

COMMENTARY

Is Supervising the Heck Out of Teachers the Answer?

By Kim Marshall

Two notions about teacher evaluation have the ring of truth: It's important for principals to get into classrooms and observe, and teachers should be evaluated on how much their students learn. But both ideas can be implemented in ways that don't improve teaching and fail to boost student achievement. Here's how.

In most schools, teacher evaluation is something of a joke. "Oh, Ms. Jones, I see you're being observed today," says a colleague, noticing the power suit and dazzling earrings. A majority of evaluation visits are pre-announced, and who can blame a nervous teacher for preparing a special lesson? Even when principals aren't seeing a dog-and-pony show, their arrival in a classroom improves student behavior and skews what's observed. Then there's the problem of how little instruction busy principals see (one formal observation a year is the norm). High student achievement depends on first-rate instructional practices happening week after week, month after month. But are they? Principals make an educated guess about what's happening during the 99.5 percent of the year when they're not there, say a prayer—and rely on teachers' professionalism.

As for evaluating teachers on student achievement, if the metric is standardized-test scores, there are practical and ethical difficulties: (a) The results of most tests are not available until summer—too late for May deadlines for teacher evaluations. (b) There are no standardized-test results for more than half of teachers, including those in art, music, physical education, and the primary grades. (c) Most tests are not designed to measure individual teachers, so it's unfair to use them for evaluation. (d) Even the "value added" approach—measuring the gains students make from September to May—isn't viable, since experts say three years of data are needed to make a fair judgment. (e) Many tests measure only lower-order skills and factual knowledge, so making them high-stakes will undermine high expectations. (f) Using test scores for evaluation could lead to more cheating by stressed-out teachers, who are, after all, the ones administering the tests. And (g) raising the stakes undermines the kind of collegiality that is essential to improving teaching and learning.

OK, there are a few problems here. But what's the alternative? In a [report just released by Education Sector](#), Thomas Toch and Robert Rothman criticize current practices—"drive-bys" is how they describe principals' evaluations—and propose (among other things) that each teacher should be observed several times by several different evaluators from outside the school. ("[Teacher Evaluation](#)," Feb. 6, 2008; "[Test Results and Drive-By Evaluations](#)," March 5, 2008.) This model would be expensive, but the authors argue that it's better than what we are doing now and could be funded by shifting resources from worthless professional-development workshops.

Not so fast! The question that hasn't been answered is whether intensive supervision and evaluation actually improve teaching. Toch and Rothman say that expert observations of teaching can *describe* the classroom practices linked to high test scores. But does the process of observing and evaluating teachers *improve* teachers who are not already effective?

I frequently ask groups of educators to recall whether a principal's evaluations ever led them to make significant improvements when they were teachers. Typically, around 5 percent raise their hands. When I ask principals if the teacher evaluations they write change teaching for the better, I get a similar response. Most principals sheepishly admit that after all the work they put into pre-observation conferences, class observations, typing up their notes, and post-conferences (totaling six to 10 hours per teacher), they rarely see much difference in the classroom—let alone in student achievement.

Could it be that the time-honored process of teacher evaluation is an ineffective strategy for improving teaching? It's a shocking, counterintuitive thought, but it might explain why supervision and evaluation never show up as key variables in studies of effective schools. There are lots of reasons for this, but the most important one may be that the traditional model is fundamentally paternalistic: "Theory X" management, focused on inspection, vs. "Theory Y," focused on employee involvement in improving results. What Toch and Rothman are suggesting would pour millions of dollars and countless hours of administrative time into an unproven strategy. True, their evaluation tag-teams would spend slightly more time in each classroom, but the approach is basically the same.

So what *does* improve teaching? Removing ineffective teachers, for starters, which requires intensive classroom visits, honest evaluations, opportunities for each underperforming teacher to improve, and the courage to pull the trigger. Thoughtful hiring is also crucial, since each vacancy is an opportunity

to get another top-notch teacher on the team. But beyond these basics, what improves teaching is the principal's skillful orchestration of the following seven factors, with sufficient time and support for each:

- *Shifting the conversation to results.* All staff members need to focus on what students are actually learning—but without making results part of teachers' evaluations. Collegial conversations about what's working and what isn't working are most productive when they are low-stakes.

- *Backwards planning.* When teacher teams plan curriculum units with the end in sight, creating final tests or performance tasks before instruction begins, everything naturally focuses on outcomes. And it's far more productive for principals to review and discuss team unit plans than individual teachers' lesson plans.

- *Interim assessments.* High-quality common assessments four or five times a year supply each teacher team with timely diagnostic information that makes it possible to fix learning problems, help struggling students, and continuously improve instruction.

- *Student involvement.* When kids are shown where they are on a learning continuum and where they need to be, they get invested in the steps necessary to reach their goals.

- *Instructional coaching.* Teachers thrive on formative feedback from educators who know what they're talking about, be they principals, assistant principals, department heads, peers, or district coaches. Feedback is most effective when it revolves around interim results and points teachers toward specific techniques (such as in-the-moment assessments to catch student errors in real time), visits to exemplary classrooms, or pertinent workshops, articles, or books. The Teacher Advancement Program, or TAP, which the Education Sector report lauds as a model of intensive supervision and evaluation, also has a strong coaching component. My guess is that the coaching is adding value, while the intensive evaluation visits are burning up a lot of energy and adding very little.

- *Mini-observations.* The best way for principals to get a reality check on teachers' practices and to stay in close touch with classrooms is to make several unannounced classroom visits a day, and then have candid face-to-face conversations with each observed teacher within 24 hours. Using this approach systematically throughout the year sparks hundreds of substantive conversations about teaching and learning—which are even more robust if the principal is part of discussions about interim results.

- *Evaluation rubrics.* For year-end teacher evaluations, well-constructed

rubrics have significant advantages over narratives and checklists. Rubrics spell out exactly what performance looks like at each level and give less-than-stellar teachers a road map for improvement. Equally important, they are much less time-consuming to complete, freeing up principals to focus on the right stuff.

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Robert J. Marzano, a senior scholar at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, said recently that, beyond a few basics, there isn't one right way to teach. Rather than prowling through classrooms with checklists of "correct" practices, he argued, administrators should be looking at interim results with their teachers, identifying the most effective practices, and improving what's not working. This approach makes sense in human terms—and it's also good management. When teachers reach that frustrating point where they've taught something and significant numbers of students haven't reached mastery, what will motivate them to hang in there, untangle students' confusions, and improve their craft? A SWAT team of evaluators supervising the heck out of them? Test scores determining their evaluation? Merit pay?

I doubt it. Teachers are most likely to commit their hearts and souls to high achievement for all students when they work in schools where no one accepts 50 percent or 60 percent or 70 percent proficiency and where teams constantly check for understanding, feed each other ideas, fine-tune their teaching, push each other to do better, and follow up with every child. Dylan Wiliam, the British researcher, said it best: "agile teaching, responsive to student learning minute by minute, day by day, month by month."

So the conventional wisdom is correct: Principals *do* need to get into classrooms, and the bottom line *is* student learning. We just need to implement these sensible principles in ways that use principals' time most strategically and get teachers and students deeply involved in the improvement process. This work isn't easy, but it's the key to closing achievement gaps.

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