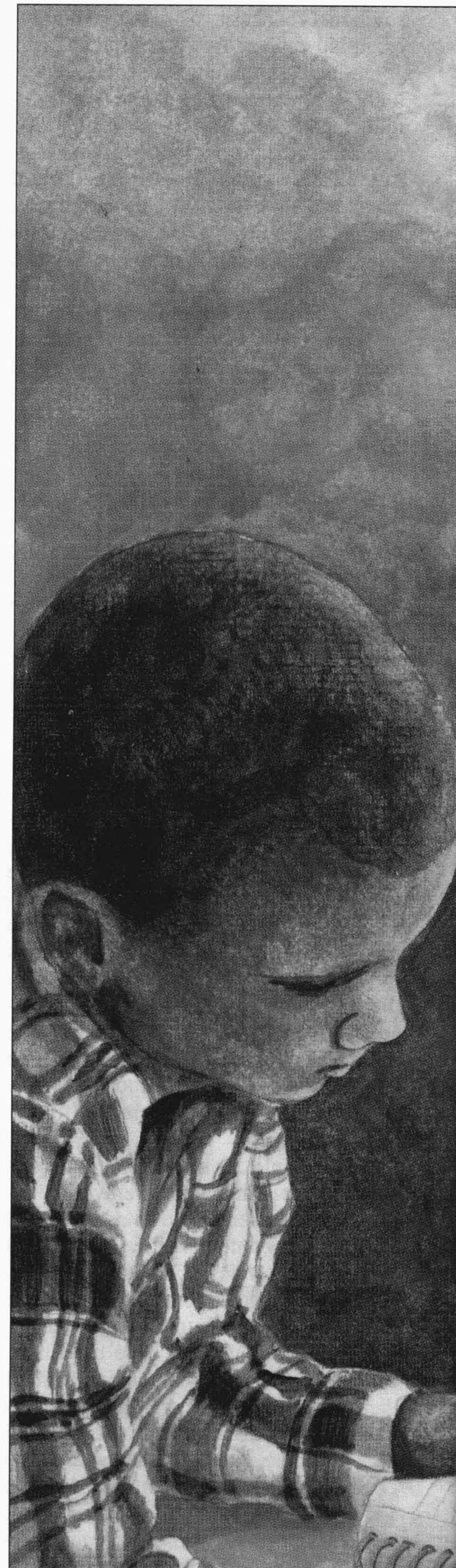
How I Confronted HSPS (Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome) And Began to Deal with The Heart of the Matter

BY KIM MARSHALL

After trying for many years to come up with a system of teacher evaluation that he could live with and that his staff would not dread or resent, Mr. Marshall boiled it down to the essentials: teachers need reassurance and constructive criticism, both based on specific examples.



I HAD BEEN trying to do a good job of evaluating the 39 teachers at Mather Elementary School in Boston. Then I read a statement by Mike Schmoker that hit me right between the eyes. "Research has finally told us what many of us suspected all along: that conventional evaluation, the kind the overwhelming majority of American teachers undergo, does not have any measurable impact on the quality of student learning," Schmoker said. "In most cases, it is a waste of time."[1]

Schmoker's statement forced me to confront several questions. How much were my evaluations contributing to teachers' professional development? Very little. Were my evaluations having an impact on student learning? Highly doubtful. Were they a waste of everyone's time? Well . . .

It's not that I am poorly trained. I have taken courses at Harvard, read voraciously about clinical supervision, and sat at the feet of some of the masters of teacher evaluation. My write-ups of the lessons I observe are clinical and thorough; I support every conclusion with descriptive narrative and with dialogue so accurate that some teachers wonder if I have spirited a tape recorder into their classrooms. Nor is it that Boston's outdated 25-item evaluation checklist makes it impossible to give teachers real feedback: I have found that I can say everything that needs to be said in the open-ended sections of the evaluation form.

No, the problem is deeper. But it took me several years to figure that out.

As a rookie principal nine years ago, I was greatly influenced by Ronald Edmonds and his research on effective schools. Edmonds maintained that effective schools have principals who are instructional leaders. Not surprisingly, then, I felt that my most important role was to serve as a positive critic of teachers' classroom work and of the expectations they communicated to children. I believed that frequent supervision and detailed write-ups were the best means to affirm the good things that teachers were doing and to redirect them when I saw shortcomings and problems.

So I began my first year with frequent classroom observations, followed by in-depth write-ups. Most teachers were astonished at and impressed by the richly detailed written feedback they were receiving, but a few teachers were aghast. They filed a grievance, and I lost. My boss said that I could continue my in-depth supervisory

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write-ups, but he ordered me to fill out the entire seven-page evaluation checklist every time I went into a classroom with pen in hand.

This meant that I couldn't make an informal supervisory visit to a classroom and give the teacher feedback. Feedback could come only in the context of formal evaluation. That took the wind out of my sails. I had wanted to restrict my feedback to helpful observations, affirmations, and specific recommendations; summative evaluation was not what I'd had in mind.

My visits to classrooms became less and less frequent. By my second year as principal, I had retreated to the minimum number of required observations: one per year (which later became one every two years for those teachers who had earned an overall rating of "excellent"). My supervision of and feedback on day-to-day teaching had gone almost completely by the board.

Even within these strictures, I tried to make the evaluation process effective. I wanted evaluation to be a nonthreatening exercise that reassured and affirmed teachers, while providing specific correctives to any teacher who needed them.

