MARCH 2016

VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

Strategies from School Leaders to Improve REACH

THE CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION FUND

ABOUT VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Our 2015 School Leadership Report, *Chicago's Fight to Keep Top Principals*, outlined four recommendations for making Chicago the best city in the country to lead a public school.

The recommendations were:

- Get out of their way
- Help them leverage the tools they already have
- Support their individual development
- Challenge them to stay

Recent focus groups and one-on-one interviews revealed that three of these recommendations apply to how the teacher evaluation system used by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) can maximize its potential to drive instructional improvement. The system, called Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students (REACH), is the subject of this brief.

School leaders said they see REACH as a critical tool in their work with teachers and that they want help implementing it well.[1] In fact, in our 2015 principal engagement survey, one in every three district principals expressed interest in additional support for REACH implementation. With the intention of encouraging that support from the district, nonprofit partners and the funding community, this brief shares perspectives on REACH as it impacts daily work in schools. This brief also underscores the importance of principal voice in ongoing policy discussions, especially as teacher evaluation systems continue to evolve at the state and national levels. Finally, this brief hopes to spark ideas that serve to measurably improve the context in which our principals lead, our teachers teach and our students learn.

[1] School leaders refers to the principals and assistant principals certified to conduct REACH observations in district-managed CPS schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores strengths and challenges of Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students (REACH), the teacher evaluation system used in district-managed public schools in Chicago, from the perspective of school leaders.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and its partners can help school leaders better leverage REACH as a tool for improving instruction and accelerating learning. This brief highlights three specific ideas:

GET OUT OF THEIR WAY.

Provide leaders with more flexibility around observations and protect their time during the instructional day.

HELP THEM LEVERAGE THE TOOLS THEY ALREADY HAVE.

Offer clear resource recommendations for common instructional challenges and produce timely data on REACH outcomes.

SUPPORT THEIR INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT.

Acknowledge and account for unique school context and provide customized training.

These recommended strategies, though important, can only take the work so far. This brief also offers insight into how several of Chicago's best school leaders and their instructional teams developed cultures of trust to maximize the full impact of REACH. Research suggests that trust is critical to the successful implementation of any meaningful teacher evaluation system, creating a foundation for an honest and constructive dialogue about teachers' performance. Yet, according to The UChicago Consortium on School Research's *5Essentials report*, only 163 of 504 district-managed schools demonstrated strong cultures of trust in the 2014-15 school year.[2] For that reason, school leaders suggested that providing examples of promising practice in building trust, in addition to broader policy recommendations, was critical to the usefulness of this brief.

[2] Based on data for district-managed schools on the Teacher-Principal Trust measure on the 2015 *My Voice, My School Survey*. The *My Voice, My School Survey* is based on the 5Essentials, an evidence-based system designed to drive improvement in schools nationwide. It is based on more than 20 years of research by The UChicago Consortium on School Research. It includes five components found to be critical for school success: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment and Ambitious Instruction. For more information, visit: http://help.5-essentials.org/customer/portal/articles/780471-illinois-5essentials-faqs.

A BRIEF HISTORY: TEACHER EVALUATION IN CHICAGO

Until recently, CPS school leaders lacked common language to facilitate discussions with teachers about what great teaching looks like. For more than 40 years, a mandatory checklist guided school leaders' performance reviews of teachers. This checklist required almost no classroom observation. Instead, it emphasized classroom characteristics such as the presence of bulletin boards, attendance records and seating charts. As a result, feedback that supported improvements in teaching and learning often occurred outside of the evaluation process. The quality of that feedback varied, sometimes dramatically, among schools.

In 2010, this pattern changed. Informed by national research and a successful local pilot program, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (PERA). This required all school districts to implement enhanced systems for teacher evaluation and feedback that included measures of student growth. As a result, in 2012, CPS launched REACH, its current teacher evaluation system.

Unlike its predecessor, REACH is designed to strengthen the continuous improvement process for teachers through longer, more frequent classroom observations, as well as timely, structured feedback to teachers about their practice.

