

Professionalism and Micromanagement: the Struggle of Chicago Teachers

Introduction

A significant change for Chicago teachers, which has taken place since 2012, is the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system, which Chicago Public Schools (CPS) named Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students (REACH). The underlying law requiring the new system was rapidly pushed through the Illinois legislature in 2010, in anticipation of federal Race to the Top funds. Race to the Top was the competitive grant program initiated by president Obama and his Department of Education led by former Chicago schools CEO, Arne Duncan. Race to the Top is known for pitting school districts against each other to enact charter privatization and test based teacher evaluation systems. It is widely seen as the policy that caused the Atlanta test cheating scandal which led to the widespread criminalization of African American educators in that city. Ironically, the state of Georgia won the federal grant in part based upon these faulty test scores. Both, the Chicago teacher evaluation system and the federal system it was designed to mimic are a reflection of the test mania and bi-partisan efforts by Republicans

and Democrats to dismantle public education systems across the country.

Teacher evaluation mandates were developed and promoted by corporate funders like the Gates Foundation and TNTP (formerly, The New Teacher Project), who claimed that the main problem in education was that most teachers had inflated evaluation scores. This claim was wrong on both counts; teachers' evaluations were not inflated, and poor educational outcomes are mostly due to poverty and racism. Millions of dollars and countless hours of principal and teacher time later, the REACH evaluation system found that 89 percent of teachers achieved one of the top two ratings during the 2016-17 school year according to officials at the Chicago Public Schools. The main components of REACH look at a teacher's lesson planning, their students' standardized test scores or value added metrics, their classroom environment, academic rigor, level of pedagogical organization, and community/parent outreach. However, we have found that principal discretion, bias, low test scores and the status of a school community, greatly influences the ultimate score a teacher receives.

A Discriminatory System

On the other hand, teachers who have received lower ratings are disproportionately those who teach in economically-disadvantaged schools or are Black or male, according to a 2016, University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) report. (<https://consortium-uchicago.edu/publications/teacher-evaluation-chicago-differences-observation-and-value-added-scores-teacher>)

These lower ratings, the CCSR found, are driven by evaluators’ observation scores, not test scores. Schools serving high-poverty students are schools that lack

much-needed resources, including sufficient numbers of nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counselors. Their class sizes are too large and their schools are often disorganized. Teachers in those schools have, on the average, lower evaluation scores because of school climate issues, not because the teachers are less able.

The lower evaluation scores given to Black teachers in particular, are driving many to leave the system, voluntarily or otherwise. Further, CPS does not appear to value their importance in the classroom. In many schools, Black teachers, especially those at the top of the pay scale, are targeted for dismissal. Latino teachers

FIGURE 1
Teachers with Lowest Value-Added and Observation Scores are Over Represented in Schools Serving the Most Disadvantaged Students

FIGURE 1.A

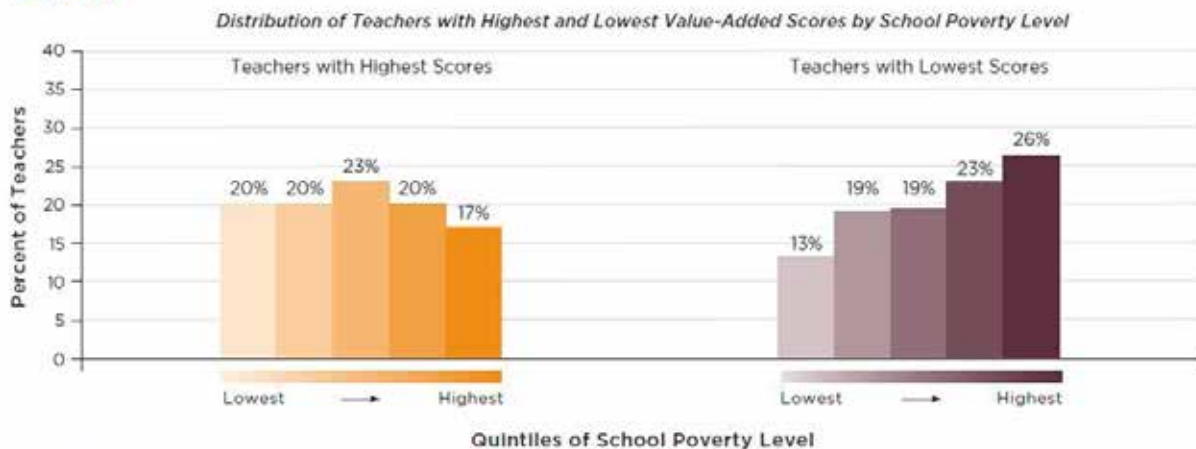
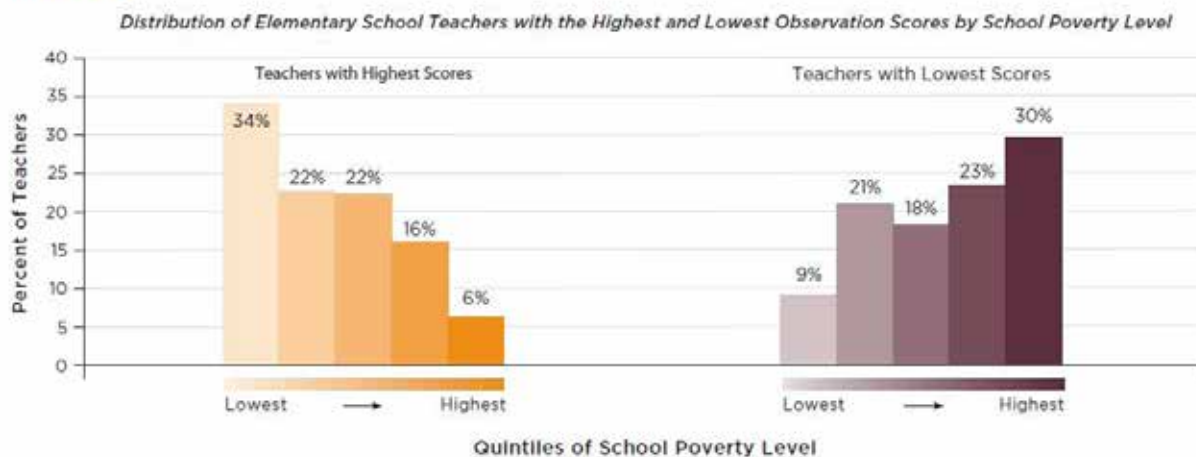


