NEW TRENDS in Teacher Evaluation

As teacher quality takes center stage in education reform, evaluation strategies are helping teachers at all career stages grow professionally.

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E valuation has often been a meaningless exercise, endured by both teachers and evaluators. Recently, however, schools and districts have discovered that they can shape an evaluation system so that it contributes substantially to the quality of teaching.

The push for teacher quality has developed from the modern school reform movement. The movement's first phase began with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education) and concentrated on such issues as lengthening the school year and requiring more academic courses. The second phase, which began in the 1990s and continues to this day, has focused on the role of challenging academic standards for students and the use of high-stakes assessments of those standards. The third phase dates from the 1996 publication of *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future) and has propelled the concept of teacher quality to the forefront of the policy agenda. All educators—practitioners and policymakers—recognize what discerning parents have always known: The quality of individual teachers matters.

As a result, school personnel are focused on enhancing teacher quality. What strategies can help teachers ensure that all students reach high standards? Enhancing the quality of professional development is, of course, part of the answer. Fortified by relicensing requirements in many states, schools and districts are rethinking their professional development offerings to support the schools' needs for specific content and teaching skills. These offerings are being structured around the goals of the school and the district rather than according to the personal inclinations of individual teachers, as in the past. But increasingly, educators have discovered that they can use a long-neglected requirement—teacher evaluation—to support teacher quality.
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Purposes of Teacher Evaluation
What are the purposes of teacher evaluation? The first purpose, and the only one recognized by legislators and policymakers, is quality assurance. As trustees of public funds who are responsible for educating a community’s young people, educators in public schools must ensure that each classroom is in the care of a competent teacher. Most educators recognize that teaching is a complex activity and that a simple, brief observation of a teacher in the classroom is not enough. An evaluation system should recognize, cultivate, and develop good teaching.

Traditionally, as school districts have attempted to develop evaluation systems that merge the requirements of quality assurance and professional development, they have concentrated on enhancing evaluators’ coaching skills. That is, they have tried to equip evaluators with the capability to provide supportive feedback to teachers as they make their evaluative judgments. This strategy is valuable but insufficient because of the inherent conflict between the functions of coaching and evaluation. Even the strongest proponents of coaching argue that educators must be very clear about which hat they are wearing when they provide feedback on teaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

Trends in Teacher Evaluation
Rather than placing the burden of evaluation on administrators, educators are discovering that a well-designed evaluation system is the best approach for merging professional development with quality assurance in teacher evaluation. What are the new trends in teacher evaluation that permit teachers to improve their practice as a result of participating in an evaluation system that also ensures the quality of teaching? What characteristics do these systems share?

Since the publication of Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 1996), many school districts have invited me to assist them in redesigning their teacher evaluation systems. Many of these districts have used the components of teaching described in the book as evaluative criteria. Each district has, of course, sometimes modified the components to apply to its own setting—for example, by including its state’s content standards.

Differentiated Systems
Many newly developed systems of teacher evaluation use a differentiated approach; they rely on different activities, procedures, and timelines for different groups of teachers. Typically, novice teachers receive more intense evaluation with higher levels of support and supervision from an administrator than experienced teachers do.

The typical pattern for a differentiated system consists of an annual, formal evaluation for new teachers, with formal evaluation of experienced, tenured teachers conducted only every two, three, or four years. During the nonformal evaluation years, experienced teachers engage in self-directed professional growth activities, alone or with colleagues. In addition,
the evaluative criteria are frequently different for different groups of teachers. For example, new teachers may be formally evaluated on the ten most crucial aspects of teaching, with six more aspects added in the second year and six more added in the third year.

Like many others, the Addison School District in Illinois has implemented a differentiated evaluation system. In this system, the activities for experienced teachers are quite different than those for novice teachers, affording much greater opportunity for professional growth and reflection.

**Multiyear Cycles**

Most new systems specify a multiyear evaluation cycle for tenured or career-track teachers. In some districts, career teachers are never formally evaluated. Once they have attained tenure, teachers engage only in self-assessment, goal setting, and self-directed professional growth.

In most districts, however, experienced teachers are formally evaluated on a regular basis every second, third, or fourth year. In the other years (being careful not to call them “off” years), teachers take charge of the process and engage in professional development activities of their own choosing. During these years, school districts have the opportunity to craft systems, particularly for experienced teachers, that permit the opportunity for professional development through which teachers can extend their practice.