This report focuses on Professional Practice.[3]
For classroom teachers, there are two components of their REACH rating.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

means a practice or behavior observed inside or outside a classroom. It is measured primarily via the REACH observation process and accounts for **at least 70%** of a teacher's total rating.
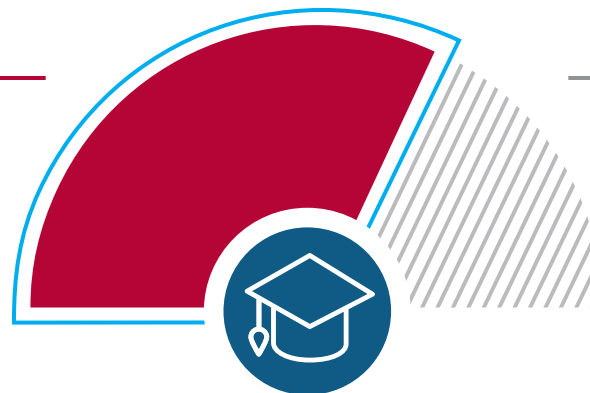
STUDENT GROWTH

means a change we can measure in a student's or a group of students' knowledge or skills between two points in time. Student growth accounts for **up to 30%** of a teacher's total rating.

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[3] The *CPS 2015-2016 REACH Educator Evaluation Handbook* outlines the Professional Practice and Student Growth weightings for teachers. The amount of a teacher's score that is Professional Practice versus Student Growth depends on a number of factors, including grade level, subject area and school type (i.e. elementary or high school).

GET OUT OF THEIR WAY

Of the time school leaders dedicate to REACH, three-quarters is spent on compliance activities, such as preparing, scheduling and mapping data collected during an observation. Only one-quarter is dedicated to working directly with teachers on instructional improvement. Moreover, the rules governing REACH are highly prescriptive, making it difficult to adjust for unexpected time demands during the school day. Realizing the potential of REACH requires limits on the compliance and time demands associated with the process.

Two ideas for improvement:

1. Provide more flexibility around observation type.

Current Status: For every formal observation cycle that principals conduct, they must assess teachers in at least 14 different areas of practice.[4] School leaders are required to conduct two formal observations every year, for every teacher, regardless of past or current performance. As a result, feedback often lacks depth, and educators sometimes struggle to focus on the areas where improvement matters most.

Ways to Improve: School leaders said they would be able to give more effective, actionable feedback to teachers through shorter, more frequent observations. To start, leaders suggested limiting out-of-building meetings for both themselves and their teachers to no more than twice per month and scheduling conference calls outside of instructional hours. These changes would allow them to maximize time for coaching and developing teachers during the limited time available for that important work.

Flexibility on the number and type of observation already exists. School leaders say they need more.

Rating categories are Distinguished, Proficient, Basic and Unsatisfactory. Tenured teachers rated Developing for two years in a row without improving are considered unsatisfactory.

Observations per teacher per year

Non-tenured teachers:
- 3 formal observations
- 1 informal observation

Tenured rated Basic or Unsatisfactory:
- 2 formal observations
- 2 informal observations

Tenured rated Distinguished or Proficient:
- 1 formal observation
- 1 informal observation

[4] According to the *CPS 2015-2016 REACH Educator Evaluation Handbook*, Teachers are evaluated on 14 components across four domains following each formal observation. Teachers also receive a rating for Domain 4—Professional Responsibility—but that rating is not given until the beginning of May. Conversations based on this domain happen throughout the school year but not necessarily during each observation.

2. Limit the demands on school leaders' time outside of school.

Current Status: Over the course of a school year, the average leader spends two and a half weeks solely on observations. Given this, time must be tightly managed. The rules governing REACH implementation allow for limited observation windows and mandate specific waiting periods between observations. Unanticipated interruptions, such as unscheduled, district-mandated meetings, pull school leaders out of their buildings and too often make observation schedules difficult to maintain.

