

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT Advantage

Evaluation & Professional Growth

at American Institutes for Research ■

Principal Observation Tool Strengthens School District Leadership

Sitting side by side with school superintendents in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Tammie Knights, a senior technical assistance consultant at American Institutes for Research (AIR), watches principals deliver feedback to teachers on their classroom practice, either in real time or on video. Ms. Knights, a former principal herself, helps superintendents accurately evaluate principal performance as part of a territory-wide effort to improve principal evaluation.

Today, she is supporting superintendents who are observing principals using a research-based protocol developed by AIR. They are observing the quality of feedback that principals give to teachers about their classroom instruction and management.

Such performance feedback, which is essential to improving teachers' instructional skills, is a key task for principals. Today the principals' evaluators will be observing how the principals deliver such feedback to teachers. Do the principals dominate the conversation, giving teachers little chance to ask questions and interact? Or do the principals ask guiding questions, promoting a conversation in which teachers reflect and come to their own conclusions? And do the principals use evidence to point out practical changes to instruction that are actionable in classrooms?

"Together we look at evidence to figure out where the principal falls along the continuum and what kind of coaching will benefit the principal most," Ms. Knights says. "This turns the superintendent into a 'modeler' from whom the principals can learn. The USVI's new teacher-evaluation system puts principals in a new role. Principals need support, and the superintendents are in a good position to do that."

After the superintendents (or other principal supervisors) observe principals, together they discuss evidence of how effectively the principals have delivered feedback to teachers. The goal in these coaching conversations is to influence the principals' feedback to teachers—and, ultimately, teachers' classroom instruction.

"It's not about principals having all the answers, but rather about facilitating more productive conversations so that teachers can own their successes and challenges," says Ms. Knights. "That's the best way for teachers to improve their practice."

For Dionne Wells, superintendent of USVI's St. Thomas–St. John School District, the process is paying off. After

one year of using AIR's Instructional Feedback Observation Tool, coaching, and support, many of her principals already are giving teachers more focused and effective feedback. This new approach is important because research suggests that principals, like

many professionals, can struggle to provide high-quality feedback. Without such evidence-based strategies, the district's investment in new teacher-evaluation systems would be lost.

"We can have the best designed teacher evaluation systems, but what it comes down to is the principal delivering the right information to teachers. If it is not delivered well, in ways that teachers can receive it, then all that work is for nothing," says Matthew Clifford, Ph.D., a senior researcher at AIR and co-author of the Instructional Feedback Observation Tool. "AIR's observation work supports principals in having critical conversations with teachers."

In the USVI district, teachers are being invited to participate actively and think more critically about how they can use the feedback they receive to enhance their own instruction. An evidence-based culture in which instructional quality is openly discussed is a cultural shift. "The mindset of individuals is changing, and that's what we want to see," says Superintendent Wells.

She sees the difference in her own skills as well: "The support I am getting from AIR will make me a better instructional leader, no matter where I go next."

Being able to have these tools to evaluate my principals is helping me become a better superintendent. Until now, I and my district have always focused on the day-to-day operations or management of the schools as being the critical part of the evaluation. Now I am able to work closely with my administrators to help them become better instructional leaders. We are meeting more often to discuss the learning of children.

