
Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time

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From Inspection to Improvement

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Explain how the focus of supervision evolved from improving the institution and its employees to improving students' learning.
- Describe the challenges and turning points in the profession of educational supervision.

ROB BECKER, AN EXPERIENCED PRINCIPAL, SHARED POSITIVE INSIGHTS WITH US ABOUT supervising and evaluating teachers in a building where 70 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Rob confirmed that the district evaluation policy clearly addresses needs of veteran and probationary teachers and was developed with the intent of helping principals like him complete formative and summative evaluations to improve teaching. However, when we asked Rob about the ways in which his district's guidelines for supervision and evaluation specifically target improving student learning, he paused before giving this thoughtful and revealing reply:

It seems that they *should*, but I think that particular message of supervision and evaluation has been implicit, whereas the goal to improve teaching and professionalism has been explicit. It would be really easy to wrap my practices deliberately around improving student learning. Why hasn't that been identified more succinctly in the research and literature? Honestly, it just makes sense.

Does Improving Teaching Always Improve Learning?

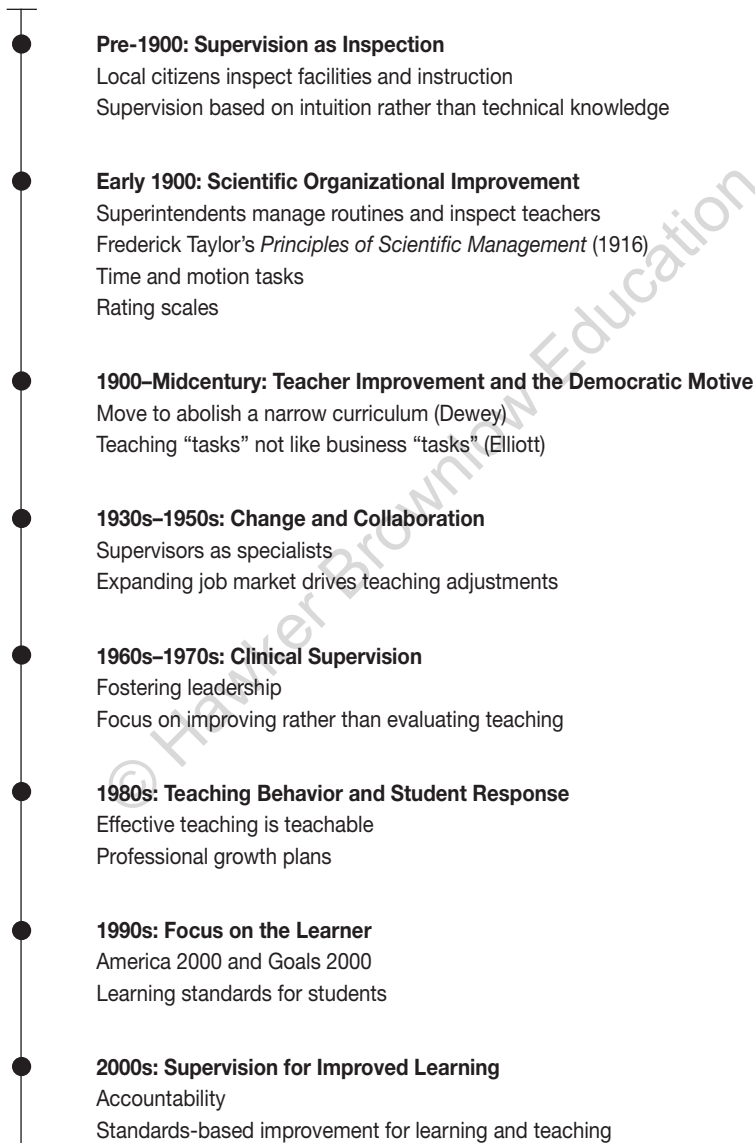
The more principals we interviewed, the more interested we became in answering this question: Why is it that the goals of supervision are to improve both teaching and student performance, yet traditional supervision strategies focus primarily on the teacher's teaching, generally minimizing or even ignoring growth in student learning? Moreover, why are some supervisory visits to classrooms viewed as supportive while others are dreaded and seen as occasional events of perfunctory judgment? Why do principals feel as though they must act as both collaborative instructional leaders and critical evaluative administrators—roles that many find difficult if not impossible to reconcile?

Although a vast literature base indicates that educational supervision in the 21st century aims to improve learning for all students, the procedures principals follow continue to require them to concurrently evaluate teacher performance and coach teachers to reflect on and improve their instruction and assessment methods. We believe that we are at the promising point in history where we as educators *can* define a supervisory movement to improve student learning. The key is to implement the research findings on ways that teaching can positively affect learning.

What we should *not* do is continue to chase deadlines for “making teachers accountable” through communicating test scores and probable sanctions. If the education profession continues to focus on inspecting *summative student data*—and primarily using these data to determine which schools should be closed and which principals are “weak” and should be replaced—we will miss out on the myriad, research-supported ways that *classroom data* can inform better instructional and supervisory decisions. History convinces us that to take the road less traveled this time around offers the real reward we seek, which is improved student learning.

