Lessons from Korea

Here’s what educators in South Korea have learned about their new national teacher evaluation program—and here’s how they’re trying to fix it.

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In 2010, after several years of strong opposition from teachers, the South Korean government announced a new teacher evaluation system—Evaluation of Teacher Professional Development—which would be required for all teachers.

The new system seeks to foster teacher professional development and, consequently, improve the quality of education. Whereas the traditional system relied exclusively on the principal’s judgment of teacher performance, the new system involves multiple evaluations conducted by multiple evaluators. For example, in the required peer review, at least three teachers and the school principal assess their colleague’s practices.

The system also calls for student surveys, in which students in grades 4–12 assess their teachers, as well as parent surveys, in which parents evaluate their children’s teachers. Evaluators score the teacher in a variety of competencies using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being the lowest score and 5 the highest.

Development—Mandated

On the basis of his or her evaluation, a teacher might be required to follow an intensive program of professional development. For example, teachers who receive lower than 2.5 in the peer review and higher than 2.0 in the student survey must take 60 hours of professional training in designated teacher training institutions. Teachers who receive lower than 2.5 in the peer review and lower than 2.0 in the student survey must take 210 hours of professional training over six months. If these teachers fail to improve their scores the following year, they’re removed from their classrooms for six months and must take 730 hours of professional training in the National Training Institute of Education, Science, and Technology.

In contrast, teachers who receive the highest scores can take a 6- to 12-month sabbatical to concentrate on research.

According to the 2011 interim report released by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, approximately 90 percent of teachers (343,725); 79 percent of students (4,191,548); and 46 percent of parents (3,045,765) participated in teacher evaluations in 2011. The average score was 4.74 in the peer review, 3.85 in the student survey, and 4.15 in the parent survey.
Approximately 2,000 teachers received lower than 2.5 in peer reviews and student surveys and had to take either 60 or 210 hours of professional training. In contrast, about 700 teachers were rated at the top of the scale and took a sabbatical.

**Effective—Or Not?**
According to research (Kim & Kim, 2012) conducted on the effects of the new teacher evaluation system, a majority of teachers felt it had little effect on their professional growth. Approximately 70 percent of teachers said the new system didn’t help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, improve their teaching, or plan further steps.

In contrast, students and parents responded more positively. Approximately 60 percent of students and 70 percent of parents said that teachers have put more effort into teaching since the new system was adopted.

So why do the majority of teachers think the new system is ineffective?

**Where It Falls Short**

*Professional Development—or Accountability?*

The new teacher evaluation system in Korea, with its mandated teacher training, ostensibly emphasizes professional development. In reality, however, it focuses more on accountability. It seeks to identify effective and ineffective teachers, and then it rewards highly effective ones and punishes those who are less skillful by forcing them to take professional training. Teachers consider this mandatory training shameful and humiliating.

Because of these factors, teachers tend to give high marks to their colleagues on the peer review—note the average score of 4.74. They are concerned that giving low ratings or identifying weaknesses might place their peers in a troublesome position. Conversely, evaluated teachers are also reluctant to openly discuss their weaknesses. They want good marks; they don’t want to hear what they need to improve in such a high-stakes evaluation situation (Kim, Jeon, & Ahn, 2011).

**Lack of Consensus**

The new evaluation system is based on a set of teacher professional responsibilities in five areas: instructional design and planning, instructional implementation, assessment of student learning, individual student guidance, and fostering students’ social competence. Each of these areas consists of several elements on which the teacher is evaluated.

For example, one element is “engaging students in learning.” If the teacher has attained a score of 5, the standard of excellence, it means that he or she “effectively engages students using various instructional methods and strategies appropriate to individual students.” But what does “effectively” mean? How many different methods and strategies are considered “various”? And what’s “appropriate”?

There’s not only ambiguity here, but also lack of consensus. The questions and scoring rubrics were developed by the government and then handed to the schools. The teachers, principals, students, and parents who participated in the evaluations never established consensus on the performance indicators, standards of performance, or evaluation criteria.

This has led to teacher distrust of the evaluation process and results. Moreover, teachers consider student and parent evaluations arbitrary and highly subjective (Kim et al., 2011). Many teachers say they are just popularity contests, and they tend to place little value on them.

**Unreliable Sources of Evidence**

For the peer review, it’s recommended that the school principal and teachers observe a teacher’s classroom more than once. The case is the same with parent surveys—parents are encouraged to come to the classroom on several occasions to observe the teacher before they fill out their surveys.

In most cases, however, peer reviewers make a single classroom observation. Fewer than half of the parents observe a lesson, and when they do, they are reluctant to provide feedback (Kim & Kim, 2012).

So classroom observation has become something of an empty ritual. Both evaluators and evaluated teachers think that a single observation is insufficient to evaluate teachers or improve teacher
practice. In the absence of more accurate data, evaluators tend to rely on their impressions or their personal opinions of teachers. Consequently, teachers consider the evaluations neither valid nor reliable.

