State Model Evaluation System

Qualitative Pilot District Focus Groups' Report

Throughout the implementation of the State Model Evaluation System, the Educator Effectiveness Unit (EE Unit) has sought information on the effectiveness of the evaluation process from the 26 pilot districts. In addition to analyzing quantitative data on educator performance on the educator quality standards, the EE Unit is interested in determining what's working, what barriers exist and what districts are doing to overcome those barriers to effective evaluation practices. The following report describes what the EE Unit learned as a result of discussions held with educators from the pilot districts in the 2014-15 school year after three years of piloting the State Model Evaluation System.

Explanation of Process

This report represents a synthesis of field research conducted through focus groups with 22 of 26 pilot districts with over 175 educators in December 2014 and January 2015. Statements from the focus groups-including direct quotations or paraphrases, where appropriate—were compiled into a product synthesis wall, in order to identify recurring patterns and themes shared by educators across the many pilot districts. Under the six major themes, several insights emerged. Each will be explored throughout this report.

Overview of the Findings

Insights on Rubric, Instruction, and Practice
- The rubric's clear, common expectations for high-quality teaching practice serve as guideposts for teachers seeking to improve.
- The system fosters more meaningful conversations between teachers and principals, and amongst teachers.
- The system encourages purposeful self-reflection.
- To inform practice, educators must focus on a limited scope of the rubric at any given time and drill down.
- There is an increased expectation for Observers/Principals.

Insights on Learning and Navigating the System
- Districts need ongoing training and support throughout the implementation process.
- There is a steep learning curve, but benefits from capacity building were realized during Year 2 of implementation.
- Identifying district leaders for Educator Effectiveness is critical to successful implementation.
- The Educator Effectiveness Unit at CDE has provided essential support and service.

Six Emerging Themes

Rubric, Instruction, and Practice

Theme 1: The State Model Evaluation System and rubric have spurred a renewed emphasis on instruction and practice.

Theme 2: The State Model Evaluation System rubric can be overwhelming.

Learning and Navigating the System

Theme 3: Understanding and implementing the system is a challenging process that requires ongoing training and support for users at all levels.

Engagement in the Evaluation Process

Theme 4: Educators' perceptions of the utility of the evaluation system vary greatly; Principals are the key leaders.

Theme 5: Balancing coaching, improvement, and growth with accountability, consequences, and Pay for Performance.

Measures of Student Learning

Theme 6: Users need more support to develop competence and capacity for working with Measures of Student Learning.

Insights on Engagement in the Evaluation Process
- Some teachers and administrators are still struggling to see/use the rubric as a tool for coaching, not for compliance and consequences.
- Principals are the key to effective implementation and teacher buy-in.
- Teachers believe in the evaluation system if they believe in the evaluator; Inter-Rater Agreement is a key.

Insights on Measures of Student Learning
- While educators recognize the value of measures of student learning (MSL) in maintaining focus on student performance, most also struggle with creating, managing, and implementing MSLs, as well as tracking and utilizing the data generated by MSLs.

Each of the themes is addressed in this report under one of the broad areas identified above and *observational statements* were identified. The *insights* listed above speak to educators' challenges, needs, and aspirations in using the State Model Evaluation System. Finally, tentative *general recommendations* will be developed through focus groups to build upon and scale the System's current successes while problem solving existing challenges.

RUBRIC, INSTRUCTION, AND PRACTICE

Theme 1: The State Model Evaluation System and rubric have spurred a renewed emphasis on instruction and practice.

"We do more observations now and spend more time on evaluations than with our old system. The state has made instruction important again."

Insight: The rubric's clear, common expectations for high-quality teaching practice serve as guideposts for teachers seeking to improve.
Educators appreciated that the rubric offers accessible guideposts for teachers seeking to improve, and the focus groups reported tangible benefits reflected in teacher practice.

Focus Group Statements:
- We're seeing teacher practice change!
- Because the rubric is so specific, it is easy to identify ways to improve and 'move up.' I'm reflecting and seeing a lot of ground in my own practice.
- New teachers said that participating in the pilot helped them get better.
- The rubric helps to ask better questions about what good practice looks like.
- The rubric has really helped to bring to light the individual professional practices for high quality teaching.
- The system has clear, common expectations and defined by the standards, elements, and rubric.
- In the new system, everyone is getting evaluated.

Insight: The system fosters more meaningful conversations between teachers and principals, and amongst teachers.
Educators reported an increase in dialogue about instruction and practice. Dialogue between educators is supported by the rubric's shared definitions and common vocabulary for thinking and talking about effective teaching.