Each year I started the process three months before the May 15 deadline, and I invited teachers to let me know when they would be presenting lessons they felt particularly good about. I wanted to see them at their best. Each year, my invitation met with stony silence from all but one or two teachers, and I had to prod the rest of them (who usually responded with more silence). Finally, I had to invite myself into classrooms for the formal observations.

Each year I gave every teacher a sheet on which to list for me the good things he or she was doing in five areas of teaching: in the classroom, with parents, with colleagues, in professional development, and in routine duties. Each year I procrastinated, delaying my formal evaluation visits right down to the wire and then frantically conducting a flurry of observations during the last week before the deadline, staying up late trying to do a good job on the write-ups, and skimping on the important activity of discussing my observations with the teachers. I rarely got more than the required teacher signature on the material I had so laboriously (and belatedly) produced.

Small wonder. Any time there is this much mutual avoidance, something is fundamentally wrong with the process.

Without in-depth observations of classrooms to give me a thorough understanding of what teachers were doing day to day, I became increasingly doubtful about the worth of the whole evaluation process. Formal evaluation should be only the tip of the iceberg, with supervision in an informal atmosphere accounting for a much larger portion of the principal's time. That's when the principal gathers detailed formative information, provides feedback, and corrects problems without invoking final sanctions. Isn't it absurd and unfair for a teacher's entire evaluation to turn on one or two lessons or on superficial impressions picked up from quick drop-in visits to classrooms? Yet that is the reality in a school in which the principal must evaluate a large number of teachers while trying to contend with a blizzard of other responsibilities.

No wonder a teacher's blood pressure goes up at evaluation time. What if the lesson doesn't go well, and he or she is penalized for an off day? What if the teacher is thrown off stride by the presence of the evaluator? It's tough to concentrate on students when an adult is nearby, scribbling away on a yellow pad. What if the teacher pitches the lesson to what he or she thinks the principal is looking for? On several occasions, I have seen teachers not be themselves because they thought I was looking for something different from the lessons they otherwise would have taught. Teachers have to psych out both the aims of the formal evaluation checklist (which, in Boston, lags 20 years behind research findings on classroom effectiveness) and the personal philosophy of the principal (which may differ from the aims of the checklist). For them, this makes evaluation confusing and scary.

Not surprisingly, many teachers respond by preparing a "glamorized" lesson for the prearranged evaluation visit and by playing it safe — keeping their more adventurous, risk-taking classroom activities under wraps. Again and again, I have come away from my formal evaluation visits with the feeling that I haven't seen what is really going on in classrooms from day to day (which might be either better or worse than what I have been shown).

Meanwhile, when teachers receive compliments or criticisms from me, they tend neither to trust them nor to take them to heart. They are probably wondering what I *really* think of their teaching. Clearly, a great deal does go unseen and unsaid. The contractual provisions on teacher evaluation and a long history of distrust of administrators conspire to keep principals and teachers from talking with real honesty and authenticity about the heart of the matter: teaching and learning.

The basic problem is that teacher evaluation combines two conflicting tasks: improving instruction and judging performance. I wanted to focus on the first, but most teachers — fearing my evaluative judgments — fixated on the second. Initially, I tried to finesse these competing interests in the face of teacher skepticism. But the filing of a grievance ended all that. Now, instead of receiving helpful formative evaluation and ongoing supervision, teachers merely emitted a sigh of relief at the summative comment ("Whew, I got an overall rating of excellent") and filed away their evaluation forms, without any real learning or improvement.

This frustrated me no end. I felt that my failure to connect with teachers via meaningful supervision and evaluation meant that I was not a genuine instructional leader. I aspired to be the kind of principal who was always in and out of classrooms and who had useful insights to share that would help teachers make an even greater difference in children's lives. Good supervision and evaluation are central to being a good principal, and I felt blocked from doing that part of my job.

SO I TRIED another approach. I made a checklist of all 39 classrooms and began to drop in on every teacher every day, either to do an errand, give a student or teacher a birthday greeting, or just "show the flag." I felt that this process would at least give me a quick impression of how teachers were doing and of how engaged and responsive their students were. And, since I wasn't writing anything down, it couldn't be considered a formal evaluation.

But the process was inherently superficial. In these 15-second visits — during most of which all eyes were on me and teaching stopped — I had no time to listen to classroom interactions, to understand the curriculum that was being taught, or to read students' work over their shoulders. For all my "visibility" and hyper-

kinetic rushing around the school, I didn't know much more about what was going on in classrooms than I had before. I certainly didn't know enough to say anything intelligent to a teacher at the end of the day or to add anything specific or valid to my evaluations at the end of the year.

There was another disadvantage as well. My flying visits raised the anxiety level among teachers, causing them to wonder what conclusions I was drawing as I raced through their classrooms every day without comment. In truth, I saw and remembered very little beyond the most general of impressions ("teacher up and teaching, students quite attentive"), but teachers thought I was mentally filing away everything within my field of vision, and they feared the worst about all the real or imagined inadequacies in their classrooms. The problem was that I wasn't *saying* anything to them about what I saw, which created a yawning communication gap. Naturally, it was utterly impossible for me to catch up with 39 teachers before the end of the day — and even if I could have talked to all of them, what I had to say about their classrooms would have been utterly vacuous!

