The past year has been an exciting and turbulent time for classrooms across New York State. With the continued implementation of the Common Core standards and teacher evaluation, educators and students have been challenged to meet high expectations. Implementing any new program can be a challenge, particularly across 695 districts and 4,788 schools, with over 2.5 million students. As educators we see challenges not as problems, but as teachable moments. Below, we lay out the state of the classroom – a look at what is working and what can be improved in New York’s schools.

In short, the state of our classroom, like the state of education in New York, is: challenging and learning. Teachers, students, and parents are learning how to implement the Common Core successfully. Principals are learning how to give better feedback and support. Teachers are learning how to embrace that feedback to improve every lesson, every day. Educators know that learning is often not easy, but always worth it. For our students we are ready to dig deeper and invest ourselves in this work and we expect our political leaders to do the same, by embracing these recommendations – some of which are not cheap – and investing in our schools through a fair and full school-funding system. Our state cannot afford not to.

**Teacher evaluation**

Teachers in New York are glad to have a new evaluation system that moves beyond the binary and overly subjective Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory model. Educators consistently report that the system has brought a renewed focus on teaching and learning in schools, with more frequent and more fluent conversations between teachers and administrators on what makes effective pedagogy. However, we can learn from experience over the last two years to make the system more useful for teachers, to better differentiate strengths and weaknesses among educators, and to ensure teachers are held accountable only for what we can control. To make teacher evaluation a fair and meaningful pedagogical tool, we must:

- **Prevent teachers who do not have grade- and subject-specific tests, performance assessments, or portfolio measures that can fairly assess their students’ growth from being evaluated on state or local Measures of Students Learning (MOSL).** In such instances, the MOSL should be replaced with student survey data and/or peer evaluations to ensure a multi-measure system for all teachers. This change would avoid unfair situations in which, for example, gym teachers are evaluated on math or English tests.

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2. Schools for which the system of MOSLs is working well should have the option to maintain the current system through a majority vote of the teaching staff. We also recommend encouraging and incentivizing districts and the state to expand portfolio and performance assessments in ways that can meaningfully measure students’ growth and enhance teaching and learning.
● Continue to use student achievement as part of evaluation for teachers who have grade- and subject-specific assessments, but use a weighted-average model that considers multiple years of data for annual evaluations. Doing so would increase reliability of these scores, decreasing the likelihood that ratings would fluctuate significantly from year to year.

● Make the scoring ranges fair by ensuring that individual HEDI scoring bands are proportionate to aggregate scoring bands. This will eliminate the possibility that a teacher could receive Effective ratings in all individual categories, but an Ineffective rating overall.

● Not require that teachers rated Ineffective on the MOSL be rated Ineffective overall, since doing so would undermine the goal of a multi-measure evaluation system.

● Use student surveys – in grades 3–12 – as part of teacher evaluation to add a rich set of data about teachers’ performance and ensure students’ voices are heard in the evaluation process.

● Leverage effective teachers to conduct observations as part of the evaluation system to give teachers more useful feedback and to increase the reliability of the observations. Quality training for peer evaluators should be prioritized.

● Audit evaluations to ensure that they are being implemented with fidelity, are providing teachers with quality feedback, and are fair to all teachers, particularly those of disadvantaged students.

● Improve communication to teachers so that all educators understand how we are being evaluated.

● Continue focusing evaluation on growth and development of teachers by training principals on quality observation and best practices for giving feedback.

"As a teacher I give feedback to my students in a structured way so they will improve. As an educator I’m also a learner, and I want structured feedback so I can improve my practice. An evaluation system with a rubric and multiple valid data points allows me to reflect on my practice to figure out what’s going right and what can be improved in my classroom."

—Nick Lawrence, Social studies teacher, East Bronx Academy for the Future
Common Core
Teachers are committed to the Common Core because it raises standards for students, replaces the previously muddled New York State standards, and holds students across many states to the same high bar. The standards have begun to give us the tools to teach our best lessons and start to see remarkable results from our students. Implementation has been a challenge, as aligning professional development, curricula, and assessments is an exceedingly difficult task. The standards have also introduced shifts that ask us all to go deeper — and for many, this is different than how we have been teaching and how we were taught. To improve implementation of the Common Core while continuing to hold teachers and students to high standards, we should:

- **Allocate funds to bring teachers across the state back to school a week early** from summer break to receive quality professional development and time for collaboration on implementing the Common Core.
- **Focus on aligning all curricula to the Common Core** and continue to build resources through EngageNY, which has attracted millions of visitors from across the country. Additionally, a mechanism should be created to allow teachers to give feedback on EngageNY material.
- **Provide additional resources and workshops for parents** to help them understand the ways that Common Core affects their child’s classroom and to empower them to better partner in their child’s education.
- **Focus attention on special education students, English-language learners, and students with severe disabilities**, by ensuring their teachers receive tailored professional development and differentiated curricula.

