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# Revamping Teacher Evaluation

Principals have an opportunity to expand their role as instructional leaders and improve teaching and learning.

BY MANDY ZATYNSKI

In the past two years, as concerns over teacher quality have swelled, teacher evaluation has emerged as a crucial tool for principals and other administrators to improve instructor performance. More states are seeking federal waivers to the stringent benchmarks of No Child Left Behind; others are vying for Race to the Top funds. Both require states to submit reform plans that promise a substantial revamping of how they evaluate teachers.

As teacher observations take center stage, gaining attention

from lawmakers and provoking union-district disputes, principals are looking at an expanded—and hugely time-consuming—set of responsibilities: They must make decisions about rubrics. They must re-learn ways to assess performance. They must work with other evaluators on norming scores. And they must conduct longer, more frequent, and more thoughtful classroom visits. The desired result of this attention is more useful feedback, honesty in grading, and true consequences.



26

27



## “Time is the greatest obstacle to making teacher evaluations as useful as they need to be.”

### Shortcomings and Time Constraints

No one, it seems, is happy with teacher evaluations. According to a report by TNTP, formerly The New Teacher Project, most teacher evaluations are based on two or fewer classroom observations totaling 76 minutes or less. Typically, new teachers must be evaluated annually, but veteran teachers are largely ignored unless they call attention to themselves. Experienced teachers told *Principal* magazine about evaluations that happened as infrequently as every five years. They got no or little follow-up, detailed feedback, or recommendations for improvement.

So it is not surprising, in a phenomenon TNTP dubbed “the Widget Effect,” that more than 99 percent of teachers receive “satisfactory” ratings. And in districts that use a broader range of criteria, the study found, 94 percent of teachers received one of the top two ratings. “It should be unusual for someone to be ‘distinguished,’” says Christine Collier, head of the Center for Inquiry schools in

Indianapolis, referring to the top rating on that system’s four-step rubric. “But in our old system, if they were good teachers, they expected all of the high marks.”

As much as teachers likely appreciated those grades, they weren’t learning a lot from them. How specifically did they excel? And what precisely were their shortcomings? Teachers want principals to be candid with them. “I like when administrators are really honest, whether it’s what they like or don’t like,” says Holly Eelman, a science teacher at Navy Elementary School in Fairfax, Virginia.

Also unhelpful, teachers say, are evaluation forms with a prescribed rubric and scoring sheet that leave no room for elaboration or commentary from the principal.

For principals, already among the busiest of professionals, time is the greatest obstacle to making teacher evaluations as useful as they need to be. After holding meetings, setting budgets, managing non-teaching staff, and appeasing parents, principals have little time to meet with teachers before and after classroom observations and to write up post-visit narratives. To provide thoughtful feedback, most principals find it necessary to hunker down in front of a computer well before school starts or to steal quiet time afterward, while waiting for an evening meeting or a school concert. “Our superintendent has a saying: ‘People by day, paper by night,’” says Collier, “which is fine, and I try to live by that, but man, it can make for some long nights.”

The time that principals spend on evaluations varies considerably. Some principals say they spend an hour per teacher per evaluation and write

about one page of feedback; others say they spend up to three hours per teacher and write between three and five pages after each formal observation. Multiply that by 30 or 40 teachers, and the task has almost a daily presence on principals’ agendas.

“It was an arduous process,” says Katie Hand, a principal for nine years at Navy Elementary School in Virginia. Before she retired last year, she evaluated up to 44 teachers annually. For each evaluation she made one announced and one unannounced visit, and she stayed between 30 minutes and an hour. She split the workload with her assistant principal, and to keep herself organized, she carried a flipchart with every staff member’s name on it. “I was in and out of every classroom at least twice per week,” she says, although these visits were informal and very brief. The walkthroughs, she says, helped her better gauge teachers’ abilities, which in turn, helped her produce more thorough feedback. Teachers received written reports of between three and five pages. “My principal mentor said, ‘You’ve got to give teachers good feedback. They’re waiting for it, and they deserve it,’” Hand says.

Brief walkthroughs allow principals to see teachers and students in action at various times and in different subject areas. They allow the administrator to become a familiar face in the classroom, minimizing disruption when formal observations occur. “It’s amazing: three to five minutes in the classroom, and you’re doing that two or three times a day, and you’ve got a good pulse on the climate of your building, the level of instruction, and where people are in their units,” Collier says. “But if you’re not getting to that, you’re losing something.”

Collier is the head of three magnet schools, and this year, each school has its own assistant principal, whose responsibilities include teacher evaluations. Previously, Collier split the task with her principals, and they evaluated teachers every three years. Now, however, a state law requires

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➤ The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality **outlines 10 types of evaluations**, the pros and cons of each, and provides links to examples of those evaluations in practice.