This quixotic attempt to see every teacher every day didn't last long. With so little payoff, I couldn't muster the energy to visit 39 classrooms every week, much less every day, and I soon fell into a pattern of six or seven desultory visits per day, driven by specific errands I found it necessary to run. So there I was, back to virtually no supervision of classroom instruction and increasingly perfunctory end-of-the-year evaluations.

And yet I was a very busy and highly visible principal. An administrative intern who shadowed me a few years ago recorded no fewer than 200 separate interactions in a single day (and that didn't count saying "Hi there!" to scores of kids as I passed them in the corridors). As I got better and better at juggling people and activities, I began to find the frenetic pace enjoyable, ego-boosting — and quite addictive. There was something energizing about being in demand, rushing around solving problems, attending to this and that. I was becoming what a friend calls an "intensity junkie."

But most of the time I was not dealing with the most important business of the school: teaching and learning. The truth was that I had fallen into the classic trap — HSPS (Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome). In my sixth year, I asked myself whether I would ever escape its grip. Was evaluation, as Schmoker had suggested, inevitably a sham? Was it a structural reality of the modern principalship that meaningful, ongoing supervision was impossible? Was it hopelessly idealistic, as some have suggested, for the principal to be a genuine instructional leader? I found these questions deeply troubling.

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THEN, AT the end of June 1993, our staff had one of those meetings in which some deeply important things are said and people are really listening to one another. One participant commented that Mather teachers didn't feel appreciated, that I didn't tell people often enough that they were doing a great job. Lots of heads nodded. He went on to say that, with a college soccer team he coaches after hours, he constantly tells the players that they're terrific, even when they aren't — and that Mather teachers needed to have their work acknowledged much more frequently as well.

My immediate reaction was that teachers would see right through me if I used the kind of general praise he seemed to be suggesting. But his comment set in motion a new train of thought. Over the course of the summer, I came to realize that teacher evaluation would continue to be held prisoner by the contractually mandated process of formal observations, checklists, comments, and ratings — a process in which I would continue to engage at a level of minimum compliance. But I also hit on a means of giving ongoing feedback to teachers in a way that was substantive and helpful.

My new approach stemmed from two beliefs. First, teachers — even very effective teachers — *do* need lots of reassurance that they are doing a good job, but this reassurance has to be genuine and based on specific examples of good things they are doing in their classrooms. A pat on the back or a glib "Great job!" won't do the trick. Second, teachers *do* need specific and constructive criticism in order to improve their performance. If they receive only supportive, appreciative comments, they will know that I am being phony, because no one is perfect. I figured that, to put these two beliefs into action, the following traits would have to characterize my supervisory practices.

- Classroom visits would have to be brief (otherwise they couldn't be frequent and still fit into my hectic schedule) but not *too* brief (because then I'd fail to see what was really going on).
- Visits would have to be frequent; otherwise there wouldn't be enough of them to balance specific praise with specific criticism. (It's almost impossible to criticize a good teacher if that is the only comment you've made all month, because the criticism will be seen as unfair and out of proportion to reality.)
- Visits would have to be random and unannounced, or I would risk seeing only specially prepared, glamorized lessons.
- I would need to give feedback soon after each visit, or teachers would be left guessing about the conclusions I had drawn.
- The feedback should be presented face to face to make it as nonthreatening as possible and to allow for conversation about what was happening in the classroom.
- Finally, nothing should be written down; written observations would make me cautious about making critical statements and would be more threatening to the teacher, who might wonder to what use the written document would be put. Moreover, anything in writing would be considered formal evaluation under our district contract.

I started my seventh year as principal determined to put this scheme into action. I had 42 professionals to supervise (39 teachers, the nurse, the special education team leader, and the student services coordinator), and I figured that — if I "cov-

ered" an average of four people a day — I could make a complete cycle of the staff every two weeks. If I kept up that pace for the whole year, I would have visited each staff member a total of 19 times.

That was the goal. Here is what actually happened.

In September, even though I was absolutely determined to break out of HSPS and had a plan for doing so, it took me forever to get started on my classroom visits. There always seemed to be a crisis or a reason for not beginning. With the school year only in its second week, our new music teacher unexpectedly took early retirement, and I had to hire someone new. There were problems with the new schedule that had to be worked out. Two new teachers were demanding their share of classroom supplies as well as carpets for their reading corners. We had to get our school council up and running to comply with the state's Education Reform Act. I had to work closely with our new assistant principal to get her acclimated to the school. There was one legitimate reason after another to keep me out of classrooms.

But I realized that the biggest barrier was in my own head. I actually felt *shy* about going into classrooms for an in-depth look. It was as if there were a force field around each room; even if I was already in someone's classroom on an errand, the field kept me from slowing down and staying long enough to see what was going on. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew how to do it. And I knew how important it was. But I just couldn't get started!

As I analyzed it later on, the problem stemmed in part from my real addiction to the fast-paced, superficial way I had been operating for years, never stopping for very long in any one place or for any one conversation. I could also sense the ambivalence that many teachers felt about having me in their classrooms. On the one hand, they craved feedback and affirmation; on the other hand, they just wanted to be left alone and feared that I might take their actions out of context, hurt their feelings, or come up with some fundamental criticism that would pose a threat to the way they had been teaching for years.

And then there were my own fears and insecurities. Would I see what was really going on in the classroom? Would I miss something important? Would my presence disrupt what the teacher was doing, throwing the teacher and the students off stride? I would be walking in there naked, with no evaluation checklist to hide behind. It was only me as an educator looking at teaching in progress. Would I be able to say anything intelligent about what I observed?

