

The Truth About Teacher Evaluation

Evaluating teachers can be a powerful tool—if done right

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How well is teacher supervision, support, and evaluation working in your schools? Are principals still using the traditional process, which is widely regarded as ineffective? Or are they using a modified system that's almost as bad?

Here's what to look for: Are almost all of teachers getting good or excellent ratings while supervisors privately acknowledge that mediocre and ineffective practices are present in many classrooms? Are school leaders ground down by the hundreds of hours they put into the process and cynical about the impact? If so, maybe the school board and superintendent need to confront the brutal facts and make some changes.

It's been said that teacher evaluation is a necessary bureaucratic chore that makes little difference to what happens in classrooms, so it's not worth fixing. I disagree. The way teachers are evaluated can be a powerful lever to improving teaching and learning – if it's done right. And if it's done wrong, there are major downsides.

As Michael Fullan said (2003), “Nothing undermines the motivation of hard-working teachers more than poor performance in other teachers being ignored over long periods of time. Not only do poor-performing teachers negatively affect the students in their classes, but they also have a spillover effect by poisoning the overall climate of the school.”

Four hard truths: First, research has confirmed what common sense told us long ago: Students learn considerably more from some teachers than from others, and that's because of specific instructional practices used in classrooms daily. Second, every single school has a range of teaching quality from excellent to less-than-effective.

Third, students who walk into school with any kind of disadvantage have a greater need for excellent or good teaching (more-fortunate students can usually survive non-stellar practices). That means that sub-par teaching is damaging for our neediest students and addressing it is a moral imperative.

Finally, the traditional teacher-evaluation process makes it very difficult for principals to evaluate teachers honestly and accurately and push the curve of teaching quality in the right direction.

What's wrong?

What's wrong with the traditional process? Surely it makes sense for supervisors to conduct a pre-observation conference with each teacher, observe a full class taking detailed notes, write up the evidence, and conduct a post-observation conference.

I say this with regret, because I went through this process hundreds of times as a Boston principal, but these time-honored steps have virtually no impact on what happens in classrooms. They are largely a waste of time. That's because the traditional approach, which takes about four hours per teacher, has these design flaws:

- The process is so time-consuming that supervisors can evaluate only one or two of the 900 lessons teachers teach a year – far from an adequate sampling and way too little feedback to affect performance.
- Most formal evaluations are announced in advance, which means that supervisors are seeing optimal performance, not what students are getting every day. All too often this is part of a collusive deal with mediocre and ineffective teachers: I’ll pretend this is how you teach all the time and write it up, you’ll pretend that’s true and sign, and we’ll put the evaluation in your personnel file and move on.
- The detailed feedback teachers receive on formal observations is often overwhelming, poorly timed (April or May), and unhelpful. When I ask audiences of educators if formal evaluations ever helped them improve their practice and their students’ learning, the answer is usually NEVER.

Because of these built-in problems, traditional teacher evaluation is generally inaccurate, ineffective – and dishonest to parents and stakeholders.

Wasting valuable time

But I’ll go a step further and argue that the old process actually *harms* teaching and learning, especially the achievement of students with disadvantages. Why? Because the hundreds of hours supervisors are spending on observations, conferencing, and paperwork is time they’re not spending on what research tells us will have the biggest impact: building a positive and trusting school culture; fostering professional working conditions; orchestrating teacher teamwork around curriculum planning and analysis of student work; hiring well; recognizing and spreading good practices; and giving tough-love feedback when necessary.

One Long Island principal who’s trapped in the old evaluation system put it this way: “Every time I evaluate a teacher, it takes me out of the game for four hours.”

Why would a school district continue to use an approach that wastes valuable time and undermines its core mission? Perhaps a collective bargaining agreement designed to protect teachers from capricious or clueless administrators? A belief that the annual dog-and-pony-show somehow represents teachers’ daily practice? Principals who enjoy the power trip of critiquing nervous teachers? A way to avoid difficult conversations and the serious work involved in dealing with mediocre and ineffective practices? Simple inertia?

Whatever the reasons, most districts have been using the old process for decades. Then along came the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top; the challenges of making adequate yearly progress, implementing more rigorous curriculum standards, and using test scores to evaluate teachers were piled on top of the traditional process, stirring up widespread resistance. Unfortunately, the outcry didn’t focus on the problems with teacher evaluation that had existed all along.