"There are many education reforms that need to happen to help kids learn and teachers teach. Common Core is among the most important, which is why we need to do it right. If we do it right, we can transform what it means to be a teacher and enable our kids to reach their potential. But if we do it wrong, we will set ourselves and our students back a generation."

—Mike Loeb, Special education teacher, Urban Institute of Mathematics

Teacher compensation
Teachers appreciate the consistency and transparency guaranteed by uniform salary schedules. However, basing pay solely on degrees held and years of experience ignores teachers’ classroom contributions, as well as the varying roles that different teachers hold. To ensure there is an excellent teacher in every classroom across the state, we must:

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8 [http://www.educators4excellence.org/common-core/tools-and-resources/a-path-forward](http://www.educators4excellence.org/common-core/tools-and-resources/a-path-forward)
9 [https://www.engageny.org/ccss-library](https://www.engageny.org/ccss-library)
Offer teachers\textsuperscript{11} additional compensation for working in high-poverty schools and hard-to-staff subjects, such as math, science, and special education.

Directly connect\textsuperscript{12} performance to compensation to reward teachers with bonuses and permanent pay raises for sustained effectiveness based on evaluation results.

Raise starting teacher salary to ensure qualified college graduates consider teaching as a financially sustainable career option.

Consider reforms to the pension system that honor past commitments while adapting to an increasingly mobile workforce.

"I think compensation reform is important because if society expects teachers to be professionals, we need to be compensated like professionals. What that looks like is rewarding teachers for performance – which will help recruit and retain excellent educators and will serve as a sign of recognition for the underappreciated work that teachers put in every day."

—Chris Fazio, English teacher, Queens Metropolitan High School

Tenure and due process
Teachers value tenure and due process and strongly oppose any effort to eliminate these protections. Indeed, doing so would be counterproductive, making it harder to attract and retain quality educators, threatening academic freedom, and opening teachers up to arbitrary firings. On the other hand, the tenure and due process systems could benefit from meaningful reforms that emphasize students’ and teachers’ shared interests. To make tenure and due process a tool that protects teachers and serves students, we must:

- Preserve tenure and due process to ensure that teachers are shielded against arbitrary and unfair dismissals.
- Connect tenure decisions directly with evaluation results. Teachers who receive two Highly Effective ratings or three Effective ratings in a five-year span should receive tenure.\textsuperscript{13}
- Reform the due process system to mandate that teachers who are found by an independent arbitrator to have committed serious misconduct that directly affects students – i.e. corporal punishment, verbal abuse, sexual harassment – are automatically dismissed.

\textsuperscript{11} http://www.educators4excellence.org/nycontract/report
\textsuperscript{12} http://educators4excellence.s3.amazonaws.com/8/46/d/376/E4E-NY_A_New_Way_to_Pay_2012-03.pdf
\textsuperscript{13} The one exception would be a teacher who received Effective or higher ratings for her fourth and fifth years, but has still not attained the necessary rating to receive tenure. In that case, a tenure decision should be extended to a sixth year, after which a teacher should be granted tenure if, and only if, she receives an Effective or Highly Effective rating.
“We need to protect teacher tenure in order to protect teacher professionalism. However, the system isn’t perfect. We need a system that supports and, if necessary, releases teachers who aren’t doing their jobs. On the other hand, we need a system that protects effective teachers, which in turn will help recruit and retain excellent educators.”

—April Rose, Fourth grade teacher, P.S. 132

Teacher preparation
All teachers enter the profession to help students. Unfortunately, many of us feel unprepared\(^\text{14}\) for the realities and challenges of the classroom. Moreover, raising the bar for entry into the profession will improve how teachers are viewed by society, making it an even more appealing career to pursue. New York is home to some of the top teacher education programs in the country, yet there is still much to be done to better prepare educators for the challenges of classroom. To improve\(^\text{15}\) teacher preparation and ensure that educators are ready for the job from day one, we must:

- **Put in place rigorous admissions processes for teacher education programs** that include assessment of candidates’ academic records and “soft skills.”
- **Ensure prospective teachers have a full year to learn from an experienced and effective mentor teacher** who provides regular, concrete feedback.
- **Require that teachers demonstrate mastery through rigorous, pre-service exams that assess their teaching practice.** The predictive validity of these exams must be regularly assessed to ensure that they are meaningful gauges of teachers’ future effectiveness.
- **Hold teacher preparation programs accountable** for quality training programs by surveying graduates, conducting quality reviews, and measuring graduates’ retention and effectiveness in the classroom.