Enough! On the evening of September 29 I jotted a note in my diary and *shamed* myself into getting started. To make it easier, I told myself I would start with those teachers who would be least threatened by my visits. I thought that at first I would concentrate on finding something positive to say. The next day, I somehow pushed through the force field and visited four classrooms for five minutes each.

If my comment was a positive one, I sometimes shared it with the teacher while other colleagues were in earshot.

It felt great! I was able to really *see* things when I slowed down enough to spend time in a classroom. And when I caught up with the teachers later on, I was able to share what struck me in a way that made them feel appreciated.

I complimented one of the Reading Recovery teachers on her extraordinary patience and gentle tenacity while working with a student who had virtually no reading skills. I reinforced a second-grade teacher's restraint in not directing students but allowing them to start working on their own. (Her tendency to overdirect instruction was something we had touched on in her evaluation the year before.) I raved to our newly hired music teacher about the way he led a class in "Fly Like an Eagle." And I praised a third-grade Vietnamese bilingual teacher for having her students do mental math while they read *Ping*. It felt good to give specific praise; for once, I knew what I was talking about when I complimented a teacher.

Cheered by my first day's success, I forged ahead. On many days I didn't visit four teachers, but I was able to complete my first cycle of the staff in four weeks. Slow, but not bad for a beginner. I began my second round, which took me only three weeks. That was more than 80 observations with feedback. My confidence grew, and by December I had completed a cycle in two weeks. I was on a roll!

What proved most difficult was catching teachers later in the day and having informal, yet meaningful, dialogues about what I had seen in their classrooms. In a few cases, if students were engaged in group work, I was able to give the teacher private feedback right then and there. But most of the time, I provided feedback when I caught up with the teacher during a break later that day or early the next. If my comment was a positive one, I sometimes shared it with the teacher while other colleagues were within earshot; with critical comments, though, I had to catch the teacher alone, which sometimes took a bit of doing since I didn't want to add the intimidation of a summons to my office. I sometimes caught teachers at a bad moment, when they were rushing off to the bathroom between classes or were preoccupied with something else, unintentionally provoking resentment. Sometimes several days passed before I found the right moment to share critical feedback with a teacher, which was also bad. When the school year ended, one teacher told me about her tension and anger when I kept her waiting over a long weekend with my reaction to one of her classes.

Many teachers felt some anxiety about my new approach. Although I had mentioned the five-minute visits in a staff meeting and introduced the idea in more detail in my daily staff memo early in the year, teachers remained uncertain about what to expect. Several were visibly relieved when I gave them positive feedback. One primary teacher practically hugged me when I said how much I liked her children's Thanksgiving turkey masks. But others were clearly disconcerted and thrown off stride when I came into their rooms, and I had to signal them to continue with what they had been doing. I hoped that, as my visits became more routine, these teachers would relax and be able to ignore

my presence. And that's what happened in almost every case.

From the beginning, five minutes felt like the right amount of time for these supervisory visits. Five minutes was my sense of how long it takes to get the feel of what is going on in a classroom and to latch on to something specific that is worth a comment or two. I found that if I moved around the room, looked at students' work, and listened carefully, I was always able to find something that could serve as a beachhead in my conversation with the teacher later on. During each visit I asked myself, What strikes me in this room? What's interesting, different, or problematic? What observation of mine is worth sharing with the teacher? What will give him or her a new insight? It could be anything in the room — the teacher's interactions with students, the lesson, the materials, students' reactions, anything.

I quickly learned to enter the room looking casual and upbeat, and I never wrote anything down while I was there, even if an unrelated thought that I wanted to remember (e.g., what time to pick up my son after school) came to mind. I allowed the style of the lesson to shape the way I handled myself in the class. If the lesson was teacher directed, I would perch on a windowsill or a table at the back of the room and watch the students while listening intently to the teacher. If students were actively working on something, I would circulate and look at what they were doing — sometimes talking to students about what they were thinking as they did their work. Sometimes I worked for a few minutes with one student, getting insights into what made the task easy or difficult. And sometimes I was able to chat with the teacher about what he or she was trying to do — although usually I tried to maintain the fiction that I was "invisible" in the room so that the lesson could go on as normally as possible (even though the principal was wandering around, thinking who-knows-what).

