This article is for principals whose reading time is limited. In fact, many of you may just browse through the sidebars to glean information to put into practice. That’s OK. You’ve stopped at this article because you want to find useful ways to help teachers improve classroom assessment. You also may have stopped because it’s almost the middle of the year and you’re behind in your classroom observations. Finding ways to consolidate tasks and yet keep your school’s focus clearly on student achievement is a necessity.

Why focus on classroom assessment?

Most teachers say they develop their assessment knowledge and practices on the job. Teachers say they do not feel skilled in designing effective classroom assessments, and they would like to improve (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). In addition, most teachers say they develop their assessment knowledge and practices on the job (Mertler, 1999; Wise, Lukin, & Roos, 1991). Many new math and language arts curricular programs already include assessments for teach-
Assessment literacy

A study group could read the following books to develop assessment literacy:


Practitioners have notoriously limited knowledge and skill in using classroom assessment, and our teachers have no working knowledge of what to do with the results so far.” Grading is, in fact, the primary purpose of assessment among all levels of teachers (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). Yet classroom assessment is as critical as curriculum and instruction in improving instructional quality. If teachers spend half their professional time creating, administering, grading, recording, and reporting classroom assessments (Plake, 1993), that time ought to include instructional decision making, not just grading.

Supervision needs to focus on classroom assessment as it relates to instruction.

A principal can build a common focus on classroom assessment by embedding it into the school improvement process, developing assessment literacy among all school staff, and then incorporating classroom assessment into supervision.

Embed classroom assessment in the school improvement process

As Richard DuFour (2002) points out, principals who see themselves as learning leaders will promote teachers’ collaborative efforts to improve student learning. The principal’s role is to provide training, resources, and support for teachers to develop common outcomes, write common assessments, and analyze student achievement data. When classroom assessment becomes an essential tool in school improvement, teachers’ collective need and desire for assessment literacy increases.

Develop assessment literacy

Practitioners have notoriously limited knowledge and skill in using classroom assessment (Butterfield, Williams, & Marr, 1999; Mertler, 1999; Wise et al., 1991). For most school faculty, including the principal, the school improvement process provides a shared incentive to develop classroom assessment literacy. Principals can support assessment literacy by encouraging:

- **Training:** Formats range from summer institutes to district- and school-sponsored workshops to provide a knowledge base for further collaborative work.

- **Collegial support:** Form coaching or collaborative teams to facilitate the transfer of training to practice.

- **Reflective inquiry:** Encourage collaborative study and/or action research that focuses on classroom assessment or uses classroom assessment data to inform practice. One form of collaborative study is a book study. In whole-school, department, or grade-level groups, depending on the school’s size, a faculty may read, discuss, and apply classroom assessment principles as teachers read a book together (see recommended reading in box above). One variation is a jigsaw approach: One school’s staff development committee initiated a schoolwide study group by presenting the first chapter of a book in a panel format. Committee members then gave every teacher in the school a copy of the book, divided the faculty into groups, and charged each group with reading a chapter and preparing a presentation on the key concepts, including demonstrating how teachers in the group had applied the concepts in their own classrooms. Each faculty meeting was devoted to a group presentation and discussion.

Incorporate classroom assessment into a clinical supervision model

Along with helping teachers collaborate, skillful principals develop ways to support teachers’ individual growth. Individual initiatives may be part of what the district requires. Through a process of preobservation conferencing, observing classroom instruction, analyzing the lesson, and
post-observation conferencing, principals and teachers can engage in professional conversations that help teachers grow in knowledge and skill. Although the distinction between supervision and evaluation has sometimes blurred in practice, the initial goal of clinical supervision was to promote teacher professional growth (Acheson & Gall, 1999; Cogan, 1973; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Goldhammer, 1969). The supervision process provides principals with opportunities in every phase to help teachers become more competent in classroom assessment that relates to instruction.

