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## policy brief

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## Teacher Evaluation, Development, and Dismissal in California

### Part 2 – The Importance of Accurate Teacher Performance Evaluations for Teacher Development and Dismissal

By Dennis Li, Michael Kent, and Chris Frank

*The authors prepared this report as part of the Graduate Practicum in Public Policy, a two-quarter sequence required for Master's in Public Policy Program students. Eric Hanushek at the Hoover Institution advised the project. The client for this project was the Education Trust-West. The full report can be obtained from the Public Policy Program at [publicpolicy.stanford.edu/graduate.practicum](http://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/graduate.practicum).*

*This policy brief is the second of a three-part series that examines teacher evaluation, development, and dismissal policies in California. In our first brief (Part 1 of 3), we described the extent of the "measurement gap" in California public school teacher evaluations. Our analysis of an original survey disseminated to administrators across the state found that 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. This policy brief analyzes surveyed administrator responses on professional development and dismissal policies for California public school teachers.*

Two traditional methods for improving teacher quality in schools are developing underperforming teachers and removing habitual underperformers. Both methods involve first identifying underperforming teachers. These teachers should be presented specific areas for development and undergo training to improve. If they are unable or unwilling to improve, these underperforming teachers

should be dismissed. These two actions should increase aggregate teacher quality. However, as described in our first policy brief, most underperforming teachers are *neither* formally identified as needing professional development nor dismissed and they continue to teach in classrooms across California.

Given the potential impact of teacher development and dismissal policies on teacher quality, we were interested in how administrators across California implemented these policies. Because the decision to pursue development or dismissal is dependent on how teachers are evaluated, we were also interested in whether the accuracy of evaluations had any impact on teacher development and dismissal. Specifically,

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we analyzed whether districts with more accurate evaluation systems were more successful in developing underperforming teachers and in dismissing perpetual underperformers.

This policy brief draws upon survey results of 1,100 California school administrators and provides an overview of professional development and dismissal practices in California.<sup>1</sup> We also interviewed two dozen administrators around the state and representatives from the California Teachers Association, the union representing most public school teachers. Our results reveal the importance of the relationship between the evaluation system and these practices in improving overall teacher quality in the state.

## Professional Development in California

The largest teacher development program used across California is the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program. In PAR, experienced teachers mentor underperforming teachers in an effort to improve their performance. There is no standardized implementation of the program; instead, districts implement their own versions of PAR.

In our survey we asked

principals about the existence of a PAR program at their schools and whether they believed it was effective in improving the performance of their underperforming teachers. Aggregate results found slightly more than half of the principals indicated having PAR. But we found no statistical relationship between the existence of a PAR program and the number of underperforming teachers reported in response to our survey; the average proportion of underperforming teachers at schools with PAR (12.6 percent) was not significantly lower than at schools without PAR (13.3 percent).

However, for schools with a PAR program, a principal's perceived effectiveness of the program was found to strongly correlate with the proportion of underperforming teachers at the school. The higher a principal perceived the effectiveness of the PAR program, the fewer number of underperforming teachers reported. Principals who stated that the PAR program is not at all effective on average had 18.0 percent of underperforming teachers. In comparison, principals who stated that their PAR program is very effective on average reported that 8.3 percent of their teachers were underperforming.

To get a sense of the degree of improvement that an underperforming teacher receives with professional development, principals were asked how many of the teachers assigned unsatisfactory ratings were now performing at a satisfactory level. These results show that only 6.4 percent of unsatisfactory teachers improve to a satisfactory

level with an ineffective PAR program, while 50 percent of unsatisfactory teachers improve to a satisfactory level with a very effective PAR program. These findings suggest that while the mere presence of a professional development program at a school does not affect the number of underperforming teachers, an effective program can dramatically reduce the number of underperforming teachers by developing them into satisfactory teachers. Table 1 summarizes the breakdown of the effectiveness of PAR by the number of underperforming teachers and the average improvement rate.

