvement in Student Achievement Scores

Since the restructuring of the evaluation system began in 2005, there has been rapid improvement in student achievement measures. Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of students testing proficient or above on the California Standards Tests (CST) for both mathematics and language arts, respectively.<sup>2</sup> The district has managed to keep pace with statewide improvement in the percentage of students testing proficient or above in language arts. In 2008, the district began having a greater percentage of students testing proficient or above in mathematics than the statewide average. The district has made many changes over this time period, but administrators place much of the credit for improvement on its focus on development and accountability as implemented through its teacher evaluation system.

### Conclusion

There are many reform proposals that aim to increase teacher quality in the state. Due

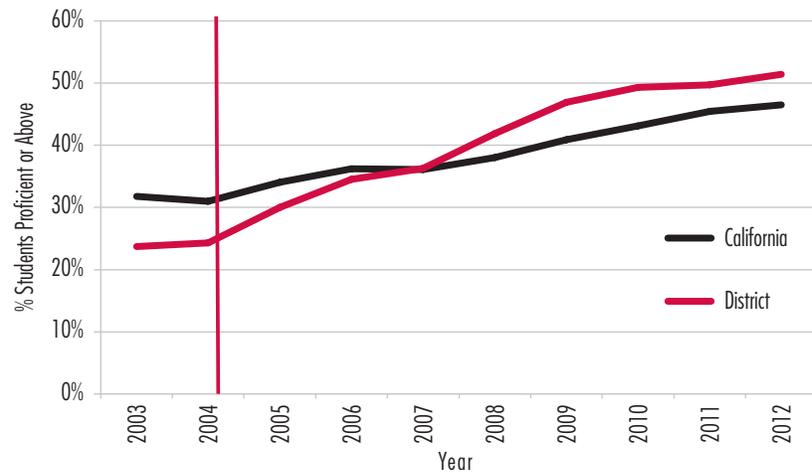
to our prior research on the relationship between accurate evaluations with effective development and dismissal practices, we propose an overhaul of teacher evaluation systems. In this brief, we examine one school district that,

in our opinion, has successfully reformed its teacher evaluation system and continues to make incremental progress.

The district implemented three primary steps to overhaul its teacher evaluation system.

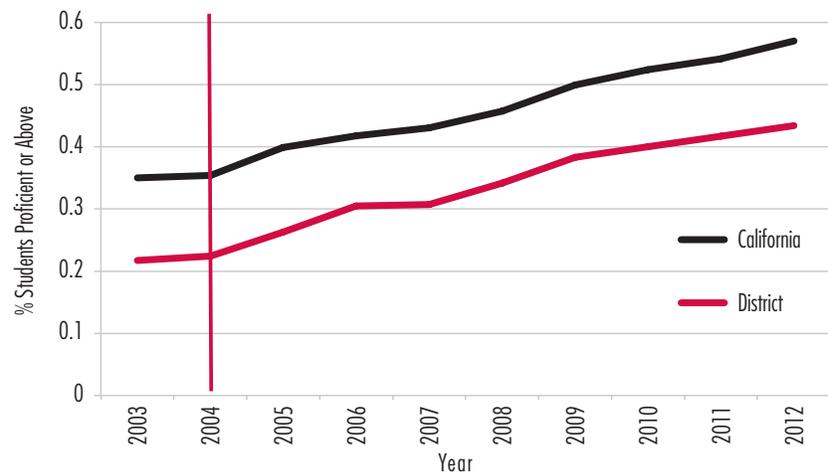
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**Figure 1:**  
Proportion of Students Proficient or above in Mathematics by Year



Note: Vertical red line indicates start of evaluation reform

**Figure 2:**  
Proportion of Students Proficient or above in Language Arts by Year



Note: Vertical red line indicates start of evaluation reform

<sup>2</sup> Note that more than 90 percent of the district is socioeconomically disadvantaged.

First, this district created more granular evaluation metrics for teacher performance. Instead of employing a binary satisfactory/unsatisfactory rating system similar to many districts in the state, this district evaluates teachers based on three performance benchmarks. Second, the district aligned administrator roles with the evaluation system. In this restructuring, job descriptions reflected the importance of evaluations and encouraged collaboration between supervisors. Finally, administrators in the district began conducting significantly more scheduled and unscheduled observations to evaluate the teaching staff. These three steps, we argue, led to more development opportunities, higher rates of dismissing habitual underperformers, and increases in student test scores.

While we do not claim the overhaul of teacher performance evaluations to be a panacea to improving teacher quality and student outcomes, we believe addressing the shortfalls of the current evaluation system will have significant positive effects. An additional benefit of this approach is that it requires no state-level legislative changes. Hence, we believe improving teacher quality in California can and should start with the districts reforming their evaluation policies.

## About The Authors



**Chris Frank** is a joint PhD in Sociology and Master of Public Policy student at Stanford. Before

coming to Stanford, Chris worked as a market research analyst in New York after graduating with a BA in Sociology from Cornell University. Upon graduation, Chris plans to begin work as a quantitative data analyst at Google.



**Michael Kent** is a Master of Public Policy student concentrating in government innovation and

technology policy. Michael received his BA in Public Policy from Stanford University. Last summer, Michael interned at Dodge & Cox Mutual Funds. After graduation, Michael plans to work as an iShares Analyst at BlackRock in San Francisco. He hopes to volunteer for a local official and eventually work as a policy advisor and strategist.



**Dennis Li** is a Stanford graduate student pursuing a joint MS/MPP degree in

Management Science & Engineering and Public Policy. Before coming to Stanford, Dennis worked as a Marketing Analyst for Vistaprint in Lexington, Mass., specializing in web analytics. Dennis received his BS in Computer Science and Operations Research from Cornell University. Upon graduation, he will work as a Graduate Fellow at Education Pioneers.

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*This policy brief is the third of a three-part series that examines teacher evaluation, development, and dismissal policies in California. In our first brief, we described the extent of the "measurement gap" in California public school teacher evaluations, whereby principals reported on average 13 percent of teachers as underperforming but issued unsatisfactory ratings to only 3 percent of teachers, or just one-in-four underperforming teachers. Our second policy brief analyzed the importance of accurate teacher evaluations in developing and dismissing underperforming teachers. This policy brief aims to provide recommendations to improve overall teacher quality in the state.*

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Stanford University  
366 Galvez Street  
Stanford, CA 94305  
MC 6015

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