

Teacher Evaluations in
Los Angeles Unified School District
Improvement Using Current Practices
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Abstract

The best method of evaluating LAUSD teachers is a multiple measure method. Evaluations should utilize objective data of student achievement. This data needs to be evaluated over time, not comparing one test on one day across classes, schools or districts. In addition, teachers should be evaluated by trained observers who take the time to visit the classroom on several occasions. Further, there is a plethora of data which can be gleaned from the students themselves. Student surveys are a reliable source of information as to the classroom environment and how the student is interacting and reacting with the teacher. Evaluations are necessary to ensure quality teachers instruct the students of LAUSD each day.

Executive Summary

It is a logical conclusion that a teacher is the single most important factor in the school's control regarding student achievement. (Goldhaber, Mackenzie) Teachers interact with the students, prepare lesson plans to reach all students with their diverse learning needs, teach lessons to a class full of wiggly students, assess student learning using a variety of methods, reflect on teaching practices and then try harder the next day to have an even stronger positive impact on each student's achievement. The many moving parts that make up a teacher's day are hard to pin down for a proper evaluation. Nevertheless, teacher evaluations are not only grounded in the California Education Code, restrictions for evaluations are part of the Collective Bargaining Agreement between districts and the teacher unions. Specifically, LAUSD and UTLA entered into a Collective Bargaining Agreement (hereinafter referred to as CBA or Agreement), a part of which formulates both the expectations and the requirements for evaluating teachers in the LAUSD. Teachers need to be evaluated not only for the students' sake, but also because it is required by law and the CBA.

The concern is whether the evaluations effectively monitor the quality of a teacher. First, defining teacher quality is not a straightforward process. Possibly a quality teacher can be identified by the positive test scores on standardized tests. Teaching students to be critical thinkers able to solve problems both inside and outside of the classroom is another hallmark of a quality teacher. When evaluations should take place, how often, if the data should be viewed as a snapshot, or gains and losses over time are a few of the issues regarding teacher evaluations.

Three means of evaluating teachers are: one, multiple observations utilizing a group of observers; two, utilizing objective student achievement data and a Value Added Model; and

three, collecting information directly from the students in a student survey. A composite of equal measures of all three methods leads to an optimal method of evaluating teachers.

Context and Importance of the Problem

The LAUSD students and teachers

A school district does not have control over all inputs into a student's education. However, one of the factors under the control of a district is the teachers who are hired, retained and teach the students. In LAUSD, there are just over 600,000 students in grades K-12. ("Fingertip Facts," 2018). In 2018-2019, the district employed 24,265 K-12 teachers. ("Fingertip Facts," 2018). Of the hundreds of thousands of teachers, the teachers, on average, have many years of experience. As depicted in Table 1, LAUSD's teachers have on average fifteen years of experience with only 2,223 in their first year of service with the district.

Table 1 LAUSD Teacher Experience

Los Angeles Unified					
Level	Code	Avg Years of Service	Avg Years in District	# First Year Staff	# Second Year Staff
District	1964733	15	15	2,223	1,871

(Rothenbaum, 2014).

LAUSD is the second largest school district in the nation, only New York City teaches more students and employs more educators. (<https://achieve.lausd.net/about>). The sheer number of people in the 1,322 school sites either teaching or learning does not tell the entire story. ("Fingertip Facts," 2018). The narrative is not complete without academic achievement. As shown in Table 2, the students at LAUSD are 59.4 points below the standard of proficiency in

mathematics. The state average is 36.4 points below proficiency for math. English Language Arts fares better. In LAUSD, ELA scores indicate students score just under 30 points below the standard of proficiency. On the statewide level, students are only 6 points below the state standard of proficiency levels. The scores in these two categories are derived from the Smarter Balance Achievement Test (SBAC). The SBAC is administered in grades 3-8 and 11th. The test is taken during a designated time period across the state near the end of the second semester of school, sometime in the late spring. (California School Accountability Dashboard, 2018).