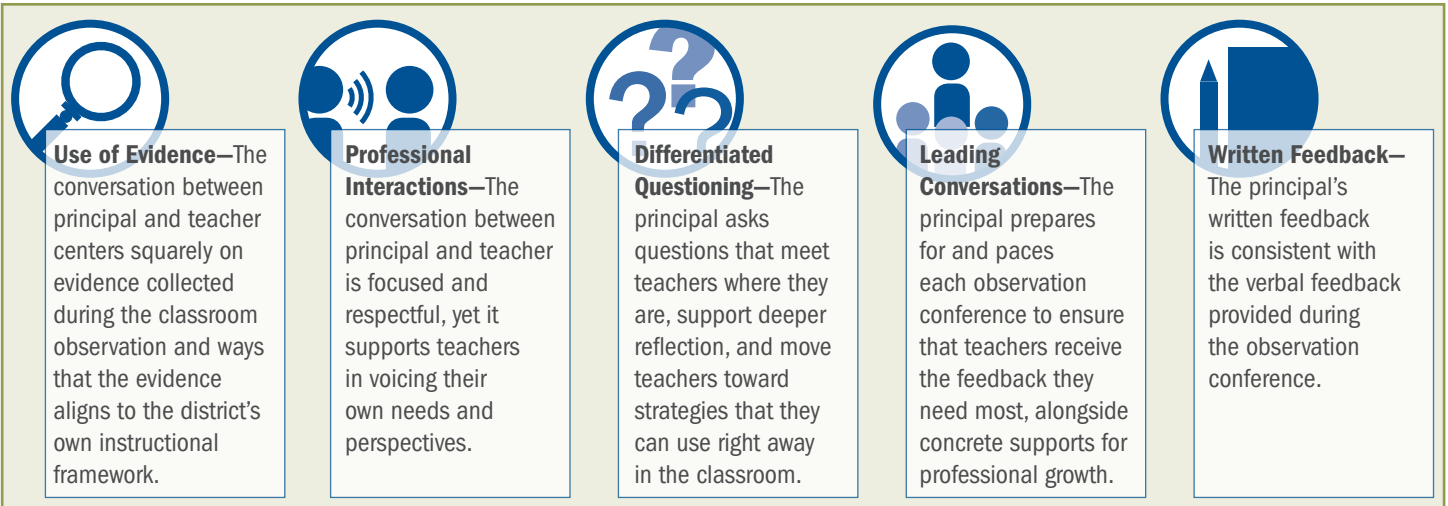
—Superintendent, Blackfoot School District 55, Blackfoot, Idaho

Instructional Feedback Observation Tool

The Instructional Feedback Observation Tool, one part of AIR's suite of school leadership evaluation tools, helps principal supervisors and coaches improve instructional leadership. The research-based tool was validated by more than 150 principals and superintendents, and it contributes to evidence-based coaching and performance evaluations for principals.

Guided by the tool, principal coaches and supervisors follow a structured process to observe principals' practice and help principals develop the core skills necessary to give teachers consistent, high-quality, and actionable instructional feedback.

The Instructional Feedback Observation Tool is built around five core indicators identified by research as central to providing good instructional feedback:



Use of Evidence—The conversation between principal and teacher centers squarely on evidence collected during the classroom observation and ways that the evidence aligns to the district's own instructional framework.

Professional Interactions—The conversation between principal and teacher is focused and respectful, yet it supports teachers in voicing their own needs and perspectives.

Differentiated Questioning—The principal asks questions that meet teachers where they are, support deeper reflection, and move teachers toward strategies that they can use right away in the classroom.

Leading Conversations—The principal prepares for and paces each observation conference to ensure that teachers receive the feedback they need most, alongside concrete supports for professional growth.

Written Feedback—The principal's written feedback is consistent with the verbal feedback provided during the observation conference.

Using the Instructional Feedback Observation tool as part of a larger system of customized support, AIR helps districts improve classroom instruction by making principals' feedback to teachers more effective. The tool is aligned with AIR's *Five Essential Practices of School Leadership: A Framework for Assessing Practice*, which provides a foundation for facilitating principal growth and accountability, and it can be integrated into any school district's evaluation system.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about the Instructional Feedback Observation Tool or the *Five Essential Practices* framework, visit AIR's *Building Leadership Talent Through Performance Evaluation* webpage (<http://www.air.org/resource/building-leadership-talent-through-performance-evaluation>) or contact Matthew Clifford at mclifford@air.org.



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Established in 1946, American Institutes for Research (AIR) is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research on important social issues and delivers technical assistance, both domestically and internationally, in the areas of education, health, and workforce productivity.

About Performance Management Advantage

The AIR Performance Management Advantage, which falls under the larger umbrella of AIR's Educator Talent Management services and resources, is a service line built on a six-step process designed to support a district or state in designing, developing, implementing, and assessing its educator evaluation system.