

Help! I Have a Sick School! Principal and Teacher Evaluations Can Heal

...and they can also hurt.

As I consult and speak with teachers, principals, and board members from around the U.S., a malaise is evident and blaming other parties is the norm. Yet, in spite of complaints regarding the lack of money, ego-driven micromanagement, resistant teachers, and mutinous stakeholders, in my observation there is one thing that holds true. The heart of every good school relies on the relationship between teachers and their students, and this is typically not acknowledged in current evaluation systems.

No matter how much drama whips up between the adults, the classroom is where students bond to form their identity and they derive orientation toward or away from learning based on the teacher. Sometimes teaching skill is actually weak, but a teacher with a magnetic character can hold a great amount of leverage with students. For this reason, teacher and principal evaluations should acknowledge this aspect of their professions. Increasingly though, current evaluation systems seem to be driving hearts away instead of nurturing them, and research indicates that they are fraught with problems and are ineffective.

Rationale for a new model

Eighty-seven percent of 600 Chicago public schools did not give an unsatisfactory rating of teachers; yet, over 10 percent of the schools were considered failures. Only 0.3 percent were rated “unsatisfactory,” while 93 percent of the 25,000 teachers rated “excellent” or “superior” (Toth, 2008). So much for the benefit we ascribe to evaluations.

No one relishes the prospect of being the focus, nor the judge, of an evaluation. There are plenty of models and guides that are available, but they typically are subjective, even when attempting to quantify a particular attribute. Currently, we see two reforms applied to evaluations for teachers and principals. They can 1) use student growth indicators, and 2) measure teachers' skills.

Since the Race to The Top (RTT) reform was introduced by the Obama Administration in 2009, a Value-Added Measure (VAM) has been introduced, which was intended to be a measurement of student learning comparing two points in time. Standardized tests are typically used for this purpose, and it is generally assumed that a rise in VAM implies that teachers are the reason. Conversely, if VAM scores are less than optimal, blame is automatically assigned to the teacher. Marzano and Toth (2013) have pointed out that their research indicates that there may well be other mitigating factors affecting VAMs, and scores for the same teacher may not be consistent over time. Furthermore, they found that when analyzing teaching skills there is not always a strong correlation to VAMs; therefore, we realize that observation scores may be inaccurate measures of teacher effectiveness.

In *Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference*, Marzano and Toth offer the following recommendations:

1. Student growth should be measured in multiple ways and aggregated across multiple measures
2. Data on classroom observations should be numerous and from multiple evaluations
3. Evaluations should also reflect the planning stage and the preparation prior to teaching
4. Evaluations should provide an accurate representation of the distribution of abilities and foster teacher development
5. The evaluation process should enhance teachers' skills
6. Evaluations for teachers and their education leaders should recognize their interdependency

These align nicely with the model we see used in Finland of how teacher and principal evaluations should be designed. In an article titled, "Teachers as Leaders in Finland," the author noted that most schools have a relaxed atmosphere and teachers work collaboratively throughout the school (Sahlberg). They see themselves as highly trained professionals with responsibility for student outcomes, and they have a high degree of job satisfaction, which seems to be related largely to their sense of autonomy. They are educational researchers on par with doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Contrast that

Susan Labadi Help! I Have a Sick School! Principal and Teacher Evaluations Can Heal

with a MetLife study (2013) citing that job satisfaction with U.S. teachers is at a 25 year low with only 39 percent rating themselves as “very satisfied.”

Michael Fullan, in his recently published *The Principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*, asserts that the principal as Instructional Leader necessitates a large portion of time spent on research and micromanaging. Time is better spent leading the teachers to learn, disseminating and mobilizing knowledge, and being a change agent. This is corroborated by Linda Darling-Hamilton (2013) who stated, “One of the historical failings of teacher evaluation systems in the United States has been their reliance on the school principal alone as the person expected to observe teachers, mentor beginners, coach those who need help, document concerns and support processes for those who struggle, and make the final call on whether to recommend dismissal based on the assembled record” (p. 24). That is in addition to the other many functions that we rely on them for leadership, expertise, and accountability.

Principals are frustrated too by the lack of professional training of their evaluators, deficient instrument designs, improper measurement criteria, and a minimum amount of time devoted to genuinely observing everything they do. “Survey results indicated that evaluation processes within districts are perceived as merely a checklist for complying with district policy and have little impact on principal professional growth or student achievement,” as cited in an article by McMahon, Peters, and Schumacher, titled, *The Principal Evaluation Process and Its Relationship to Student Achievement*.” How futile overburdened principals feel their evaluations are to accurately represent their reality is clear. The researchers stated, “When principals were asked ‘What effect, if any, has your experience with evaluation had on your beliefs about your performance?’ 74.1% of the principals surveyed felt the evaluation process did not reflect their work.” One principal exclaimed, “My evaluations HAVE NOT reflected the amount of work I have done nor the quality. I have to believe in myself and value the work I have done without receiving the compliments or adequate evaluations from my supervisors” (McMahon, et al.).

