

Strengthening Teacher Evaluation

School leaders need to focus on the human side of teacher assessment

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In our efforts to ensure that every student receives top-quality teaching, we have made substantial progress in understanding the links between teacher practice and student learning — the technical side of teacher assessment. But we have too often overlooked the human side. Also, we have not fully appreciated the crucial role that district leaders play in establishing the relational climate that can make or break schools' efforts to improve teacher quality.

Research on teaching largely addresses the measurement of teacher effectiveness. Models of teacher performance assessment apply this research to district supervision and evaluation policies. Although these findings are vital to successfully assessing teacher performance, a technically valid and reliable assessment framework will not by itself ensure the improvement of teaching.

In our experience, the assessment of teacher quality fails more often because of organizational neglect than because of technical deficiencies. In particular, school districts have typically not done a good job of managing the relational and political aspects of the process. The result

is usually that neither supervisors nor teachers find performance assessment a constructive and respectful experience. Overall, the push for "highly qualified" or "highly effective" teachers is more often an uncomfortable, if not inept, accountability activity rather than a systematic strategy to support teacher development that generates superior performance — or, when a teacher hasn't "developed," that concludes in a just and humane departure from the profession.

5 Steps to Stronger Teacher Evaluation

District leaders can cultivate high-quality teaching — and attend to the human side of assessment — by taking five crucial steps.

STEP 1 Include teachers in designing the performance evaluation system. If the school system's goal is to promote student learning, teachers must endorse that goal and feel confident that their participation in performance assessment will help them progress toward

that goal. Many district evaluation systems don't function well precisely because, in the judgment of classroom teachers, they don't address valid performance competencies. For example, evaluation systems that use overly rigid, narrow criteria for room arrangements, lesson-execution frameworks, and student behavior often ignore the realities of the teacher who seeks to differentiate instruction and teach creatively. The result is that teachers neither respect nor trust the process — and often the administrators who implement it.

A sound assessment system begins with discussion about what good teaching looks like. The district creates ongoing opportunities for all teachers to examine the rich literature on teaching effectiveness and to explore successful performance review models, such as Cincinnati's Teacher Evaluation System, broader frameworks like Charlotte Danielson's framework for teaching, or the tenets underlying the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

In several districts we know, professional development time and resources focused on this task for a year. The process included drafting performance criteria — such as promoting higher order thinking or

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fostering positive school-home relationships — as well as observation and student-data indicators for those criteria. Teachers then voluntarily piloted these criteria and indicators in classrooms. The process concluded with a written assessment system endorsed by teachers and administrators and adopted by the school board. In the process of hashing out a district-wide definition of effective teaching, developing examples, and creating the criteria by which teachers will be assessed, teachers and administrators together internalize the district's notion of what makes for high-quality instruction. For example, the Farmington Public Schools in Farmington, Connecticut, developed

a framework for teaching and learning that specifies how teachers can best support student learning. The framework lays out five key principles, such as individual responsibility and purposeful engagement, and describes how teachers can help students master these skills.

The payoff extends beyond teachers' formal and informal observations and post-observation conferences. Teachers have a more structured and explicit framework by which to self-assess even without having administrators in their classrooms. Because they have played a central role in creating their district's framework for effective teaching, analyzing their own practice using this

framework becomes second nature. Opportunities thus expand for peer coaching and collegial support for instructional improvement.

Most important, leadership of the design process is transparent and inclusive. Whether the effort is facilitated by the administration alone or by a district team of teachers and administrators, every employee is expected to participate. And participation explicitly invites the questions, doubts, and concerns that inevitably accompany the creation of any process that so directly affects an employee's welfare. At this crucial design stage, the roots of trust and buy-in begin to grow.



STEP 2 Protect opportunities to learn and grow.

Too often, districts pay lip service to the feedback and learning process. Post-observation conferences are either nonexistent or crammed into difficult time slots; observers aren't adequately trained to lead effective coaching sessions, so the conferences come across more like one-way summative evaluations. As Charlotte Danielson puts it, if we want teacher evaluation systems that teachers find meaningful and from which they can learn, we must use processes that not only are rigorous, valid and reliable, but also engage teachers in those activities that promote learning — namely self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation.

The performance assessment system must include the time and professional development resources necessary to support teacher learning — and, just as important, administrator learning. As teachers confer with administrators or peer coaches over documentation of their teaching

and student learning, conjectures emerge regarding their successes and challenges and their strengths and failings with individual students and whole classes. For teachers to find these conjectures credible and respond to them with efforts to build on their strengths and address their weaknesses, they must trust the observer and have access to subsequent learning opportunities.

When a teacher and coach/administrator identify a skill that needs developing, the district's professional development environment must be flexible enough to support the teacher's pursuit of that skill. This means individualizing; every professional in the district must have a personal professional growth plan. It also means providing ongoing professional development for principals and peer coaches around their own consultation and coaching skills with teachers.

The most compelling and successful professional development is that which teachers find most relevant to their classroom work. First- or second-year teachers need ample

and frequent feedback to build their awareness of the myriad things going on in their classrooms, and they need colleagues' help to develop specific techniques and confirm that those techniques work. For example, a beginning teacher might benefit from learning a specific strategy for engaging students with attention challenges. Master teachers, on the other hand, benefit from professional development to diversify and expand their repertoire — for example, by learning how to develop students' 21st century skills.

