

Toward Teacher Learning

Our school district, like many others in the United States, had a teacher evaluation system that had become outmoded and outdated. In 2008, the teachers' union and administration, united in their dissatisfaction with the system at the time, came together to modernize and fundamentally change our system for teacher evaluation. As a result of our work together, we have created a radically different system for teacher evaluation based on what we currently know to be true about human learning and motivation.

Our old evaluation system was determined to be too subjective and artificial. It lacked meaningful feedback and dialogue between administrator and teacher that could have led to growth or improvement. Instead it encouraged "Performance Teaching" that required time-consuming planning and meetings that rarely led to teacher growth. Our dissatisfaction led to deeper conversations that examined how a meaningful evaluation process could and should look.

Against a background of formative assessment and social science research, the group identified its core values. The resulting system is based upon the following beliefs:

- The overwhelming majority of teachers do the best job they know how and always want to be better.
- Teacher evaluation should not be based upon the small number of teachers who cannot or will not provide quality education for their students, but the system must have provisions to deal with them.
- Evaluation should be about growth and improvement and not about punishment.
- One size does not fit all. Teacher evaluation must be flexible and provides for individualization based on experience and interests.
- Feedback, coaching, and self-reflection are essential elements to creating teacher growth.
- Only the teacher can do the learning. The process is supported by administrators and colleagues; its outcomes are owned by the individual teacher.
- Scores and grades are distractions to the feedback being provided.
- Trust in teachers and the creation of an environment in which it is safe to take risks and to try and fail in order to ultimately improve, encourages creativity and collaboration.
- Research exists (see Reference List, below) that will tell us how to better evaluate teachers.
- Any system we create must be compliant with state laws regarding the employment of teachers and flexible enough to change with shifting mandates. A law newly-enacted in Colorado requires that every teacher be evaluated every year in relation to

teacher quality standards and that multiple measures of student growth be used in those evaluations.

The feedback on the resulting evaluation system built on these core beliefs has been overwhelmingly positive and results show it is effective as a tool for teacher learning (see Evaluation of the System, below).

At its start, principals and union leaders were trained on the system together so that they could deliver a consistent message about teacher evaluation. A similar system was also implemented to evaluate principals so that they have empathy and experiences to share.

The process begins with the teacher and evaluator deciding together the one or two aspects of quality on which the teacher will focus for the year. This decision is made based on district- and building-level goals, teacher experience and interest, any relevant student assessment data, and data gathered from classroom observations. The teacher and administrator then identify data that will be used to determine progress toward the identified goal(s).

As the school year progresses, the teacher and administrator enter their activities and results into a “learning log” that is shared between them. Activities may vary widely depending on the goal, from reading, to administrator and peer observations, to reflective questions and responses, to test data evaluation. Depending on the activities and their results, a goal may be altered during the year. At the end of the school year the teacher and administrator meet to determine whether the goal was met and needs to be altered for the coming year, or the teacher needs to continue with the same goal. They both sign off that the process has been completed in good faith and the teacher and administrator continue on the same path.

If an evaluator determines that any teacher is unwilling or unable to make progress on the goal they have agreed upon, and that this deficiency is documented and clear, the teacher may be moved to what we call the “Intensive Track” under which they are offered opportunities for remediation and, if there is no improvement, they may be removed after 60 student-contact days. This process may be used for probationary or non-probationary teachers

Evaluation Documents

The evaluation documents themselves are simple, concise, and in clear terms, so that all parties understand the target. Rubrics are used as resources for understanding targets and setting goals, so “checking boxes” is not the end goal of the system: teacher improvement and student achievement are.

The documents lead to a focused approach to growth by allowing the teacher to focus on one or two aspects of quality at a time. They do not imply that a teacher needs to be working on multiple or all aspects at once. This is overwhelming for both parties. Instead, they allow teachers and their evaluators to determine the simple action steps to achieve success.