Ways to Improve: School leaders said the district and other partners must do everything they can to remove unexpected interruptions to their day. To start, leaders suggested limiting out-of-building meetings to no more than twice per month and scheduling conference calls outside of the instructional day. These changes would allow them to maximize time for coaching and developing teachers during the limited time available for that important work.

REACH observations are multifaceted. Unplanned disruptions can create delays and limit impact.[5]

NOTIFICATION

48-hour notice to educator of pre-observation conference is best practice.

OBSERVATION

Within 5 days of pre-observation conference.

INPUT EVIDENCE

Map evidence to The Framework and input into the online tool after observation and before post-observation conference.

POST-OBSERVATION CONFERENCE

Within 10 days of formal observation.

OBSERVATION RATING

Best practice is to share within 5 days of post-observation conference.

THE AVERAGE SCHOOL LEADER SPENDS 2.5 weeks PER SCHOOL YEAR SOLELY ON OBSERVATIONS.

Observations cannot be conducted earlier than week 5 (October 5) or later than week 35 (May 27) in school year 2015-16.

[5] In its 2013 report, *Teacher Evaluation in Practice: Implementing Chicago's REACH Students*, The UChicago Consortium on School Research found that the average elementary school principal spends two full weeks solely conducting REACH observations; the average high school principal spends three full weeks conducting REACH observations. We combined these to reach an average of two and a half weeks spent on observations per school year and per school leader.

HELP THEM LEVERAGE THE TOOLS THEY ALREADY HAVE

Eighty percent of school leaders believe REACH is a valuable tool to improve teaching practice, but one in three want more support in implementing it.[6] Ensuring that REACH is used to coach teachers and improve instruction demands that school leaders have access to better tools and more timely data throughout the observation and feedback cycle.
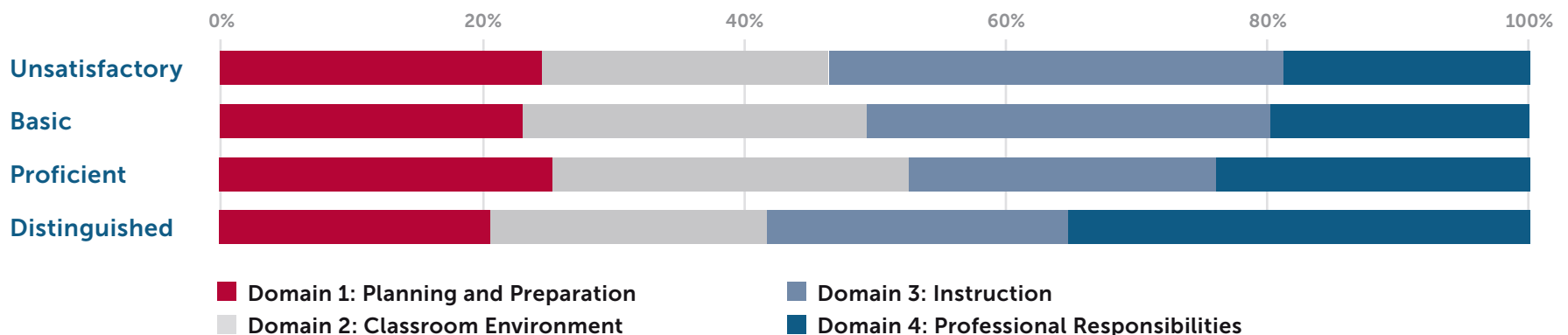
Two ideas for improvement:

1. Provide an initial summary of ratings in July so leaders can better plan for the year ahead.

Current status: Shortly before the end of the school year, CPS provides the school-level report on the most pressing professional development needs, which are based on observation data. However, school leaders do not receive full ratings until the fall, when the following school year is already in session. This is due in large part to the need to incorporate student growth metrics into teachers' REACH scores.[7] Ultimately, this timing limits a leader's ability to accelerate teacher growth and make informed staffing decisions.

