

CAN TEACHER EVALUATION



Improve Teaching?

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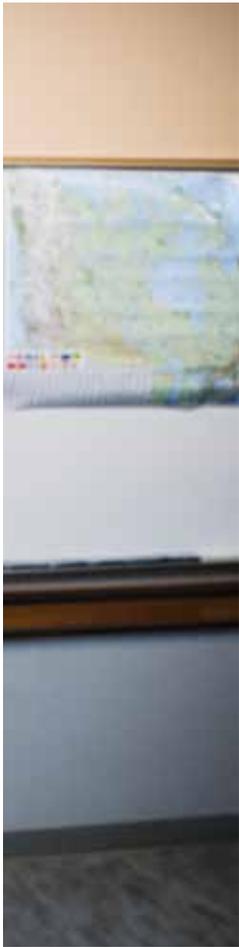
Teacher evaluation has changed rapidly since I taught middle school in the '90s. Gone are the unstructured observations and checklists that were used in many schools. Gone, too, is the belief that the principal's chief role in the process is to give teachers scores. A teacher who received a good score got a pat on the back and was told to keep up the good work. The very few teachers who received poor scores were likely to be told that they could—and must—do better for the sake of their students. Teachers learned little from that process.

Saying, "I know good teaching when I see it" is no longer an acceptable explanation of a teacher's evaluation because now high-stakes decisions are made on the basis of evaluation results. Today, most teacher evaluation systems include the expectation that principals will provide meaningful feedback to their teachers that is based on evidence of teaching practices as well as student learning. Standards for principals and frameworks for teacher evaluation often reference principals' abilities to give their teachers guidance and support that will help them improve their performance. As a result of those new expectations, principals may look back at their leadership preparation and wonder when they were supposed to have learned about the importance of feedback, how to give constructive feedback, and what the content of that feedback should be.

The Importance of Feedback

The changes in the role of the principal and in what the teacher evaluation system is designed to do are the result of dissatisfaction with evaluation systems that have largely failed to distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). For accountability purposes, this failure is a serious problem. But perhaps equally important is the fact that teachers receive little or no benefit from the process because the feedback is often limited, haphazard, or lacking in specifics. This is not to say that principals have failed to do their jobs, but rather that they have not received the mandate, the training, and the tools that will enable them to promote teachers' professional growth as a result of evaluation.

A shift in the purpose and design of teacher evaluation systems emphasizes data, feedback for growth, and ongoing professional conversations.



Using feedback in teacher evaluation is an area of great interest in the education community because of the focus on using those evaluations to improve teaching, rather than solely for accountability purposes. Although the research is limited, several studies point to the importance of feedback:

- A study of Chicago principals found that teachers saw a connection between principal feedback and instructional improvement:

Nearly all teachers felt that their practice had improved due to use of the Framework [for Teaching] and most identified the conferencing process as a critical aspect of that change. Teachers reported improvement in planning, classroom management, using assessment during instruction, differentiated instruction, and student-focused learning. (Sartain, Stoelinga, & Brown, 2011, p. 27)

- An evaluation of Tennessee's teacher evaluation system found a number of positive outcomes from the provisions of feedback by evaluators (usually principals), noting that regular and specific feedback leads to increased self-reflection and focus on instructional improvement among teachers (State Collaborative on Reforming Education, 2012).
- A longitudinal case study of schools in California documented the importance of "focused and timely feedback on individual performance and on aspects of classroom or school practice" (Little, 2006, p. 22). Such feedback was notable in the most successful schools in the study, including those with students who were at risk.
- The usefulness of principal feedback seems to vary considerably, possibly reflecting differences in principals' training, the instruments they're using, and their understanding of their role in the evaluation process. Overall, teachers indicate that principal feedback can be helpful (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009).

Key "takeaways" from the research are that meaningful feedback is based on evidence from research-based instruments and that those using the instruments must be appropriately trained to make reliable and meaningful judgments. Feedback that is based on poor or inadequate data may do more harm than good.

