

Effective Evaluation

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PREVIEW

Evaluation in the form of regular, consistent feedback about instruction is valuable to new and veteran teachers.

Increased frequency, multiple evaluators, and specific training are among the recommended best practices.

Common evaluation tools that promote consistency are compared on several characteristics.

Principals know that effective teachers are the greatest school-based contributors to improved student outcomes. What is not always clear is how principals can help teachers adapt their instructional practices to the increasingly diverse learning styles they find in their classrooms. Teacher evaluation practices are typically not seen as a tool for improving teacher effectiveness, yet regular, consistent feedback on classroom instruction can be enormously empowering to new and veteran teachers alike.

Illustrative Case

Seeking to strengthen classroom instruction to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, the principal and staff members of a suburban high school near Chicago have taken steps to improve their teacher evaluation process. Only five years ago, the teacher evaluation process mirrored that of many schools across the country. Evaluations were a required activity that was performed using a protocol that yielded summative results (ratings of satisfactory or unsatisfactory performance). In most cases, teachers received a satisfactory rating and little real information on how to improve their instruction.

The principal, along with the teachers' union and district and school leaders, developed a standardized classroom observation rubric that is grounded in Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching and aligns with the district's goal of measuring teachers' behaviors in a student-

centered learning environment. Several times a year, the high school division heads and assistant principals attend teacher evaluation trainings that are led by district administrators. Those training sessions have resulted in a shared understanding of the logistics of conducting evaluations, better alignment between the rubric and the district's goals, consensus about what constitutes effective teaching, consistent implementation of effective teaching strategies, and uniform interpretation of the data.

But the principal admits that some obstacles still prevent his school from getting the maximum benefit from its improved evaluation process. For example, the current teacher contract establishes minimal expectations on how often teachers with different levels of experience can be evaluated; the principal has had to work hard to develop a level of trust between teachers and administrators to permit more-frequent-though-less-comprehensive evaluation activities, such as classroom walk-throughs, checklists, and staff meetings to supplement the evaluations.

This Chicago-area principal is not alone. Many school and district leaders want to implement best practices in teacher assessment and evaluation but are challenged by real and perceived constraints. School and district evaluation policies often dictate who is allowed to conduct the evaluation, the frequency with which the evaluation should occur, and the ways in which the teacher can receive the results.

Multiple evaluators—such as teacher mentors or peers who have an instructional background, content knowledge, and experience teaching similar students—are a growing alternative to administrators as the sole evaluators.

Research Review

According to a study of 140 midwestern school districts' evaluation policies conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest at Learning Point Associates (Brandt, Mathers, Oliva, Brown-Sims, & Hess, 2007), evaluation policies do not always align with research-based practices. Following are summaries of the research on common evaluation policy components across seven midwestern states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin). Each summary indicates how the current reality stacks up against research-based best practices.

Who Evaluates Teachers

Reality: Administrators (e.g., principals) are the most common evaluators (Brandt et al., 2007).

Best practice: Multiple evaluators—such as teacher mentors or peers who have an instructional background, content knowledge, and experience teaching similar students—are a growing alternative to administrators as the sole evaluators (e.g., see Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). Teachers highly regard evaluators who have deep knowledge of curriculum, content, and instruction and can provide suggestions for improvement (e.g., see Stiggins & Duke, 1988; Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, & Bernstein, 1984).

Frequency of Evaluation

Reality: Nontenured teachers typically are evaluated twice a year; tenured teachers are evaluated once every two to five years, unless they receive an unsatisfactory evaluation (Brandt et al., 2007).

Best practice: Both nontenured and tenured teachers should receive frequent evaluations. Infrequent evaluations, particularly of tenured teachers, result in missed opportunities to inform teaching practices and improve student learning. Research using video observations of teachers as part of the evaluation suggests that four or five observations

a year would be ideal (Blunk, 2007). Additional research is needed to determine the optimal frequency of evaluations for both nontenured and tenured teachers, however.

Training of Evaluators

Reality: Districts rarely require evaluators to be trained (Brandt et al., 2007; Loup, Garland, Ellett, & Rugutt, 1996).

Best practice: Evaluators should receive proper training because lack of training can threaten the reliability of the evaluation and the objectivity of the results. Evaluators need a good understanding of what quality teaching is as well as the evaluation rubric and the characteristics and behaviors that the evaluation is intended to measure. Training helps ensure that the evaluation is authentic. If an evaluator has a preconceived expectation of a teacher or is overly influenced by the local school culture and context, the results may not be objective (Mujis, 2006). Without adequate training, evaluators may be unaware of the potential bias they are introducing during their observations.

Communication

Reality: District policies do not always require that teachers be informed of the criteria, the process, or the potential implications of the evaluation (Brandt et al., 2007).

Best practice: Systematic communication about the evaluation should occur with teachers before, during, and after the evaluation process (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983; Stronge, 1997). To ensure that the evaluation policy is clearly communicated, the available research suggests involving teachers in the design and implementation of the evaluation process (Kyriakides, Demetriou, & Charalambous, 2006).