When a performance review helps teachers clarify their own competency profiles, teachers come to see which behavior sets, planning procedures, and knowledge bases they need to strengthen. With the assistance of coaches and supervisors, who themselves are developing coaching competencies, the teachers can develop strategies to address these areas. Repeated observations and conferences can then build evidence of whether teachers are growing in the relevant competencies.





Focus on MENTOR PROGRAMS

With the impending “Educator Effectiveness Initiative” taking effect in 2014-15, the focus on educator effectiveness and performance evaluation procedures has dramatically increased. This initiative will alter the way all teachers and principals are evaluated.

School officials may want to begin investigating how to incorporate aspects of the new performance evaluation system into current mentor programs to prepare

new educators. The June 2012 issue of **The FOCUS** describes some of the legal and policy considerations related to mentor programs and includes related policies and programs being implemented by Wisconsin school districts.

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STEP 3 Hone principals' and coaches' skills at observing and consulting with teachers.

Principals and peer coaches need to understand what good instruction is and how to

discern it in action. They must also be empathetic consultants capable of building trust while sharing potentially unwelcome or discomfiting information. Teacher growth requires a careful balance of constructive and critical performance feedback, creative coaching in new practices, and insistent optimism.

Principals sometimes lack the pedagogical backgrounds and the consulting skills to deliver feedback that teachers find both valid and constructive. This is true, as well, for some peer coaches, who face the particularly challenging task of providing critical feedback to their colleagues. Coming to their work with little training as observers or consultants, most supervisors learn on the job, for better or for worse. Districts can no longer leave this crucial process to chance. They must provide ongoing training and consultation that focus on the interpersonal as well as the technical aspects of observing and coaching teachers. Without such professional development and support, performance assessment will slip back to where it often is today: Most teachers receive vaguely worded praise and are “socially promoted” to the next contract year.

For example, instead of an evaluator writing, “You have good rapport with students,” he or she might write:

“You and the students smiled often when working together during the observed math lesson. Students approached you seven times to clarify misunderstandings, and two students shared personal stories with you. This shows they are comfortable with you and see you as an ally in their learning. Overall, your interactions with students are friendly and supportive while also focused on learning goals.”

STEP 4 Build time for teacher evaluation into principals' workloads.

The process of effective performance review and improvement is time-consuming and often intense work. It requires careful consideration of observational and other data and discussion about alternative strategies, followed up by more observation. It can no longer be viewed as a fringe activity for administrators and coaches. Gone are the days when principals can be assigned 50 teachers to evaluate on top of all the other duties of running a school. In business, it has long





been commonplace to assign supervisors 15 supervisees. In schools, supervisors' loads are often much higher, leading many principals to report that they are unable to devote adequate time to evaluating teachers.

School systems that are serious about teacher quality do not follow these old patterns. They engage peer coaches and differentiate the kind of supervision teachers receive on the basis of their work directly and intensively with probationary teachers to ensure sound contractual decisions. Continuing-contract teachers, whose competence is well established, work almost exclusively with peer coaches. Teachers whose performance has raised serious questions are supervised primarily by administrators, particularly if the district has assigned them a "program of improvement." Ongoing training support needs to differentiate between peer coaches and administrators, particularly when legal contractual procedures become paramount in cases of possible renewal.

School districts' success at developing the best teachers — and at moving the mediocre ones out — hinges on the technical and interpersonal skills of their front-line supervisors. Whether these key leaders include only administrators or collegial coaches as well, a district cannot expect them to succeed unless it seriously invests in their support and ongoing learning.

STEP 5 Make instructional improvement a district priority.

None of these conditions can be sustained without strong district leadership that makes improving teaching a way of life in every school. When the central office and the school board clearly and persistently pursue assessment and growth for every staff member, teachers stay focused on their own growth, as well, as their students' growth. When district leaders neglect performance assessment and professional

learning, some teachers will likely improve on their own, but mediocre and poor teachers will continue to underteach our children.

Keeping teacher improvement central to the district's mission is difficult for leaders. Other priorities continually crowd in. Every decision or word from district leaders that says, "We value superb teaching" tells teachers, administrators, and the public that they mean it.

Strong district leaders champion the performance assessment system. They do not cut funding for professional development and peer coaching. They back a principal's decision to place a teacher on a program of improvement or to dismiss a teacher. They believe that "all teachers can learn" until, on a case-by-case basis, some teachers prove unable or unwilling to do so.

District leaders who make teacher improvement a high priority push beyond old, combative relationships between unions and management. Unions exist to defend teachers' employment rights; over the years, they have learned to play hardball. Frankly, this has intimidated some administrators, giving them a convenient excuse for not pushing hard on teacher performance assessment. In the present climate, unions are publicly supportive of efforts to raise teacher quality. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have published their own well-reasoned frameworks for teacher assessment and growth.

All district leaders, representing administration and teachers' associations, must agree on the importance of high performance standards and a rigorous and respectful assessment system. Their commitment must form the backbone of a new and more respectful relationship among



the leaders themselves — one that is strong enough to prevent sacrificing high-quality teaching to union-management politics.

Communities that are serious about improving the learning of their children can start by hiring superintendents and other central office staff who are courageous enough to make teacher growth one of the highest priorities of the district. By following the principles we've outlined here, these leaders will create a full program of human resource management. They won't farm it out to overburdened principals or expect that observations and conferences will be squeezed into teaching days that are already full to the brim.

Where It Starts

Supervisors cannot help teachers develop the complex instructional skills they need without time, resources, and trusting relationships. The bottom line for district leaders is to cultivate a vibrant system of adult learning focused on the teaching that is happening in every classroom every day. ■

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