There are 13 different subgroups for each category. For LAUSD's English Language Arts scores, Table 3 indicates Asian, not including the Filipinos, performed the best on the English Language Arts test in the blue section. Students scoring in the orange section, which is the second from lowest section, were foster youth, American Indian, Pacific Islanders and Students with Disabilities.

Lack of student achievement in LAUSD is a concern not only because the district is so large and impacts so many students. The district also teaches many of the economically disadvantaged students in California. In the 2018-1019 school year almost 78% of the students (77.9%) were on Free and Reduced School Lunch. (Ed Data <http://www.ed-data.org/district/Los-Angeles/Los-Angeles-Unified>). In addition, 143,196 students in LAUSD during the same year were English Language Learners. LAUSD must do everything possible to make sure the students are taught by quality teachers every day of the year. Proper evaluation techniques must be in place for this goal to be realized.

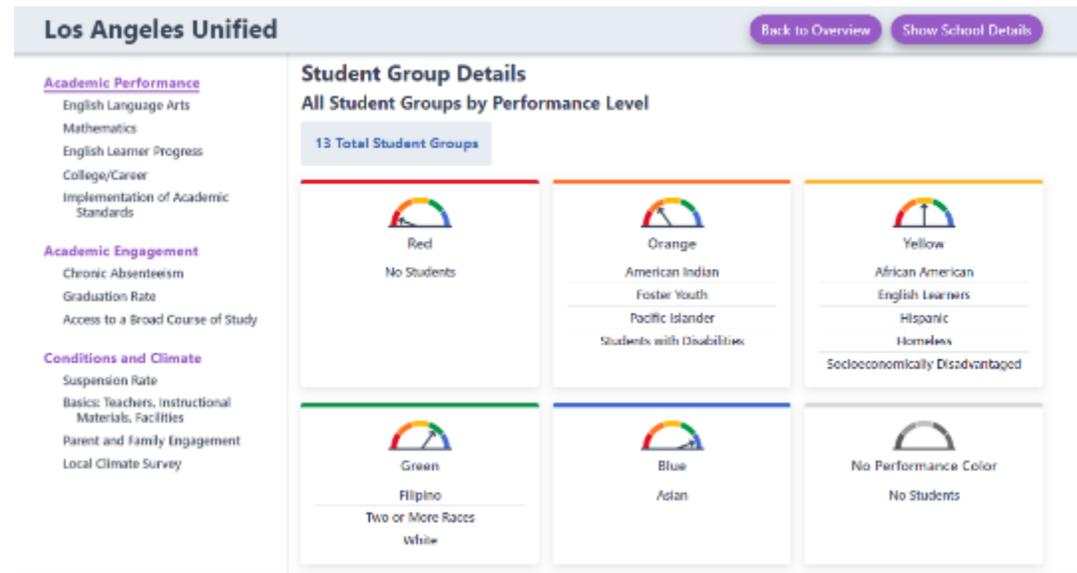
Table 2-LAUSD Achievement As Measured by the SBAC in grades 3-8 and 11 and Graduation Rates¹

LAUSD Graduation Rate	LAUSD ELA	LAUSD Math
 <p>82.7% graduated Increased 1.7% Number of Students: 31,962</p>	 <p>29.2 points below standard Increased 5.6 Points Number of Students: 226,587</p>	 <p>59.4 points below standard Increased 3.3 Points Number of Students: 226,237</p>
State Graduation Rate	State ELA	State Math
 <p>83.5% graduated Maintained -0.9% Number of Students: 518,317</p>	 <p>6 points below standard Maintained 2.2 Points Number of Students: 3,171,704</p>	 <p>36.4 points below standard Maintained 1.3 Points Number of Students: 3,166,345</p>

California School Accountability Dashboard 2018

¹ It is unknown why the scores are better for California as opposed to LAUSD, but the dashboard indicator color reflects the opposite. It is this author’s opinion the color indicates improvement in achievement or graduation rates or a decrease as compared to the last year.