Ways to improve: School leaders said that receiving initial observation ratings and a schoolwide analysis in July would better position them to develop the strengths of their team in a systematic way. Access to this preliminary data could help teachers and leaders plan until the student-level data can be incorporated effectively. School leaders also said that receiving data more frequently and in a more actionable format would allow for adjustments to professional coaching and supports throughout the year.

Principals receive annual reports on key observation data but they want them more often.[8]

Legend:
- ■ Domain 1: Planning and Preparation
- ■ Domain 2: Classroom Environment
- ■ Domain 3: Instruction
- ■ Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities

[6] According to 2015 school leader survey conducted by The UChicago Consortium on School Research, 85 percent of leaders believe REACH leads to improved instruction in their building and 81 percent believe it leads to improved student learning.

[7] For the 2015-16 school year, summative ratings are scheduled to be released in August 2016. However, summative ratings have typically been released no earlier than October of the following school year.

[8] This chart illustrates the type of annual observation data that leaders receive at a school level. It does not contain data for a particular school and is for illustrative purposes only.

2. Curate the most valuable resources and make them simple to find.

Current status: The district makes a multitude of training tools, videos and teacher-created resources available to school leaders on its internal website The Knowledge Center. However, it is difficult for leaders to navigate the resources and quickly identify what an individual teacher needs. Additionally, the changing role of the Instructional Effectiveness Specialists (IES), who serve as the primary support to help school leaders identify the most relevant tools, will present new challenges in identifying individualized teacher supports.[9]

Ways to improve: School leaders said the district needs to better articulate how to effectively utilize the resources and tools currently available on The Knowledge Center. Leaders also said that a simple list of recommended resources, with a focus on common instructional challenges, would be helpful in improving the coaching process. They emphasized that the list should also include development opportunities offered by local nonprofit and university partners.

Resources exist to support individual teacher growth, but principals said they are not yet usable.

WHAT DO SCHOOL LEADERS WANT?.

- One-click access to information
- Increased user feedback on the quality of resources
- Better communication about which resources drive instructional improvement

Resources

Professional Development

Photos

Videos

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[9] IES provide training and calibration support to school leaders on REACH implementation. When REACH first launched, there were 18 IES who spent the majority of their time in schools. Currently, only four such positions exist. Time spent in schools is considerably reduced as a result of budget constraints.

SUPPORT THEIR INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Of the 105 leaders who are responsible for 60 or more teacher observations a year, 24 percent are in low-performing schools and 43 percent are in their first three years in a school leadership role. Recent research from The UChicago Consortium on School Research also suggests that low-performing schools have disproportionately low numbers of proficient and distinguished teachers, suggesting additional support is especially important there.[10] Clearly, implementing REACH in a way that improves instruction requires differentiated support based on individual school needs.

Two ideas for improvement:

1. Tailor the specific support school leaders receive.

Current Status: School leaders lack consistent support for expanding their capacity related to REACH. Similarly, development opportunities are not always responsive to the factors that impact a leader's ability to effectively manage REACH observations, such as content area expertise or leadership tenure. Outside of initial technical training, school leaders need repeated opportunities to learn and grow based on the specific challenges they face. They also need space to collaborate with peers to generate new ideas for providing holistic support to teachers.