Data Versus Evidence

Some principals may think that teacher observations are the only evaluation component that will generate useful data for providing teachers with feedback, but all data collected as part of the evaluation process can and should be used for feedback purposes. It is important to realize, however, that there is a difference between data and evidence. Copland and Swinnerton (as cited in Brinson & Steiner, 2007) argue that "data by themselves are not evidence of anything until users of the data bring concepts, criteria, theories of action, and interpretive frames of reference to the task of making sense of the data" (p. 80). For feedback to make sense, data must be examined and presented in systematic ways and be informed by concepts of what good teaching looks like (teaching standards) and how the data relate to teaching practice. Data become evidence only through the act of analysis and interpretation. For example, a principal might jot down some notes during a walk-through. At that point, the notes are simply data. In conversation with the teacher later, the principal may share why she noticed those events, how she interpreted these events, and how the events might affect student learning. The teacher should also share his interpretation of the events as he and the principal engage in a discussion about how he might strengthen his practices that are not as successful as desired or share his successful practices with his colleagues.

Collecting evidence of meaningful aspects of practice is supported through the use of the following high-quality tools.

Observations. Data collected as part of classroom observations should provide a range of evidence, including teacher-student interactions, teachers' content knowledge, the classroom environment, and student engagement.

Artifacts. Lesson plans contain data on teachers' abilities to develop lessons that are fo-

cused on learning standards, engaging, rigorous, differentiated for learners with special needs, and so forth. Student assignments and resulting student work may also contribute useful data.

Surveys. Student surveys can provide important information about students' perceptions of their learning environments and their teachers. Well-designed surveys are not meant to be gotchas, but to provide actionable feedback. In the large-scale Measures of Effective Teaching study, survey results (using the Tripod Student Perception Survey, which is administered by Cambridge Education) were found to correlate with other measures of teaching quality, such as observations and student learning growth (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010).

Student assessments. Data about student learning, particularly learning that can be attributed to individual teachers in a specific time period, have become a key component of most teacher evaluation systems, but researchers are only beginning to investigate how such data can

be used by teachers and principals to improve teaching practices and student outcomes.

Portfolios. The types of data collected as part of building a teaching portfolio vary considerably. The most useful data usually focus on the teacher's identification of a specific area of instruction that he or she would like to improve, documentation of efforts made over the course of the year to improve in that area, and the results of those efforts. The data included in the portfolio are generally drawn from one or more sources, such as observations, student learning artifacts, and surveys or student assessments.

Using Data for Feedback

Data that have been collected for evaluation can serve two purposes: accountability and feedback. Specific direction for and training on collecting data for accountability purposes are typically provided by the district or the state, but they may offer limited guidance that helps principals understand how to use the data to



Resources

Linking Teacher Evaluation to Professional Development: Focusing on Improving Teaching and Learning by Laura Goe, Kietha Biggers, and Andrew Croft (2012, National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality)

An informal framework for using evaluation results to identify professional growth opportunities for teachers that is based on the idea that evidence collected for teacher evaluation can also be used to determine focus and strategies for improvements in teaching practice. Focusing on the use of teaching standards as a guide to improvement, principals can help teachers target specific standards for development.

www.tqsource.org/publications/LinkingTeacherEval.pdf

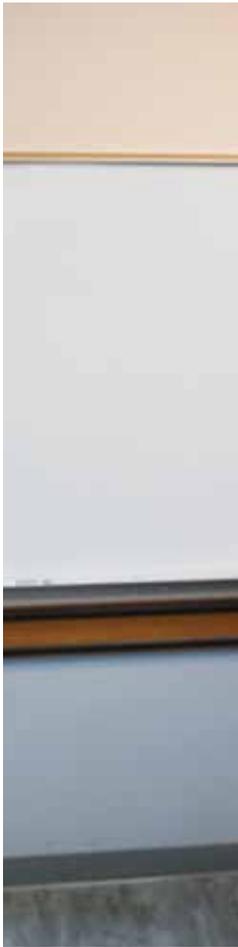
Linking Teacher Evaluation and Student Learning by Pamela D. Tucker and James H. Stronge (2005, ASCD)

This book offers ways of including measures of student achievement in teacher evaluations with the goal of helping schools. It also provides some useful ideas about using evidence of student learning to focus teacher and school goals.

Rethinking Teacher Evaluation in Chicago: Lessons Learned From Classroom Observations, Principal-Teacher Conferences, and District Implementation by Lauren Sartain, Sara Ray Stoelinga, and Eric R. Brown (2011, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute)

This report focuses on one measure: classroom observations. It provides a wealth of information about principals' challenges in assessing teachers and offers useful directions for how to ensure that observations are done well and that feedback is meaningful.

<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Teacher%20Eval%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>



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provide feedback. Sometimes the district may provide training in using evaluation results in conversations with teachers, but in many cases, principals are left to their own devices.