## Teacher Dismissal in California

If an underperforming teacher is unable or unwilling to improve with professional development, administrators use formal dismissal as a method to manage the quality of their staff. The California Education Code (CEC) specifies the procedure that principals must follow in order to dismiss a teacher from a school district. The CEC also specifies the procedure that teachers may use to appeal their dismissal.

Many of the administrators we interviewed across the state indicated that dismissal of teachers was a rare occurrence. The results of our survey supported this claim. When asked about dismissal charges last year, 88 percent of respondents indicated they did not attempt to formally dismiss a teacher. When asked how many teachers they attempted to dismiss over

<sup>1</sup> An online survey to more than 10,000 California school administrators was distributed in January 2013. Our responses consisted primarily of principals (76 percent), followed by superintendents (20 percent), and human resource officers (4 percent). The characteristics of schools represented in our sample had no statistical difference with the population characteristics of schools across California with respect to population density measures (i.e., sample proportions of urban, rural, and suburban schools are representative of the California school population).

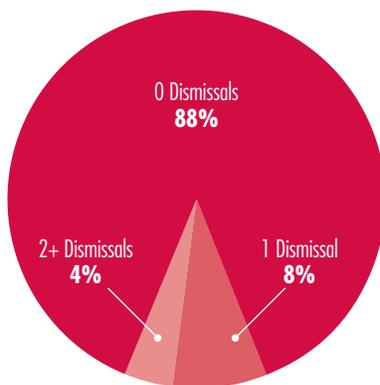
**Table 1:**  
**Principals' Perceived Effectiveness of PAR**

Principal response to "How would you rate the effectiveness of your PAR program?"	Responses N=354	Average percent of underperformers at school	Average percent of unsatisfactory teachers that improve to satisfactory level
Not Effective At All	69	18.0%	6.4%
Not Effective	69	13.5%	30.5%
Somewhat Effective	142	12.1%	34.9%
Effective	55	8.8%	21.6%
Very Effective	19	8.3%	50.0%

Source: Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

**Figure 1:**  
**Dismissal Charges Filed per Principal**

(From September 2011 to May 2012)



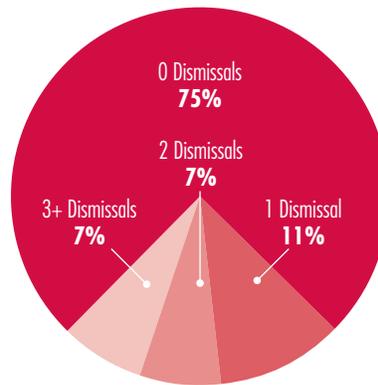
Source: Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

the course of the tenure at their current position, 75 percent of respondents indicated they had never attempted to dismiss a teacher; the average tenure of respondents was 5.5 years. Figures 1 and 2 represent the use of formal dismissals by principals.

The low number of dismissals

**Figure 2:**  
**Dismissal Charges Filed per Principal**

(Over tenure at current school)



Source: Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

attempted by California administrators is not surprising, since one of the first steps in dismissing a teacher is assigning an unsatisfactory rating. As reported in our previous policy brief (*Part 1 – The Measurement Gap: Investigating the Accuracy of Teacher Performance Evaluations*),

assignment of unsatisfactory ratings is exceedingly rare. As detailed below, we wanted to gain a better understanding of why unsatisfactory ratings are not assigned and furthermore why habitual underperformers were not put onto the track for dismissal.

### Why Aren't Underperforming Teachers Removed?

When asked the main barriers to pursuing a dismissal, administrators provided a variety of reasons, including the lengthy appeals process, the amount of evidence needed, and the cost of the process. For principals, by far the greatest deterrent was the belief that initiating the dismissal process would not actually result in a dismissal (51 percent). One principal stated, "The process is so arduous and often ineffective." Another went so far as to claim, "It is impossible to replace poor teachers unless they commit murder or molest a child."