In this chapter, we take the time to describe the important evolution of our profession because it shows that while supervision had been adjusted on a continual basis to improve professionalism, there have been relatively few changes in practices designed to ensure gains in student achievement. As we continue to meet with supervisors, we find that retracing the historical milestones in the development of the profession (see Figure 1.1) not only helps supervisors

FIGURE 1.1
The Evolution of Educational Supervision





Supervisor Voice

Richard Zimman, Superintendent

Based on his experiences as a teacher and district leader, Richard tells about how he transformed his own thinking about teacher evaluation and supervision and discusses how his district changed its culture for the better by improving learning through supervision.

Here We Go Again: Observing and Evaluating

“The next item on our agenda is teacher observation and evaluation,” I announced to the district’s administrative team gathered for one of our regular meetings. The friendly banter that characterized our close-knit team stopped, as if a person we were talking about had just entered the room. Everyone suddenly showed intense interest in his or her shoes or the paperwork in front of them. No one was making eye contact with me or with one another.

I wasn’t surprised at all by the staff’s reaction. Teacher observation and evaluation—even discussing teacher observation and evaluation—is the third rail of education administration; no one wants to touch it. After nearly 20 years of administration in three different school districts, I had a good idea why. Almost universally, observation and evaluation were seen as processes that gobbled huge amounts of time and effort without making significant differences in teacher performance, student achievement, or organizational culture. Two personal examples from my own career help to illustrate why this point of view is so widespread.

The first incident dates to my time teaching high school, when our building administrator incorporated a flashcard quiz on the components of the Madeline Hunter model into our pre-observation conferences. Although we

understood that the principal had good intentions and just wanted to raise the level of understanding and discourse regarding lesson design, the absurdity of using flashcards to achieve that higher level provided much fodder for teachers lounge spoofs, which undermined a positive organizational culture.

A second example comes from another district, where the superintendent launched an initiative to improve teaching by adopting a reflective supervisory model based on well-established research. Much time and expense went into training administrators to use this model. Principals spent many hours observing each teacher and engaging in reflective conferences. A four-point evaluation scale was developed and applied to the summative evaluations and then totaled so that district administrators could discern trends and gaps that would guide future districtwide staff development efforts. Additional time and expense went to training all teachers on how to use the model to guide their practice. The net result was more paperwork, more meetings, and more analysis . . . but, unfortunately, no significant differences in teaching or student achievement and no organizational shift to more reflective practice.

These scenarios were swirling through my head as I looked around the table at my administrative team. I knew what they were thinking, and they knew that I knew, but nobody wanted to say it out loud. The collective, if unspoken, voice of experience told us all the same thing: “Buckle up, because here we go again.”

A Dedicated Focus on Teachers Is Not Enough

About 15 years prior to the meeting I’ve described, a joint teacher–administrator committee in our district had developed a teacher supervision system with much fanfare. It was a clinical model similar to the Danielson model (2007), and its focus was having each teacher demonstrate various competencies while planning, teaching, and engaging in professional practice. There was an ongoing tug-of-war between teachers who believed that they had exceeded the performance standards (the “walk on water” descriptor) and administrators who were trying to provide honest feedback without making the teaching staff feel unappreciated. It was a very time-consuming task that, in the best-case scenario, left teachers feeling like they put in a lot of effort only to be told that they were good teachers—which everyone already knew. In the more prevalent scenario,

less-than-glowing feedback triggered teacher resentment and frustration that tended to fester into feelings of being underappreciated. The end result? The process didn't improve teacher instructional prowess, it didn't improve student achievement, and it made building a positive school culture impossible.

All this was in my mind when I put the topic of teacher observation and evaluation on the agenda for the administrative team meeting. For one thing, I wanted to ensure that the system we were using was consistently implemented districtwide. Because the district practice is to route all summative evaluations through the superintendent's office, I had read them all prior to their being filed away in the district's official personnel files, and I had noticed considerable differences in the way that our administrators approached the evaluation process. Somehow, I thought that getting all the principals on the same page would make a positive difference, and to do that, we had to discuss how each administrator was interpreting and approaching his or her observations, evaluations, and ratings.

I was intrigued by the summative report format that one principal used. It consisted of a summary of the teacher's skills in targeted areas, followed by a brief list of suggestions for improvement based on the rating components of the evaluation instrument. For probationary teachers, this feedback provided some direction for their own development and set benchmarks for retaining their jobs. For veteran teachers, this feedback was a relatively benign way of pointing out a few areas for professional growth. We decided to adopt this format for summative reports on teacher observations.

How did that work out? Some teachers readily accepted the feedback and sought ways to improve in the designated areas. More often, though, teachers either argued that they were already "outstanding" in those areas or set about to prove the principal wrong by showering him or her with artifacts, parental letters of praise, or classroom activities to which the principal was invited. Well, I thought, at least now we're talking about instruction instead of simply filling out forms in ways that attempt to avoid making anyone uncomfortable. But clearly, this focus on teachers and their instruction just wasn't enough.

Working Hard, but Stuck

Our district curriculum was written and comprehensive, but the content was still a hodgepodge of activities, textbook chapter titles, state standards, and