➤ **Education Sector** spent several months examining the teacher evaluation system in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

annual observations, regardless of teacher experience. And that, Collier says, has pushed walkthroughs off the list. “Principals are spending so much time with evaluations by doing each teacher [every year] that they don’t have time; their informal walkthroughs went by the wayside, and that’s not good.”

Each of the three principals at the Center for Inquiry are evaluating about 30 teachers this year. In the past, only 10 teachers—a “workable load,” Collier says—had to be observed. “In principle, it’s a really good idea to evaluate teachers every year,” she says, “but in practice, as far as being able to give the time you need to a quality evaluation ... it about kills them.”

In order to provide thoughtful feedback, principals must devote their full attention to a classroom for an uninterrupted block of time; this varies depending on grade level and subject matter. Principals say they generally try to observe both sufficient instruction from the teacher and significant interaction with the children. Is the lesson tailored appropriately for the students’ level? How does the teacher modify her lesson to address students’ needs? Are the teachers adaptable? How is classroom behavior? Are students engaged?

Hand really wants to see hands-on learning combined with technology. “Were children just answering questions? Or did they have a wiki set up where they could put their opinion on the computers in the classroom while they worked in groups? Cooperative learning, not ‘Read this and answer questions one through five.’ Boring!” she says.

### What Teachers Want

Many teachers embrace observations as a rare opportunity to get outsider feedback on a somewhat insular job. Because teachers often teach behind closed doors, bad habits can sometimes fester unchecked. An observer can point out those failings and set the teacher back on track. “I don’t care if I’ve been teaching for 50 years;

# Teacher Wish List

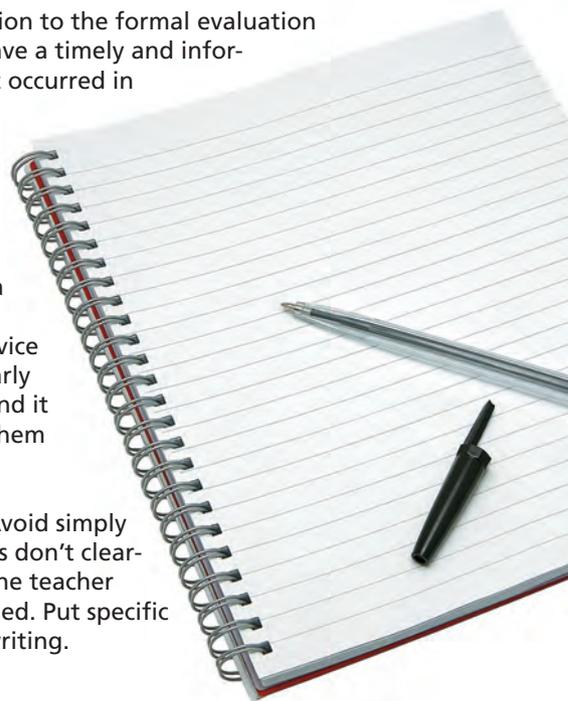
**FEEDBACK.** First and foremost, teachers need and want feedback. Point out where the teacher excels and where he or she needs to improve. Suggest alternative approaches. A praise-filled evaluation report with no constructive criticism doesn’t help the teacher hone his or her skills. Working with the teacher, develop a professional development plan.

**RESOURCES.** Follow up the professional development plan with time and resources to make it happen.

**COMMUNICATION.** In addition to the formal evaluation process, conduct walkthroughs and have a timely and informal collegial conversation about what occurred in the classroom. Make sure teachers are familiar with your school system’s definition of effective instruction and share—and frequently discuss—your rubric for professional practices.

**MENTORS.** Consider setting up a mentoring system. A strong supporter who helps to plan lessons and give advice on classroom management is particularly valuable for new teachers. Veterans find it helpful to have someone to listen to them and to collaborate with.

**EVALUATION REPORTS.** Avoid simply scoring the evaluation rubric. Numbers don’t clearly and precisely tell the story of how the teacher needs to improve or where they excelled. Put specific feedback with concrete examples in writing.



I will never be perfect,” says Molly Booe, a National Board Certified teacher in Fairfax County, Virginia. “There are always areas of improvement for me. And it’s nice to have someone else come in and watch and say, ‘OK, that was great, but why don’t you try this?’”

Booe and other veteran teachers say they have no qualms about inviting observers into their classrooms; they just want a substantive response afterward. “I think sometimes [principals] are worried, ‘How is the teacher going to take constructive criticism?’” says Julie Nordaas, a kindergarten teacher at Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary School in Colesburg, Iowa. “But most of us want to find ways to get better.”