To dismiss an underperforming teacher, principals must observe and document examples of ineffective performance in order to build a strong enough case to remove a teacher from the classroom. More than a third (39 percent) of principals surveyed responded that the time and effort to collect the evidence required to pursue a dismissal was one of their greatest deterrents. One principal claimed, "The process is unwieldy and so cumbersome!" More than a

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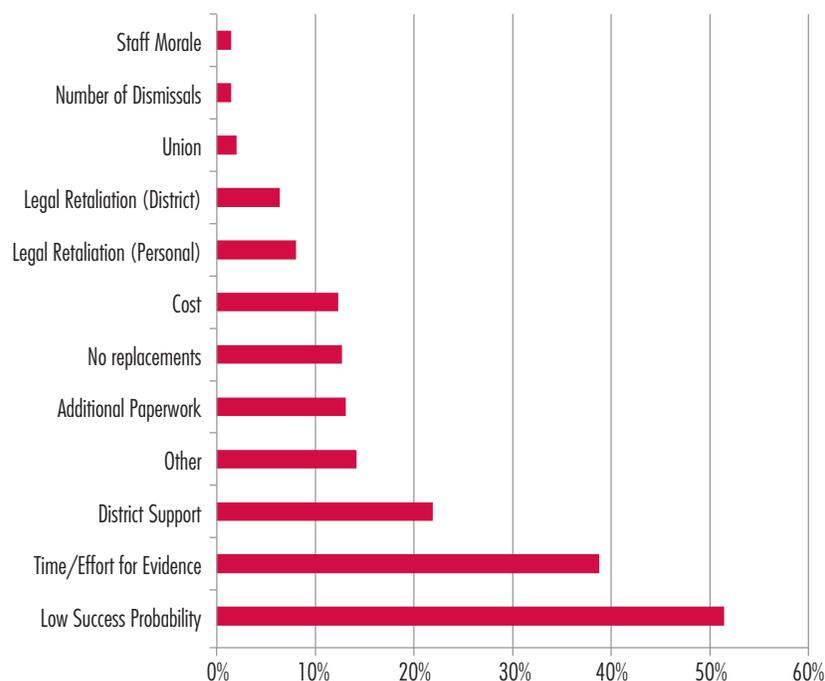
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fifth (22 percent) of principals surveyed indicated that the lack of district support deterred them from pursuing dismissal. Nearly an eighth (12 percent) of principals were deterred by the costs of pursuing dismissal. One principal stated that she once successfully dismissed a teacher with permanent status, adding, “All told, it took eight years and \$200,000.” When we asked superintendents about barriers to dismissing underperforming teachers, 62 percent indicated that they were concerned about the costs of pursuing dismissals. The high percentage of superintendents concerned about costs could be a reason principals responded that lack of district support was one of their greatest deterrents to dismissing underperforming teachers.

Principals gave other reasons for being deterred from pursuing dismissal, including concerns about legal retaliation, staff morale, and teachers’ unions. Fewer than 15 percent of principals agreed with the statement “the process for removing underperforming teachers is fair to administrators.” Similarly, only 13 percent of principals agreed that they had the flexibility to remove an underperforming teacher from the classroom. Figures 3 and 4 show the common barriers to dismissal cited by principals and superintendents.

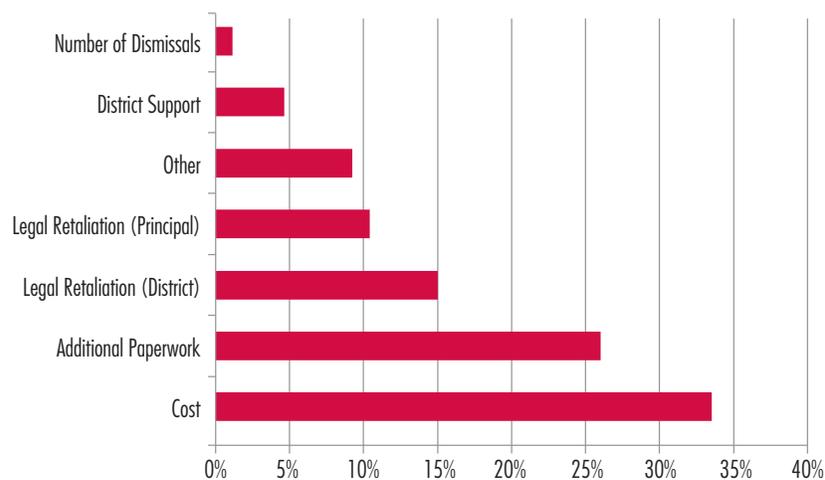
These barriers explain the reasons that few formal dismissals have been pursued. Administrators do, however, use alternatives to the formal dismissal process to rid their