“I believe we need to raise the bar for teacher prep so that teachers’ practice and prestige are also elevated. By raising the bar we are modeling for our students the expectations that we have for them.”

—Kalyca Thomas, 8th grade English teacher, Pelham Academy for Academics and Community Engagement

Teacher development
Like all professionals, teachers need the opportunity to grow in our work. For too long, the teaching profession has been flat with few chances for career growth and uneven professional development. Teachers are constantly taking on additional responsibilities


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– mentoring colleagues, hosting tutoring sessions, bringing in parents – and we deserve to be recognized for this work, just like other professionals are. The New York City teachers’ contract took important steps in this regard – by instituting career ladders\textsuperscript{16} and additional professional development time\textsuperscript{17} – but more work must be done in this area. To ensure teachers have opportunities to advance in our careers, without having to leave the classroom, we must:

- **Create meaningful career ladders**\textsuperscript{18} across the state, allowing excellent teachers to take on leadership roles and providing extra supports to novice educators.
- **Ensure teachers receive high-quality professional development opportunities** that are led by colleagues – with support and resources from their districts – and tailored to individual teachers’ areas for growth, as identified in their evaluations.
- **Align all professional development to the Common Core standards**

"Right now teaching is a flat profession. A first-year teacher is often doing the same work as a twenty-year veteran. That needs to change. We need to make careers ladders so teachers like myself see an upward trajectory and a set of career goals. This will not only make the profession more appealing to young people, it will create formal pathways for teachers to use their expertise to help improve their schools."

—Darby Masland, Social studies teacher, Urban Assembly Institute of Math and Science for Young Women

Testing

As teachers, we assess our students constantly, so we of course support high-quality tests. There is strong evidence\textsuperscript{19} to suggest that test scores provide meaningful information about student knowledge and teacher quality. That being said, standardized tests are imperfect metrics and should always be viewed and used carefully, alongside other measures and with multiple years of data when available. Moreover, many teachers report negative cultures surrounding standardized testing in their schools. To provide teachers with valuable information, while protecting instructional time, we must:\textsuperscript{20}

- **Provide teachers and families with timely, user-friendly, and disaggregated test data** that can be used to assess students’ strengths and weaknesses.
- **Continue to work to eliminate unnecessary exams** to minimize how much instructional time is taken up by testing.

\textsuperscript{16} http://www.uft.org/contract-2014/expanded-career-ladder
\textsuperscript{17} http://www.uft.org/contract-2014/repurposed-workday
\textsuperscript{18} http://www.educators4excellence.org/nycontract/report
\textsuperscript{19} http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/value_added.pdf
\textsuperscript{20} http://www.educators4excellence.org/NYtesting/report
Explore alternatives\(^2\) to the Regents exam requirements for high school graduation, which research\(^2\) shows do not benefit students.

"I have been able to use actionable data from my own assessments to meaningfully alter my instruction. I've seen the benefit of that. If we get the support we need, standardized tests could also help me as a teacher improve my instruction, and would help my students see the use of these assessments."

—Suraj Gopal, Ninth grade STEM special education teacher, Hudson High School of Learning Technologies in Manhattan.

Conclusion
Educating the next generation of New Yorkers is a critical part of our state’s economic and cultural future. It is a project all New Yorkers – students, teachers, principals, parents, CEOs, community leaders, and elected officials – have a stake in. Teachers need to lead this work and make our school system the best in the country. New York is on that path, but we must do more and we must do it better. We need to lead the change we want to see in our classrooms by insisting on policy solutions informed not by politics but by pedagogy. The state of the classroom is getting stronger, but there’s a lot to be learned and a lot more to do.

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For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table – the voice of classroom teachers.

**Educators 4 Excellence (E4E),** a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers. E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers’ Principles and beliefs. E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

For more information, please visit www.educators4excellence.org.

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\(^2\) [http://edexcellence.net/articles/exit-exams-dont-work](http://edexcellence.net/articles/exit-exams-dont-work)