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I

Think Systemically

I have had administrators who never came into my classroom for formal observations or asked me for anything more than the initial planning/goal sheet. I have had administrators observe a formal lesson and put the feedback sheet in my box without ever having spoken to me about the lesson, and I have had years where I am just asked to sign the end-of-the year evaluation sheet [without being observed].

—Jane Fung, National Board Certified teacher and Milken Award Winner,¹ California

The United States is at a critical moment in teacher evaluation. The evaluation process is undergoing extensive changes, some of them quite radical, in nearly every state and district across the country. As states and districts embark on these reforms, it is crucial for schools, teachers, and especially students that we move practice forward to improve the quality of teaching while avoiding potential pitfalls that could damage education. It is imperative that we not substitute new problems for familiar ones, but that we instead use this moment of transformation to get teacher evaluation right.

Virtually everyone agrees that teacher evaluation in the United States needs an overhaul. Existing systems rarely help teachers improve or clearly distinguish those who are succeeding from those who are struggling. The tools that are used do not always represent the important features of good teaching. It is nearly impossible for principals, especially in large schools, to have sufficient time or content expertise to evaluate all of the teachers they supervise, much less to address the needs of some teachers for intense instructional support. And many principals have not had access to the professional development and support they need to become expert instructional leaders and evaluators of teaching. Thus, evaluation in its current form often contributes little either to teacher learning or to accurate, timely information for personnel decisions.

These problems are long-standing. They were obvious when my colleagues and I first studied teacher evaluation systems in the United States in the early 1980s.² As part of a RAND Corporation study, Arthur Wise, Milbrey McLaughlin, Harriet Bernstein, and I searched the country for effective evaluation systems and found the process rather like rummaging for the proverbial needle in a haystack. We discovered only a very few that offered opportunities for teachers to set goals and receive regular, useful feedback, along with systems that could support both learning and timely, effective personnel decisions.

There were some bright spots, like the then-brand-new Toledo Peer Assessment and Review model—a labor-management breakthrough that introduced intensive mentoring and peer evaluation for both novice teachers and struggling veterans, and that ensured serious decisions for tenure and continuation. Also noteworthy was the Greenwich, Connecticut, model of teacher goal-setting and continuous feedback—which involved teachers in collecting evidence about their practice and student learning long before this was fashionable elsewhere. Although the use of some of these successful models has spread, the broad landscape for teacher evaluation has changed little, and impatience with the results of weak systems has grown.

Today, teacher evaluation is receiving unprecedented attention, in large part because new teacher evaluation systems are a requirement for states and districts that want to receive funding under the federal “Race to the Top” initiative or flexibility waivers under the No Child Left Behind Act. As teaching has become a major focus of policy attention, teacher evaluation is currently the primary tool being promoted to improve it. Federal requirements include the use of multiple categories of teacher ratings, rather than just “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory,” based on multiple observations, feedback, and the use of student test scores to assess effectiveness. They also encourage the use of these evaluations to inform decisions about tenure and continuation, compensation, promotion, advanced certification, and dismissal. As a consequence, most states in the country are in the process of dramatically overhauling their evaluation systems for both teachers and administrators.

Although there is widespread consensus that teacher evaluation in the United States needs serious attention, it is important to recognize that changing on-the-job evaluation will not, by itself, transform the quality of teaching. For all of the attention focused on identifying and removing poor teachers, we will not really improve the quality of the profession if we do not also cultivate an excellent supply of good teachers who are well prepared and committed to career-long learning. And teachers' ongoing learning, in turn, depends on the construction of a strong professional development system and useful career development approaches that can help spread expertise. Finally, improving the skills of individual teachers will not be enough: We need to create and sustain productive, collegial working conditions that allow teachers to work collectively in an environment that supports learning for them and their students.

In short, what we really need in the United States is a conception of teacher evaluation as part of a *teaching and learning system* that supports continuous improvement, both for individual teachers and for the profession as a whole. Such a system should enhance teacher learning and skill, while at the same time ensuring that teachers who are retained and tenured can effectively support student learning throughout their careers.

This book seeks to outline how such a comprehensive system for the development, support, and assessment of teaching would operate if it were based on research and best practices currently found in the field. It also describes where reforms of teacher evaluation can go awry, by creating unmanageable systems, using tools that are not reliable measures of teacher effectiveness, or reinforcing isolation and competitiveness rather than joint work among teachers. Finally, it examines how the contexts for teaching must evolve so that teaching is supported as the collegial activity it must be to promote student learning.