Teachers also want follow-through. They need not just talk but action,

resources, and time to take action. “A recommendation [for improvement] should come with a resource to carry that through,” Booe says.

### Catalyst for Change

These days, says Paul Wenger, principal of Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary School in Iowa, teachers have less opportunity for the staged performances—those “dog-and-pony shows”—so common in earlier years. One day in January, Wenger stopped in six classrooms unannounced. In some rooms, he stayed for 10 minutes; in others, up to 45. He followed up informally in a way he says was “non-threatening.” In one sense the visits were a rehearsal for the formal observation. “It has made the teachers more comfortable having you in



the room,” Wenger said. “It also has improved the conversation piece because you have a much better understanding of what is going on in the teachers’ classrooms.”

Now, Wenger says he feels more like an instructional leader than a building manager. “That’s probably been the biggest change in my 12 years,” he says.

Despite these improvements, Wenger’s district only requires evaluations for veteran teachers every three years. New teachers are observed twice annually for their first two years. In comparison, the District of Columbia evaluates teachers five times a year—three times by principals and twice by master educators—and Tennessee principals now observe all teachers for 60 to 90 minutes annually.

Wenger sees the benefits in evaluating teachers annually, but he hardly needs to mention the obvious challenge: “You’re dealing with that four-letter word called ‘time,’” he said.

Mitchell Forsberg, principal at Gypsum Elementary School in Gypsum, Colorado, empathizes with colleagues elsewhere who are struggling to find the hours necessary not only to observe teachers, but also to provide them with quality feedback. “They are freaking out, frankly,” said Forsberg after returning from a statewide conference for administrators that addressed evaluations. “Many principals are worried about how they will find the time. But like anything, if it’s important to you, you work it in; you find a way.”

Forsberg’s district, Eagle County Schools, has employed a pay-for-performance evaluation model for the past decade. His advice to worried colleagues? Put your assumptions aside and embrace the evaluation for what it is and can be.

“Look at it as a catalyst to change the conversation or to change the dynamics of a district and to look more positively at teaching and

learning,” he told conferees. He also stressed the importance of establishing “a professional practices rubric or a document that defines effective instruction” for guidance.

Forsberg observes all 40 educators in his building once annually. Before he goes into the classroom, though, every teacher is observed once each by a mentor teacher and a master teacher on two separate occasions. The mentor and master teachers, who themselves still teach, confer with teachers before they observe; Forsberg goes in unannounced and without consulting the mentor or master teachers. Afterward, the three compare notes to ensure their impressions were the same. Only Forsberg’s evaluation and that of the master teacher count toward decisions on pay.

“I couldn’t imagine being the instructional leader in my building without this team,” Forsberg says. “Mentors can give more in-depth support for teachers. By



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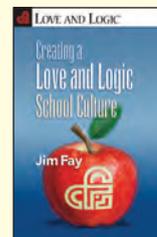
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having a team looking at teaching and learning, we get a more comprehensive view on instruction.”

Heather Marner, a mentor teacher in Forsberg’s school, said that the district’s model allows her to give teachers support throughout the year—professional guidance that administrators have little time to offer. While she does most of her observations in October, she regularly follows up with her 11 teachers, helping them plan lessons and troubleshoot problems with classroom management. The goal is to measurably improve teachers’ day-to-day performance.

Because their evaluations don’t

count toward teacher’s pay, Marner says, the mentor teachers also give the classroom teachers a welcome chance to talk frankly without worrying about the consequences. Marner, like all teachers in the building, has her own mentor teacher. “I can vent to this person,” she says. “It’s a much safer environment and it’s truer to the collegial environment of teaching.”

With more evaluators, however, comes more opportunity for contradictory information: What if the strengths pointed out by the mentor teacher are the weaknesses identified by the master teacher or vice versa? As a former union president, Forsberg said he

understands teachers’ fear of collusion or personal bias, particularly when a team of leaders is responsible for evaluations. “It’s an ongoing battle,” he said, adding that the keys are “building relationships and communication.”

For peace of mind, at the end of the year, Forsberg compares evaluation scores with data on student achievement, which is also included in teacher pay decisions. If any inconsistencies pop up, he reviews the case to ensure the evaluation process was fair. Marner, who has been a classroom teacher for 16 years, said her own evaluation scores always correlate with her students’ test scores, although her evaluation score is often a nudge lower.

Why?

“I get nervous when the principal is in the room,” she says. 

**Mandy Zatynski** is a writer/blogger for Education Sector, an independent think tank.

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