Table 3. Student Subgroups of Achievement in ELA for LAUSD



California School Accountability Dashboard 2018. www.caschooldashboard.org

Policy Implications of the Problem-Ineffective Teacher Evaluations

Amongst factors within the school control, the teacher is the single most important factor between a child receiving a poor education, a moderate education or an excellent education. (Goldhaber, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2005). Consequently, school improvement must focus on the teacher. A good teacher can eliminate the unwanted baggage of the student's achievement gap burdening the student. In fact, "having five years of good teachers in a row... could overcome the average seventh-grade mathematics achievement gap between lower-income kids... and those from higher-income families. In other words, high-quality teachers can make up for the typical deficits seen in the preparation of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds." (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004, p. 21). As the teacher is undeniably the most important factor, we need to ensure all students have continuous access to great teachers. Just as families differ dramatically based on

the parents or adults in the home, students receive tremendously varying educations based on the teacher in the classroom. A child's education is the primer for the endless layers of lifetime learning. (McKenzie, Santiago, & Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 2005). Unfortunately, many of our most disadvantaged students are receiving a poor-quality education.

Before the issue of increasing teacher quality can be tackled, the enigma of what embodies a quality teacher must be explored. There are many variables which could possibly explain a teacher's effectiveness: how well the teacher performed on a credentialing exam; if the teacher had an alternative method of credentialing or a rigorous course of credential study; the educational level of the teacher and the quality of that education; the overall achievement of the students at the teacher's school; and the more difficult to measure, personal characteristics of the teacher. (Goldhaber, 2002; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004). However, when the total teacher effect is measured by looking at the growth rates of students over time, the quality of the teacher becomes clear. (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004). A student with a high-quality teacher will gain a full year *and a half* for the school year. The reverse also holds true. A student with a poor teacher will lose a half of a year. Furthermore, the effects are cumulative. Each year a student has a good teacher, the growth continues to rise. (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004) This is what leads a seventh grader to scale the achievement divide that existed when the student first entered school.

Policy Options to Improve Teacher Evaluations

There are many methods to evaluate teachers. Methods include Value Added Models (VAMs), one specific VAM is the Academic Growth Over Time (AGT) model utilized by LAUSD, student surveys, and observations by administrators. Evaluations can also be based on a combination of the different models. There may be no one size fits all for districts, schools and

teachers. However, if the teachers and the administration work together, the effectiveness of teachers can be evaluated.

LAUSD's Academic Growth Over Time (AGT)

LAUSD dabbled in the Academic Growth over Time (AGT) model for teacher evaluations starting in 2009 and incorporated AGT into the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) for the 2012-2013 school year. (Supplement to Article X of the CBA and Appendix B to the CBA) AGT is one version of a Value Added Model developed specifically for LAUSD. (AGT Technical Report) Starting in 2009, the district began utilizing the Academic Growth over Time (AGT) program to gain information on how students progressed and as a possible method of evaluating teachers. The statistical model attempts to isolate the gain in student knowledge that is attributable to the teacher and school. (AGT Technical Report). VAM is a statistical model based on the factory model of value added to raw materials and labor. (Harris, 2011). For example, if the labor, raw materials and all other costs to manufacture a product, say an Iphone, is \$450.00, and an Iphone sells for approximately \$1,200, the value Apple added is \$750.00 per Iphone (Harris, 2011). The AGT model inputs a whole host of variables for students, the classroom and the school. By inputting as much information as possible, the model isolates the change in achievement as measured by standardized tests. The model asserts that because all else is taken into account, the change reflects a gain or loss solely attributable to the teacher. (Harris, 2011; VARC Technical Report). However, the value added for a student's learning is less discrete. In schools, Value Added models such as AGT are evaluating the growth of children, not raw materials and costs. Some children will naturally learn more as they age. Others may struggle during certain years and not learn as quickly as in the past. Also, dramatic outside influences not accounted for in a model, such as individual trauma, can affect student learning for a period of

time. (Larson, Chapman, Spetz, & Brindis, 2017). The simple addition of a popular video game such as Fortnite, could potentially affect students focus and time spent on homework.

