

North Carolina Public School Teachers:
Reactions to Teacher Evaluations and Merit Pay

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Due to the considerable and increasing array of dissenting opinions on recent educational reforms across the state North Carolina, the purpose of this study was intended to assess the opinions of teachers, perceived impacts and implications of two legislative reforms: (1) the federal Race to the Top (RttT) teacher evaluation standards, with an emphasis on Standard 6 calculated by EVAAS and (2) the state elimination of career status in exchange of a merit pay bonus of \$500 awarded to the top 25th percentile. Recent reports of dissatisfied teachers leaving North Carolina or the field of education for another career led the researchers to ask teachers to share their perceptions of the current North Carolina teacher evaluation system and report how long they were planning to stay in education in North Carolina.

With 800 respondents and 85 NC counties represented, the survey responses indicated that current reforms were not improving the quality of teaching that is occurring in classrooms, teacher morale, or retention of teachers. Overall, there was high disapproval of using merit pay bonuses to incentivize teachers and the evaluation process, including Standard 6, was not one that is highly regarded for determining teacher effectiveness. Respondents on the survey referred to the evaluation system as the “Horse and Pony Show” and that merit pay will lead to the “Hunger Games” of public educators. While some believe there may be some value to holding teachers accountable for student growth, the data that is collected and the rankings are not believed to be meaningful. Most teacher respondents believed that putting emphasis on student test scores will harm education if they are continued to be given such weight.

The researchers would like to caution that the survey was posted online during April 2014 and participants were self-selected. The overwhelming negative perceptions may be biased since people who are upset may be more likely to respond than those who are doing well. There is some support for the results that many teachers are unhappy with the current legislation as evidenced in other studies (Smith & Imig, 2013; Kifer & Elder, 2014) and the trending increase in teacher separation rates from their positions for 2013-14 (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, 2014; Wake, 2014).

Since both political parties enacted this legislation, we do not find this study as an endorsement or condemnation for either. What we do question is any education policy that uses student high stakes testing to make teacher evaluation and merit pay decisions. Though North Carolina teacher evaluation reports to use “multiple data sources in assessing educator performance . . . to provide the basis for performance goals and professional development activities” (NCDPI, 2014). Often only high stakes tests are used to create an EVAAS student growth score on which teachers are not privy to any direct data or details. One main criticism in the survey was that the data was not useful in helping teachers improve their practice, nor was it a fair assessment for a large number of teachers who teach non-assessed subjects, students with special needs, ELL students, or students from poverty. North Carolina spent over \$1.15 million in 2013-14 (NCDPI, 2013) on EVAAS scores; however, survey results indicated that most teachers did not find the information helpful and many saw it as confusing or harmful. Several teachers reported that they saw the high stakes tests as encouraging teachers to teach to the test and may even promote cheating.

All major reputable educational statistical research organizations including the American Educational Research Association, the National Academy of Education and more recently the American Statistical Association have come out against using high stakes tests to evaluate teachers and schools (ASA, 2014; AERA, 2013). There are multiple studies demonstrating that the scores from EVAAS and other value-added models are unreliable and not accurate for measuring teacher impact on student growth (Amrein-Beardsley & Collins, 2012; Berliner, 2014; Corcoran, 2010; Haertel, 2013; Polikoff & Porter, 2014).

We hope that these findings will encourage educational policy towards adopting evidenced-based evaluations and incentives that will support professional development and improved instructional practices of teachers in North Carolina. There are valuable teachers in North Carolina and many of them are choosing to leave their classrooms for a better future in another state or in another line of work. When promoting accountability in North Carolina, we also must encourage the preservation of successful teachers who are essential to delivering quality education for our students.

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Bios

Megan M. Oakes received her B.A. in Music from Columbus State University in Columbus, GA where she simultaneously taught private flute lessons for seven years at the elementary, middle and high school level. As of May 2014, she graduated with honors from UNC Wilmington, receiving a Masters of Public Administration (MPA) with a concentration in Public Management from the Department of Public and International Affairs. She worked as an intern for New Hanover County Governments Human Resources Department and was involved with leadership roles at UNCW. She was awarded the Masters in Public Administration Special Achievement Award for exceptional research and scholarly achievements at UNCW. She is currently involved with educational policy efforts around North Carolina.

Dr. Janna Siegel Robertson has worked in the field of education for over 30 years and received her doctorate from University of California in Los Angeles in Educational Psychology. She is currently a Professor of Secondary Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Her research and multiple publications focus in the areas of dropout prevention, at-risk students, instructional technology, teacher preparation, arts education, special education, gifted education and diverse populations. Dr. Robertson is the co-coordinator of the Southeastern North Carolina Dropout Prevention Coalition. Recently, she has been researching educational policy at the state and federal level and has been an advocate for public education.