

The Value of Teacher Evaluation

Traditionally, teacher evaluations have been used to determine eligibility for licensure, promotion, and school accreditation status. The results of these locally created evaluation policies and processes have been inconsistent at best, and downright misleading at worst. Most states and districts are now in some phase of redeveloping these systems as a result of recent federal mandates that require evaluation systems to differentiate at least three levels of performance, use multiple valid measures to assess performance, evaluate teachers on a regular basis, and provide appropriate feedback for improvement.

The question before the field is not “Why should we evaluate teachers?” but rather “How should we evaluate teachers?”

What to Look For

Teacher evaluation systems are only as good as their design, and that design needs to measure teacher knowledge, skills, and behaviors that help students do their best. Recent research provides findings that can guide the design and use of educator evaluation systems.

Not so good at first. In their article “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement,” Stephen Rivkin and his colleagues report that initially most new teachers are not very good at their craft, but that they improve dramatically over the first few years in the classroom. And, in *Who Leaves? Teacher Attrition and Student Achievement*, Donald Boyd and colleagues found that 25 to 30 percent of new public school teachers leave teaching within the first three years on the job.

Know what to teach and how to teach it. A study conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond and John Bransford in 2005 reveals that the most effective teachers have a deep understanding of their subject matter, know how to support learning and connect new information to prior student knowledge and experience, are facile with pedagogy and can match instructional strategy to content and students, continually monitor learning and provide timely feedback, and create and maintain inclusive and effective learning environments.

The field of education is embarking on a new journey into the world of personnel assessment and evaluation.

Choose the right strategy and the right time. The second edition of *Classroom Instruction that Works* reveals that students will benefit from explicit instruction in note-taking, and that there is a link between positive reinforcement and feedback and student learning over time. We also know that it’s not just which instructional strategy a teacher uses that matters, but it’s also about when and how he or she uses it that can make all the difference.

Solving the measurement problem. There are many challenges to using sophisticated statistical methods such as value-added models to link teacher performance and student performance. But we must eventually make the connection between teacher and student performance, and these models can be one tool in our measurement arsenal.

The challenge facing researchers, developers, educators, and administrators is how to combine all these relevant findings from research, professional wisdom, and statistical wizardry in just the right proportions to create the next generation of teacher evaluation systems.

Benefits to Teachers

Principals should adopt an evaluation program that gets new teachers off to the right start, requires frequent feedback, aids in personal growth, and decreases turnover.

A Faster Start. New teachers should be able to accelerate the learning curve that comes with their new job. Targeted assistance and training should be provided to struggling teachers, helping them improve their mastery of content and pedagogy; manage classrooms; enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning; and lead more productive conversations with interested parents.

Timely Feedback. Teacher observations and post-observation conferences should occur at regular intervals throughout the school year and result in more consistent and timely feedback about their performance.

Personal Growth. The development of individual teachers over time should be guided by individualized professional development and growth plans. Link professional development plans and resource selection to performance deficiencies identified during the evaluation process.

Increased Retention. With the latest advances in content and instructional knowledge and resources readily available, experienced teachers will be better equipped to overcome the effects of burnout and the five-year performance plateau. They will be more likely to settle into a successful and satisfying career.

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author outlines ways in which teacher evaluations can and should be improved, arguing that they benefit both teachers, administrators, and ultimately, students. Do you agree with his assessment? Share your thoughts on The Principals' Office blog at www.naesp.org/blog. Click on Speaking Out.

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Benefits to Administrators

Effective teacher evaluation systems will also benefit administrators as you work to improve the operations and impact of public education systems. As you evaluate teachers, collect information that will help you achieve the following:

Improve policy- and decision-making.

The availability of teacher performance data linked to student achievement will improve the accuracy and timeliness of state and local decisions regarding policy, process, and program improvements.

Select the next generation of leaders.

The collection of performance data over time will help principals monitor and manage teachers' growth and identify those teachers who are particularly suited to developing and mentoring new talent entering the teaching profession.

Create a record of performance.

The flow and consistency of individual data from year to year will simplify the process of managing a teacher's performance information over time and provide a cumulative picture of performance, a profile of strengths and weaknesses, and guidance about which resources are most appropriate for improvement and growth.

Assess school and district performance. Performance data should be aggregated at the school and district levels so that patterns of performance can be uncovered and professional development or other interventions can be effectively deployed when necessary.

The Future

The field of education has embarked on a new journey into the world of personnel assessment and evaluation, which is likely to be just as controversial and fraught with pitfalls as the standards-based movement of the past 20 years. Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners are now charged with ensuring that the journey is rich and productive for this nation's principals, teachers, and students. □

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