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LEARNING ON THE EDge

Putting supervisors on a steep learning curve

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by Kim Marshall

As we work to improve the quality of teacher supervision and evaluation, there are three essentials for principals and other school-based administrators: developing an effective strategy for getting into every classroom frequently and seeing teachers' daily work; having a good "eye" for instruction and good judgment on what's most important; and developing an effective way to share insights with teachers. I've been working with administrators in a variety of schools and want to suggest an approach that continuously improves practice in the second two areas.

First, block out several hours in a school and convene the principal, two or three other school-based supervisors, and the superintendent (or the area administrator responsible for that school). Second, ask one or two teachers if they're comfortable having the group visit and are willing to get feedback in a fishbowl setting. Third, arrange for coverage for those teachers at the appropriate times. Fourth, visit those classrooms, staying 10 to 15 minutes in each one. I always recommend that people take off their jackets (to make the visits as low-key as possible), carefully observe what's going on without being intrusive, and jot a few notes (no laptops or checklists).

Here's the heart of the process: The group meets in a conference space, determines if there's any important information the group should know about the first teacher (for example, his or her goals for the year, just returned from a maternity leave, has an unusually high percentage of students with special needs, got outstanding test results the previous year), and establishes which person in the room is the teacher's official evaluator. Going around the table, everyone then shares a few quick take-aways from the observation — compliments, questions, suggestions, and/or criticisms — with the teacher's evaluator going last. The evaluator then says what he or she thinks are the most important points to raise with the teacher and gets reactions

from the group.

The teacher is then invited in, sits next to his or her evaluator, and is asked to ignore the others in the room (nervous laughter at this point) and treat this as a routine post-observation chat. The evaluator and the teacher spend 5 to 10 minutes having the feedback conversation, and the teacher then responds to the group on several questions: How did the conversation feel? Did the administrator discuss what was most important? Did you have a chance to fill in key information that wasn't evident during visit? Did you feel appreciated? What is your big take-away? Then the teacher leaves and the group gives the administrator feedback on all aspects of the conversation – opening lines, body language, tone, substance, and closing.

If there's time, the process is repeated with the second classroom observation – but in my experience, the first discussion often lasts longer than anticipated and there isn't time for the second. Be prepared to bring closure after the first – and be sure to start with the classroom that had the most substance in case there isn't time for the others.

Tags: [teaching](#)

About Kim Marshall

KIM MARSHALL is an education consultant and publisher of the weekly *Marshall Memo*. His last *Kappan* article was "Let's cancel the dog-and-pony show," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94 (3), (November 2012), 19-23.

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