1. Preobservation conference

How often, when the principal asks to observe a class, do teachers say, “Well, I’m giving a test tomorrow. How about Monday?” Principals typically don’t observe a class when the teacher is testing. Instead of choosing another day to observe, a principal can suggest that the testing plan be used as the basis for a preobservation conference. For example, a principal might ask the teacher to bring in a copy of the assessment for the principal and teacher to review together. Questions that might guide the discussion include:

- What is being assessed?
- Is the form of the assessment congruent with what is being assessed?
- What types of questions are asked?
- If higher-level thinking is a learning objective, does the assessment include higher-level questions?
- How do you expect students to respond?
- Do the questions and forms of response match the assessment’s purpose?
- What form will the assessment record take? Does that form match the purpose of the assessment?
- How will you use the results to make instructional decisions?

In preobservation conferences for regular classroom observations, principals can help teachers link assessment and instruction by asking questions such as:

- What is your objective for the lesson? What instructional strategies will you use?
- How did you use assessment to determine the objective or the strategies?
- How will you assess the learning?
- How do you plan to use that assessment in your instructional planning?

The preobservation conference helps teachers clarify the logistics of the lesson, fosters dialogue and communication, reduces the teacher’s anxiety, gives the teacher a chance to conceptually rehearse the lesson, and gives the principal a sense of how the teacher sees the impending lesson in the context of instructional objectives (Goldhammer, 1969). The preconference is also an opportunity for the principal to introduce classroom assessment as an important factor in the larger context of teaching and learning.

2. Observation

The observation lends another pair of eyes to what happens in the classroom. The observer’s goal is simply to describe what is observed, not to interpret or judge. Observation data can be gathered from listing categorical frequencies, diagramming, taking verbatim notes, and using performance indicators. Principals need to use the methods their district’s supervision system requires or those most appropriate for the observation purposes they have agreed on with the teacher in the preobservation confer-
ence. The data frequently will reveal areas the principal may want to explore with the teacher regarding classroom assessments and instructional decision making.

3. Analysis and interpretation

The principal must next make sense of the collected data and prepare for the post-observation conference.

For example, observations of teacher/student interactions may lend themselves to a post-observation conference that includes reflecting on classroom assessment by discussing:

- Written feedback;
- Peer assessment;
- Student self-assessment;
- Performance assessments;
- Student/teacher conferencing;
- Student writing;
- Reading-related assignments;
- Portfolio development;
- Student drawing, graphing, recording;
- Teacher data gathering during lab classes;
- Student products;
- Individual and group presentations;
- Wall displays of student work; and
- Posted charts of student achievement.

To promote professional dialogue, reflection, and growth, principals will find it helpful to prepare post-observation discussion maps, matching discussion questions with observation data. (See box above for examples from discussion maps.)

4. Post-observation conference

The post-observation conference is an excellent catalyst for teachers’ self-reflection and individual professional growth. Whether using a cognitive coaching model or a more traditional model, the principal’s primary goal is to ask questions that enable the teacher to reflect on his or her practice and to use those reflections to plan for growth. Preparation is important so the principal avoids asking questions that might make the teacher feel defensive. Ask open-ended questions that promote dialogue and criti-
The principal as lead learner

In a learning organization, the principal becomes the lead learner, not in the sense of becoming an expert who then imparts knowledge to teachers, but as the catalyst who keeps the school’s collective focus on learning and continually develops his or her own skills to facilitate others’ learning. Principals can position themselves as lead learners in the area of classroom assessment in several ways:

Learn with your staff.

Be an active participant in school and district professional development activities. By being present, visible, and engaged, you model expectations for the faculty in addition to acquiring the knowledge and skill that strengthen your expert power as a leader.

Learn with a mentor.

If you are a new principal, seek an experienced, respected principal who is willing to mentor you. Ideally, this will be someone knowledgeable about using classroom assessment for school improvement, skilled in classroom observation, able to come to your site periodically to do walk-throughs and observations with you, and willing to have you observe at his or her school. An excellent mentor asks questions that promote reflective dialogue. Your mentor may be someone in your own or a neighboring district. Time and distance do not have to be a barrier; I know of strong mentoring relationships that occurred primarily by e-mail. For example, a mentor can send e-mail suggestions about formal and informal assessment practices to look for during walk-throughs, critique a discussion map, or help you brainstorm ideas for engaging teachers in a study group on assessment.

Learn with a mentee or peer.

If you have an opportunity to work with an administrative intern, or if you have a professional peer willing to team with you, you might establish classroom assessment as a learning goal for both of you. Do a walk-through together, identify the ways in which you observe teachers using classroom assessments, and discuss your observations together. Seek a teacher who is willing to let the two of you work with him or her using the clinical supervision process described in this article. What better way to model continuous learning, as well as to increase your own knowledge?

