

From Compliance to Growth: Changing the Conversation about Teacher Performance

by Susan A. Gendron

New standards and pedagogical practices demand flexibility and learning from teachers, even as districts around the country scramble to implement strict teacher evaluation protocols. Given this challenging context, how can schools design and implement systems that help teachers grow and students learn?

The Push Toward Compliance and the Need for Support

Two conflicting forces are currently converging on American teachers. On the one hand, the emphasis on high-stakes teacher evaluation demands immediate, measurable results from teachers, and is highly focused on compliance. Teachers must demonstrate high levels of expertise in codified instructional practices, and students must show significant gains in test scores every year, even when the assessments themselves are not yet fully field tested, validated, or aligned with the standards being taught. (Van Roekel, 2014)

On the other hand, Common Core and the rise of new learning technologies mean that ideas about teacher and student practices are changing in significant ways. While these changes are intended to lead to better outcomes for students, meaningful improvement takes time. Like all learners, teachers need the time, space, and structural supports that will allow them to take risks, receive formative feedback, learn from mistakes, and collaborate with members of a learning community.

The Rise and Impact of Evaluation Policies

As of October 2013, the vast majority of states require evaluations of all teachers, and many of them require specific practices and protocols. The tight timelines and funding constraints connected to Race to the Top and NCLB waivers have led many states to rush into implementation without full consideration of context or impact. In spite of the hastiness of their implementation timelines, these evaluative processes are often directly tied to personnel decisions that include teacher pay, hiring, and firing.

State-mandated evaluation systems place a heavy time burden on the instructional leader, and often on the teacher as well. In addition to the time spent learning every domain and indicator of their assigned observational protocols, instructional leaders are required to conduct multiple formal observations of

each teacher every year in order to comply with state or district policies. Furthermore, staff professional development time is devoted to the details and nuances of the evaluation processes, rather than improving the system or building staff capacity to use effective instructional practices. The time schools spend learning and implementing evaluation processes could be better spent coaching and collaborating as a staff to improve the quality of student learning.

A New Conversation: Focusing on Teacher Growth

Rather than focusing on compliance and measurement, truly effective schools place an emphasis on actively supporting teacher growth. Leaders and other stakeholders in these schools think deeply about the following key questions:

Q: How can we think *systemically* about instructional effectiveness? Schools work best when organizational leadership, instructional leadership, and teaching are built around a shared understanding of instructional effectiveness, and an understanding that all staff in a building are responsible for everyone's learning. While observation and evaluation play a role in this system, they are not the totality of the system, and will not lead to instructional improvement on their own. Instead, evaluation, feedback, professional learning, standards, collaboration, and coaching should all align in service of common goals and a common vision for student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2014, Daggett, 2014). One powerful way to support a systemic framework for schoolwide improvement is to use a shared set of standards and learning progressions. For example, the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Learning Progressions for Teachers (2013) outline a context-sensitive and developmental vision for strong teaching and learning. These learning progressions encompass standards for leadership and collaboration in addition to classroom instructional practices. and emphasizes that focusing deeply on a few key areas can be much more effective than spreading resources and attention widely.

Q: How can we *build a culture of collaboration* across our school? Research shows that teacher collaboration within a professional community is one of the most critical elements of school success (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) write:

If teachers are learning together day in and day out (learning is the work), it makes the difference... developing learning cultures is the primary task, with professional development and appraisal as enablers, not drivers. Professional learning should be designed as a holistic, ongoing formative feedback cycle with continuous collaboration at its center. (p. 57)

A culture of collaboration and distributed leadership can infuse every aspect of the teacher support system. Using professional standards as a starting point, all stakeholders can play a role in the design of an integrated cycle of inquiry and continuous improvement, and provide one another with well-aligned formative feedback on curriculum and instruction. As they identify opportunities for ongoing development, staff members can engage in a range of collaborative professional learning experiences that complement their individual study and learning.

Q: How can we provide *actionable* feedback to teachers? Every teacher has different strengths and opportunities for growth, and teachers vary widely in terms of experience, preparation, content knowledge, and disposition. Effective support systems meet teachers where they are and help them to grow along a developmental continuum. Transitioning from a one-size-fits-all measurement model to a context-sensitive developmental framework can help to establish a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) across a school, encouraging continuous improvement and a focus on learning for all staff members.

Truly attending to the developmental needs of every staff member places new demands on instructional leaders. Just as teachers need intensive support as they shift to new instructional paradigms, it's essential that administrators receive intensive, high-quality training on what strong instruction looks like, and on how to provide meaningful formative feedback to staff members.

Taking Action

Transitioning from a mindset of evaluation to a mindset of teacher growth and support demands thoughtful and strategic leadership. The following recommendations can help guide your thinking as you develop a system that truly supports ongoing growth for all teachers:

- Complete a comprehensive review of your current system of teacher evaluation program, support systems and performance data. Use research, data, and evidence of student learning to appropriately develop a systemic plan.
- Work collaboratively with all staff to learn how to implement a shared vision for high-quality teaching and learning.
- Ensure that observers and coaches are in place that are knowledgeable and trained in the implementation of high-impact strategies *and* the ways in which they align to professional standards and evaluation frameworks.

- Identify quick and simple opportunities to observe teachers and students and provide formative feedback focused on teacher growth and meaningful student learning.
- Provide recognition and incentives for teachers that take risks, pursue new learning experiences, and collaborate with colleagues

Recent policies have put pressure on states and districts to jump headfirst into the implementation of strict and complex evaluation processes even as new standards require teaching practices to evolve and adapt. Since teacher development is critical to student and school success, schools, districts, and states should focus on the creation of comprehensive teacher support systems that are aligned, collaborative, research-based, and focused on a growth mindset. Effective support for teachers leads to greater student learning—and that's the only measure that really matters.

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