

THE LEADING Teacher

Inside

- Individual learning goals, pp. 5-6
- Advancing the standards, p. 7
- In practice, p. 8

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

LEARNING IS THE FOUNDATION FOR EVALUATION

RHODE ISLAND EDUCATORS BUILD TEACHER EVALUATION
ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Valerie von Frank

In a state divided into 39 municipalities, Rhode Island teachers found themselves with 39 different evaluation processes. A five-mile move from Providence to Pawtucket could mean more than a change in building and principal. Teachers could be judged on different criteria — if either district even used its evaluation.

That inconsistency in how teacher performance is examined, along with some districts' spotty use of evaluations (Jordan, 2009), led the state to revamp the way teachers are judged for their work, a trend across the country as accountability measures begin to home in on teacher quality. The state will begin this fall to phase in a new evaluation system.

What's different about Rhode Island, however, is that when some districts thought about the new system, teachers and administrators were together at the table to rewrite the criteria. And, the evaluations are based on solid grounding in research and standards for exemplary practice.



“We all need good feedback on our practice,” said Colleen Callahan, Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP) professional issues director.



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RHODE ISLAND EDUCATOR EVALUATION SYSTEM STANDARDS

Adopted in 2009, the standards state:

Standard 1: District evaluation systems establish a common vision of educator quality within a district through clearly communicated evaluation processes that build upon professional standards, emphasize professional practice, impact on student learning, demonstration of professional responsibilities, and content knowledge; and support district initiatives.

Standard 2: District evaluation systems emphasize the professional growth and continuous improvement of individual educators' professional practice to enhance student performance.

Standard 3: District evaluation systems create an organizational

approach to the collective professional growth and continuous improvement of groups of educators' (e.g., departments, teams, programs, schools) professional practice to enhance student performance.

Standard 4: District evaluation systems provide quality assurance of all district educators and differentiate evaluation processes based upon level of experience, job assignment, and information from prior evaluations.

Standard 5: District evaluation systems assure fair, accurate, and consistent assessment of educator performance.

Standard 6: District evaluation systems are an integral part of the district human capital management system and are supported by district educators who regularly review and revise the system in response to systematic feedback and changing district needs.

“The current system didn't provide that. Any evaluation system has to be designed for professional growth. What this (revised) system should do is give folks confidence that we have reliable information about the effectiveness of educators. Absent that, people make generalizations about all educators and blanket statements about teachers.”

Across the country, policy makers are reconsidering what teacher evaluations look like, with considerable debate over how to hold teachers accountable for student learning. With the press to use student standardized test scores as the main or sole measure of teacher effectiveness, few states or

systems have yet found a balance of measures that most would agree is a reasonable accounting. Fourteen states in the last two years have made evidence of student learning the main criteria for evaluating teachers, with several using test scores as more than 50% of the evaluation. The emphasis on student standardized test scores for evaluations and sometimes merit pay has led to several highly-publicized cheating scandals. Basing evaluations and in some cases bonus pay on teachers being able to raise scores has led not only to cheating scandals, but to divisions that research now says may hinder the

collegiality necessary for real reform — “the power of the collective” (Leana, 2011).

In six urban Rhode Island districts, the state teachers federation worked with district administrations over two years to come to a new agreement on how to examine teacher practice that incorporates the insights of both teachers and administrators. The RIFTHP is one of seven state unions to receive a grant from the American Federation of Teachers Innovation Fund, which, along with a federal Investing in Innovation Fund grant, supported the work of developing the evaluation.

Callahan said, “There have been lots of efforts to

involve practitioners on the periphery, but we wanted them to be involved at a leadership level in putting the system together.”

The new evaluation meets the requirements set out by the state department of education, which allows some latitude in how districts enact a revision so long as they have state approval. It is built on the state's approved professional standards for teaching, a significant aspect of the work, according to Callahan. The evaluation is aligned with state professional teacher standards (see boxes above and on p. 3), the state department of education evaluation system standards, and Charlotte Danielson's framework for quality teaching.

Danielson (n.d.) says quality teacher evaluation has several characteristics:

- Clarity about what is being evaluated, and good communication of those criteria to those undergoing evaluation. She notes that both teachers and evaluators are ideally involved in defining the criteria.
- Clear procedures for documenting performance.
- Trained evaluators.
- Differentiated procedures for novices and veterans, with additional support for newer teachers, multi-year evaluations for more experienced teachers, and required professional learning.

Teachers' evaluations should be reflective and not add on to their workload, Danielson says: “Whether discussing an observed lesson, or analyzing student work, or selecting samples of family communication to include in a professional portfolio, teachers engage in activities, as part of the evaluation process, that engage them in reflection and conversation about their practice. To the maximum extent possible, these activities also represent a ‘natural harvest’ (to borrow a concept from the National Board) of teachers' work; that is, what they do for their evaluation is not extra work.”

The Rhode Island federation plan focuses on student success by promoting continuous improvement of teacher

The linchpin in the system is professional learning.