Focus Group Statements:
- Now my evaluator is having conversations with me about how students are achieving. [This] lets me look at the bigger picture.
- Midyear conversations have been extremely powerful.
- Teachers feel the system results in more feedback, but less deep. Peer coaching helps to fill this need.
- The rubric has opened the door to deep dialog and conversation with peers and principals.
- Peer coaching has been very powerful.
- Need to make sharing learning out the norm, not the exception. This might increase ratings in [rubric element] 5B.

Insight: The system encourages purposeful self-reflection.
Numerous educators identified increased self-reflection as an important benefit of the new system.

Focus Group Statements:
- [The system/rubric] supports systemic, purposeful, reflective practice.
- Self-assessments have provided an outlet [for me] to clarify expectations and a time to be reflective.
- One success is self-assessment. In the last nine years I was never asked to reflect… Now I am! But, it is worthless unless you share it.

Theme 2: The State Model Evaluation System rubric is comprehensive.

"This [rubric] is huge! How do you look at all professional practices at once?"

Insight: To inform practice, educators should focus on a limited scope of the rubric at any given time and drill down.
Educators reported that the breadth of the rubric hinders teachers' ability to selectively focus on narrow target areas. They talked about the need to focus their attention on a limited scope of the rubric at any given time, and then dive deeply into these few elements/practices by examining, practicing, performing, and reviewing each one--repeatedly, over time--in order to for new teaching practices to become engrained. It is difficult for teachers to simultaneously focus on improving performance across all professional practices.

Focus Group Statements:
- We need to be able to focus on a smaller number of items.
- The only way to implement Educator Effectiveness with any meaning and purpose is to meet educators where they are and start small--this may mean 'phasing' certain requirements in.
- This [rubric] is huge! How do you look at all professional practices at once?

Insight: There is an increased expectation for Observers/Principals.

Educators emphasized a substantial amount of observation time is necessary for evaluators to be able to make informed, observation-based evaluations across all professional practices. An observer/evaluator/principal looking for evidence of hundreds of professional practices may have a difficult time providing focused, actionable feedback on a set of high-leverage professional practices targeted to the teacher's specific growth needs.

Focus Group Statements:
- This is too much work for principals.
- Each principal has to evaluate many teachers. We need to be able to differentiate.
- A major challenge is time!
- One challenge is time: reorganizing it, prioritizing it, finding the immense amount needed for inter-rater agreement.

Learning and Navigating the System

Theme 3: Understanding and implementing the system is a challenging process that requires ongoing training and support for users at all levels.

"It takes time to learn this and see the benefits. The pilots are just at the cusp of this."

Insight: Districts need ongoing training and support throughout the implementation process.

District leaders expressed a strong need/desire for additional support from CDE throughout the pilot process, as well as tiered [/paced/scaffolded/] trainings that would anticipate and respond to districts' evolving needs and gradually build districts' understanding over time.

Focus Group Statements:
- We needed more support than the initial trainings (which were good). We would hit roadblocks and get stuck. This is a large level of change.
- We needed more scaffolded trainings that 'pace' the work and understanding over time.
- Can CDE take any new program this size and break it into milestones, and then check with the pilots at those points to see how it is going?

Insight: There is a steep learning curve, but benefits from capacity building were realized during Year 2 of implementation.
While the learning curve for understanding and implementing this large scale change was steep, district leaders reported reaping substantial benefits from participating in the CDE pilot program. Districts identified that even after two years of working with the State Model Evaluation System, they still had much more to learn and significant room for improvement.

Focus Group Statements:
- [There is] huge value in serving as a pilot. Although challenging at times, we were able to get ahead and implement [the System] meaningfully.
- Last year : Understanding the rubric :: This year : Actually doing it
- This is a far better process than what we used to have for evaluation. It is hard to implement.
- When asked 'what would you change in the rubric' the most common answer was 'Nothing—we need more time with it as long as we can focus on certain standards.'

Insight: Identifying district leaders for Educator Effectiveness is critical to successful implementation.
Participants highlighted the benefits of having a dedicated district-level liaison focused on Educator Effectiveness.

Focus Group Statements:
- Having even a person devoted solely to the work of Educator Effectiveness made everything possible.
- Having an educator effectiveness leader dedicated to the work 100% of the time! This has led to moving the work to a much deeper level.
- [We need] more opportunities to partner with other districts (e.g. CEI liaison project).