**Figure 3:**  
**Principals’ Perceived Barriers to Dismissal**



*Note:* Principals were asked to indicate top three barriers to dismissal.  
*Source:* Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

**Figure 4:**  
**Superintendents’ Perceived Barriers to Dismissal**



*Note:* Superintendents were asked to indicate top three barriers to dismissal.  
*Source:* Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

classrooms of ineffective teachers. We asked specifically about these tactics.

### **Alternatives to Professional Development and Dismissal**

In addition to providing professional development to underperforming teachers or using the formal dismissal process to remove them from classrooms, interviewees discussed other methods for maintaining the quality of teachers in their classrooms. The first strategy that districts appear to use to maintain teacher quality is to be very selective when evaluating and choosing to retain probationary teachers. Pursuant to the California Education Code, probationary teachers who have been employed by the district for two or more consecutive years become classified as permanent employees of the district.

In contrast to the multi-step process required to dismiss a permanent teacher, probationary teachers can be released (or “non-reelected”) without any specified cause during the first two years they are working in a district. During this period, new teachers are treated similar to “at-will” employees in the private sector. As a result, administrators attempt to avoid dismissals by keeping poor probationary teachers from gaining permanent status. As one administrator put it, “When you come down to a decision on a probationary teacher, the one question is whether the teacher

is an ‘all-star.’ If the answer is ‘no,’ then get an all-star. I’ve never met a parent who came to school and asked for a ‘reasonably adequate’ teacher.”

Throughout the interviews, administrators reported non-reelecting 10 to 30 percent of their probationary teachers each year. All of the administrators emphasized the importance of choosing appropriately when selecting teachers to elect to permanent status. One administrator went so far as to suggest that electing a teacher to permanent status was akin to marriage, stressing the importance of making the right decisions when choosing which probationary teachers to keep. On average, principals responding to the survey said that they non-reelected 22 percent of their probationary teachers, meaning they retained 4 in 5 new teachers after two years. This tactic can be problematic however, as new teachers may take longer than the designated probationary period to refine their craft. Under current law, principals have fewer than 2 years to decide whether to award a probationary teacher permanent status.

Another alternative purportedly used by principals to remove underperforming teachers from their schools is to transfer these teachers to other schools. None of our interviewees indicated that they had ever transferred an underperforming teacher to another school, but 8.3 percent of principals responding

to our survey indicated that at one point or another they had done so. This practice, commonly known as the “dance of the lemons,” does not rid underperforming teachers from the education system but rather masks the problem for particular schools. Other alternatives that survey respondents used include counseling underperforming teachers to voluntarily leave the profession and pressuring older underperforming teachers to retire.

In sum, we find that administrators are employing alternative strategies to formal dismissal to remove habitual underperformers. However, these tactics, such as non-reelecting probationary teachers and waiting for retirement, force administrators to make premature decisions without fully evaluating the growth potential of a teacher or are often even slower than the formal dismissal process. Due to these limitations, we investigated which schools were most successful in developing and dismissing their underperforming teachers. We found strong relationships between the accuracy of formal evaluations and these practices.