There are additional disadvantages to the AGT model beyond the lack of variables for outliers that may impact changes in achievement, such as unusual circumstances not accounted for in the model such as trauma or a widely popular video game. For example, the AGT model cannot be applied to all teachers in LAUSD because not all grades or content areas are testing with the current standardized test, the SBAC test. Only about 20% to 30% of teachers can be assessed using standardized tests and Value-Added Measures (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016). Furthermore, the timing of the SBAC test does not accurately reflect a student's growth *during the school year*. The SBAC is administered during a specific set of dates in the latter part of the second semester of the school year. The students in LAUSD suffer from setbacks over the summer and start the school year further behind than when they took the SBAC test at the end of the school year. (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012). The growth of the students is already negatively impacted before the teacher even meets the students in the fall of the new school year. Consequently, as the SBAC test is both limited in content and timing, the AGT based on the SBAC input is not an ideal method of evaluating teachers.

In addition to the specific issues with AGT resulting from the input of the SBAC test, the model itself is problematic. First, using a Value-Added Model such as AGT for teacher effectiveness ratings is inconsistent over the years which leads to unreliable testing data (Cantrell & Kane, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013). The model is also subject to fluctuations because the inputs for a teacher are small. An elementary school teacher may only have 25 students in the class. One or two overachievers, a few disruptive students, chronically absent students or English Language Learners can have a tremendous impact on the

class and the teacher's rating (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013). A third criticism of using a VAM method such as AGT is that there is no explanation for the teacher who teaches the same lessons and same curriculum year after year, but nevertheless has widely varying VAM results. If the VAM scores should correlate to lesson plans and the day to day teaching in the classroom and the lesson plans do not change, the VAM scores should not vary widely. This presents an unexplained inconsistency. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012).

One advantage to using a VAM model such as the AGT model is the method reveals a student's progress, as opposed to a snapshot from one point in time (Harris, 2011). When growth is the measure, neither the students nor the teachers in their evaluation are crippled by a low starting score on a test. In fact, students who are on the lower end of achievement scales tend to show more growth than those whose scores are on the advanced level of standardized tests (Harris, 2011). AGT provides valuable data on student growth, however, the disadvantages of AGT preclude it as an effective method of teacher evaluation.

Teacher Observations as a Method of Evaluating LAUSD Teachers

LAUSD currently employs the My Professional Growth System for teacher evaluations. Steps in the process include a pre-observation meeting, a meeting on the lesson plan to be observed and one informal and one formal observation by the administrator. This method of evaluation can be improved. First, utilizing more than one observer is helpful for a deeper understanding of the teacher's effectiveness, the lesson plan's execution, and the students' learning and engagement (Cantrell & Kane, 2013; Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016). Observation training for administrators and observers from outside the school will also improve the process. Extending the number of lessons observed further adds to the reliability of evaluation (Cantrell & Kane, 2013; Harris, 2011).

Student Surveys as an Evaluation Tool

Teacher evaluations will benefit from student surveys. Students are in a powerful position to provide information on what is working in the classroom and what is not (Ripley, 2012).

Furthermore, student surveys are more stable than the objective measure of test scores. (Ripley, 2012). LAUSD currently utilizes a survey for teacher growth and development. How the survey is to be used is unclear from the LAUSD website. In one FAQ, the district responds as follows:

What is the purpose of the Stakeholder Feedback Survey?

Survey results provide teachers with an opportunity to better understand their students' experiences in the classroom. The survey was designed to provide student feedback on the following key aspects: classroom environment, instructional practice, and academic support, which have been linked to student behavior and academic outcomes. The feedback is also intended to support a teacher's professional growth and development.

<https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12159#spn-content>

How will the data from the Stakeholder Feedback Survey be used?

Results are to be used for feedback purposes only, to inform teacher practice and support a teacher's growth and development. Survey results will not be used for evaluation purposes. School leaders will not have access to individual teacher reports.

<https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12159#spn-content>

This information indicates the survey responses are not to be used for evaluation purposes. The LAUSD survey has 24 questions for secondary school students. The responses are all on a 5 point Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree with a Neither Agree nor Disagree as the median response. (<https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12159#spn-content>). The summary of survey information is available in Table 3. Seventy-seven percent of students responded positively to questions about the classroom environment. Eighty percent of students were positive regarding instructional practice of the teacher. The final general category of academic support was in the same range, with 80% of students responding positively. The information does not reveal if the remaining percentages responded neutrally or the percentage of those who

strongly disagreed. As this is an obvious area for support and concern, this information is necessary to fully analyze the data. The teacher who is the subject of the survey does receive a report on each question presented and a breakdown of the five Likert categories.

