

THE COUNCILgram

MARCH 2013 / VOLUME 2 / NEWSLETTER ISSUE 3

QUALITY ASSURANCE: HOW CAN SUPERINTENDENTS GUARANTEE EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN EVERY CLASSROOM?

By Kim Marshall, Educational Consultant; Sponsored by the Leadership for Educational Achievement Foundation, Inc. (LEAF, Inc.)



The bottom line for school districts is good teaching. That’s what parents and taxpayers want and children deserve – especially children who enter school with any kind of disadvantage. But the politician’s exhortation to “put a great teacher in every classroom” has two flaws. First, it’s hyperbolic: human accomplishment will always be on a bell-shaped curve and it’s unrealistic to make “excellence,” rigorously defined, the goal in every classroom. Second, it talks about teachers (implying that it’s mostly about hiring the best and the brightest) versus the nurturing and development of effective teaching (the way we do things around here, which lives on when individual teachers leave).

Good News: Four-point teacher-evaluation scales will help us out of this trap. Most states and school districts have now adopted a 4-3-2-1 approach to assessing classroom performance: Level 4 is highly effective, master

teaching; Level 3 is effective professional practice; Level 2 is mediocre performance that needs to be improved; and Level 1 is ineffective teaching, not meeting agreed-upon standards. This scale gives leaders a demanding, measurable goal: all teaching at Level 3 and 4. What every superintendent should aspire to is being able to look a savvy parent in the eye – someone who knows the criteria for performance at these four levels – and say with honesty, “We have effective and highly effective teaching in every classroom in this district.”

This is not something most superintendents can say right now. There isn’t a lot of teaching at Level 1, but when I speak to audiences of principals and teachers, they say (via anonymous clicker responses) that there is a fair amount of Level 2 teaching in their buildings. How has this been allowed to continue? And what can superintendents do about it?

The answer to the first question is the seriously flawed way we’ve been evaluating teachers for the last 50 years. Infrequent, full-lesson evaluation visits that are announced in advance and written up in great detail have resulted in principals chained to their desks spending huge amounts of time dutifully documenting dog-and-pony show performances. Is it any surprise that a recent study reported that 98-99 percent of American teachers are rated Satisfactory or Excellent?

I believe the way to fix this is for principals to conduct unannounced, frequent, short classroom visits (at least ten a year for each teacher); have prompt, face-to-face feedback/coaching conversations after every one; follow up with a

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SUPERINTENDENCIES

Cornwall CSD

Student Enrollment.....3,348
 SalaryUp to \$190,000
vcoppola@buffalo.edu
 Reply By: 4/19/13

General Brown CSD

Student Enrollment.....1,500
 Salary\$120-140,000
placlair@boces.com
 Reply By: 4/19/13

Holland CSD

Student Enrollment..... 945
 SalaryUp to \$160,000
dorourke@e2ccb.org
 Reply By: 4/22/13

Massena CSD

Student Enrollment.....2,973
 Salary\$120-150,000
kmorgan@sllboces.org
 Reply By: 4/1/13

Newark CSD

Student Enrollment.....2,150
 Salary\$130-150,000
suebbing@warner.rochester.edu
tim.mcelheran@warner.rochester.edu
 Reply By: 4/1/13

Remsen CSD

Student Enrollment.....454
 Salary\$110-120,000
awightman@oneida-boces.org
 Reply By: 4/5/13

Walton CSD

Student Enrollment.....1,023
 Salary\$125-145,000
tamarow@dcmboces.com
 Reply By: 4/4/13

Warsaw CSD

Student Enrollment.....998
 Salary\$125-135,000
jlewis3@gvboces.org
 Reply By: 4/12/13

CABINET VACANCIES

Binghamton CSD

Elementary School Principal
 (Benjamin Franklin)
 Student Enrollment...450
 Salary...Competitive
gretz@binghamtonschools.org
 Reply By: 4/12/13

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paragraph summing up the major commendations or recommendations; and pulling all these insights together in an honest, accurate end-of-year evaluation. This approach guarantees authenticity and turns a worthless bureaucratic exercise into a dynamic process for developing teachers (and administrators) and ensuring accurate teacher evaluations at the end of every year. It also identifies mediocre and ineffective teaching practices and gives teachers time and support to improve – and if they don't reach Level 3 or 4, it paves the way for dismissal.

This promising strategy is being used by a growing number of innovative principals around the nation – but the devil is in the details. This is where the superintendent comes in. Through frequent school visits and skillfully-conducted meetings with their principals, superintendents can ensure that 11 key components are being implemented well by school leaders.