Learn with your colleagues:

Increasingly, superintendents are establishing professional learning communities among administrators in order to keep a district focused on learning. If you have input into this process, suggest classroom assessment as a book study topic or as an item for professional discussion.

Learn at national conferences.

The national principal organizations, the National Staff Development Council, ASCD, and the National Middle School Association all sponsor comprehensive conferences featuring sessions on best practices. Look for opportunities to learn more about classroom assessment at these conferences.
each, like, “I like the summary,” and “That sketch is a good way to remember.” Tell me about the notebooks. What purposes do they serve for the students and for you?

By adopting a nondirective approach, a principal can use the post-observation conference to promote reflection and perhaps to inspire collaborative work with other teachers. This approach is consistent with the clinical supervision model and also respects teachers as professionals.

TAKING THE MODEL INTO ACTION

Here’s an example of how clinical supervision can support a teacher’s growth in classroom assessment competency.

1. Preobservation conference

Julie Sprague, a middle school teacher at Kasson-Mantorville Middle School in Kasson, Minn., invited me to observe her 8th-grade English class as students engaged in a Socratic discussion. In our preobservation conference, Sprague described process as well as content objectives; she wanted the students to examine the meaning of courage in their lives and to demonstrate discussion and listening skills. She had previously taught the students how to participate effectively in a discussion, how to listen, and how to ask questions to engage others. A veteran teacher and teacher educator, Sprague had acquired assessment knowledge and skills through extensive research study on alternative and authentic assessment during independent study for her master’s degree.

She had collected key questions the students wanted to discuss, and she had given them a rubric to use during the discussion. She had developed the rubric by researching what good speakers and listeners do and then asking the students, “What else are you doing that I need to comment on or be looking for to encourage and instruct you on being better speakers and listeners?” Many groups of students contributed to the rubric over time. She showed me the list she would use to assess students’ skills in demonstrating both content and process skills.

“I practiced and practiced and had many failures,” she told me later. “I almost always write rubrics with my students now. In fact, we wrote rubrics today for multiple intelligence structures. I wrote the content portion, but they all helped me write the structure of the presentation/project/paper.”

We agreed that I would sit next to
Assessing Elementary Techniques in the clinical

As they entered the room, students who wanted to participate in the discussion sat in one of six desks arranged in the middle of the room. Others sat in a semicircle, facing the middle group, with a checklist of their own to record strategies they observed. I sat next to Sprague, who had prepared a checklist for each student. During the discussion, she checked off behaviors she observed, writing specific comments as appropriate. When one student took the risk of describing some of her daily fears, Sprague jotted a note pointing out that the student had modeled courage. At the conclusion of the discussion, the observing students offered feedback and comments that indicated close listening and engagement in the activity. I was able to take notes on Sprague’s use of the checklist as a form of assessment and on the student learning behaviors I had observed.

Observation data that connected assessment with instruction: Student peer feedback, teacher use of rubric and written feedback; congruence between objectives and assessment methods

3. Post-observation conference

Sprague shared the successes and failures she had encountered on the path to this lesson, including the trials and errors in developing an assessment that matched her instructional objectives. We both commented on the high quality of the discussion, and Sprague reflected how she might develop future lessons that would engage other students in discussion. Clearly, assessment informed instruction throughout this lesson, and including it in the evaluation process highlighted the critical role it played in achieving learning objectives and establishing new ones. The conference concluded with a plan for Sprague to give a presentation at a future faculty meeting on the strategies she had used.

Post-observation discussion topics that connected assessment with instruction: Matching assessments with objectives, student outcomes documented by the assessment, feedback methods; using this assessment to set new objectives

IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

As James Popham (1999) says, “Teachers should never assess students without a clear understanding of what the decision is that will be informed by results of the assessment. The chief function of educational assessment ... is to improve the quality of educational decision making” (p. 8). Using clinical supervision to promote and support powerful instructional decision making can be one of the most rewarding aspects of the principal/teacher relationship. Working together, principals and teachers can increase classroom assessment competency and enlarge a school’s capacity to promote student learning.

REFERENCES


