

Feedback

for

Teachers

Focused, Specific, and Constructive

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Feedback is a powerful tool in student learning, and it's important for teachers' professional development too.

Research findings and expert opinions about how traditional feedback from classroom observations affects instruction and student achievement are not encouraging (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). Yet across the country, there is a renewed emphasis on using teacher evaluation not only to rate teachers but also to give them formative feedback that will help them improve classroom instruction. Just what busy principals and assistant principals have been asking for: an expectation that they devote even more time to tasks that have little or no impact on student achievement. Fortunately, recent research shows that applying the strategies that teachers use to give students effective feedback to the teacher evaluation process produces promising results.

The Research and Its Implications

First, in the interest of assessing and building upon relevant background knowledge and modeling effective instructional practices, please stop and

take the short diagnostic assessment in figure 1. Use the results from the assessment to compare your beliefs about teacher evaluation with best practices as identified in the professional literature. The survey can also be used to help identify inconsistencies in philosophies and beliefs among members of a school or a district administrative team and introduce a discussion about teacher evaluation and its purposes to a school faculty.

Regarding question 1, in opinion surveys that involved thousands of educators, Marzano (2012) found that the vast majority (81%) identified teacher development as the primary purpose of teacher evaluation. Agreement with statements 2–13 is strongly supported by research and expert opinion. (See Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Danielson, 2012; Di Carlo, 2012; Marshall, 2012; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Mielke & Frontier, 2012; Pickering, 2012).

The implications of the research for principals and assistant principals



who are responsible for conducting evaluations are significant. Administrators who hope to make an impact on classroom instruction are advised to conduct classroom observations by employing several short, unannounced visits, rather than scheduling one or two full-period observations; focus on a limited number of improvement targets over the long haul, rather than bombard teachers with different improvement targets after every classroom visit; and involve teachers as partners in the teacher evaluation and development process. To accomplish those goals, feedback to teachers following classroom observations must be focused, specific, and constructive.

Focused Feedback

Focused feedback is characterized by two important qualities:

- Focused feedback centers around a limited number (one to three) of specific aspects or indicators of teacher performance
- Focused feedback connects specific teacher and student evidence from classroom observations to words and phrases in the teacher evaluation instrument.

As a principal, I was sometimes guilty of overwhelming teachers with a list of every performance indicator or teacher behavior from the evaluation instrument on which the teacher could possibly make improvements.

The result was often a form of cognitive paralysis that produced little or no growth of any kind. Feedback that has the potential to contribute to teacher development focuses on a manageable number of growth goals over the entire period of the evaluation cycle.

To effectively serve the purpose of teacher development, the language used in a district's evaluation instrument must communicate a clear definition or description of effective teaching to instructional personnel. Those definitions or descriptions are usually presented in a rubric with a range of performance levels (e.g., ineffective, developing, proficient, and accomplished). Teachers must become

very familiar with that language—the official “language of instruction” in the district. It follows then that effective feedback to teachers gets them comfortable with that language by tying evidence from classroom observations directly to the language in the evaluation instrument. For example, after an informal classroom visit an administrator in Ohio might write in a follow-up note, “Your use of reciprocal teaching as an instructional strategy to analyze the targeted text ensured that *the lesson was student-led, with the teacher in the role of facilitator.*” The italicized language is taken directly from the Ohio Teacher Performance Evaluation Rubric. Tying language in the observations to the language in the evaluation instrument also gives teachers a sense of where their present performance falls with regard to district expectations and allows them to track their progress.

Specific Feedback

“This was a good lesson.” “I really enjoyed this class.” “Nice job!” Such statements as those are frequently found in feedback to teachers and may be OK if the goal is to make the teachers feel warm and fuzzy, but they offer no leverage for promoting teacher growth. Instead, effective feedback:

- Emphasizes *how* strategies are used, not how *many* strategies are used
- Focuses on evidence, not interpretation
- Includes both teacher and student evidence.

Care must be taken to avoid a checklist-and-bean-counter mentality if the primary purpose of teacher evaluation is growth. Simply documenting and commenting on the use of high-probability strategies by a teacher, rather than on how appropriate a strategy was to the particular

teaching situation and the skill level at which the strategy was employed, can be counterproductive.

Although interpretation may be appropriate at some point (e.g., students were not engaged), greater emphasis should be placed on the evidence leading to an interpretation (e.g., four students were asleep and at least a half dozen others were texting on their cell phones). That information allows the teacher to be a partner in the interpretation process. Finally, avoid limiting data gathering to teacher behaviors. Specific student behaviors and samples of student work related to the observed classes are valuable sources of evidence that indicate potential areas of growth.

Constructive Feedback

From the research recommendations, one can put together a composite list of qualities that collectively increase the likelihood that feedback to teachers will contribute to sustained and significant teacher improvement.

Constructive feedback:

- Is more than telling; it is dialogue and sharing views and perspectives in a professional conversation
- Encourages self-assessment, data collection, and reflection on practice
- Helps the teacher construct his or her own options for using feedback to move forward
- Gives the teacher a sense of where he or she is on the continuum (e.g., from ineffective to accomplished)
- Features “bite-sized” action recommendations that give teachers clear direction on how to improve
- Promotes focused, deliberate practice
- Accommodates tracking progress and recognizing growth.

Principals and assistant principals have precious little time to waste, especially when it comes to the time carved out of their jobs for improving classroom instruction. Feedback to teachers following classroom observations can be one of the most powerful tools for increasing student learning, but only if it is conducted in accordance with the research on effective feedback. Feedback to teachers that increases student learning is focused, specific, and constructive. **PL**

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Figure 1

Survey of Teacher Evaluation Factors

Please respond to the following questions and statements.

	measurement___	development___	both___		
1. What is the purpose of teacher evaluation?	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
2. An evaluation system that relies on announced visits is inaccurate, dishonest, and ineffective.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
3. The core driver of teacher development is not accurate scoring, but skillful coaching.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
4. A basic principle of effective feedback is that it should provide teachers with clear direction.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
5. The focus of feedback to teachers should be on evidence, not interpretation.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
6. An analysis of student work is an essential source of information for feedback to teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
7. Expertise is a function of <i>how</i> strategies are used, not how <i>many</i> strategies are used.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
8. Mastering a new teaching strategy takes dozens of hours of focused, informed, and deliberate practice.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
9. Professional learning requires the learner to be an active participant in the process.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
10. Teachers should be the central users of the teacher evaluation system.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
11. If all teachers in a building receive the same rating on classroom performance from their principal in a teacher evaluation system that bases teachers' final ratings equally (50/50) on the principal's assessment of classroom performance and student growth, student growth will determine 100% of the variation in teachers' final summative ratings.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
12. Ten 5- to 15-minute observations in a year are necessary and adequate to make a judgment about a teacher's effectiveness.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree
13. Ten 5- to 15-minute observations per year per teacher is a realistic expectation in my school.	1	2	3	4	5
	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree

Note: Survey developed by Tim R. Westerberg.