Rethinking the process

Now we have the new Every Student Succeeds Act legislation, which doesn’t have any specific mandates on teacher evaluation. This is an opportunity for states and districts to rethink

the process! But what to do? Here's the good news. A few districts and charter management organizations have hit upon an approach that shows real promise; among those using it with great success are Hamilton County, Tennessee, Manhasset, New York, and the Uncommon public charter school network.

Here's how it works: Supervisors make short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits followed promptly by face-to-face coaching conversations and succinct narrative write-ups, with a comprehensive rubric summing up each teacher's performance at the end of the school year. The efficacy of this approach is based on several insights:

- *Short observations* – A 10- to 15-minute classroom visit is amazingly informative, providing more than enough for a rich conversation afterward. Of course, it's essential that there are enough visits to get a good sampling of a teacher's performance – once a month is a good frequency, which in most schools means supervisors averaging two to three short observations a day. It's also important that the visits are timed to see the beginning, middle, and end of lessons, different subjects or classes, and different times of the day, week, and year.

Should teachers ever have full-lesson observations? Yes, if they request them (it's a healthy sign when teachers invite supervisors and colleagues to watch them teach). Yes, for brand-new teachers, although they're best observed by freeing up colleagues who know their grade level or subject. Yes, in schools where literacy or math coaches can give teachers more fine-grained feedback. And yes, for teachers who are having major difficulty and need a more-detailed diagnosis of what's happening – and perhaps documentation for dismissal. But most of the time, a steady rhythm of short, frequent, unannounced visits with follow-up conversations is the best use of supervisors' time.

- *Look-fors* – Short visits are highly informative if supervisors are humble, curious, *present*, and low-tech. Visitors who use a laptop or tablet to tally data or script every detail miss a lot of the real action in classrooms. And using a checklist or rubric to score the lesson distracts the supervisor – there's simply too much going on to capture in a detailed format. Also, it undermines the quality of post-observation coaching. Observers are most perceptive when they keep their heads up, walk around, look over students' shoulders at the work they're doing, chat with one or two students (*What are you working on?*), look at what's on the walls, and jot only a few notes. The three framing question on an observer's mind might be: What are students supposed to be learning? Is this the best way to teach it? And are they all learning?

- *In-person coaching* – A face-to-face conversation after each short observation, ideally in the teacher's classroom when students aren't there, is the best way to build trust, share insights, ask questions, learn about teachers' triumphs and struggles, get teachers engaged in non-defensive reflection, and positively influence instruction. These brief conversations give teachers a chance to fill the supervisor in on what was happening before and after the visit, explain the larger context of the lesson, look together at students' work, and take full advantage of having an extra pair of eyes on their work. Conversations also allow supervisors to decide on the best "leverage point" to strengthen teaching and learning and note the practices that deserve praise and perhaps promulgation. After the conversation, it's most effective if supervisors send the teacher a very brief narrative summary without scores (like students, teachers tend to ignore

everything but the grade). One clever software program limits post-observation write-ups to 1,000 characters.

- *Time management* – Each short-observation cycle takes about 30 minutes – 10 in the classroom, 10 for the conversation, and 10 for the write-up. Even super-busy administrators can fit a few of these into all but the craziest school days. Doing 10 mini-observation cycles a year takes less time than the traditional process (about 175 hours versus 300 hours in a medium-size school). Think about the difference: In the same four hours it takes to do *one* traditional evaluation, a supervisor can do *eight* mini-observation cycles. Not only is that much more productive, but the time saved can be spent working with teacher teams, thinking about curriculum, and being more attentive to colleagues and parents.

- *Evaluation* – Teacher-evaluation rubrics developed in recent years provide organized, comprehensive descriptions of teaching, usually at four levels of proficiency, giving educators a common language about effective and not-so-effective practices. But rubrics are not appropriate for evaluating a single classroom observation.

The biggest bang for the buck comes from using them at three points in the year. In September, teachers self-assess and agree on two to three professional improvement goals with their supervisor. In mid-January, supervisor and teacher compare the teacher's current self-assessment and the boss's tentative rubric scores and debate any disagreements. At the end of the school year, they repeat that process and the evaluation is finalized. It's challenging for supervisors to remember everything a teacher has done during a year. That's where rubrics and each teacher's self assessment are excellent memory prompts, eliciting the myriad impressions and reflections from the year's classroom visits and other points of contact. It produces a surprisingly accurate picture of overall performance.