Finally, the documents lend themselves to authentic learning, as opposed to contrived performances that lead to checked boxes. Large, cumbersome documents stifle the authentic learning process we are trying to create. Learners need multiple attempts to take risks, learn something new, receive feedback and persist in their attempts toward quality. Our evaluation documents are flexible enough to capture the process of real learning.

Student Data

Our evaluation system begins and ends with student data – from standardized testing to informal teacher questioning. Data from multiple assessments are used to create plans to guide individuals toward learning and implementing that learning in the classroom. Data is a guide for teachers and students in answering the formative assessment questions: Where am I now? Where do I need to go? What do I do next to get there? How will I know I am there?

Data is used as a form of feedback on the practice and not the person. It is not used to rate, rank, or label educators, but is used to identify and clarify what is working and what is not working in regard to the learning goal and the strategies implemented to achieve that goal. Data helps individuals stay focused on their targets and analysis of their targets helps the district focus its professional development efforts.

The Role of Peers

Our system is based on peer collaboration rather than peer evaluation. Learning is the purpose for our evaluation system, and educator collaboration and dialogue are vehicles for that learning. Collaboration allows for an inclusive, simple, and natural process to improve instructional practice that is less intimidating than one in which only the evaluator provides feedback. The responsibility for educator learning is shared, and is not the sole responsibility of the administrator. Therefore, there is no need for a peer evaluator designee.

Peer collaboration, rather than peer evaluation, also allows us to avoid awkward situations in which peers are put in the position of passing judgment on one another, which undermines trust among colleagues.

Performance Pay

Our school district does not support a movement towards performance pay. There are many reasons for our resistance. First, we know that education is a complex endeavor that requires creative and novel approaches. Decades of social science research has shown that performance pay is not effective in improving performance in such situations. (Performance pay can be effective in mechanistic processes. Teaching is not one.)

The power of intrinsic motivation surpasses the extrinsic monetary value of performance pay. Extrinsic monetary rewards can even decrease performance. Further studies have shown

intrinsic motivation produces greater results over the long term, as opposed to the “quick fix” extrinsic motivator. Teachers should be paid fairly and as well as our system allows so that worry is taken away and they can get on with the business of honing their craft.

Collaboration, rather than competition, allows us to pool our knowledge and expertise and merge our diverse perspectives to solve complex problems. Competition would deteriorate the collaborative efforts already taking place throughout our organization.

Finally, we know that our staff members are giving their best effort every day. Performance pay implies that if people have more money, they automatically will perform at a higher level. Our fundamental belief is our teachers are doing the best they know how with the tools at their disposal. Our goal as a district is to assist teachers in honing and improving these tools for the benefit of educators and their students.

Evaluation of the System

Has the implementation of our evaluation system led to gains in student achievement? Given the number of variables in the larger system, it is difficult to isolate this one change. Despite major cuts in funding in the past four years, decreases in staffing and instructional resources, our students have held their own. We do know that teachers’ perceptions of evaluation have shifted dramatically.

[Insert APA data here]

We remain committed to evaluating the results of teacher evaluation in our district and will continue to look at student data, survey our staff, and provide staff development based on teachers’ learning goals for the coming school year.

Reference List

Ariely, D. (2013, April 10). *What Makes Us Feel Good About Our Work?* Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aH2Ppjpcho>

Brookhart, S. (2008). *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*: Assn for Supervision & Curriculum.

Butler, R. (1988). Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation: The effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58(1), 1-14.

Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, 2nd Edition. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Deming, W.E (1982), *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT

Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist*, 41(10), 1040-1048. p.1041

Dweck, C., & Leggett, E. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 256-273.

Pink, D. (2009, August 25). *The Puzzle of Motivation*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrkrvAUbU9Y>

Seijts, G., Latham, G., Tasa, K., & Latham, B. (2004). Goal setting and goal orientation: An integration of two different yet related literatures. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 227-240.

Seven Strategies

Schmoker, M.