Get the best out of teachers by enhancing evaluations.

Charlotte Danielson, an educator who has worked at all levels, is well known for her work on teacher quality and evaluation. A 2012 Best Practices for Better Schools Conference speaker, Danielson has specialized as a consultant in aspects of curriculum planning, performance assessment, and professional development.

Principals: You write that the Danielson Framework for Teaching promotes professional learning. Please explain how an evaluation system can support learning.
Charlotte Danielson: I believe that the principal value of the Danielson Framework for Teaching is in promoting professional learning by teachers and other educators. It provides a tool for them to arrive at consensus at what constitutes good teaching. Then, in using this tool for a variety of purposes—teacher preparation, mentoring and coaching, professional development, and teacher evaluation—educators, led by the principal, can adopt procedures that emphasize the learning rather than the inspection aspects of those activities.

How can the principal encourage this learning environment?
The key to promoting professional learning lies in the procedures adopted and the culture within which the framework is used. In a punitive environment, no framework for teaching, regardless of its merits, will ensure professional growth. Principals must promote a culture of inquiry. Professional learning requires both time and support for teachers to work together to improve their skill as well as the setting of a tone of inquiry that emphasizes teachers’ obligation to engage in ongoing learning—and the resulting joy in doing so. This culture of inquiry is built on a foundation of trust where people feel safe and are secure that others are telling the truth, where educators can admit vulnerabilities and feel safe that others aren’t asserting their power as a substitute for rational discussion.

The Danielson Framework also emphasizes reflective practice. Why is reflective practice critical to teaching and how can principals help new teachers to improve it?
As we all know, self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom. It’s not that we learn from our actions; we learn from our thinking about our actions. To acquire the capacity to improve their teaching, teachers must be able to analyze it, to recognize their areas of relative strength and weakness. Only with experience, and aided by structured support from a mentor, a coach, or a principal, do novice teachers look beneath the surface and explore more complex questions about their teaching. When invited to do so, they are able to consider whether the instructional outcomes they set for their students were appropriate, whether students were engaged in productive learning, whether the student groups should have been formed differently, or whether the learning activities were productive. By analyzing a lesson one element at a time, teachers become more analytical, more reflective, and more evidence-based in their thinking. Such thinking then becomes a habit of mind that teachers engage in independently on a regular basis.
What is the most important advice you give to principals as evaluators of teaching?
Whatever procedures are used—formal and informal classroom observation, pre-conferences and post-conferences, samples of student work and other artifacts, or annual evaluations—must represent a serious effort to engage teachers in the activities known to promote professional learning such as self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation, all conducted in an environment of trust. Through this culture of inquiry, the twin goals of teacher support—quality assurance and professional learning—can be achieved.

Some districts use observational evaluations to make decisions about job security and compensation. Do you support that approach? I don’t think these decisions can be made based on observation alone. Both teacher practices and results of teaching are important indicators of teacher effectiveness. Both must be highly evolved before they are used for high-stakes personnel decisions. There are no quick fixes. When done well, an evaluation system can yield significant benefits in enhancing capacity.

As for decisions about compensation, I’ve not been convinced by evidence from either education or the business sector that merit pay has positive effects on performance. But again, I’m not an expert in compensation policies.

From your vantage point as a consultant, how has today’s emphasis on teaching to the test affected teacher instruction and student learning? Teaching is a very complex as well as physically and cognitively demanding job. Most teachers leave school exhausted at the end of the day, knowing that their students will return the next day rested and ready for more. An environment of high-stakes accountability only exacerbates teachers’ levels of stress. Teachers are under enormous external pressure, as never before, to prepare their students for productive lives in the knowledge economy and success in externally mandated assessments. I believe that a teaching framework can help teachers in these challenging times by providing a common language that promotes development of shared understanding, structured professional conversation, self-assessment, and reflection on practice.

But the emphasis on teaching to the test depends on the quality of the test; if the tests assess important life skills—such as higher order thinking and collaborative work—then teaching to the test can have positive effects. But if the tests assess only a narrow range of knowledge and skill, then teachers are under pressure to limit their instruction to those areas that are assessed. I think it’s a terrible pity that there are schools where the curriculum no longer includes the arts, or even science or social studies if they’re not on the test.

What can attendees look forward to hearing and learning during your workshop at NAESP’s conference? I will offer an overview of teacher evaluation, and what a system that’s used for high-stakes decisions about teachers must include, such as clear standards of practice, instruments and procedures to capture evidence of those standards of practice, and trained (and certified) evaluators who can make accurate and consistent judgments based on evidence. In addition, I’ll offer suggestions for how a teacher evaluation system can promote teacher learning as well as ensuring instruction of high quality.

DANIELSON’S FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING
The Framework for Teaching is a research-based set of components of instruction, aligned to the INTASC standards, and grounded in a constructivist view of learning and teaching. The complex activity of teaching is divided into 22 components (and 76 smaller elements) clustered into four domains of teaching responsibility:

1. Planning and Preparation
2. Classroom Environment
3. Instruction
4. Professional Responsibilities

The Framework may be used for many purposes, but its full value is realized as the foundation for professional conversations among practitioners as they seek to enhance their skill in the complex task of teaching. The Framework may be used as the foundation of a school or district’s mentoring, coaching, professional development, and teacher evaluation processes, thus linking all those activities together and helping teachers become more thoughtful practitioners.

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