Communities, not corporations

While there are some efficiencies and protocols from corporate practices, schools are unique communities. Evaluations were practically applied historically to corporate entities in order to qualify

hiring and compensation, and they provided leverage to elicit performance from employees. However, schools are very different in that the people in them are even more deeply connected psychologically. Schools touch our children and families in general. Their communities influence goals, habits, perceptions, and their effects are long lasting into people's lives, much more than any corporate affiliation in most cases.

Leveraging jobs, pay cuts, or promotions to amend job performance may be effective in companies, but teachers, principals, and staff workers of a school often work and are motivated by their desire to be part of something more substantial. To attempt to leverage behavior with threats that usually can influence a corporate worker may be severely detrimental to apply in a school environment. A pop up or erosion in morale can be contagious and more long lasting, as people expect to be treated respectfully for their efforts. The sense is that they are doing something more far reaching than simply helping an entity improve their bottom line. They are affecting lives, and seek the accord that should be forthcoming for such a pivotal mission.

Overcoming threatening dynamics

When the mindset of all school stakeholders is to develop and help each individual find their talents, the climate is vastly more positive and nurturing than in a school where people feel threatened. A bond of trust is necessary and often the best way to elicit this is to demonstrate a bit of initiative to acknowledge talent wherever it can be found, and to also admit one's own shortcomings, incidents of poor judgment, and areas which reflect some humility, especially if one is seen as a leader. The common humanity of everyone should be acknowledged, and focus should be toward ownership of each one's personal mission to advance. This can be leveraged to specifically target student achievement as part of a person's evaluation, and it should incorporate some type of knowledge or skill acquisition.

Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) started over 30 years ago and is well established in at least 13 states, many which feature high achievement (Darling, p. 24). Highly expert mentor teachers train as evaluators and coaches for new and those needing intensive assistance. The system involves both lead

teachers and administration who recommend personnel decisions based on evidence. Both mentoring teachers and new teachers said they improved.

One tactic that has proved to be effective is to utilize video exemplars of quality teaching so that teachers use what Hill, Beisiegel, Mitchell, and Herlihy describe as a common lens for examining effective instruction and class management. Their research described finding an observation tool for Math, and they trained teachers to score videos of instructors in class. Some groups watched instructors from among their peers and others watched videos of other teachers unfamiliar to them. Interesting results captured that the teacher created videos were more effective in influencing the teachers' own performances than stock videos of unfamiliar teachers. Also, when analyzing the discussions that were held for these videos, one group had a third-party facilitator compared to another grouping where teachers themselves had a teacher-led discussion about the videos. The teacher-led group seemed to be more focused and better received than inviting an outsider to facilitate. There were twelve groups in the study and each grouping consisted of three participating teachers. These results can be extrapolated to consider small subject-specific or grade-specific grouping of teachers, and a principal or department head acting as a facilitator for our purposes.

Cultivate a culture of personal growth and ownership

Evidence indicates that principal effectiveness is a key area of differentiation, and the best principals own their responsibility to protect instructional time and develop learning communities (Marzano, et. al). As a top-down strategy, establishing an "I can do it and I want to do it" ethic among students and teachers comes from leadership to drive the message: Expect greatness and work for it. This is also substantiated by Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2007), who published "...there is a need for administrative support, an appropriate structure, and a monitoring system. Administrative support begins with needs assessment, of course. It continues when the expectations are established. It is buttressed by a willingness to engage others in the planning of the development efforts and a willingness to secure time and dollar revenues to support the effort" (p. 198).

The formula is laid out then from above:

- Administration, or a proxy, does needs assessment
- Expectations and willingness to cooperate are established
- Time is dedicated toward improvement efforts, evaluation, and follow-up
- Monetary investment is seen as a winning return with resultant principal and teacher retention and ongoing student achievement

Coaching in professional progress

“...coaches must help teachers set strategic, differentiated goals and make every coaching interaction count” (Aguilar, 2014). Not every person is willing to accept someone to be their coach, and some principals are not well equipped to serve as coaches. However, there are a few key phases which must be part of the evolution in a plan to develop people into better education professionals. They are 1) awareness of the benefit and intent to engage in professional development; 2) a readiness and desire to grow personally, professionally, and make strides in learning; 3) and a solid commitment to better one’s self. Without the acceptance of the process, the results will likely fall short of the mark. A clear understanding of the differences between coaching, mentoring, and sponsoring is useful to introduce the next level of comprehension in how to elicit optimal results.

Coach, mentor, or sponsor?

It is not uncommon for there to be confusion between these terms; but with increased acceptance that some type of patron-protégé relationship is highly valued in the work place, the differences should be recognized between coach, mentor, or sponsor.

Coaches facilitate the client to realize their own challenges and find their own means to advance. If a client is unwilling to do the effort or make changes, then coaching is not productive. Coaching entails probing the client to decide what they want to work toward, and then finding a plan and timeline to make the client accountable. Frequent meetings, follow ups, and plan adjustments are expected.