For principals trying to determine the best way to use data, it may be helpful to think about why specific data are gathered. First and foremost, data are collected as evidence of teachers' performance on state teacher performance standards. Conversations with teachers about evaluation results should focus on specific teaching standards and any data related to those standards. Focusing on performance standards ensures consistency and structure for conversations, creates a common language to discuss teaching, and provides the basis for expectations.

For example, most teacher evaluations result in determining teachers' levels, such as "effective" or "developing" on particular standards. It is likely that any level below effective will be a standard where the teacher will want to focus improvement efforts. Specific feedback on those standards will help teachers determine where to start on the road to strengthening their practice.

Different types of data collected for teacher evaluation will be relevant to different teaching standards, and the use of that data in conversation may also vary. In particular, discussing students' assessment results requires special consideration. It is important to focus on trends over time, gaps in content mastery, and areas where students are developing mastery. Obviously, it is unhelpful to say to teachers, "Your students need to learn more." In other words, discussing the specific learning standards where students are succeeding or struggling is more helpful than simply discussing students' overall scores on assessments. Doing so keeps the conversation focused on potential steps the teacher can take to strengthen instruction in those areas.

It is also important to use high-quality data in discussions of student growth data. According to Peine (2008), "If student data represent multiple sources of information, if they present reliable trend data, if they produce accurate inferences about student achievement and program concerns, then they can and should play an important role in targeting professional

growth" (p. 54). Such discussions require the principal to understand the student growth data thoroughly. When assessment data are not detailed enough to provide direction for teacher professional growth, greater reliance on other data sources will be necessary.

But even with good data, teachers, with the help of principals who have information on the teachers' practices, must determine the impact that their teaching practices, content knowledge, curricula, classroom environments, support, and so forth have in producing specific outcomes. For example, if teachers' learning growth results are satisfactory overall but one student learning standard shows poor growth, it may implicate the teacher's knowledge and delivery of content for that specific student learning standard. Looking for such anomalies in the data helps focus the conversation on areas of need. Thus, agreement on targets for improvement as well as strategies for meeting those targets flow directly from the data.

Effective Feedback

The keys to giving meaningful, relevant feedback that might have an impact on teaching performance are the content and the specificity of the feedback. In a literature review, researchers found that content is the essential element of good professional development, stating that "it is important to focus on the daily teaching practice, more specifically, the subject content, the subject pedagogical content knowledge and the students' learning processes of a specific subject" (Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2011, p. 17). They also noted that "when teachers develop with respect to these aspects of content, an increase in teacher quality and student learning results" (p. 12). The findings about the quality of professional development can provide guidance for those giving feedback.

Regardless of the data used, principals' feedback should be:

- Tied to specific teaching standards
- Immediate (as close to the time data is collected as possible)
- Specific and detailed
- Focused on specific data and evidence about the teacher's practice, pedagogical content, efforts to strengthen their practice,

and student learning outcomes

- Constructive, rather than critical; conversations should focus on instructional strategies to address learning needs or strategies to help promote a positive, engaging learning environment in the classroom.

Immediately after discussing areas where the data suggest that teachers may need to strengthen their instructional practices, principals will need to direct them to appropriate resources for professional growth, including professional development.

An Ongoing Conversation

Principals may see feedback as something that happens in a conference at the end of the year after all evaluation data is collected. Kennedy (2007) stated, “Often, the feedback practicing teachers receive from these annual assessments is the only feedback they receive on their teaching each year.” But principals should think of teacher evaluation as a process, not an event. Principals collect evidence formally and informally over the course of the year. Providing feedback as soon as possible ensures that the teacher and the principal will recall specific actions and details, making the information more relevant for the teacher. Teachers are continuously improving their craft and looking for information to help guide that process, so timely feedback is generally welcomed. Younger teachers in particular value frequent feedback (Coggshall, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Drill, 2011).

One of the key concerns about the new evaluation systems is one that principals have been addressing for some time: how to find more time to be instructional leaders as well as building managers. Evaluation systems may include multiple observations as well as documentation of student learning growth and constructive feedback, all of which are time consuming. Clearly, principals must continue to practice shared leadership to get everything done and done well.

The answer to the question, Can evaluation improve teaching? is a qualified yes. Teacher evaluation has changed and the role of the principal has changed as well; the focus now is on evidence, not merely good judgment. With the right tools, systems, and

support, it should be possible to help improve teaching performance and student learning outcomes, not just measure them. Principals play an essential role in the success of that vision. **PL**

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