- *Skillset* – Do principals have the chops to make effective use of short classroom visits? Skeptics doubt the instructional leadership skills of many building leaders, and indeed, the constraints of the traditional teacher-evaluation process have greatly limited their impact on teaching and learning.

But I would argue that mini-observations have several design elements that bring out the best in supervisors and provide a pathway for improvement for those who aren't currently up to snuff.

First, making unannounced classroom visits confronts supervisors with practices that need to be improved – they tend to ask themselves, *Would I want this for my own child?* Second, frequent visits allow supervisors to focus on one improvement item at a time, making the challenge of difficult conversations more manageable. Third, the face-to-face feedback format reduces teachers' defensiveness and opens the possibility of productive dialogues. Fourth, the post-observation chats allow teachers to educate their supervisors about important background information and can create a collegial, two-way coaching dynamic. And finally, having multiple "at bats" gives supervisors the time to improve their skills and make a difference with more and more teachers.

- *Superintendents* – For principals and other supervisors who need serious improvement in their observation and feedback skills, superintendents (or their designees) are ideally positioned to do what needs to be done. When superintendents do frequent co-observations with

building administrators, they can see if each one has a good “eye” for instruction and knows how to zero in on key points and have productive conversations with teachers. It’s also important that superintendents use principals’ meetings effectively – watching classroom videos, role-playing feedback conversations, and discussing challenging case studies. Some principals will need intensive coaching, and if they don’t improve, they should be moved out of their positions.

There’s a lot of talk about superintendents ensuring “inter-rater reliability” among their supervisors. It’s certainly important that everyone is on the same page, but an even more important goal is continuously improving the observation and feedback skills of building leaders. That can only happen if superintendents are frequently in classrooms and make effective use of principal meetings. The fact is that HSPS – hyperactive superficial principal syndrome – is the default setting for school leaders, and it takes clear direction and supervision to make sure they spend significant time every day working on the deeper instructional mission.

Okay, the short-observation approach sounds promising, but is there research evidence that it works? Not yet, and schools using the new approach are taking something of a leap of faith. But they are not crazy. That’s because the short-observation process supports seven factors that research and common sense link directly to improved teaching and learning: (a) Building relational trust among colleagues; (b) fostering professional working conditions; (c) principals acting as highly visible instructional leaders; (d) teachers getting frequent, specific appreciation and/or redirection; (e) early intervention with problems, including tough-love feedback when needed; (f) developing teachers’ skills in formative assessment; and (g) getting a student’s-eye view of the work of teacher teams’ curriculum planning and analysis of student work.

All this happens much more readily when principals are in classrooms every day and following up with teachers about what they see. In short, there’s ample reason to believe that mini-observations will come through with flying colors when the research is done – and every reason not to wait around for that far-off day.

School boards are frequently admonished to set policy, hold the superintendent accountable for execution, and refrain from micromanaging. What should a board do about a dysfunctional teacher-evaluation process? I believe it’s entirely appropriate to ask the superintendent how well the district’s current process addresses these fundamental goals:

- Quality assurance – Can you look students, parents, and other stakeholders in the eye and say honestly and credibly that there’s effective or highly effective teaching in every classroom virtually all the time?
- Feedback – Are principals frequently noticing and praising good classroom practices and continuously coaching and holding accountable teachers whose pedagogy is less than effective?
- Motivation – Are teachers challenged to bring their A game every day and to continuously reflect, individually and collectively, about what’s working and what isn’t?
- Personnel decisions – Is the district making the right calls on retaining struggling but promising teachers, granting tenure to those who truly deserve it, putting the most effective teachers to work as mentors and curriculum planners, and dismissing educators who are persistently ineffective?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is NO (and that's been my experience in the 12 years I've been consulting with districts around the nation), the next step is crafting policies that will turn things around.

Once the traditional process has been thrown out the window and an effective teacher-evaluation policy is in place, superintendents can focus on giving hands-on support to their principals, fine-tuning the kinds of feedback they are giving teachers, and looking for patterns of teaching performance across the district that need to be emulated by others or addressed in professional development.

Principals, liberated from hundreds of hours of traditional observations, write-ups, and conferences, can spend their time where it will make a difference. This includes frequently visiting classrooms, talking to teachers about effective practices, coaching those who are using mediocre and ineffective practices (and dismissing those who can't or won't improve), spreading good ideas around the school, meeting with teacher teams as they plan curriculum units and look at student assessment results, and fostering professional working conditions. In other words, they will be doing the work that will enable all students and educators to do their very best work.

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