### **The Relationship Between Accurate Evaluations and Development/Dismissal Practices**

Because the decision to professionally develop an underperforming teacher

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**Table 2:**  
**Perceived Accuracy of Evaluations**

Principals' level of agreement with "Evaluations are an accurate measure of teacher performance"	Responses N=511	Percent of underperformers given unsatisfactory rating	Percent of unsatisfactory teachers removed from school
Strongly Disagree	40	9.2%	5.6%
Disagree	163	17.8%	12.1%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	81	28.5%	13.2%
Agree	183	36.0%	13.8%
Strongly Agree	44	43.7%	21.2%

Source: Stanford Public Policy Graduate Practicum Administrator Survey (2013)

is generally predicated on the teacher's evaluation, we investigated whether principals' perceived accuracy of evaluations had any relationship with how they perceived their PAR programs. We found that principals who claimed that their formal evaluations accurately reflected teacher performance were more likely to respond that their PAR programs were effective. Furthermore, principals who claimed their formal evaluations also provide meaningful feedback for teachers to improve claimed that their PAR programs were more effective. A possible explanation for this correlation is that schools that accurately assess the deficiencies of their underperforming teachers are better prepared to correct those deficiencies once teachers enter PAR.

We also examined whether the rigor of performance documentation systems in

districts had any relationship with the percentage of underperforming teachers assigned unsatisfactory ratings and the proportion of underperforming teachers removed from the classroom. Our analysis found that, the more accurately principals perceived their evaluation systems, the more unsatisfactory ratings were assigned to underperforming teachers and the higher the number of underperforming teachers were removed from their school. In sum, the principals who believe their evaluation systems accurately reflect teacher performance are more likely to assign unsatisfactory ratings and remove underperforming teachers from the classroom, whether through dismissal or an alternative action.

As shown in Table 2, the principals who strongly disagreed with the statement

"evaluations are an accurate measure of teacher performance" assigned on average around 9 percent of underperformers unsatisfactory ratings, while the principals who strongly agreed assigned on average 43.7 percent of underperformers unsatisfactory ratings. Similarly, those principals who strongly disagreed with the statement removed only 5.6 percent of unsatisfactory teachers from their schools, while those principals who strongly agreed removed more than 21.2 percent. It is also interesting to note that a majority (55 percent) of principals did not agree that their evaluation systems accurately reflect teacher performance.

This relationship supports our prior hypothesis that more accurate evaluation systems will lead to a larger proportion of unsatisfactory ratings to underperforming teachers. Also, we found that schools with more accurate evaluation programs that removed more underperformers also had on average higher student test scores in language arts and math. These findings support the theory that more accurate and thorough evaluation systems allow administrators to identify their underperforming teachers and the specific areas in which they need development. Furthermore, it allows administrators to document ineffective teaching practices that render dismissing an underperforming teacher an easier task.

## Conclusion

This brief aimed to analyze the use of traditional professional development and dismissal practices to improve teacher quality in California. We found that while more than half of the principals in our survey reported to have a professional development program, the mere presence of such program did not affect the number of underperforming teachers at a given school. We found that the level of effectiveness of professional development programs, as perceived by principals, was strongly correlated with both the number of underperforming teachers identified as unsatisfactory during the formal evaluation process and the number of underperforming teachers that were able to improve to satisfactory levels.

We also found that formal dismissals were seldom pursued. We conclude that this is because principals perceive the evaluation process, and the work required to document an ineffective teacher, as too cumbersome and difficult to complete. This corroborates our findings in our earlier brief that highlighted the measurement gap, i.e., more underperforming teachers are given satisfactory ratings than unsatisfactory ratings.

Through our analysis, we have determined that the accuracy of evaluations plays a significant role in assigning unsatisfactory ratings to

underperforming teachers and removing them from the classroom. This supports our hypothesis that the first step in improving the quality of California teachers is improving the accuracy of the evaluation system. If teachers in need of improvement are accurately identified, along with the precise areas in which they require development, administrators can tailor professional development training to focus on those areas. Moreover, accurate identification of problem areas can serve as a way to build enough evidence to remove underperforming teachers that do not improve over time.

While the scope of our research did not allow us to outline precisely what constitutes an effective professional development program or a teacher evaluation system, we were able to research several districts that have successfully integrated rigorous evaluation systems into their schools. These research findings, along with our other policy reforms, will be presented in our third and final brief.

## About The Authors



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