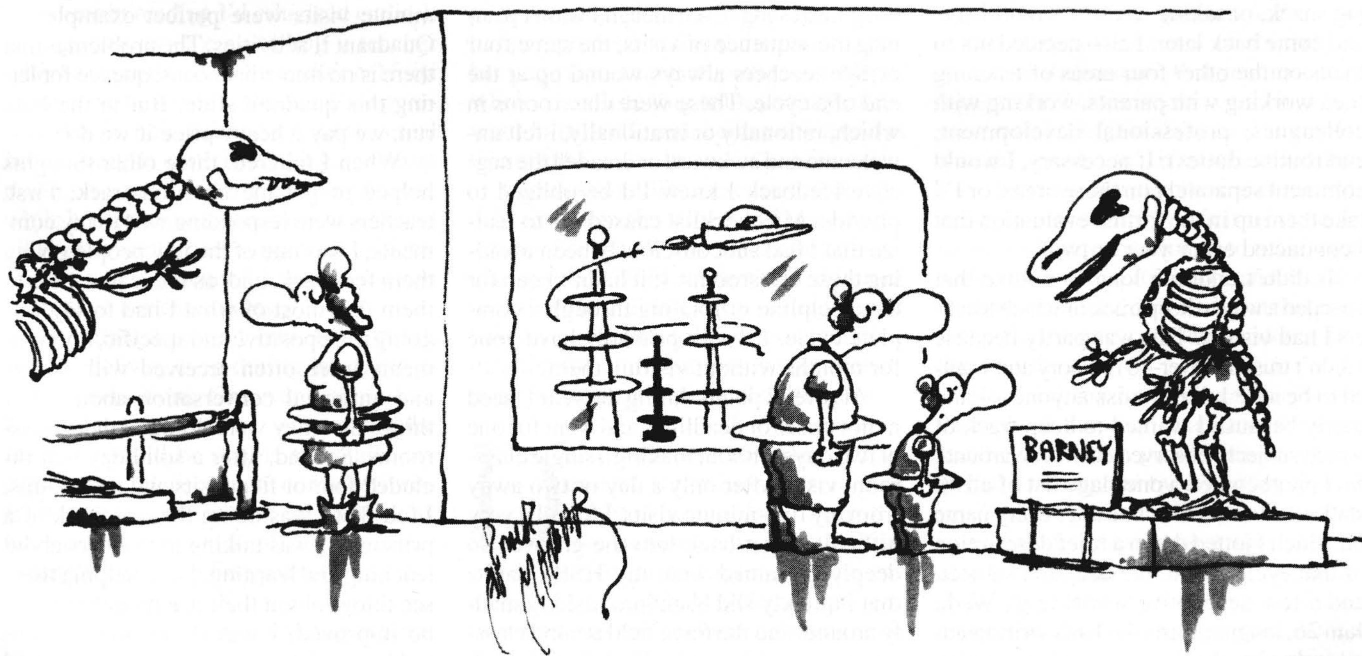
As I got into the groove, I found that four or five classroom visits a day was a manageable number. If I worked on it, I could visit that number even on a very busy day — but it took some will power, and my old habits died hard.

The brevity of the observations made them easier to fit into my hectic days. Many times, my beeper went off while I was in the middle of an observation, but I was almost always able to finish what I was looking at before I left to respond to whatever had led my secretary to summon me. On one occasion, a visitor showed up early for an appointment. I gave him our fact sheet, excused myself, and ran upstairs to fit in an observation before our meeting began. Nooks and crannies of the day suddenly became much more productive.

Once I visited a primary teacher during the last period on a Friday afternoon before a vacation. The class was going full steam, with all kinds of great learning going on, and I kidded the teacher later that she had passed the ultimate test: first-rate instruction in the final minutes of the last period before a vacation! But if the class had been in transition, I would not have counted that observation or held it against her. It was wonderful to have that flexibility.

On the rare days when I was able to visit six or seven teachers (usually in an attempt to finish a cycle by the end of a week, an artificial deadline that I nonetheless felt driven by), it was impossible to catch up with that many people and give each one meaningful feedback within a 24-hour period. Those times stretched my memory in recalling details to share with the teachers.

After I completed my second cycle of observations, I began to feel more comfortable about offering criticisms. In the third round, I told one teacher that a particular student seemed lost in an activity



and wasn't receiving help. I told another teacher that she needed to use a firmer tone to make sure all students were paying attention when she gave directions. And I commented on a lesson that involved three simultaneous activities — a tape playing, a worksheet, and an explanation by the teacher on another topic — that left some students clearly confused.

In one classroom in mid-November, I inadvertently let my body language communicate my critical reaction. Chronically sleep-deprived, I am known among my fellow administrators for dozing off during boring administrative meetings. I had assumed that I would not have that problem during such short and active classroom visits, but one morning as I sat in a first-grade class my eyelids began to droop. When I talked with the teacher about my reactions later in the day, she let me know that this had not escaped her attention: "You fell asleep in my math class, Mr. Marshall!" she said. But she did acknowledge that it had not been her best lesson, and she went on to talk about how pressured she felt by the upcoming standardized test and how it led her to teach this kind of low-interaction, drill-and-practice lesson. The truth was that she had been bored with the lesson too.

I made a decision early on to focus my brief observations only on active teaching. If I came into a classroom and the students were in transition, eating a midmorning snack, or taking a test, I would leave and come back later. I also decided not to focus on the other four areas of teaching (i.e., working with parents, working with colleagues, professional development, and routine duties). If necessary, I would comment separately on those areas, or I'd take them up in the formal evaluation that I conducted every year or two.

It didn't take me long to realize that I needed a way to keep track of which teachers I had visited. This was partly because I didn't trust my over-40 memory and wanted to be sure I didn't miss anyone — and partly because I wanted to keep track of which subject I observed each time around. So I photocopied a one-page list of all 42 staff members, with a line after every name on which I jotted down a brief description of that cycle's visit: the date, the subject, and a few descriptive words (e.g., Wed., Jan. 26, language arts — Kids writing autobiography sheets in cooperative pairs; quite engaged). I then added a check mark after I had caught up with each teacher and given him or her feedback. As it turned out, I was pleasantly surprised by my strong memories of these visits; I was able to recall what had struck me in each classroom, even a day or two later, and I never needed to refer to my notes during my conversations with the teachers.

