

# Now is not the time to throw out teacher standards

## Senate bill would nix important job-performance measurements

By Molly Macek | October 2023

Teachers would no longer be held accountable for their impact on student achievement under legislation that is being considered in the state senate. The proposal would make it harder for schools to measure teacher performance and retain quality teachers.

Senate Bill 395 would gut the state's requirement that student test data be included in teacher evaluations. Currently, student growth and assessment data make up 40% of a teacher's evaluation score. Half of that must include standardized test data for teachers of subjects and grades that take the M-STEP. The remainder of the evaluation score is mostly based on a teacher's instructional abilities, as measured by a classroom observation tool. The bill would reduce the student assessment portion to 20% of the total evaluation score.

The current policy is in place for good reason. It was adopted on the basis of findings from a study performed by the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness. The Legislature established the council in 2011 to develop a statewide system for evaluating teachers. State law requires districts to perform

annual teacher evaluations, but many at that time were struggling to develop effective tools for doing so. To support districts, the council developed policy recommendations for the state's current teacher evaluation system.

Its recommendations included using student test data to measure a teacher's impact on student learning.

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Many other states enacted similar reforms during this period, largely in response to President Obama's Race to the Top program. The District of Columbia and Tennessee implemented evaluation models (IMPACT and TEAM, respectively) that include student assessment data as a significant portion of the teacher's evaluation score.

Senate Bill 395, if passed, will undo the teacher evaluation reforms recommended by the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness. If student test results are downgraded in the evaluation, administrators will likely rely on classroom observations to assess the teacher's impact on student learning. But the bill only requires teachers to be observed twice per year for 15 minutes each

observation. And teachers rated as “effective” for three consecutive years will only need to be evaluated once every three years.

Without objective student data, the evaluation will be based on infrequent, subjective classroom observations that fail to measure the teacher’s impact on student learning. Only a more robust evaluation system that includes a variety of student-level and teacher-level performance metrics can do that.

Fortunately, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer opposes the removal of student performance data from the state’s teacher evaluation system. (An earlier version of SB 395 would have eliminated the student assessment altogether.) This is despite her political alignment with the bill’s sponsors, Sen. Dayna Polehanki (D-Livonia), Chair of the Senate Committee on Education, and Sen. Erika Geiss (D-Taylor).

“Teacher performance cannot be adequately measured without consideration of meaningful student academic progress, using metrics determined on the local level by a student’s teacher and principal,” a spokesperson for the governor told a committee hearing, according to Gongwer News. “Student growth is important to parents and demonstrates results from state-level investments in our kids.”

The bill would make other changes that could harm schools’ ability to identify and reward highly effective teachers. For instance, it reduces the number of

evaluation categories from four (highly effective, effective, minimally effective and ineffective) to three (effective, satisfactory and needing support). This means it will be harder to differentiate the highest-performing teachers from those who are just meeting expectations. More teachers will be given the highest rating (effective) and potentially miss opportunities to identify areas for professional growth. And if an administrator neglects to perform an evaluation, the teacher’s rating for that year automatically defaults to “effective,” even though the teacher’s performance wasn’t assessed. This means a teacher could receive an “effective” rating despite poor job performance.

Senate Bill 395 is the latest example of proposed legislation that would result in reduced school accountability and performance. With students needing to recover from record learning losses, this is not the time to water down accountability standards. A robust evaluation system that includes student data ensures teachers are doing what they were hired to do: improve student learning.

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