Five Ways to Improve Teacher Evaluations in New York
By Thomas J. Kane
Walter H. Gale Professor of Education
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1. Allow teachers to accumulate a long-term track record. Especially for those with a
distinguished track record, one bad year should not end a career.
As in many professions (including higher education), a past history of success signals that a
teacher has the talent and accumulated skill to be successful in the future. The only reason to
place greater than proportional weight on their most recent performance is to preserve
teachers’ incentive to maintain effort and meet new challenges. It’s inappropriate to continue
asking an accomplished teacher, “What have you done for us lately?” For both the student achievement and the classroom observation categories, all available years
of observations should be given the same weight, unless the weight placed on the most curr89>3<t1

effectiveness of the average first-year teacher highlights the implicit choice made in every
tenure decision.

Second, it would be a self-adjusting standard: if classroom observation scores become inflated
over time, if different districts choose different rubrics, or if the quality of those willing to enter
teaching were to decline (or rise), the threshold for tenure would adjust accordingly.

Third, by relying on the scores given by external observers, the tenure decision would no longer
be at the sole discretion of the local principal. A tenure decision involves thousands of future
students as well as future colleagues and supervisors at other schools in a district where a
teacher might work. It makes no sense to leave the decision in the hands of their current
supervisor alone.

If tenure protections were reserved only for accomplished teachers, just imagine how different
our schools would be. If such a system had been in place decades ago, when it was already
clear that there was evidence on the importance of individual teachers on student achievement,
we might not be having this debate today.

3. External observers will make the system more honest (and fair).

We cannot expect better student outcomes without major changes in teaching. But that’s adult
behavior change, and we should not underestimate how difficult that will be. No one would
launch a Weight Watchers club without any bathroom scales or mirrors. Student achievement
gains are the bathroom scale, but classroom observations must be the mirror.

However, in order to be helpful, the process must be honest. In a recent research project, we
sent videos of teachers’ lessons to their own principal, as well as to other principals and peer
observers to score on their observation rubric.
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 We found clear evidence of that teachers enjoy
a large “home field” advantage when their principals are doing the observing—with principals
rating their own teachers higher than principals from other schools. (Every principal in the
study were rating videos from their own teachers as well as those of teachers from other
schools.)

A number of districts-- such as Washington DC and Hillsborough County (Tampa), Florida—
already use external observers in their observation process. In the initial years of
implementation, external observers in DC tended to score teachers lower than the teachers’
own principals. However, over time, those ratings have converged. (In fact, teachers in
Washington and Hillsborough demanded external observers, to ensure that they would be
treated fairly.)

A second opinion from an external observer will help in other ways as well. Even with trained
raters, the typical rubric requires judgement, and different raters will form different
judgements. For that reason, there is a much larger improvement in reliability from adding

1
 Andrew D. Ho, Thomas J. Kane The Reliability of Classroom Observations by School Personnel (Seattle, WA: Bill &
Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013).

observations from different observers than from adding more observations by the same
observer.
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However, because of the time commitment, external observations are also costly, and they
should be used wisely. During the 2015-16 school year, the highest priority should be given to
external observations for probationary teachers. For instance, all probationary teachers could
be required to have at least two full-lesson observations by external observers during 2015-16.
Second priority should be given to already tenured teachers with poor student achievement
growth in the prior year. Once observers are trained and processes are in place, the remaining
experienced teachers could be added in subsequent years, perhaps with one full-lesson
observation by an external observer.

external observers, peers and supervisors will provide be a more effective mirror than any
observer’s written notes in helping teachers transform their teaching.
The use of video would save observers’ travel time. Moreover, it would make it much more