During the first couple of cycles I visited teachers in random order, dropping by classrooms when I happened to be in that part of the building or when another errand took me into a room and it seemed like a good time to observe. After the first two cycles, I began trying to arrange my classroom visits during certain periods (working from a master schedule of the school that told me when math, science, reading, and so on were being taught in any given classroom). But I found that teachers had often changed their schedules and that my own plans were usually thrown off by unexpected visitors or other events. I did try to rotate the subjects I observed each teacher teaching, however — even if this meant leaving a classroom and coming back later. I tried visiting teams of teachers on the same day (e.g., all the fourth-grade teachers during one period, all the specialty teachers during the same day), but those attempts almost never worked out because of interruptions that called me back to the office.

Toward the end of December, as I neared the end of my fifth cycle, I noticed something interesting. Even though I wasn't planning the sequence of visits, the same four or five teachers always wound up at the end of a cycle. These were classrooms in which, rationally or irrationally, I felt unwelcome and awkward or dreaded the negative feedback I knew I'd be obliged to provide. My checklist caused me to realize that I had subconsciously been avoiding these classrooms. If it hadn't been for the discipline of rotating through a complete cycle, I would probably have gone for months without visiting them.

At several points during the year I faced major crises or deadlines and went for one or two days without making a single classroom visit. After only a day or two away from my five-minute visits, I found it very difficult to get back into the groove. So deeply ingrained were my HSPS habits that I quickly slid back into rushing madly around, and the force field around classrooms sprang up again. Each time, it took a self-conscious effort of will to get back into the routine of five-minute visits. This fact made me realize how important it was to have a target number of classrooms to visit each day. Visiting 42 people feels like an impossible challenge, but visiting four or five a day is doable — and I knew that, if I kept up a steady pace, I would get to everyone in just two weeks' time.

On the days when I backslid to HSPS, another thought struck me as well: there was absolutely no one pushing me to carry out this crazy plan. There was zero external pressure. The Boston evaluation process didn't demand it. Teachers, ever ambivalent, were not clamoring for it. The union was basically indifferent, concerned only that I not use my visits as illegitimate sneak attacks for purposes of evaluation. The sole thing pushing me to get started again was my own hunch that this would make a difference in teachers' morale and in their effectiveness with students. So, lacking external support, I had some very shaky moments during the winter and spring, times when I was sorely tempted to slide back into my old HSPS pattern. But I resisted the impulse.

One indirect source of support was Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, in which he describes "Quadrant II" activities — the ones that are important but not urgent and thus get easily pushed aside by activities that are either urgent *and* important or urgent and *not* important. It struck me that my five-minute visits were perfect examples of Quadrant II activities. The problem is that there is no immediate consequence for letting this quadrant slide. But in the long run, we pay a heavy price if we do so.

When I faltered, three other thoughts helped to get me back on track. First, teachers were responding well to my comments; I was one of the few people giving them feedback, and, as it became clear to them that most of what I had to say was going to be positive and specific, my comments were often received with smiles and animated conversation about other things that they were doing in their classrooms. Second, after a solid day that included four or five visits and follow-ups, I felt that I was doing the real work of a principal: I was talking to teachers about teaching and learning, I was helping them see things about their teaching that could be improved, I was deepening and enriching my relationships with them, and I was creating an opportunity for them to

talk to me about what they were doing in their classrooms — opportunities that had been virtually absent before. And third, I was building my own knowledge about the school's curriculum and instruction, which would enhance my work with grade-level teams, the parent group, and the school-site council.

Conversely, on days when I made no visits, I felt superficial and insubstantial, and I knew that I wasn't really doing my job. I may have been very busy. I may have worked very hard. I may have come in contact with a large number of people and solved a lot of problems. But I was not dealing with the heart of the matter. Once I had experienced a really substantive workday, it was hard to go back to HSPS.

All this got me back on track, and I kept up the pace — sometimes slower, sometimes faster — through the difficult middle portion of the year.

As I got into a steady, consistent pattern of classroom visits, I found that the feedback I gave teachers fell into four categories: 1) praise — e.g., commenting on some amazing writing in third-grade students' weekly picture books, or on the way a bilingual class was working with a monolingual class on a lesson, or on the way a teacher called on and drew out a shy student in the midst of a forest of eager hands; 2) reinforcement — e.g., commenting on a teacher's animated oral reading of a textbook passage (as contrasted to the halting round-robin reading I'd criticized earlier); 3) suggestions — e.g., telling a teacher who was covering the four traditional food groups to take a look at the new food pyramid that is now printed on most cereal boxes; and 4) criticism — e.g., coming down on a teacher for correcting papers while her students watched a movie they'd all seen several times at home or criticizing the way a teacher "dissed" a student in front of her classmates.

I continued to find critical feedback hard to deliver, even during brief, informal conversations. On several occasions, I pulled my punches out of fear that the teachers would be unable to handle my criticisms and use them constructively. Each case was a judgment call, and I may have erred on the side of caution (cowardice?) during my first year of using this supervisory approach.

As I got the hang of sharing my observations, it became more frequent for the teachers and me to get into discussions about what I had observed. They usually provided some background on what had been going on before I entered the classroom or on what the students did after I left. In so doing, they gave me a sense of how this particular lesson fit into an overall curriculum unit and into their classroom goals for the year. And what started out as a criticism often became a compliment, once I understood what the teacher was trying to do, just as what started as a compliment might evolve into a suggestion on how to handle a certain situation differently next time.