FIGURE 1.B



1. Report “Teacher Evaluation in Chicago: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/teacher-evaluation-chicago-differences-observation-and-value-added-scores-teacher>



and other teachers of color have also received lower evaluation scores. A win in the 2015 contract requires CPS to participate in a joint study investigating ways to remove these disparities. As we embark on another contract campaign (our current agreement expires in June of 2019) members are prepared to address the racial and economic disparities that are perpetuated by the current evaluation system.

While students in well-funded private and suburban high schools are engaged with dynamic, meaningful questions, concepts, and ideas, their public school counterparts are being fed quick-fix “test prep” that fails to nourish them emotionally, intellectually, culturally, and even morally. —CPS high school teacher

An important part of every teacher’s job is student assessment. Traditionally, teachers have used a wide variety of assessments, tailored to the class and subject. Standardized tests have been a feature of schools for decades, but their numbers have increased dramatically in this century. In 2005, Chicago’s students took two standardized tests, and CPS eliminated one of them, saying “they were spending too much time on standardized tests”.

By 2018, CPS testing was out of control. In addition to tests required by the state, tests used for teacher evaluation, and tests for special programs, CPS network chiefs regularly required progress monitoring every five weeks or made other testing demands. Because a school’s rating is heavily dependent on student test scores (65 percent of elementary and 40 percent of high

schools’ rating is tied to testing), principals feel obliged to mandate several *practice* tests as well.

The Union Action

In 2012, Chicago’s newly elected Mayor, Rahm Emanuel, attempted to eviscerate our collective bargaining agreement, usher in a wave of privatization, racist school closings and test based teacher evaluation system. Instead, CTU members engaged in a historic strike that stopped much of this plan dead in its tracks. Over 98 percent of CTU’s membership authorized the strike and blazed a trail of resistance to neoliberal school reforms that are reverberating today as teachers in Los Angeles, Colorado, Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia and even within the charter school industry itself embark on a historic strike wave. Tens of thousands of teachers took to the streets in both 2012 and 2016 and chanted “Hey Hey, Ho, Ho, Rahm Emanuel has got to go.” Rahm recently announced that he would not run for re-election as Chicago’s Mayor, a contest that will be decided this year by April, 2019.

The CTU has fought hard for changes to REACH, starting with the 2012 strike, which won an appeals process, a decreased weight for the testing component, and a rigorous Joint Teacher Evaluation Committee. The CTU won additional needed changes to REACH in the 2015 contract, including the incorporation of best practices that principals now must follow. The fight continues. As the results of both the old evaluation system and the new one indicate, the vast majority of teachers do not

need to be continuously evaluated. Some teachers need intensive supports, and they should receive those. For most teachers, however, having time to work with their colleagues in collaborative professional learning groups is considerably more helpful than REACH evaluations. Yet, most teachers have few opportunities to use their preparation periods in this way. Students deserve teachers who are treated as professionals.

The CTU won in the 2015 contract the right to vote on whether to give certain tests at their schools. Teachers and students have since received some much-needed relief from relentless testing, but the struggle continues to return testing autonomy to the teacher.

Similarly, CPS has attempted to micro-manage teachers' grading. This is another responsibility that teachers have always had, and one that is dependent on the objectives of the class and the particularities of the students in the classroom. The CTU won contract language on this issue as well, and some of the more odious impositions of grading policies have ended.

CPS initiatives that take classroom decision-making away from teachers are similar to *teacher-proof* curricula. These materials aim to minimize teachers' control through scripted curricula and other resources that give educators little room to deviate, even when student needs indicate they should. With the new emphasis on computerized *personalized* learning, many people imagine that CPS may start to decrease the role of teachers and increase the role of computers in student learning. This would be great for tech companies, horrible for

Chicago students, and something that would never be suggested for wealthy or private school students. The CTU will continue to fight for the teachers our students deserve.

Professional Teacher Demands

While the CTU no longer has Rahm as our most visible enemy, it is clear that the commercial and business interests are gearing up throughout Chicago to try and put reduce our rights and power. We will not stand down and will build upon the energy and momentum that has reversed the worst features of neoliberal school reform in Chicago. In our current contract fight, CTU members are demanding that the city pay all teachers and paraprofessionals fairly. In order to remove the worst discriminatory features of the REACH system it is imperative to diversify the teaching staff throughout the district, this will require more robust special education and bilingual education services, demands that are front and center in our current contract proposals. Additionally the most vulnerable members, such as substitute teachers, must possess clearer rights and be treated respectfully. Most importantly, in order to truly empower teachers to have professional autonomy over grading and assessment it will be critical to in the first instance demand the elimination of the REACH system or a wholesale revision that reflects the needs and interests of our school communities not those of the corporate elite.

