

Addressing Teacher Evaluation Appropriately

A Practice Brief for School Leaders, Superintendents, & Principals

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An Urgent Need

Teachers impact student achievement¹, and some teachers have more impact on student learning than others². Accordingly, administrators and school board members should do everything possible to aid principals in their efforts to support teachers. School leaders, in turn, must support teacher development and provide teachers with—at least—the minimum conditions they need to be successful.

Given the importance of teachers, there has been intense interest in improving and evaluating teachers. Some educators, policymakers, and media sources have contended that observational and student achievement data are reasonable measures for evaluating teachers. Yet, these measures of teaching effectiveness are flawed. They fail to adequately account for the content, complexity, and the variance in teacher effectiveness and practice. Because of this, teacher evaluations often yield erroneous information about the quality of teaching and student learning and do nothing to enhance student achievement.

How to Use Student Achievement & Observational Data

Student achievement data can be beneficial if it provides clear information about what students have and have not mastered.

Student artifacts—classroom quizzes, portfolios—may be particularly informative along with standardized tests, if they emphasize relative gain (how much progress a student has achieved in a year). It is helpful to examine changes in a range of student work over time. Principals may not have time to examine student artifacts, but they can and should encourage teachers to do so in ways that are the most informative.

Likewise, observational data *can* be valuable. They can provide information on:

- how a teacher implements specific teaching practices,
- if changes in teacher fosters changes in students,
- the general classroom climate, and
- estimates of student engagement

No single teacher action correlates with student achievement, but patterns and combinations of teaching actions often do.³

Thus, principals should engage in research on teaching to become more familiar with what combinations of teacher actions constitute effective teaching in different contexts.⁴



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Recommendations for Practice

Practices should prioritize teachers' professional growth and development, such as:

- **Consider teacher concerns and needs.** Pre-observation conferences help principals gather data on teacher concerns and needs to inform subsequent observations. Principals can determine if an existing observation instrument will suffice, or if supplementary measures are necessary, such as: seating charts to mark participation, or tallies of depth of knowledge questions.
- **Emphasize formative feedback and individual growth.** Beginning- and middle-of-the-year feedback is more likely to improve practice than summative, end-of-year feedback. Feedback that emphasizes a teacher's individual growth as opposed to feedback that compares a teacher's performance to others is more likely to foster motivation to improve and actual improvement.
- **Connect teachers with opportunities to improve their efficacy and effectiveness.** Formative feedback should identify for teachers or help teachers to identify growth opportunities such as lesson study, peer observation and coaching, Professional Learning Communities, and high-quality professional development, that is linked to areas in need of improvement.

We also recommend practices that recognize the context and complexity of teaching, such as:

- **Acknowledge content.** Teaching practice varies by content area. Principals and district leaders might consider supplementing more "generally effective" observation instruments with content-specific ones. Where principals lack in content-area expertise, subject- or grade-specific peers and coaches can be leveraged, especially if their knowledge is well grounded in findings from research on teaching.
- **Honor context.** Teaching practice varies by time and across classes. Principals and district leaders might observe an entire unit (e.g., beginning, middle, end), a range of a teacher's classes (e.g., remedial, advanced), or various types of lessons (e.g., student-directed, problem-based). It might also be useful to observe a well-developed lesson, one that is being taught for the first time or engages an innovative practice, or one that the teacher perceives as challenging.
- **Provide professional development opportunities for principals.** Given the complexity of teaching and its various forms, district leadership should provide principals with ongoing opportunities to develop their knowledge, participate in research conferences, and dialogue with other principals to further develop their skills for observing carefully and for providing helpful feedback to teachers.

Notes

¹ Aaronson, Barrow, & Sanders, 2007; Brophy & Good, 1986; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1999; Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1975; Konstantopoulos, 2014; Rubie-Davies, 2014.

² As acknowledged in the widely cited work of Raj, Friedman, and Rockoff (2014).

³ For example, it is important for teachers let students know that in-class work will be reviewed at the end of the lesson ("alerting"), but only if the teacher also follows through ("accountability").

⁴ Investments in teacher development can and do lead to more positive and productive classrooms. Much research has shown that by working with teachers notable changes can be made in teaching and learning (Good & Grouws, 1979; Johnson, 2019; Rubie-Davies, 2014).

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