<https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/12159#spn-content>.

Table 4. LAUSD secondary school student survey responses and demographics of responding students.



Student surveys provide valuable data. Students across classes and semesters provided similar answers in surveys. Also, there is no variation in the results due to race or income (Ripley, 2012). A survey provides information directly from the students we are teaching. The information culled from a survey is consistent and reliable.

Analysis and Recommendations

The AGT model provides beneficial information regarding student achievement. However, the data is too limited to be used as a model for teacher evaluations. A better system than the AGT and the current method of evaluating teachers, the one observation by one administrator approach, is using multiple methods to determine the extent teachers are impacting student achievement. A complete picture of the teacher's effectiveness includes objective data of student achievement. Using mastery grading and mastery learning, the students' growth from the beginning of the school year to the end serves as an objective measure of the teacher's effectiveness. Mastery grading is based on each department within a school determining the learning targets for the year considering the student population and specific skill sets to be mastered (Block, 1980; Juarez, 1994). Both students and the teacher can be held accountable for progress toward mastery of the skills established by the department. Every teacher should be moving the needle on student achievement. How quickly a student masters a learning target and the number of areas of mastery is an objective measure of teacher effectiveness which can be an additional set of data for evaluations.

Having identified three methods of evaluating teachers, namely, observations, AGT, and student surveys, the next concern is to what extent each method will factor into the overall evaluation. Placing 81% of the evaluation on achievement gains has the highest correlation to gains on standardized tests. (Cantrell & Kane, 2013). However, if the district is more concerned with the critical thinking skills of students, there is a slight advantage to utilizing achievement gains on standardized tests as less than fifty percent of the evaluation, with achievement factoring in only 25% of the evaluation resulting in the highest level of correlation with critical thinking skills. (Cantrell & Kane, 2013). Finally, if reliability of evaluation is the primary goal, then an equal weighting of all three models: observations, surveys and achievement gains is the

best method of evaluating teachers. (Cantrell & Kane, 2013). As critical thinking is a skill sought in the workplace and necessary for higher level thinking post-secondary school, a focus on evaluation leading to the highest critical thinking results is the optimum method of evaluation.

Impediments to Recommended Three Part Teacher Evaluation Method

The policy problem of LAUSD's ineffective method of evaluating teachers can be improved, but the improvement process is not an easy one. The primary roadblock to changing the evaluation system is the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the district and the teachers' union, UTLA. Although some states passed laws to remove evaluations from a district/teacher CBA, California has not done so. (Pogodzinski, Umpstead, & Witt, 2015). An understanding of the historical journey to the current agreement between LAUSD and UTLA informs the analysis of the possibility the recommendations for future teacher evaluations can be implemented in LAUSD.

In 1974, Education Code § 44660 was enacted in California. (Cal. EDC § 44660). California Senator Stull wrote the bill which was enacted into law. The law requires each school district to adopt "objective evaluation and assessment guidelines" for the purpose of evaluating and assessing teachers in public schools. (Cal. EDC § 44660). The law was later clarified with respect to teacher union influence§ and collaborative bargaining agreements. In 1999, California Education Code § 44661.5 was added. This section stated the unions and the district may agree to utilize specific objective standards for evaluation and assessment of teachers. (Cal. EDC § 44661.5). Also, in 1999, Section 44662 of the Education Code was enacted. This code section laid the framework for teacher evaluations across the state. (Cal. EDC § 44662). The section set forth specifics as to what teachers should be evaluated upon. For example, teachers were to be evaluated on the following items: expected student achievement, pupil progress, instructional

techniques and strategies, if the teacher adhered to curricular objectives, and the learning environment. (Cal. EDC § 44662). The California legislature was quite specific as to how it expected teachers to be evaluated. The code section also included a few prohibitions. Teacher evaluations could not include “the use of publishers' norms established by standardized tests.” (Cal. EDC § 44662). Neither the code section nor case authority explain the meaning or reference to publishers’ norms and standardized tests. The overriding regulation for teacher evaluations in LAUSD, however, is the collective bargaining agreement.