Improving Evaluation to Enhance Instruction

Taking the next steps to apply best practices to the teacher evaluation process may sound like common sense. For example, the principal should not be the only person evaluating teachers and should look to instructional leaders, department chairs, and high-performing teachers to participate. More challenging is how to identify other evaluators, train those evaluators, improve communication about evaluation, and increase the frequency of evaluation.

Figure 1

Common Teacher Evaluation Instruments

Instrument	What It Measures	To Properly Measure, It Needs:	What It Does Not Measure	Limitations
Classroom Observation	Observable teacher skills and student behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ An understood and agreed-upon purpose ■ A valid and reliable protocol ■ Trained evaluators ■ Frequent use ■ Multiple evaluators (preferably) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The teacher's beliefs, intentions, and expectations ■ Engagement with students, parents, and colleagues outside of the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is time-consuming ■ The teacher and the students may act differently when being observed
Lesson Plan	Quality of planned instruction and strategies that are linked to goals for student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A valid and reliable protocol ■ Trained evaluators ■ Frequent use to determine whether and how the plan addresses appropriate challenges and includes support for student learning over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Actual instruction ■ The teacher's ability to adjust to student needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is time-consuming ■ Is only a snapshot of the activities planned ■ The plan may not align with actual practice
Portfolio Assessment, Student Work Samples, or Other Instructional Artifacts	Teacher and student experiences that are often not captured during observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A variety of teacher and student artifacts that the teacher reflects on ■ Trained evaluators ■ A valid and reliable protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The teacher's ability to interact with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is time consuming ■ May be biased when only exemplary work is included
Self-Assessments	A teacher's report of how well he or she is working with students and colleagues in and outside of the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To include the teacher's beliefs, intentions, and expectations ■ The teacher's strengths and areas for growth ■ Valid and reliable protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students' and colleagues' perceptions of the teacher's performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ May be biased because it is based on self-reported data
Student Achievement Data	The teacher's contribution to student learning gains using statistical modeling (e.g., value-added, growth models)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To link student scores and teacher identification ■ Availability of standardized and vertically equated tests for every student across grades ■ Staff members to create the model and run analyses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elements of teaching that contributed to the student learning gains and vice versa ■ Students' social and emotional learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Test scores often arrive too late for data to drive changes in instruction ■ Evaluation may depend on one-time snapshot of student performance

School leaders should consider the following recommendations for improving teacher evaluation policies and procedures:

- Create a school or districtwide evaluation committee to improve the teacher evaluation process. If possible, recruit teachers as well as district and union representatives to serve on this committee. It is important to collaborate with all of the parties involved.
- Develop trusting relationships. Knowing staff members as individuals helps evaluators build collegiality and cultivate the trust necessary for staff members to give and receive constructive evaluation feedback.
- Recruit experienced and exemplary teachers to serve as evaluators. The evaluator-to-teacher ratio may contribute to the brevity and infrequency with which evaluations are conducted. By enabling exemplary teachers to conduct evaluations, school leaders give teachers an opportunity to expand their skills and reduce the number of evaluations that are usually conducted by the principal.

Principals play an important role in transforming teacher evaluation systems into mechanisms for improving teacher instruction and student learning.

- Increase the frequency of formative evaluations. Frequent formative evaluations enable evaluators to better understand classroom dynamics and the teaching strategies that teachers use. Evaluators thus can further recognize what teachers are doing well and provide them with richer, more-informed strategies for improving teaching practices.
- Use evaluation results to inform professional development opportunities for teachers. Evaluations have the potential to reveal teachers' instructional strengths and weaknesses. Teachers could set their individual professional goals on the basis of evaluation feedback. Similarly, a collective picture of the staff's professional needs could guide administrative decisions about investments in professional development.
- Develop a process for gathering feedback to improve the evaluation system. To identify and

address perceived issues with the evaluation process, develop a systematic way to collect anonymous feedback. Establishing a feedback system ahead of time will help keep the evaluation relevant and meaningful to teachers.

Schools often use common evaluation tools to measure teacher performance (see figure 1). Each tool has its strengths and limitations. For additional information on evaluation instrument descriptions, measurement strengths, limitations, and research, refer to Mathers and Oliva (2008) and Goe, Bell, and Little (2008).

Conclusion

Principals play an important role in transforming teacher evaluation systems into mechanisms for improving teacher instruction and student learning. If the education system cannot provide meaningful ongoing and summative feedback to teachers, it relinquishes significant opportunities to influence teacher practice and student achievement. Given the overwhelming evidence that teachers have the greatest impact on student outcomes, supporting their ongoing growth and development should be a priority. Without appropriate assessments that recognize excellence and identify problems, investments in teacher development are disconnected from school and district goals for improvement. To ensure teacher growth, principals can assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of their teacher evaluation systems and take the necessary steps for continually improving those systems. **PL**

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