Of all lessons for teacher evaluation in the current era, perhaps this one is the most important: that we not adopt an individualistic, competitive approach to ranking and sorting teachers that undermines the growth of learning communities which will, at the end of the day, do more to support student achievement than dozens of the most elaborate ranking schemes ever could.

The growth of learning communities will do more to support student achievement than dozens of the most elaborate (teacher) ranking schemes ever could.

Before we can build these more productive systems, however, we need to understand where most current schools are struggling and why. Understanding the source of the problems is key to finding the right solutions.

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT EVALUATION SYSTEMS

In a recent report on teacher evaluation,³ a group of expert teachers—the Accomplished California Teachers (ACT) network—identified these problems with many of the district evaluation procedures they had experienced:

- **Lack of consistent, clear standards of good practice:** The standards statements that attempt to guide teaching practice often list the elements of effective teaching but fail to elaborate what constitutes evidence of these, thus hampering accurate, fair, and reliable assessment of a teacher's work, and clarity about how to improve.
- **No focus on improving practice:** Discussion about ways to improve the quality of the teaching performance is very often left out of the follow-up conversation, if there is one.
- **Inadequate time and staff for effective evaluations:** In many schools, especially large ones and under-resourced schools serving high-needs populations, principals have little time or training for evaluation, and even less for teacher support.
- **Little or no consideration of student outcomes:** Most evaluations pay little or no attention to the performance of a teacher's students, and hence provide little advice about

how to support student learning. The ACT teachers noted: “As long as the class is well managed and *seems* to be on task, not much else matters.”

- **Cookie-cutter procedures that don’t consider teacher needs:** Evaluation procedures are typically determined by contract rules and seniority (with greater frequency for novices) rather than by teacher needs. There is little consideration of which teachers could benefit from being evaluated, how often, in what manner, and by whom.
- **Detachment of evaluations from professional development:** Evaluation is rarely used to help teachers access professional development to address their unique learning needs.

These teachers are not alone. In a survey of 1,010 teachers across the nation, researchers found that:

Teachers indicate that the most obvious technique used to assess teacher quality—the formal observation and evaluation—is not doing the job. In fact, only 26% of teachers report that their own most recent formal evaluation was “useful and effective.” The plurality—41%—say it was “just a formality,” while another 32% say at best it was “well-intentioned but not particularly helpful” to their teaching practice. Almost 7 in 10 teachers (69%) say that when they hear a teacher at their school has been awarded tenure, they think that it’s “just a formality—it has very little to do with whether a teacher is good or not.”⁴

In addition to the problems just noted, criteria and methods for evaluating teachers vary substantially across schools and districts, and these are typically disconnected from the ways teachers are evaluated at key career milestones—when they complete preservice teacher education, when they become initially licensed, and when they are tenured and receive a longer-term professional license. As a consequence, over the course of their careers, most teachers experience a cacophony of standards and directives—both in terms of *what* they are expected to teach and *how* they are expected to do so. In short, many states have no coherent system for evaluating and improving teaching, which makes it difficult to come up with

effective solutions to the problems of teaching practice we face. The ACT report observes:

The links between existing policies for preparation, induction, ongoing evaluation, and professional development are weak or non-existent now, and the result is a patchwork of programs that don't achieve the purpose of creating a system that ensures and promotes quality teaching at all levels of teacher development.⁵

As my colleagues and I found in our research nearly 30 years ago, and as I experienced as a high school teacher some years ago myself, most teachers want more from an evaluation system. They crave useful feedback and the challenge and counsel that would enable them to improve. Far from ducking the issue of evaluation, they want more robust systems that are useful, fair, and pointed at productive development. The ACT teachers noted:

We worry that the future of our young colleagues in teaching may not fulfill the promise we have dreamed of for our profession, where the highest consideration is given to teachers' important questions: "How am I doing?" and "What can I do better?" We want evaluation that offers answers to those questions, that paints a detailed picture of good teaching, that serves to guide professional development, and that lays out a clear, coherent path through a teacher's career where the expectation is for continual improvement.⁶

HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT THE IMPROVEMENT OF TEACHING?

Some proponents of teacher evaluation reforms have conjectured that if districts would eliminate the bottom 5 to 10% of teachers each year, as measured by value-added student test scores, U.S. student achievement would increase by a substantial amount—enough to catch up to high-achieving countries like Finland.⁷ However, there is no real-world evidence to support this idea and quite a bit to dispute it. (I discuss this evidence in later chapters.)