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1

Readying for Informal Classroom Observations

In This Chapter ...

- ◆ Why informal classroom observations are important
- ◆ Principals make the commitment to get out and about
- ◆ Principals know their people
- ◆ Principals assess the context of supervision and their own beliefs
- ◆ Principals develop the leadership skills of the administrative team
- ◆ Principals develop practices to track the observation efforts of the administrative team

A resounding finding in the literature of the accountability movement is that teacher quality improves student learning. If this premise is true, then the assessment of teaching in classrooms needs to become the first step toward improving instruction and assisting teachers to examine their practices. Assisting teachers begins at the place where instruction occurs—in the classroom. Principals and other school leaders are urged to remember that, like students, teachers need opportunities to grow, develop, and learn.

What Is This Book About?

This book focuses on assisting the principal (and others) as he or she works with teachers in formative ways, primarily through informal classroom observations. To make informal classroom observations a priority, principals must frame their work habits and daily routines around dropping by classrooms and then following up by providing teachers with feedback and opportunities for reflection and inquiry. This book is written for the principal who wants to be viewed by teachers as a support for the instructional program. Assistant principals, department chairs, lead teachers, teacher leaders, and others can enhance the instructional program by developing a better understanding of informal classroom observations.

This book provides a series of classroom observation tools to help frame the informal classroom observation and follow-up discussion with teachers. This second edition includes additional classroom observation tools that have been field tested by school personnel. There is also a new chapter with tips and cues on how to incorporate examining student work and other artifacts in postobservation conversations.

Professionals are encouraged to use and adapt the tools in this book. The value of the tools and techniques offered is that they are easily adaptable. Principals, assistant principals, and coaches need not think that they have to use every tool to be an effective instructional leader. Pick the tools that make sense and use the existing tools to develop more tools.

These tools are available to you in three different ways. In each chapter you'll see how the tools can be implemented by an instructional leader during classroom observations and in postobservation conferences. In the Appendix, you will find a blank version of the same tools that appear throughout the chapters of the book. Permission is granted to those who have purchased this book to photocopy the blank forms and use them while working with teachers. Blank versions of the tools can also be downloaded from Eye On Education's Web site: www.eyoneducation.com. See page v for details.

WHY INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Informal classroom observation is a way to get instructional supervision and teacher evaluation out of the main office. Teachers need feedback more than once or twice a year. Informal classroom observations provide valuable opportunities for more frequent interaction between the supervisor and the teacher. Informal classroom observations can provide opportunities to extend the talk about teaching if the principal carves out enough time after an informal classroom observation to engage teachers in a discussion of their instructional practices.

Recently, informal classroom observations have become vogue with principals who are learning the art and science of the "3-minute walk-through" advocated by the research, practice, and work of Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004). The value of the 3-minute walk-through is acknowledged. This book, however, offers a different view of informal classroom observations. Namely, the informal classroom observation should be extended to more than 3 minutes to achieve its purposes—working with teachers in ways that are more meaningful. A 3-minute walk-through is simply not enough time to capture a sustained picture of teaching and learning, and that is why this book advocates a more enlarged view of the informal classroom observation. In general, teachers want context-specific information about their teaching, and data observed in the window of a 15- to 20-minute observation can provide such opportunities for specific feedback, discussion, and reflection.

Tool 7: Open-Ended—Key Areas

Teacher: **Jose Hernandez**

Date of Observation: **January 31, 2008**

Observer: **Gregory Torchenski**

Class: **Health**

Period of the Day: **4th**

Time of Observation: Start: **11:30** End: **11:40**

Total Time Spent in Observation: **10 minutes**

Number of Students Present: **24** Grade level: **9th (girls)**

Topic of the Lesson: **Weight Management/Nutrition**

Date of Postobservation Conference: **February 1, 2008**

I. Learning Objective: **Appropriate eating and physical activities that support weight management (posted on white board and handout).**

II. Instructional Strategies (also note time): **11:30-11:37 lecture on calories and physical activity to burn calories. Had students stand and run in place for 1 minute. Led discussion on the amount of physical activity needed to maintain or lose weight.**

III. Seating Arrangement:

IV. Transition Strategies: **Cued students "stand and run briskly" and blew whistle to stop running in place.**

V. Calling Patterns:

VI. Markers of Student Engagement: **All students were engaged. The physical activity was a positive way to illustrate calorie burning.**

Checklists

A narrow data-collection method is the *checklist* approach, in which data are usually tallied at the end so that patterns can be inferred; however, checklist data also can be descriptive. A sample of checklist data is detailed in Tool 8.

Tips

- ◆ To reduce the amount of “noise” on any one diagram, use more than one seating chart for an extended classroom observation, notating the start and end time at the top of each.
- ◆ Record anecdotal notes in the margins or on another sheet of paper.

Suggested Postobservation Conference Strategies

With the seating chart as a backdrop for the postobservation conference, lead the teacher into “seeing” the patterns of movement. Probing questions could include the following:

- ◆ Which students did you spend a majority of the time working with?
- ◆ Were there students who did not need assistance?

TRACKING THE BEGINNING AND ENDING (CLOSURE) OF CLASS

Background

Effective teachers engage in bell-to-bell instruction. The first few minutes and the last few minutes are acknowledged as two critically important points of time. Research shows that time wasted at the beginning and ending of class can never really be recouped; once time is lost, it is gone. Effective teachers establish daily routines for beginning and ending class. Grade level dictates the types of routines established. Although there are vast differences among elementary, middle, and high school classrooms, all share a commonality: the need for routines to begin and end instruction.

Beginning Class Routines

Teachers who have routines for the beginning of a class period use the time immediately before the tardy bell for getting students ready and organized for learning. Strategies to maximize time on task and to reduce “empty air time” before formal instruction begin include the following:

- ◆ taking attendance as students are entering the room;
- ◆ having a “sponge” activity, such as a short quiz or math problem, for students to start working on as they arrive;

Tool 38: Thinking, Listening and Reflecting With Colleagues About Student Work*

Reflecting on the process

Looking for evidence of student thinking ...

- ◆ What did you see in this student's work that was interesting or surprising?
- ◆ What did you learn about how this student thinks and learns?
- ◆ What about the process helped you to see and learn these things?

Reflecting on one's own thinking ...

- ◆ What questions about teaching and assessment did looking at the students' work raise for you?
- ◆ How can you pursue these questions further?
- ◆ Are there things you would like to try in your classroom as a result of looking at this student's work?

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Another way to frame the discussion of student work is to examine content standards and the adopted curriculum for the school system. Tool 39 provides a sample guide to help the principal frame the examination of student work around content standards adopted by the school system.

Appendix

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOLS

Throughout each chapter, tools to assist the principal frame and conduct classroom observations are offered. Each tool presented in the chapters is provided as a blank form in this Appendix to help the busy principal collect usable and stable data during informal classroom observations.*

These tools are also available on Eye On Education's Web site as Adobe Acrobat PDF files. Those who have purchased this book have permission to download them and print them out. Instructions can be found on page v of this book.

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