Ways to Improve: School leaders recommended offering diverse supports that reflect their individual schools and leadership needs. For example, they suggested pairing leaders—especially new ones—with a peer who has a different area of content expertise. They thought this might help ensure teachers get effective coaching support, while building school leader capacity. Regardless of the specific solution, addressing the unique needs of new school leaders and those who lead struggling schools was identified as critical to building an effective system of evaluation and feedback for continuous teacher improvement.
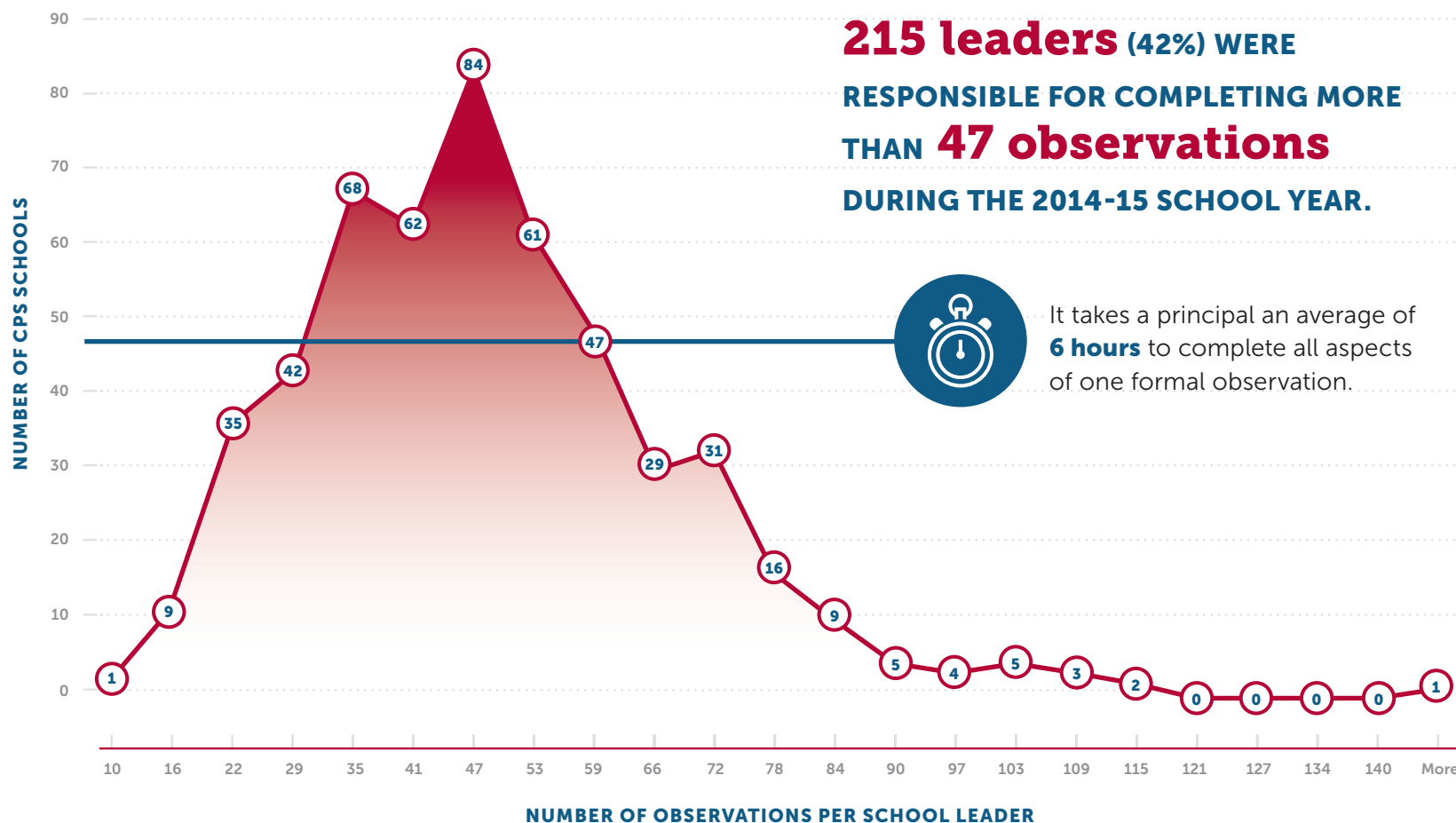
2. Design more supports to address areas where teachers struggle most.

Current Status: Most REACH professional development focuses on the technical elements of the process instead of the interactions with teachers. Yet leaders told us they most struggle with holding difficult conversations, applying The Framework consistently over time, and collecting strong written evidence in specific areas. School leaders said very few of the existing supports help them foster the various skills necessary to effectively evaluate and coach teachers across all content areas, grade levels and experience sets in a building.