Mentors typically are the models that mentees wish to copy in some degree, and mentors may invest their energies to advise those they mentor. Responsibility is solely on the mentee to learn and advance. This can be a one-way relationship whereby the mentor may or may not invest themselves in the mentee. The mentor typically has no risk in the relationship to their reputation or assets.

Sponsors open doors and support individuals through advancement in position or other connections to influencers, and they have a reciprocal relationship whereby they risk their own reputation in sponsorship for the benefit of the individual.

With these differences understood, the next bit of comprehension should be to outline what happens in a coaching relationship.

Essential coaching steps

Aguilar details what is behind good coaching. 1) It relies on a voluntary engagement on behalf of the client that results in reflection and learning. 2) A coach helps form a professional development plan that can be differentiated to the client's needs. For example, even teachers benefit their students when they become coaches in giving their classes the thinking habits and tools for harmonious collaboration on projects. 3) Coaches guide in using data, as a form of measurement and tracking efficacy of their clients' action plans. Interventions, for example in the cases of principals and teachers, should have goals that relate to student achievement. 4) Goals are personalized and benchmarks for their achievement should be checked for validity. 5) Regular visits to adjust practices and to further discuss relevancy of the goals are part of the protocol. Coaches ask the right questions, help in finding resources for development, and support the common interests of the school and individual.

The Danielson Framework

As support and respect for the individual teacher or principal has been addressed, the standards for evaluation seem to be popularly favoring incorporation of the Danielson Framework. Charlotte Danielson holds the rank as originator of the most commonly adopted structure at this time.

“The Framework for Teaching is a research-based set of components of instruction, aligned to the INTASC standards, and grounded in a constructivist view of learning and teaching. The complex activity of teaching is divided into 22 components (and 76 smaller elements) clustered into four domains of teaching responsibility” (The Danielson Framework website). These domains encompass the wide spectrum that teaching is about. No wonder teachers are on rank with the highest trained professionals in other countries. There are many responsibilities and skills to develop, and that includes staying current in the relative disciplines and subject matter that instructors teach.

Principal evaluation plan

Principals have even more range in responsibilities in diverse areas of expertise and function. Evaluating them is likely to exhaust the observer; yet, that is what should be done in order to coach the principal to greater heights. A proper evaluation of a principal would have the following 7 steps (Ubben, et al.):

1. Prepare a plan
2. Select objectives or activities for observation or review
3. Determine the observation, time, and place
4. Observe and collect data
5. Analyze data and provide feedback
6. Summarize and interpret collected observation data
7. Report results, target achievement, make recommendation for further professional development

Summary

These steps parallel the coaching process, and from among these numerous references there should be a clearer vision of what constitutes a proper evaluation. Our schools do more than teach content and values, they should also be models of how to interact socially and professionally. A climate of empowerment, positive expectations, solid work ethic, and a view toward achievement and discovery

Susan Labadi Help! I Have a Sick School! Principal and Teacher Evaluations Can Heal

should motivate and provide impetus for an excellent school and workplace. We model personal improvement and growth for our future generations, and using the evaluation process and tools have been research tested to verify their importance in creating happy schools and quantifiable success.

References

- Aguilar, E., Effective coaching by design, *Educational Leadership*, 71:8
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may14/vol71/num08/Effective-Coaching-by-Design.aspx> (accessed October 8, 2014)
- Darling-Hammond, L. When teachers support & evaluate their peers, *Educational Leadership*, 71:2 October 2013.
- Fullan, Michael (2014). *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hill, H. C., Beisiegel, M., Mitchell, R., Herlihy, C. Do you see what I see?, *Educational Leadership*, 71:8
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may14/vol71/num08/Do-You-See-What-I-See%2%A2.aspx> (accessed October 8, 2014)
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results* p.10. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R. J., Toth, M. D. (2013). *Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference: A New Model for Student Growth and Student Achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- McMahon, M. M., Peters, M. L., Schumacher, G. The principal evaluation process and its relationship to student achievement, *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Fall 2014, 11:3
http://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_Journal_of_Scholarship_and_Practice/JSP-Fall2014.FINAL.pdf (accessed online October 8, 2014)
- MetLife. (2013). *MetLife survey of the American teacher: Challenges for school leadership*. New York: Author. <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf> (retrieved October 8, 2014)
- Sahlberg, P., Teachers as leaders in Finland *Educational Leadership*, 71:2 October 2013.
- Toth, T., Rothman, R. (2008). *Rush to Judgment: Teacher evaluation in public education*. Washington DC: Education Center at American Institutes for Research.
http://www.educationsector.org/sites/default/files/publications/RushToJudgment_ES_Jan08.pdf (accessed online October 10, 2014)
- The Danielson Framework (website) <http://danielsongroup.org/framework/>
- Ubben, G.C., Hughes, L. W., Norris, C. J., *The principal: creative leadership for excellence in schools*. 6th ed., Pearson Education, Inc. Boston 2007