Insight: The Educator Effectiveness Unit at CDE has provided essential support and service.
Educators recognized and appreciated the CDE Educator Effectiveness Unit's customer service approach.

Focus Group Statements:
- Becoming a pilot and starting the work at the beginning has been extremely helpful. The [CDE] Educator Effectiveness team is always here to help!
- CDE provided good support. We needed ongoing support to keep from getting stuck.
- There is huge appreciation for the Educator Effectiveness team in coming out, listening, and caring.

Evaluations: Process and Engagement

Theme 4: Educators' perceptions of the utility of the evaluation system vary greatly; Principals are the key leader.

"Buy-in from leadership makes a difference in how their staff perceives the process. Principals that use the system as a coaching model have buy—in from teachers; whereas using the evaluation as a compliance tool brought resistance."

"[The district needs to be] increasing the level of transparency of ratings and raters. Data shared with the district validated the fact that evaluators are not calibrated. District is now putting systems in place to address."

Insight: Some teachers and administrators are still struggling to see/use the rubric as a tool for coaching, not for compliance and consequences.
Across the focus groups, some educators described the system as focused on growth, improvement, and coaching, while other educators described the system as more about compliance and evaluation. Differences in leadership (and therefore implementation) at the school and district level may explain different perceptions across districts.

Focus Group Statements:
- We have moved from *Compliance: We have to do this* to *Growth: This is about good practice*.
- One challenge is how do we change this from an evaluation system to a coaching system?
- One success for us has been having a supportive principal that very clearly states that this is about growth, producing feedback, and teamwork.
- Another [key to success] was letting teachers lead the work - select their focus area(s) and ask for feedback in certain areas.

Theme 5: How to balance a focus on coaching, improvement, and growth with accountability, consequences, and Pay for Performance.

Insight: Principals are the key to effective implementation and teacher buy-in.
Principals drive the work of Educator Effectiveness at a school level, and teachers' perceptions of the work. Teachers said that Principal buy-in and understanding of the system is a prerequisite for teacher buy-in and effective implementation and that Principals must clearly communicate the vision and purpose of the system. Teachers reported support and engagement with the system if framed as a coaching model, but reflexively reject a compliance tool. Therefore, building understanding and investment with Principals is a key to driving teacher- and classroom-level improvement.

Focus Group Statements:
- Buy-in from leadership makes a difference in how their staff perceives the process. Principals that use the system as a coaching model have buy-in from teachers; whereas using the evaluation as a compliance tool brought resistance.
- When a principal has a strong vision and understands the system, there is much better implementation and buy-in from everyone.

Insight: Teachers believe in the evaluation system if they believe in the evaluator; Inter-Rater Agreement is a key.
Teachers' view their observers/evaluators as direct representatives of the evaluation system, and teachers interactions with their observers/evaluators are among the most direct interactions teachers have with the entire process. Therefore, participants said that teachers need to believe in evaluators to believe in the evaluation system. Evaluators and instructional leaders must have expertise to earn the trust and respect of teachers. Additionally, educators and districts recognize a major need for structures to ensure Inter-Rater Agreement and consistency of "the bar" for high-quality practice.

Focus Group Statements:
- Outside observers and peer coaches would be helpful.
- [We need to be] Increasing the level of transparency of ratings and raters. Data shared with district validated the fact that evaluators are not calibrated.
- What structures can we put in place to come to agreement about what the elements mean?
- "One challenge is getting to inter-rater agreement (IRA)—we are nowhere near that yet—but it takes such intensity, it is difficult to start."
- "[A challenge is] how can a principal be a true instructional leader in every content area?"

Measures of Student Learning

Theme 6: Users need more support to develop competence and capacity for working with Measures of Student Learning

Insight: While educators recognize the value of measures of student learning (MSL) in maintaining focus on student performance, most also struggle with creating, managing, and implementing MSLs, as well as tracking and utilizing the data generated by MSLs.

Focus Group Statements:
- "[Using] MSLs has leveled the field; non-state-tested areas are now focused on student achievement."
- "MSLs helped focus teachers on student performance."
- "Districts are struggling with creating MSLs. We need more support with assessment literacy."
- "[Our] struggle with assessments is balancing standardization, validity, reliability, and time versus ease of use and value to community."
- "We are having conversations about uniform expectations and assessments."

Where can I learn more?

- Learn more about the State Evaluation System:
  http://www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness/statemodelevaluationsystem
- Learn more about Educator Effectiveness: http://www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness
- To view all CDE fact sheets, visit: www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/factsheetsandfaqs