Several times, a teacher and I debated the value of a particular instructional approach. Round-robin reading is a good example. When I saw a teacher using this approach, I made a point of criticizing what I strongly believe to be an inefficient and ineffective strategy. In one such case a teacher responded that her students enjoyed reading aloud (perhaps out of some sense that this is the way reading instruction is supposed to be or out of a desire to show off their reading skills), but she also said — a little defensively — that she rarely used the approach. With another teacher who used round-robin reading, I offered to share a journal article describing a different strategy.[2] The teacher read the article and proceeded to implement the new approach, which she reported made a terrific difference. Instead of round-robin reading, she had each student rehearse a page of a high-interest book with her or her paraprofessional and then read his or her page into a tape recorder — with the whole class listening triumphantly afterward to its well-read, coherent, cooperative effort.

Conversations like these were strikingly different from the stilted and wary interactions that usually take place around evaluation time. What made them different was that they didn't carry a judgmental boss-to-employee tone. These brief but meaningful conversations were interactions between professional colleagues.

DESPITE some very slow patches and some moments of real doubt, I was able to keep the five-minute visits going for the whole year. By the end of June, I had completed 11 cycles. Each cycle ranged from two weeks to six weeks in duration, with the average cycle lasting a little over three weeks. This means that I made only 11 visits per staff member, not the 19 for which I had aimed.

But "only" 11 visits per person meant a total of 462 visits for the year — and that was 462 more than I had ever made before. And most of them had been high-quality observations followed by good feedback conversations. For me as an instructional leader, this was a huge improvement, and, though I lacked any evidence as concrete as test score gains, I think my new supervisory procedures made a real difference in the school. I was elated.

How did teachers respond to the feedback they received? In my end-of-year questionnaire (which most staff members fill out anonymously), I asked teachers to circle the adjectives that applied to my feedback following the five-minute visits, and here are the outcomes: perceptive, 54%; gave me insights, 50%; honest, 46%; affirmed my teaching, 46%; sparked discussion, 38%; helped me improve, 25%; phony, 13%; irrelevant, 4%; off target, none. One person who had missed my beginning-of-the-year explanations of the five-minute supervisions commented that the process smelled of surreptitious evaluation. But most staff members seemed to appreciate the feedback and wanted me to get around to their classrooms more frequently.

Did teachers feel more appreciated under the new system? The informal comments that I received during the first year led me to believe that most of them did. And I think that the amount and quality of the feedback was one of several reasons why staff morale that year rose to its highest level in the seven years I had been principal. I think the increased amount of detailed, specific, and honest feedback built trust between the teachers and me. My compliments *and* my criticisms were detailed and frequent enough to make them believable and helpful. I hope and trust that students benefited as well, but at this point I don't have any concrete evidence that this was the case.

How did my brief supervisory visits throughout the year relate to the formal teacher evaluation process that I was required to complete by mid-May of each year? Although the five-minute visits were supervision, not evaluation, they contributed to my overall impression of each teacher and provided background for my formal classroom observations. They also steered my assistant principal and me toward teachers we thought would benefit from in-

depth supervision and evaluation. In all, the assistant principal and I targeted four teachers for additional support, and we spent more time with those four than with others during the formal evaluation process.

From the first year's effort, I learned some important lessons.

• Get into a *consistent* routine of visiting a certain number of classrooms each day (four or five felt optimal to me) so that every teacher is seen regularly. It's a matter of constantly fitting these brief visits into the nooks and crannies of the day.

• Back off when something unrepresentative is taking place in a classroom (e.g., a transition, a random disciplinary problem). The worst thing that can happen is to have teachers feel that they are being judged unfairly or out of context.

• Be a perceptive observer in order to capture something interesting and helpful to say during the feedback session. There's no hiding behind the standard evaluation checklist with this approach.

• Give teachers a mixture of praise, affirmation, suggestions, and criticism. A solid diet of any one of these will undermine your credibility.

• When sharing critical observations with teachers, be tactful and nonthreatening but totally honest.

• Use good judgment about when to deliver criticism and when to hold off.

• Save heavy-duty evaluation and redirection for the formal evaluation process.

As I go into my second year of five-minute visits, I have made several resolutions that will improve my performance. First, in my follow-up conversation with each teacher, I intend to concentrate on the quality of the feedback. Occasionally during the first year, when I was rushed from trying to visit too many teachers per day, I felt I was talking to people just to get them checked off my list, not to impart interesting insights about their teaching. The key to high-quality feedback is slowing down and consistently covering just four or five teachers a day.

Second, I intend to try next year to see teams of teachers — e.g., all the second-grade teachers, all the teachers of inclusion classes — on the same day. This will better enable me to identify common themes and to share them with team members to foster collegiality and to help them learn from one another. Who knows? Teachers might begin to observe one another, which I have been told is one of the best ways to encourage people to reflect on their craft. My assistant principal and I would be willing to drop everything to provide classroom coverage to make peer observations possible. But we also know how difficult it is to get such an effort started.

Third, I will try to get teachers to use the video camera as a tool for observation and feedback. There is nothing quite so powerful as watching yourself on screen if you wish to learn how you are coming across to students. The best way to encourage this practice may be to get teachers to use the camera on one another, while I stay out of the picture. To date, though, I have had no luck in enticing teachers to pick up on this idea.

If some principals are not up to the task of giving meaningful feedback, shame on those who hired them!

