A teacher and principal were meeting after the principal had conducted a post-observation conversation as part of the teacher's evaluation. As the two looked over the freshman algebra students' assignments quizzes, the teacher was distressed to find that at least half the students didn't know that a negative number multiplied by another negative resulted in a positive.

“This is horrible,” she said. “I keep going over this fact, but the kids just can't remember.”

As the two continued their discussion, the principal asked the teacher about next steps.

“After school today, I'm going to go poll my colleagues on how they've taught this concept,” the teacher said. “I don't want to wait for our next learning team meeting. I'd love to observe a successful lesson, but I want to try to re-teach this concept and reassess the students next week.”

The principal made a note to check back the next week. When he followed up in a brief visit to the classroom, he found that students overwhelmingly had remembered the rule on the quiz — and they were able to explain to him why the rule worked.

That kind of progress in a teacher's instruction is significant, said Jon Saphier, founder of Research for Better Teaching, who related this fictional example. The teacher's ability to assess student learning, analyze outcomes, and adapt instruction to meet student needs may not always

Continued on p. 4
Continued from p. 1
show up on a state standardized exam, but is a good indica-
tor of the teacher’s effectiveness, he said.

Principals who pay attention to different measures of
teacher effectiveness and hone their abilities to be effective,
objective observers provide more meaningful teacher evalua-
tions that promote teacher growth, experts say.

“It may be that by the end of the year, many of these
kids still are not at grade level in math, but there are five or
six things (the teacher) did that show (she’s) moving kids
from believing they don’t have the math gene to thinking
they actually could be competent in mathemat-
ics,” Saphier said. “And some may have decided
they can take a class in summer school to get
back on track with the college-bound kids.

“On a standardized test the state gives,” he
continued, “the students still may not do very
well, but other data show that teacher does get
student results.”

It’s up to the principal, Saphier said, “to
figure out what else to record besides numbers
to show evidence of the teacher’s ability to
impact student results.”

Saphier and Kim Marshall, a former Boston principal
who now works for New Leaders, a national nonprofit that
develops transformational school leaders, provided several
areas in which principals can concentrate to ensure a quality
evaluation that leads to teacher professional growth.

Unpack the rubric.

Principals can review the district’s evaluation rubric
early in the school year with teachers to develop a shared
understanding of how the district is defining good teaching,
Marshall said. Districts can help principals with this under-
standing as well, he noted.

Saphier said most teacher evaluation rubrics include a
large number of items, and principals would do well to dis-
cuss with staff what he called “five big rocks” in the assess-
ment to focus on at one time to avoid being overwhelmed.
As the principal and teachers look at these items, they
should talk about what each would look like in practice, he
said.

Marshall also suggested having teachers self-assess, and
then aggregating the results and using the information to
plan professional learning for the school year.

Move beyond state standardized test scores.

Rather than stressing about student standardized test
scores, Saphier said, broaden the definition of student
results. Decide alternative ways to represent student results,
such as the teacher in the example who showed professional
growth and understanding in adopting a new instructional
method that helped students on the classroom assessment.

Marshall pointed out that research has demonstrated that
student surveys are another source of valuable data, in
conjunction with student learning data from a variety of
sources and observations.

Have teachers provide data.

Teacher evaluation systems in some states require that
teachers provide their own evidence of student results. (See
“Students talk back: Opportunities for growth lie in student
perceptions” in The Leading Teacher, Winter 2013. Avail-
able at www.learningforward.org.) Saphier said principals
can use that approach to develop a clearer picture of teacher
effectiveness. The system lessens the burden on the admin-
istrator of finding evidence for each teacher and allows teach-
ers to come up with different ways to demonstrate their
effectiveness. The teachers “have to think about how they’re
making progress and what data don’t show up in tests—and
be the educator of the principal,” he said.

See daily practice — daily.