During the years of formal evaluation, the system can be fairly traditional, with evaluators conducting observations and teachers documenting those aspects of their practice that are not observable in the classroom. Evaluators are trained to recognize the different aspects of teaching identified in the system as evaluative criteria, and teachers have the opportunity to clarify misconceptions on the part of the evaluator.

The multiyear cycle is sometimes tied to a teacher’s performance on the last formal evaluation. In Coventry, Rhode Island, for example, experienced teachers are evaluated every two, three, or four years, depending on their rating during the previous evaluation cycle.

**Active Teacher Roles**

Traditionally, evaluation is an activity that is done to teachers. Administrators conduct observations, write up the observations, and conduct a post-observation conference to provide feedback to the teacher on his or her teaching.

The new systems place teachers in more active and professional roles. Once teachers have attained career or tenure status, they are assumed to be professionally competent and can use the evaluation activities as an opportunity to extend and enhance their practice. They engage in such self-directed professional activities as meeting with colleagues in study groups, conducting action research, and pursuing advanced knowledge in either content or pedagogy. The teachers’ active role tends to take one of the following forms:

**Portfolios.** Depending on the district’s evaluative criteria, some aspects of teaching may not be demonstrated during a classroom observation. For example, if communicating with families is an important aspect of teaching, an evaluator will need evidence on which to base an evaluation. Without evidence, he or she can only guess a teacher’s skill level.

So what would count as evidence? On what should an evaluator base a judgment regarding a teacher’s skill in communicating with families and other nonclassroom-based aspects of teaching, such as collaborating with colleagues and contributing to the school and the district? The answer for many districts lies in asking teachers to collect and submit artifacts from their practice in individual portfolios.

Teachers discover many benefits of collecting items for a portfolio. They must examine their materials—such as letters to parents, handouts prepared for open houses, and grading guidelines—to determine which artifacts best illustrate the characteristics of good communication identified in their standards of practice. This exercise requires them to reflect on their practice. Then, in
explaining their artifacts to their evaluators, teachers describe their practices and formulate their ideas of expert teaching.

As part of their formal evaluation process, teachers in Newport News, Virginia, submit a portfolio of work they have collected during the previous three years. These artifacts document their performance on those aspects of their practice that cannot be observed in the classroom.

Teachers report that if they wait until the last minute, the task can seem daunting; if they work on the portfolio a little bit at a time, it is more meaningful and less time-consuming. The experience of collecting artifacts and presenting them to their principal permits teachers to participate in valuable reflection and professional conversations. One high school teacher commented, "I didn't realize how much I had accomplished!"

**Professional conversation.** As part of many districts' new teacher evaluation systems, educators are building in multiple opportunities for professional conversation. Educators recognize that such conversation promotes reflection on practice and mutual learning. The conversations are required both for teachers undergoing formal evaluation and for those in the self-directed phase.

This focus on conversation recognizes the value of reflection in learning. We advance professional learning not so much by action, but by reflection on action. And we promote reflection by dialogue with others. Others may see aspects of our teaching of which we are unaware. Conversation extends the benefits of reflection to capture the ideas of others.

Educators in Reno, Nevada, have reported that since the implementation of their new evaluation system, they have had a formal opportunity to participate in structured, highly rewarding professional conversations. This opportunity is one of the principle benefits of their revised system.

**Student achievement.** In some locations, districts examine student achievement and student learning in the evaluation of teachers. In Delaware, for example, recent state legislation has required districts to do so. Such practices are highly desirable because student learning is the purpose of schools. Such evaluation systems, however, are only now being developed, and their designers are faced with daunting challenges of equity and reliability. Many factors affect student learning; it is extremely difficult to attribute such learning to the skill of individual teachers.

**The Results**

For many years, educators have agreed that the fundamental purposes of teacher evaluation are both quality assurance and professional development. Previous evaluation systems, however, have largely failed to achieve either goal: Evaluation is either neglected altogether or conducted in a highly negative environment with low levels of trust.

Educators are designing the new systems, however, so that educators can have it all. Their systems respect the principles of assessment design in which evidence is captured for each of the evaluative criteria. In addition, because of the methodologies used—portfolios, study group collaborations, teachers’ explaining their own practices—the new systems promote teachers’ reflection and professional growth.

It would be an exaggeration to say that teachers and administrators in districts that have redesigned their evaluation systems have come to love teacher evaluation. With systems that promote professional dialogue and enhance professional learning, however, educators have come to recognize the value of teacher evaluation for advancing the professional standing of teaching and have engaged in highly rewarding conversations. The result of such efforts is improved learning opportunities for all students.

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**References**


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