Fourth, I want to experiment for an entire cycle with looking at one particular facet of the classroom — e.g., participation by special education students, level of student cooperation, amount of student writing versus worksheets, and so on. Focusing my observations this tightly will give my comments to teachers more cohesion and impact. It will also give me schoolwide information about specific issues.

Fifth, I would like my brief observations and feedback to become part of a more intensive and focused evaluation process that involves in-depth supervision and evaluation of a limited number of teachers (say, one-third of the staff) each year. But this plan will have to wait for changes in the district's evaluation process. In the meantime, I think that the five-minute visits are a good proxy for lengthier and more detailed observations; the short visits may even have some advantages in terms of frequency and informality.

Finally, I intend to support my regular classroom visits and feedback with more detailed dialogue about what students are supposed to be learning. The Mather faculty has defined its curriculum carefully and agreed on exemplars of good student writing at each grade level. Our next step is to regularly study actual data on students' achievement and to talk about what is working and what is not. If we begin to focus on the curriculum in this fashion, the conversations that I have with teachers about what I see happening in their classrooms will have an even more coherent context. One goal (though I may not achieve it yet this year) is to hold a monthly sit-down conversation with each homeroom teacher, during which we review students' work folders and talk about how they are progressing.

THIS EXPERIMENT in quick supervision and rapid feedback is still very much a work in progress. I am sharing my ideas at this stage to provoke reactions and to get ideas from practitioners who have developed similar or better ways of dealing with the challenge that Schmoker posed in the stinging passage that I quoted at the beginning of this article.

I can already anticipate several skeptical points that might be raised about my approach to supervision.

• *Comments based on five-minute classroom visits are bound to be superficial. After all, a five-minute visit every two weeks allows a principal to see only a tiny sliver of what a teacher is doing — one-fifth of 1% of instructional time — and teachers have every right to feel that a lot is being missed.* True enough, but I have argued that frequent, unannounced, randomly scheduled visits can provide more accurate and reliable information on what is really taking place in classrooms than scheduled, formal observations. Talking to teachers after such visits is something that principals who know instruction and know their teachers can readily do, and the conversations give teachers a chance to correct misinterpretations and to fill in the larger context. Most important, brief but frequent visits with timely feedback provide qualitatively more observation and commentary than most teachers are getting now.

• *It is unrealistic to expect principals*

consistently to squeeze this number of high-quality observations into their hectic days. For many principals caught up in HSPS, it would take some training and prodigious self-discipline to get into this approach. The main point in its favor is that, without ongoing supervision of and feedback to teachers, what is the principal doing to improve the instructional program? Why hire educators as principals if they are not going to be involved daily in the instructional program? Why not hire business managers or facilitators? Why indeed!

• *Principals who give supervisory feedback in this fashion are bound to be coopted by the need to get along with teachers; they will not bite the bullet and deliver the kind of hard, critical messages that many teachers need to hear.* While this is a real danger, visiting classrooms with eyes wide open makes a principal more conscious of what needs to be changed. Moreover, the frequency of the principal's interactions with teachers makes it easier to salt the bad news in with the good in a way that enables teachers to hear and to act on it.

• *This kind of informal supervision is open to abuse by principals who would not be fair-minded about not taking teachers' actions out of context.* This objection is valid, but it only strengthens the case for training principals to implement the approach. Without such training for principals, unions might slam the door on a systematic application of this process by insisting that all supervision take place within the context of formal evaluation.

• *Supervision should take place only after the principal analyzes each teacher's weaknesses and makes a plan for improvement. Brief classroom visits should monitor progress toward these goals; the visits are wasted time if they are not focused on this agenda.* This notion harks back to the paternalistic approach to evaluation. Today, we need to develop something more collegial and interactive. Few teachers will put their best thinking into a formal goal-setting venture; teachers are far more likely to take risks and be adventurous in an informal setting.

• *Supervision should be based on teachers' own ideas about what their goals are and what they want an outside observer to look for.* Although this is an admirable goal, it is very difficult to achieve in large schools, and it slows supervision to a pace of only three or four visits per classroom per year. Moreover, teachers and administrators tend to tense up when they get into this kind of goal setting — and that reaction is not conducive to risk-taking or to genuinely honest communication about teachers' hopes and fears for the classroom.

• *Principals would be better advised to put their energies into fostering peer observation, which is a better way for teachers to improve their craft.* Peer observation is an excellent way for teachers to receive clinical, nonthreatening feedback, and I am trying to move our staff in this direction. But it is also important that teachers be observed regularly by their principals, who have a schoolwide perspective and input into the formal evaluation process (a real asset when observations suggest a need for significant changes in a given classroom).

• *Teachers don't need principals snooping in their classrooms all the time. Principals don't know much about teaching anyway, and their comments are irrelevant to the kind of personal growth that teachers must foster on their own.* On the contrary, the literature shows that most teachers feel isolated in their classrooms, cut off from adult interaction, and starved for feedback and appreciation. If some principals are not up to the task of giving meaningful feedback, shame on those who hired them! We need to develop and put in place a new generation of school leaders who relish the task of getting into classrooms and giving rich, helpful, supportive feedback to teachers every day of every year.

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1. Mike Schmoker, "What Schools Can Learn from Toyota of America," *Education Week*, 13 March 1992.
2. James V. Hoffman, "Rethinking the Role of Oral Reading in Basal Instruction," *Elementary School Journal*, January 1987, pp. 367-73.

"How much to shred a report card?"