



What's in a rating?

Brian A. Jacob¹, Elias Walsh*

University of Michigan, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, 735 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-3091, USA

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ABSTRACT

We examine the relationship between the formal ratings that principals give teachers and a variety of observable teacher characteristics, including proxies for productivity. Prior work has shown that principals can differentiate between more and less effective teachers, especially at the tails of the quality distribution, and that subjective evaluations of teachers are strongly correlated with subsequent student achievement. However, whereas prior work has relied on survey data, we consider formal ratings from a setting in which the stakes are reasonably high. We find that the ratings are correlated with an array of teacher qualities including experience for young teachers, education credentials, and teacher absenteeism. Our finding that principals reward qualities of teachers known to be related to student productivity provides reason to be optimistic about policies that would assign more weight to principal evaluations of teachers in career decisions and compensation.

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1. Introduction

Recent education reforms including the federal Race to the Top (RTT) initiative focus on improving teacher quality by instituting evaluation and compensation systems that are based on student achievement. Such evaluation systems often rely in large part on “value-added” measures of teacher effectiveness. Concerns with the validity and reliability of value-added has led many schools and districts to adopt teacher evaluation systems that rely heavily on supervisor ratings. Indeed, some of the well-known popular reforms in this arena such as the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) and Denver ProComp place a significant emphasis on supervisor assessment.

The emphasis on subjective ratings, however, has raised a variety of concerns. Some observers worry that principal assessments will dilute inappropriately the focus on student outcomes. Other observers fear that placing greater weight on subjective evaluations will encourage

favoritism, nepotism and even discrimination. Another set of concerns centers around the fact that formal performance ratings are almost universally high² and thus cannot reasonably be thought to identify teaching quality.

Several recent studies have examined principal attitudes and behaviors with regard to teacher assessment in order to assess the potential importance of such concerns. The existing evidence is limited, but does suggest that principals can differentiate between more and less effective teachers. Moreover, there is evidence that principals use this information systematically in high-stakes hiring and dismissal decisions. Jacob and Lefgren (2008) examined the relationship between subjective (principal holistic assessments) and objective (i.e., value-added) measures of teacher effectiveness, finding that principals could identify the most and least effective teachers but have less ability to differentiate between teachers in the middle of the distribution.³ Kane, Taylor, Tyler, and Wooten (2010) studied the relationship between a teacher's effectiveness

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bajacob@umich.edu (B.A. Jacob), felias@umich.edu (E. Walsh).

¹ University of Michigan & NBER. Tel.: +1 734 615 6994.

² In their report “The Widget Effect” The New Teacher Project (2009) found that in the districts they study over 94% of teachers receive positive performance ratings.

³ Also see Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, and Thompson (2006).

as measured by value-added and the ratings the teacher received on the basis of classroom observations by trained supervisors. They find that classroom-based observational measures of teacher effectiveness are strongly correlated with student achievement growth. Jacob (2010a,b) found that principals in Chicago who were given more flexibility to dismiss probationary teachers were more likely to dismiss those teachers with greater absences, weaker educational background and lower value-added scores. Grossman et al. (2010) find classroom-based observational measures of certain instructional practices are highly correlated with teacher effectiveness as measured by value-added.

In this paper, we extend this literature by examining the relationship between the formal ratings that principals give teachers and a variety of observable teacher characteristics, including proxies for productivity such as teacher absences, experience and educational background. To do so, we combine personnel records on all classroom teachers in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) between 2002–2003 and 2005–2006 with data on the ratings they received from their principal in each applicable year. The benefit of this approach relative to prior work is that it examines the formal evaluations that principals currently give teachers, whereas prior work has relied on surveys in which principals might not evaluate teachers as they would in the institutional context of the formal ratings.⁴ By examining the formal ratings we can assess how principals evaluate teachers in a setting where the stakes are reasonably high. Understanding how principals use the performance evaluation tools currently available to them will help policy makers design evaluation and compensation procedures that place appropriate weight on subjective evaluations.

We find that ratings are positively associated with teacher experience for younger teachers, but that there is no relationship between experience and ratings for teachers with more than 10 years of experience. We also find that ratings are negatively associated with teacher absences and positively associated with some measures of educational background. Conditional on observables, men and minority teachers receive lower ratings. Also, conditional on principal, teacher, and student observables, principals in higher performing elementary schools give higher ratings.

These patterns are largely consistent with findings from the teacher effectiveness literature. For example, a large body of prior research has found that early teacher experience is positively associated with student achievement growth (Rockoff, 2004; Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2010). Similarly, there is evidence that teacher absences and (in some cases) the quality of a teacher's college (often viewed as a proxy for the teacher's own cognitive ability) are positively associated with student performance (Rockoff et al., 2010). In short, our findings suggest that these formal ratings are strongly related to proxies for pro-

ductivity, which provides reason to be optimistic about policies that would assign more weight to principal evaluations of teachers.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents background material, and Sections 3 and 4 describe the data and empirical strategy, respectively. Section 5 presents the results, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Background

The collective bargaining agreement between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the CPS specifies which teachers are to be evaluated based on probationary or tenured status and prior ratings received. The efficiency ratings procedures relevant to this study went into effect for the 2000–2001 school-year, and were not significantly altered until the 2007–2008 school-year, after the time-frame of our analysis. The agreement specified that tenured teachers previously rated excellent or superior were to be rated every two years, while tenured teachers rated satisfactory were to be rated annually. An exception to these rules is that principals newly assigned to a school were not to rate tenured teachers with prior satisfactory or better ratings until having served in the school for at least 5 months. The only guidance given for the rating of probationary teachers was that newly assigned principals should rate all probationary teachers. The agreement does not specify how frequently returning principals should rate probationary teachers.

While principal ratings of teachers were not a significant factor in teacher dismissals during our period of analysis, the ratings were a factor in some personnel decisions. Administrators make use of the ratings in assigning teachers to summer school positions, and in some school re-assignment decisions. Also, teachers given unsatisfactory ratings are required to participate in drafting a remediation plan with their principal. As we show below, the vast majority of ratings given are positive, and as a result it is teachers at the low end of the quality distribution who are most affected by performance ratings.

The CPS ratings system is similar to those used in many large school districts. Principals in CPS assign teachers a rating in one of four categories, “superior,” “excellent,” “satisfactory,” and “unsatisfactory.” The New Teacher Project (2009) profiled rating systems in several districts including the CPS. While districts vary in the number of categories of ratings given from two to five, in all districts, including the CPS, the vast majority of ratings are given in the top one or two categories. The systems are also similar in the frequency of required ratings and the evaluation process.

3. Data

The data for this study come from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administrative data. Teacher personnel files provide information on teacher background, assignment and efficiency ratings. We supplement this teacher-level data with information on school demographics and principal characteristics from personnel files. We obtain teacher absences from payroll records. Details on how absences are cleaned can be found in Appendix A.

⁴ The formal ratings are supposed to be based on a principal's review of teacher lesson plans, observation of the teacher's classroom and monitoring of student progress.

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