- **Getting into classrooms frequently** – Each principal (and in larger schools, each assistant principal and department head) needs to decide on a daily classroom-visit target that will result in at least ten visits per teacher per year. In most schools, this comes down to two or three classroom visits a day. Keeping this up is challenging even for the most energetic school leaders, and the superintendent's encouragement and problem-solving is vital. One of the best things the superintendent can do is take something off the table – specifically, the burdensome, time-consuming traditional teacher-evaluation process that accomplishes so little.
- **Having a good eye for what's happening in classrooms** – A good district-wide rubric is helpful in creating a common language about teaching at four levels. So is a book study of *Teach Like a Champion* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), Doug Lemov's superb book about effective teaching practices. And so is a short list, shared with teachers, of what should be happening in every classroom K-12 – for example, SOTEL: Safety, Objectives, Teaching, Engagement, and Learning. (A New York City principal recently gave me her definition of student engagement with rigorous objectives: “mental sweat.”) Superintendents should make sure principals are walking around during each classroom visit looking over students' shoulders at the instructional task and checking in with two or three students (“What are you working on?”).
- **Deciding what's most important** – In every short classroom visit, there are six or seven things that could be praised or addressed. To monitor and improve principals' judgment about the one or two that are the highest priority, superintendents should do three things: during each school visit, conduct a couple of mini-observations with the principal, step out, and discuss what was happening and the kind of feedback that will be most appropriate for that teacher. Second, play short classroom videotapes at principals' meetings and have principals role-play feedback conversations and discuss the best approaches for post-conferences. And third, have principals bring case studies and brief write-ups to every meeting and discuss one or two in depth.
- **Finding the best note-taking system** – Superintendents should steer principals away from typing on laptops, tablets, or smartphones or trying to fill out detailed checklists or rubrics during classroom visits. They need to be on their feet moving around and have their heads up to capture the subtleties of classroom interactions and jot quick notes in the least obtrusive, informal way (notepads are the heavy favorite among principals and teachers I talk to).
- **Committing to having face-to-face feedback conversations** – Superintendents need to address the reasons many principals push back on this idea: the time it takes and not being good at difficult conversations. Superintendents should insist on direct conversations because they are the best way for principals to build trust, understand the dimensions of classroom dynamics during short observations that only the

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teacher can explain, and change mediocre and ineffective teaching practices.

- **Catching teachers in a timely fashion** – Many principals have difficulties with this, and superintendents need to remind them of their manageable daily target of two or three visits a day, making sure they have teachers' non-teaching schedules in their pocket for quick reference, and suggesting that the best place for feedback conversations is in teachers' classrooms when students aren't there (it's on the teacher's turf, student work and other artifacts are at hand, and the principal has more control of when to end the conversation).
- **Conducting feedback conversations skillfully and courageously** – Role-plays in the "safe space" of principal meetings can hone the skills many school leaders need to handle difficult conversations. Superintendents should also ask to sit in on the occasional feedback conversations (with the teacher's permission) and provide feedback afterward on how the principal is handling them.
- **Providing written follow-up after each short observation and conversation** – The key here is keeping documentation short and direct. Superintendents should monitor principals' short write-ups and discuss one or two in each principal meeting to hone school leaders' skill in making their points succinctly and skillfully. Superintendents should insist that the written follow-ups happen after the conversations. Principals will be tempted to get them off their desks and make conversations optional. This robs the process of most of its power.
- **Monitoring teachers' reactions** – Superintendents should conduct periodic anonymous survey/questionnaires to tap into teachers' reactions to the supervision/evaluation process. Five or six questions should get at frequency, the quality of feedback, whether principals are listening to what teachers have to say, and whether the process is actually helping improve teaching and learning.

- **Following up with teachers** – Frequent school visits and co-observing classrooms will give superintendents a sense of whether principals are checking on whether suggestions or directives they have given teachers are actually being implemented.
- **Conducting end-of-year evaluations** – All the brief classroom visits and conversations will culminate in summative evaluations, most commonly in rubric scoring for each teacher. Superintendents should look for three things: First, making sure that principals don't get bogged down in onerous, bureaucratic, unproductive evidence-gathering on all the rubric areas during the year (they should gather evidence only on areas that need serious improvement, largely in the written follow-ups after each classroom visit and conversation). Second, that principals conduct their end-of-year evaluation conferences by having teachers fill out the rubric in advance and comparing scores page by page spending most of the time discussing areas of disagreement and debating the evidence. And third, getting principals to do mid-year check-ins with teachers (following the same page-by-page comparison) to make sure teachers' self-assessments on the rubric are in line with principals' tentative assessments. This is the best time to catch major discrepancies.

Following these steps will ensure that principals get into classrooms frequently, know what to look for, follow up effectively with each teacher, and gradually eliminate mediocre and ineffective practices. This will allow superintendents to be actively engaged in the process and give genuine, honest quality assurance to the public: I know that there is effective or highly effective teaching in every classroom in this district.

Kim Marshall was a teacher, central office curriculum director, and principal in the Boston Public Schools for 32 years. He now coaches principals in New York City for New Leaders, writes the weekly Marshall Memo, and speaks and consults on school leadership issues. He is the author of Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation (Jossey-Bass 2009, second edition to be published in April 2013). For more information about this article, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall48@gmail.com.

VACANCIES

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Binghamton CSD

Elementary School Principal
(Calvin Coolidge School)
Student Enrollment.....390
Salary Competitive
gretz@binghamtonschools.org
Reply By: 4/12/13

Gloversville Enlarged SD

Elementary School Principal
Student Enrollment.....260
Salary Competitive
dgraham@gloversvilleschools.org
Reply By: 4/1/13

Gloversville Enlarged SD

Middle School Principal
Student Enrollment.....670
Salary Competitive
dgraham@gloversvilleschools.org
Reply By: 4/1/13

North Merrick UFSD

Interim Elementary Principal
Student Enrollment.....480 (K-6)
Salary Competitive
defeller@nmerrick.org
www.nmerrickschools.org
Reply By: ASAP

Otsego Northern Catskills BOCES

Health Benefits & Claims Coordinator
Student Enrollment.....8,947
Salary \$90,000
Reply By: ASAP

Schalmont CSD

High School Principal
Student Enrollment.....620
Salary Competitive
www.schalmont.org/employment
Reply By: ASAP

Southside Academy

Charter School (Syracuse)
Principal
Student Enrollment.....680 (K-8)
Salary Competitive
cfink@nhamail.com
Reply By: ASAP

Troy CSD

Assistant Superintendent for
Curriculum & Instruction
Student Enrollment.....3,991
Salary Competitive
humanresources@troy.k12.ny.us
miasik@troy.k12.ny.us
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