Video vs. Traditional Observations

In-person teacher observations have some inherent challenges: They are extremely time consuming and rely on the administrator’s notes, and students are often “on their best behavior” because an administrator is in the room. Can video technology transform classroom observations for teachers and principals, making the process easier and more reliable? That is the question that researchers from Harvard’s Center for Education Policy Research set out to determine, summarizing their findings in The Best Foot Forward Project: Substituting Teacher-Collected Video for In-Person Classroom Observations.

Researchers studied 347 teachers and 108 administrators in four states, who were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Teachers in the treatment group video-taped themselves presenting a lesson and then submitted the lesson to their administrators (and, for the purpose of the study, outside observers as well). To level the playing field, the teachers were able to choose which lesson videos they submitted.

Findings
Teachers valued the video approach, 96 percent completed all of their observations using video. Even though the official requirement was to submit five videos, teachers averaged 13.

The video teachers were much more critical—and, perhaps, honest with...
themselves—than those observed in the traditional way. On average, they rated their performance lower. Forty-six percent also caught student behaviors that they otherwise missed.

Was the teaching of better quality because teachers were allowed to “put their best foot forward” and choose their videos? The outside observers noted little difference between the videos the teachers submitted compared to the ones they did not. If a teacher was struggling on their un-submitted videos, they were likely struggling on their “good” ones as well.

Finally—of primary concern to administrators—the teachers and administrators both benefitted. The video teachers believed their observation process to be fairer and were more likely to agree with what the administrator observed on tape. Not surprisingly, administrators appreciated the time flexibility. Most accessed the videos during non-instructional hours.

Although this was only one study, conducted over one year, the findings indicate that the benefits of video observations outweigh any perceived disadvantages. According to the study’s authors, “It boosted teachers’ perception of fairness, reduced teacher defensiveness during post-observation conferences, led to greater self-criticism by teachers and allowed administrators to shift observation duties to quieter times of the day or week.” Read the full report at cepr.harvard.edu/best-foot-forward-project.

UNthink Your School
Do you have a brilliant idea to solve a problem at your school, and just need a little money to make it happen? NAESP has partnered with the Wahl Foundation to offer $40,000 in UNthink My School grants to schools that take an innovative approach to solving a school problem. “We want to reward teachers, principals, and other staff who are bold in their thinking, and who are not afraid to do things a little differently,” said Tasha Wahl, executive director of the Wahl Foundation.

One $20,000 and 10 $2,000 grants will be awarded to schools that champion themes of innovation and creativity. Proposals are due Feb. 15, 2016. Visit bit.ly/1Z7dzF for more details.

Fresh Ideas for Family Nights
Parents are invited to the principal’s “Chat and Chew” where they set the agenda for open discussions. We offer parent trainings on ways they can help their child at home. Last year, our session was called, “That’s Not How I Learned It!” We worked with staff to create a “hands on” evening for parents regarding the new mathematics standards in the Common Core. Parent feedback reflected their frustration of not knowing the new way to do things; they didn’t feel knowledgeable to help their child. We answered with training, handouts, website connections, and gratitude for their willingness to help.

—Carol E. Hahn, principal of Bellows Spring Elementary School in Ellicott City, Maryland, and a 2015 National Distinguished Principal

Each term, content area teams host a preview night of the upcoming content. During the event, the teacher instructs parents on some of the key content and/or vocabulary, providing exemplar work samples. Parents are then equipped with examples so they are more comfortable helping their children with homework questions. Time is also set aside to teach parents how to read and understand the benchmark and state assessment results. Information nights are also planned to introduce parents to the various Web-based programs and Google products that students will use in class.

—Kelli Grimsley Brown, principal of Petal Elementary School in Petal, Mississippi, and 2015 National Distinguished Principal