Ways to Improve: To start, school leaders suggested that the district could offer quarterly sessions on effective coaching conversations, focused on particular content areas or particular types of teachers. The district could also begin to share data more regularly, informing the approach school leaders take to evaluation and coaching in their schools. School leaders said more transparency around common development needs might also help nonprofit and university providers adjust content to support school leaders and teachers in their growth.

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[10] The UChicago Consortium on School Research's 2016 report, *Teacher Evaluation in Chicago: Differences in Observation and Value-Added Scores by Teacher, Student and School Characteristics*, outlines the need for further research into the impact of school and student characteristics on teacher evaluation scores. To learn more, visit: https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Teacher%20Evaluation%20in%20Chicago-Jan2016-Consortium.pdf.

In 2014-15, the average number of observations per school leader in CPS was 47.[11]

215 leaders (42%) WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR COMPLETING MORE THAN **47 observations** DURING THE 2014-15 SCHOOL YEAR.

It takes a principal an average of **6 hours** to complete all aspects of one formal observation.

NUMBER OF CPS SCHOOLS

Data points: 1, 9, 35, 42, 68, 62, 84, 61, 47, 29, 31, 16, 9, 5, 4, 5, 3, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1

X-axis (NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS PER SCHOOL LEADER): 10, 16, 22, 29, 35, 41, 47, 53, 59, 66, 72, 78, 84, 90, 97, 103, 109, 115, 121, 127, 134, 140, More

Y-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90

[11] The observation per school-leader ratio is the total number of required observations, which is two or four, depending on the teacher type, divided by the total number of leaders per school as found in the 2014-15 CPS position file.

PROMISING PRACTICES: INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FROM SCHOOL LEADERS

While REACH policy and structure must continue to evolve to maximize the system's full potential, top school leaders citywide have already found ways to get the most out of the current system. The section below highlights promising practices developed by school leaders.

| PROMISING PRACTICE | No. 1 | PROMISING PRACTICE | No. 2 |

Build trust with non-evaluative observations.

Brian Metcalf, *School Leader*
Gage Park High School (Neighborhood School | 9-12)
371 students served
5 years as principal
2 years at school
88 total number of observations
44 observations per school leader

"My assistant principal (AP) and I conduct frequent pop-in observations, called PQS – praise, questions, solutions – to provide feedback on teachers' identified areas of improvement.[12] These are key to developing trust with teachers because PQS help them recognize that we are there to be supportive. We owe much of our success to REACH and the implementation of this strategy.[13] In fact, more than 70 percent of our teachers agree or strongly agree that our school leadership team provides useful feedback and the necessary support to improve their teaching."

Build trust by connecting REACH with existing instructional improvement strategies.

Mariel Laureano, *School Leader*
Prieto Math and Science (Neighborhood | PK-8)
1,043 students served
7 years as principal
7 years at school
164 total number of observations
82 observations per school leader

"One way we've approached REACH observations is to connect them to Lesson Study.[14] This school-wide practice allows groups of teachers to participate in a research cycle and present their lessons to colleagues. My AP and I sit in on planning meetings, lessons and the final feedback session, which directly align to each aspect of the formal observation cycle. In fact, I was able to complete observations for all five of my second grade teachers with one cycle of Lesson Study. Not only do I save time, but the process helps improve trust with my teachers who see me as a thought-partner instead of someone there to check a box."

[12] PQS is a strategy taught by Luis Soria, Chief of Schools for Network 8. It is a signature of the Network. It is also an example of a Chief supporting school leaders with REACH implementation.

[13] Based on 2015 *My Voice, My School Survey* results for Gage Park High School on the Instructional Leadership metric.
View more at: https://illinois.5essentials.org/2015/s/150162990250015/measures/ins3/#performance.