Announced observations create unnatural situations in
which teachers may spend too much time preparing the les-
on they think the administrator wants to see, according to
Saphier and Marshall. Frequent, casual observations, on the
other hand, give the principal a better idea over time of how
the classroom and teacher function routinely. Marshall said
the principal making daily routine visits to classrooms could
result in 10 or so short observations a year for a teacher,
allowing the teacher to become more comfortable with
making her practice public and enabling the principal to get
a broader perspective on the teacher’s abilities. “You’re not
scoring” the teacher in these observations, Marshall said.
“You’re forming an impression.” He said each visit, followed
by an informal, brief conversation with the teacher, is a
combination of supervision, coaching, and evaluation.

Saphier said time management and self-discipline are
essential leadership skills for getting into classrooms and
recommended trying to observe in three to four rooms each
day. Marshall said many principals could see each teacher
10 times in a year with visiting just two classrooms a day.

Both Saphier and Marshall recommended visits of at
least 10 to 15 minutes rather than shorter walk-throughs
in order to get impressions of individual teachers. Shorter
visits, they noted, can be useful to get a cross-section of
information about instruction throughout the school to use
to develop whole-faculty professional learning.

Saphier said principals can create a folder for each
teacher with notes jotted from these observations that can
be used at the end of the year to help with formal evalua-
tions. Marshall pointed out that the quick conversations

Continued on p. 5
The power of observation

continued

Develop observation skills.

“The most important thing for principals to do is to deepen their ability to observe teaching in all its complexity,” Saphier said. “That’s a long-term study. It doesn’t come from a six-module workshop your state puts out on evaluation systems. It means long-term and continuing professional development for principals on being an acute observer.” (See sidebar below.)

Both Saphier and Marshall said that part of observing means switching focus from the teacher to students and how they are learning.

“This is not short-term, easy work for very busy principals,” Saphier said. “You don’t get (these skills) by experience. There are certain things you can’t learn just by being thrown into the ring.”

He said those who supervise principals set the groundwork for ongoing, long-term principal development. Principals who don’t have support from the district level could form their own peer groups or use regular principals’ meeting times to focus on professional learning.

“When you have principals meetings once a month, do round-table case reviews or watch a video together and analyze it,” Saphier suggested.

“The biggest challenge,” he said, “is to not get hooked on compliance with the dizzying array of new regulations and to keep in mind the most important things for improving teaching and learning.”

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How to be an acute observer

- **Notice what’s important.** Saphier said principals need to study the rubric and have deep knowledge of exemplary teaching. They need to know what each skill looks like and sounds like in action, he said.
- **Know what to expect.** Marshall said principals who work closely with teacher teams in learning communities know what curriculum units are being planned and how learning will be assessed so they are more knowledgeable observers and prepared for what they will see when they go into a class. In addition, he said, when the principal is orchestrating the team process, teachers are analyzing data periodically throughout the year rather than waiting for annual test results to modify their practice to improve student learning — and principals get a better sense of what teachers need to learn and can target professional development.
- **Co-observe to develop skills.** Both Saphier and Marshall said observing along with another person — another principal, the coach, an administrator or the superintendent — and then discussing as observers what each saw helps hone individuals’ observation skills. Both said viewing videotapes and scoring them, then comparing notes is helpful. Marshall also suggested role playing with fellow administrators what the principal might say to the teacher.
- **Take literal notes.** Avoid opinions or generalizations, Saphier said. Notes should describe the “actual words that were spoken or a picture of the problem a kid just wrote on the paper or a description of the movement across the classroom,” he said. “It’s totally objective, nonsubjective data.” Learning to gather impartial data is a mindshift for many people, he said. The principal then uses that data to make a claim, such as, “You consistently boost kids’ confidence and focus on effort-based ability” and can present the evidence to support the claim, he said.
- **Avoid the iPad (and other technology).** Marshall said technology can distract from the principal’s ability to observe what’s happening in the classroom and diminish time available to interact, when appropriate, with students. “To be a good observer, you should have maybe a pad of paper,” he said. “Technology should be used for sharing unit plans and for documentation. But for the actual visit to the classroom and the conversation with the teacher, opt for low tech — a pencil, paper, and face-to-face conversation.”
- **Invest in professional learning.** Ultimately, becoming an expert observer who can analyze effective practice requires formal professional learning, Saphier said.