



The Education Trust–Midwest

October 10, 2023

Dear Chairwoman Polehanki,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written comments on the proposed changes to the current teacher evaluation system. As strong advocates for Michigan's students who have long been underserved, we are focused on ways to strengthen academic performance and outcomes. Teaching quality is among schools' most powerful levers to improve student learning and close gaps in opportunity for Black and Latino students, English Learners, and students from low-income backgrounds. It is why our organization and that of our national office, The Education Trust, have worked on this issue over the last two decades.

Indeed, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are four times more likely, on average, to attend schools with higher percentages of uncertified and inexperienced teachers. And research shows that Black and Latino students also are much more likely to be placed with struggling teachers.

Supporting and improving teaching quality is critical for Michigan's students, a state that lags nationally in student performance on key measures, like early literacy, and has persistent and troubling gaps in opportunity and achievement for students who are the most underserved. Many strategies are needed to support and improve teaching quality – and to support teachers – and ensure that they and their students are successful. A system of educator evaluation and support is just one of these many strategies, yet an important one for the opportunities that such systems can provide, when they are implemented well.

Michigan fails on implementation

Other states have seen great benefits after implementing high-quality, statewide systems of educator evaluation and support. For instance, Tennessee's well-regarded teacher evaluation and support system is not only considered a national leader for the quality of its work on this front, but it's also been credited for as a major contributing factor to making Tennessee among the nation's fastest-growing states for improvement in key subjects such as early reading.

Unfortunately, Michigan has failed to implement our current system with fidelity, and we have not seen similar gains. Some teachers have expressed concern that the system feels punitive, rather than

supportive. This lack of effective implementation was a missed opportunity to improve teacher quality and learning outcomes for students. Our suggestion is to build upon the educator evaluation and support system as it was intended, rather than dismantling essential components.

Start with honest feedback about student growth

Like other professionals, teachers need and deserve honest feedback and support offered by a rigorous evaluation system so they can improve their practice and provide their students with the education they deserve. Removing the student growth component in the evaluation process effectively guts the emphasis on improving learning, and it would strip away an objective strategy to measure and evaluate teachers. Parents also deserve an accurate system that informs them on how the teachers in their school district are contributing to student achievement gains. As an alternative, we respectfully suggest Michigan require that 25 percent of the teacher's evaluation be based on student growth, which would provide greater flexibility while still maintaining a strong focus on student growth. To better understand issues of equitable access to high-quality teachers for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, we also propose new statewide reporting requirements for the state to help identify which schools and student subgroups have access to teachers who demonstrate the highest growth to inform future research and policymaking in the state.

Provide ongoing feedback for new teachers and those transitioning roles

The bill before you proposes a change to the current annual evaluation cycle: a teacher who is rated "effective" three years in a row no longer receives an annual evaluation and can instead be evaluated once every three years. We support this change because it would allow principals more time to focus on teachers most in need of support. However, we believe there should be exceptions.

For example, teachers who change grades or subject levels in elementary school or move to a new school building or district should continue to receive an annual evaluation in their new assignment for the first three years. Just because a teacher was effective in kindergarten, for example, does not mean that teacher would be equally effective in a new assignment teaching third grade. After three years of effective ratings in the new role, these teachers would qualify for the three-year evaluation cycle.

Similarly, new teachers should be evaluated annually for their first six years in the classroom – even if they have been rated effective. This is critical because new teachers need the most attention from administrators and benefit the most from honest feedback.

Keep ratings clear to easily identify mentor teachers

Another change in the senate legislation reduces the number of evaluation rating categories from four to three by eliminating the "highly effective" rating and renaming the other three. Our recommendation would be to maintain four rating categories, but rename them as follows: "Highly Effective," "Effective," "Developing" and "Needs Improvement."

Maintaining the "Highly Effective" rating will help districts identify high performing teachers who can then serve as mentor teachers to help newer, less experienced teachers. Peer mentoring has been shown to be an effective tool for improving teacher performance and satisfaction. In Tennessee and other leading states, highly effective teachers also serve a critically important role as the coaches of other educators to support statewide efforts to improve learning outcomes – as well as to take on

leadership roles in their schools and districts. This model is a good one for Michigan to consider as it works to strengthen both the teaching profession and to improve student learning in the state.

To ensure successful mentoring and teacher coaching, it is critical that mentor teachers are highly effective, and the only way to know that is through transparent ratings.

Support principals for effective implementation

One last item not addressed in the legislation is the need for increased funding for principal calibration training. Under the current system, many principals are trained initially but may not be receiving the level of ongoing support to effectively perform the evaluations. Providing ongoing support for principals will ensure better implementation, and therefore more consistent and useful feedback, that will serve educators and their students. It is also important that the state provides adequate funding to ensure every school has the capacity to implement the evaluations with fidelity.

Working together as partners

We are eager to work with you to ensure that teachers have honest feedback through a high-quality evaluation system that honors them as professionals and provides ongoing opportunities for support so they can be empowered to perform at their best level. We also share your goal that all students should have access to highly effective teachers and quality learning.

We can do this by building upon the existing teacher evaluation system by continuing to use student growth as a component of evaluations, targeting support for those teachers most in need, ensuring teacher mentoring is done by highly effective teachers and providing adequate training and resources for principals.