The UTLA/LAUSD contract in Article X sets forth the agreement regarding teacher evaluations. Article X informs the teacher and the district as to the frequency of evaluations, notification to the employees, the need to establish objectives, the requirement of one formal observation, the deadline for that observation and the final evaluation report prepared by the administrator. (Appendix B to CBA, 2013). Appendix B of the CBA further provides information on the nuts and bolts of what the evaluation procedure should include. This supplement to Article X of the CBA states the Initial Planning Sheet which is the first step in the evaluation process, “shall” include “multiple measures of student achievement...” (Appendix B to CBA, 2013). The Collective Bargaining Agreement between LAUSD and UTLA (hereinafter referred to as CBA or Agreement) also includes language as to the use of AGT in teacher evaluations. AGT scores are to be used “solely to give perspective and to assist in reviewing the past [standardized test] results of the teacher and shall neither form the basis for any performance objectives/strategies nor be used in the final evaluation.” (Agreement, Appendix B, § 3.1, 2013) The administrator should be aware of the teacher’s AGT, and consider it, but not mention it the written evaluation. Once the administrator is aware of the AGT and considers it, it cannot be unconsidered. This section of the Agreement is troublesome. Although the AGT for a teacher

cannot be officially included in the Final Evaluation, the CBA requires the Final Evaluation to include information regarding student progress. Student progress must be commented on in the Final Evaluation Form. (Agreement, Appendix B, § 2.0 b, 2013). Consequently, as the CBA requires data regarding student achievement. Therefore, the recommended approach to the use of mastery grading and skills is not impeded by the Agreement.

The CBA specifically requires the use of formal observations as a method of evaluation. However, the Agreement requires one Formal Observation.² The issue with the recommended expansion to multiple observations by multiple observers is not precluded in the Agreement. The CBA in Article X, § 5.0, requires a Formal Observation, but does not define Formal Observation. Therefore, additional observations by multiple observers is not directly prohibited by the Agreement.

The use of student surveys in the evaluation of teachers is less clear. The CBA does not include any language of student surveys. As surveys are not specifically allowed in the Agreement, the district cannot utilize student surveys in the Final Evaluation Report. The question remains as to if the District can utilize surveys for background information similar to the AGT information. May the District be aware of student survey information and consider it, but not include it in the Final Evaluation Report? This is the issue, but this issue has not been resolved at this time.

Conclusion

Evaluating job performance is a tricky area. Evaluating job performance based on how children perform on standardized tests could be fraught with peril. Student achievement provides

² Formal Observation is a capitalized term in the Agreement. It is this author's understanding a contract term which is capitalized becomes a term of art within the contract. Such a term is then specifically defined and capitalized throughout the document. However, in the entire 430 page CBA, the term Formal Observation is capitalized throughout, but never defined.

a peek into the effectiveness of a teacher because achievement can be analyzed over time. Moving away from a snapshot approach to evaluating achievement is a step in the right direction. However, the source of data collected to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness should also include multiple observations by varied observers. This data is more subjective than test scores. It needs more than one time in the classroom and more than one person observing to achieve reliability. Furthermore, student surveys are an excellent method of collecting data from those closest to the learning. However, teacher evaluations are shackled by the CBA currently in place for a district. LAUSD has language regarding using student achievement gains over time, but it is not to be included in the formal evaluation report. Currently, the CBA limits evaluations to an observation by the administrator. LAUSD utilizes a student survey, but it is not part of the teacher evaluation process. The means are available for a more comprehensive method of evaluating teachers in LAUSD.

A well rounded, thorough evaluation of LAUSD teachers is necessary. LAUSD teaches such a large number of students, many of whom are English Learners and from economically disadvantaged families. The achievement is low. As teachers are the most important factor in student achievement that the district can control, the district must do everything possible to ensure the teachers are being evaluated using a host of data sources.

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