[14] According to The Center for Collaborative Classroom, "Lesson study is a form of long-term professional development in which teams of teachers collaboratively plan, research, and study their lesson instruction as a way to determine how students learn best. It is a process that deepens the interaction of a school's professional learning community by developing the habits of self-reflection and critical thinking through very personal collaboration with their colleagues and structured observation of their students. Lesson study has the power to transform the life of a school." To learn more, visit: https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/lesson-study.

To learn more about these practices, visit: **www.TheFundChicago.org/VoicesFromTheField/Tools**

PROMISING PRACTICE | No. 3

Build trust and collaboration through grade-level growth opportunities.

Gerardo Arriaga, *School Leader*
Tonti Elementary School (Neighborhood | PK-5)
1,117 students served
7 years as principal
7 years at school
128 total number of observations
64 observations per school leader

"I observe all teachers across a certain grade level at the same time. For example, I schedule all of my first grade teachers during one month when I know a certain standard is being covered. This ensures consistency and allows me to identify trends that I can immediately use to provide support during our regular grade-level team meetings. According to our 2014-15 5Essentials data, more than 80 percent of my teachers feel I know what's going on in their classroom and provide useful feedback that improves their teaching practice."

PROMISING PRACTICE | No. 4

Build trust and ownership through school-based REACH teams.

Carolyn Eggert, *School Leader*
DeVry High School (Magnet | 11-12)
196 students served
5 years as principal
3 years at school
26 total number of observations
26 observations per school leader

"My school-based REACH team has been integral in raising the level of collaboration and pushing teachers to improve their practice. The team includes myself and two teachers who volunteered to train and provide support to their colleagues around all aspects of REACH. These teachers are go-to experts who share their own best practices for preparing for an observation cycle. They even created a REACH display with information about the technical aspects of the process. As a result, teachers rely on each other to drive their professional growth, which allows me to provide more strategic coaching. Our Instructional Leadership Team used the focus components from the school-based REACH team to develop our embedded PD cycles. This school-wide coherence is a key reason we have been able to shift to classrooms with a focus on collaborative students conversations, which has helped drive student growth and improve REACH scores."

WHAT'S NEXT?

The primary role of REACH is to provide a framework for improving individual teacher practice over time. Improved instruction ultimately benefits students, as they learn more in classrooms with stronger teachers. There is clear evidence that when a teacher evaluation system is working, it does improve both overall teacher quality and student achievement across schools.[15] In Chicago, school leaders and their teachers say they need the time, flexibility and resources to implement REACH effectively; only then will we see large-scale progress in instructional practice and sustainable student growth.

To support effective implementation and best-practice sharing, The Fund will host a workshop this spring to explore common REACH challenges and to innovate around school-specific solutions. Additionally, we expect challenges and successes around REACH and in other areas of instructional improvement to be a focus of our upcoming work. School leaders are strongly encouraged to take our annual engagement survey when it is released this spring; every leader's voice matters in our work to improve schools.

Finally, we urge the district, education partners and policymakers to understand these issues deeply. In order for CPS to reach its ultimate goal of graduating students prepared for all aspects of life, school leaders must be able to support teachers on their trajectory of growth and improvement. REACH, when used to its fullest potential, is an indispensable element of that success.

[15] According to a January 2016 *Washington Post* article, the Washington D.C. Public Schools teacher evaluation system created turnover among low-performing teachers that led to improvements in average student achievement. To view the complete article, visit: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/sometimes-teacher-turnover-is-a-good-thing-study-finds/2016/01/24/cb13cd14-c29f-11e5-8965-0607e0e265ce_story.html.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION FUND

The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) is a nonprofit organization working to increase the number of great public schools in Chicago by supporting talented principals and enabling effective educator teams to reinvent classroom learning. Our current efforts seek to more than double the number of top principals in Chicago's public schools by 2018 and to enable the city's best educators to redefine what's possible for our schools and students.

Visit **www.thefundchicago.org** for more information.

THE CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION FUND

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