

Testimony of Dr. Rodney E. Watson
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
House Education & Workforce Committee
Hearing on “Raising the Bar: How Are Schools Measuring Teacher Performance?”
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rodney Watson, and I'm the Chief Human Resources Officer for the Houston Independent School District. Under the leadership of Superintendent Terry Grier and our Board of Trustees, we have been working to improve teacher evaluation and professional development in our district for the last three years.

This is work we undertook because we saw a major disconnect between our old traditional teacher evaluation system and student achievement. This was a system not unlike those in effect in most districts across America. In Houston, this old system gave acceptable performance ratings to 97 percent of teachers, despite the fact that 70,000 Houston students were reading below grade level. To their credit, Houston teachers told us they wanted a useful evaluation system that treats them like the professionals they are.

As a result, thousands of teachers joined with other educators, parents, and community members to help design a new teacher evaluation and development system that is now in its second full year of implementation. Today, two-thirds of Houston ISD teachers are aware of at least one specific area in which they need to improve. More importantly, they are getting the guidance and tools to make it happen. We think it's one of the most innovative approaches to teacher evaluation in the country, and I would be happy to address some of the specifics during the question and answer period.

I would like to spend my time sharing a few of the most important lessons we have learned so far, which I think will help you and especially education leaders in your states and districts who are tackling these issues.

First, we have learned that better teacher evaluations are not an end goal. They are one part of a solution to the most critical challenge our schools face today: how to find and keep teachers who can prepare our students for success in today's ultra-competitive economy. Nothing we can do for our student's matters more.

In Houston, our work on evaluations and professional development is just one part of our Effective Teachers Initiative, which we launched in 2009. This initiative is a commitment to refocus nearly every aspect of our human resources operation on putting great teachers in every classroom. That commitment has led us to reexamine everything from the way we recruit teachers to the way we pay them to the way we encourage our best teachers to stay in HISD.

Specifically, we have made human capital acquisition a focus as a district to recruit and select teachers earlier because research has shown that teachers who are hired earlier have high student achievement results in the classroom. We kick off our recruitment season as early as October to ensure our recruiting trips to campuses that are likely to yield high performing teachers. We also offer potential teaching candidates early contracts which support our ability to hire teachers in the winter and spring instead of late in the summer. Steps like these allow us to finally compete with many of our surrounding suburban

districts and charter networks, who have historically sought out and hired the best candidates far earlier than we ever could in the past.

In addition, as part of the Effective Teachers Initiative, we are rethinking how we can use compensation and career pathways to retain and reward our best teachers. Using data from our evaluation system, we are able to identify our best teachers and use a multi-pronged approach to retain them in HISD. For years, our district has been a leader in the field of performance pay by rewarding top performing staff with significant bonuses through the ASPIRE award program. And this past year, we engaged teachers and principals from around the district to develop teacher leader roles and a career pathway framework that is currently being piloted in 23 schools. These opportunities allow our best teachers to specialize and extend their reach to more students and colleagues, without having to leave the classroom.

Second, we have learned that rigorous evaluations and better professional development go hand in hand. Some people suggest that these two things are mutually exclusive—that better evaluations undermine professional development, for example—but nothing could be further from the truth. We expect a lot from our teachers, and our new evaluation process reflects that by providing them with specific expectations for their classroom practice. But we also designed the evaluation system to give teachers more and better development opportunities than they ever had under the old system. We've raised the bar, but we are also helping our teachers meet those expectations. For example, as part of the evaluation process, our teachers meet regularly with their administrators to discuss their performance and create an Individualized Professional Development Plan. This plan not only connects teachers to development opportunities that fit their needs and interests but is also matched directly to the specific instructional practice criteria that make up the observation part of their evaluation—a far cry from the one-size-fits-all workshop approach to professional development that prevails in most districts.

In addition, all teachers have the opportunity to work with one of 130 Teacher Development Specialists, master teachers in specific subject areas whose only job it is to offer advice and connect teachers with resources that can help them improve. This is a position we created and staffed as part of Effective Teaching Initiative using existing funds. We have also created a library of exemplar videos that showcase some of our best teachers engaging in best practice around each of the 13 instructional practice criteria found in our teacher appraisal and development rubric. Our evaluation system has helped us create a roadmap for our teachers to know and meet the expectations we have for the quality of instruction they deliver to our students on a daily basis.

None of this means we've lost sight of our high standards: Under our old evaluation process, about 97 percent of our teachers were told they were essentially perfect and had absolutely nothing to work on. Now, nearly two-thirds of teachers have a development area identified on their evaluation.

Setting a high bar for excellence is critical to good professional development, because we can't help teachers reach their full potential unless we are honest about what they need to improve, and provide examples of what excellence looks like.

Third, we have learned that better evaluations can help us hold on to our best teachers. A lot of people worry that more rigorous evaluations will push good teachers out the door. That hasn't been our experience. In fact, we see our teacher evaluation system as a crucial tool that helps us keep even more of our best teachers—after all, we can't work to retain great teachers unless we can identify them in the first place. Thanks to our evaluation system, we know who our best teachers are, and we're aiming to keep at least 95 percent of them this year after retaining 92 percent of teachers rated “highly effective”

last year. We are also taking steps to attract more promising teachers to our schools by offering signing bonuses of up to \$5000.00 in the hardest-to-staff subject areas and schools.

Our research and experience suggests, more rigorous evaluations are actually directly related to higher levels of teacher satisfaction with the evaluation process. During the first year of implementation, we made it a priority to gather feedback from teachers and appraisers on their experience with the new system at several checkpoints throughout the year. We found that teachers who reported that their appraiser consistently applied the expectations articulated in the rubric and who received useful feedback about their practice from their appraiser were 10 times more likely to report that the evaluation system was “fair” and believed their rating to be an accurate reflection of their performance. Likewise, teachers who saw and received feedback about their performance from their Teacher Development Specialist more frequently during the year were more satisfied with the evaluation process as a whole. What this tells us is that our teachers welcome and embrace high standards and high quality feedback, which ultimately supports their overall improvement.

I'll conclude with an obvious but important point: This is hard work. Getting the logistics of a new teacher evaluation system right is hard enough, but on top of that you are really asking schools to embrace an entirely new culture of honest feedback and accountability for results in the classroom. No school system can hope to get this exactly right on the first try, but perfection shouldn't be the standard. Our experience in Houston shows that it's possible to make big strides in teacher evaluation and development right away—and keep making improvements as you go along.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.