**In Search of a Better System**

The interim report on the two-year implementation of the new teacher evaluation system has reignited a heated debate. But even as discussions continue about how to improve the process, schools in South Korea are demonstrating new approaches to implementing the teacher evaluation system and are obtaining better results. Their efforts suggest several ways to improve the national system.

**Hangang Middle School: A Focus on Teacher Autonomy**

In the first year of implementing the new teacher evaluation system, teachers at Hangang Middle School in Seoul used the standardized evaluation questions and rubrics and found they weren’t useful in identifying teachers’ strengths and weaknesses or improving their practices. The second year, the teachers decided to develop a school-level teacher evaluation system and use it in combination with the national system to overcome the latter’s weaknesses.

The teachers kept the framework of the national system—including peer review, student and parent surveys, evaluation questions, and scoring rubrics—but developed three open-ended questions for peer review as well as two additional questions using a five-point scale.

One question was this: Was the observed lesson effective in helping students learn key concepts. Student work shows an in-depth understanding of key concepts. The arguments, questions posed, and methods used go well beyond the grasp of the key concepts typically found at this level of experience”). Most important, this question invited peer reviewers and the teacher to focus on student learning.

In the post-observation meeting, peer reviewers and the teacher discussed the key concepts in the observed lesson, whether students learned those concepts, and which evidence illustrated that learning. Given this information, the peer reviewers were able to discuss with the teacher how he or she might improve the lesson.

In particular, the teachers emphasized building a shared understanding of the standards of performance and clarifying what good teaching looks like. For example, a team of teachers conducted student, parent, and teacher surveys at the beginning of the school year to understand these major stakeholders’ thoughts on good teaching. Survey results were interesting. Teachers tended to value subject-matter knowledge, students tended to value student-teacher communication, and parents tended to value a teacher’s care for individual students.

The teachers discussed the survey results with both students and parents and came to a consensus. All parties agreed that good teaching involved engaging all students in learning, helping students develop a deep understanding of content, effectively communicating with students, caring for individual students, and helping all students succeed in school. This helped clarify what was expected of teachers and what to assess in teacher evaluation.

As a result of these efforts, evaluators were able to give more constructive feedback, which teachers found useful. Teachers reported that their school-based teacher evaluation system was highly effective at promoting their professional development (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2012).

**Namsan High School: A Focus on Collective Responsibility**

While experts grapple with value-added teacher evaluation models, which seek to identify the specific contribution an individual teacher has made to a student’s achievement, a different approach is capturing widespread attention. It posits that improving student learning is a collaborative endeavor, that all parties involved—teachers, parents, and the students themselves—are responsible for student learning.

In Namsan High School in Gyeonggido, Korea, teachers have developed a school-level peer review system that encourages collaboration among teachers. Teachers in the same department form teams of four or five. Because most students will take the college entrance exam in the 12th grade, teachers focus on promoting students’ academic achievement. The teacher teams collaboratively diagnose individual students’ learning needs and then plan lessons together.

Once a month, a team member conducts an open lesson as other team members observe. After the observation, the team holds post-observation meetings and evaluates the lesson. The evaluation focuses on identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the teacher’s practice and clarifying what the teacher might do to improve.
discussed how they could more effective efforts to improve each student’s achievement.

Consequently, teachers were better able to understand individual students and provide appropriate support. That second year, approximately 70 percent of parents participated in teacher evaluation (MEST, 2012). Parents not only did a better job of rating teacher performance, but also provided feedback that helped teachers understand their practice from the parents’ point of view. For example, some parents said that although they opposed teaching basic skills by rote memorization and supported teachers in their efforts to promote creative thinking, they wanted the teachers to put more emphasis on teaching basic skills. Some parents asked teachers to review questions that students answered incorrectly after an exam; others were concerned that their children were competing too aggressively to get praise stickers and asked the teacher to modify the reward system.

For teachers and parents at Sejong Elementary, teacher evaluation has been a learning process in which they have built a shared vision and shared values, collaboratively fostered student learning, and developed competencies for teacher evaluation.

A Hybrid Plan
A revised plan for the new teacher evaluation system is currently under discussion (MEST, 2012). The government would provide a national framework for teacher evaluation that includes basic evaluation instruments, core evaluation questions, and a scoring system. The government would also provide schools with guidelines and templates to assist them in developing a school-level teacher evaluation system.

What It Takes to Make It Work
If the primary purpose of teacher evaluation were to weed out incompetent teachers, we might not have needed to work so hard on developing a better system. Building an evaluation system that fosters professional learning and growth takes time, and it requires commitment and support from all involved, particularly teachers. After all, it’s teachers who play a central role in making teacher evaluation work.

References

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