— Colleen Callahan, Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals professional issues director.

THE RHODE ISLAND PROFESSIONAL TEACHING STANDARDS

The Rhode Island Professional Teaching Standards describe the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to ensure student achievement for each student. The Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the standards in 2007.

Standard 1: Teachers create learning experiences using a broad base of general knowledge that reflects an understanding of the nature of the communities and world in which we live.

Standard 2: Teachers have a deep content knowledge base sufficient to create learning experiences that reflect an understanding of central concepts, vocabulary, structures, and tools of inquiry of the disciplines/content areas they teach.

Standard 3: Teachers create instructional opportunities that reflect an understanding of how children learn and develop.

Standard 4: Teachers create instructional opportunities that reflect a respect for the diversity of learners and an understanding of how students differ in their approaches to learning.

Standard 5: Teachers create instructional opportunities to encourage all students' development of critical thinking, problem solving, performance skills, and literacy across content areas.

Standard 6: Teachers create a supportive learning environment that encourages appropriate standards of behavior, positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.

Standard 7: Teachers work collaboratively with all school personnel, families and the broader community to create a professional learning community and environment that supports the improvement of teaching, learning and student achievement.

Standard 8: Teachers use effective communication as the vehicle through which students explore, conjecture, discuss, and investigate new ideas.

Standard 9: Teachers use appropriate formal and informal assessment strategies with individuals and groups of students to determine the impact of instruction on learning, to provide feedback, and to plan future instruction.

Standard 10: Teachers reflect on their practice and assume responsibility for their own professional development by actively seeking and participating in opportunities to learn and grow as professionals.

Standard 11: Teachers maintain professional standards guided by legal and ethical principles.

practice. It includes three strands: observation of teachers' practice, professional development with an emphasis on support for those not meeting goals, and a measure of teachers' impact on student learning.

Under the union plan, teachers will set a professional practice goal and undergo both a formal and informal observation. They will receive feedback in a pre- and post-observation conference. Each teacher will be rated highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective on a rubric that involves both student learning measures and professional practice.

The measurement of student learning, according to Callahan, will include not only state standardized assessments, but local assessments and student learning objectives from class work, such as end-of-course exams. Teachers may use portfolios to help gauge growth.

The linchpin in the system is professional learning, Callahan said. The system is designed to give teachers feedback and support to improve, an essential component of a quality process, according to Danielson.

Callahan said leaders have been working intensely to roll out the system by providing training to principals and other potential evaluators, as well as teachers, to understand the new criteria. The state federation has created video exemplars of pre- and post-conferences around classroom observations so all involved can see what to expect. As the new plan is enacted, teachers can expect professional development to be more specifically focused on their needs, based on classroom observations, she said.

"We are going to make sure that professional development is in place," Callahan said, particularly for teachers who need support to move from developing to effective. Teachers whose evaluations are less than adequate have two years to improve or face sanctions.

"It is absolutely critical that an evaluation system is designed to give teachers the information they need to do the job better," Callahan noted. "We need deeper professional development aligned with what we know about best practice. This is a rigorous system. It's not a drive-by, and it's not a gotcha."

In Cranston, local union president Liz Larkin said early professional development is focused on helping math and literacy coaches, principals, and department chairs understand what is required by the evaluation and how to gather the needed evidence of student learning. Cranston will have a four-part session to help educators learn about the evaluations and how to write individual SMART goals for their own professional development.

Larkin, a 7th grade social studies teacher, said, for example, that she has always begun unit lessons with some sense of what her students know and need to learn. Under

Learning Forward BELIEF

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ARTICLES

Teacher evaluation:

An opportunity to leverage learning at all levels

The Learning System, Fall 2010

This issue on teacher evaluation includes tools for exploring and discussing how teacher evaluations align with professional learning.

www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=317

BRIEFS/REPORTS

Getting Teacher Evaluation Right

September 2011

This brief for policymakers, from the American Education Research Association and National Academy of Education, offers an insightful overview of why value-added models are highly unstable and unreliable and offers other, more reliable, approaches to teacher evaluation.

www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Gov_Relations/Getting_Teacher_Evaluation_Right_summary_brief-FINAL.pdf

A summary presentation is available here:

www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Gov_Relations/AERA-NAE_briefing_Combined_Slides_FOR_PRINTING.pdf

WEBSITE

The TAP System's Lessons Learned for Designing Better Teacher Evaluation Systems

This report's web page from the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching offers links to the full report, a summary outline of ten recommendations, and panel discussion video.

www.tapsystem.org/newsroom/newsroom.taf?page=whatsontap&_function=detail&id=112

the new system, however, she is creating a checklist and pre-assessment for each quarter's instruction to reach the SMART goal she set.

Rhode Island's multipart evaluation system may be a model for teacher involvement in revamping how educator evaluation occurs.

"We did not want this to be a punitive measure designed to weed out bad teachers, but a system to help assess which teacher practices are good and which could be improved and then to provide support and professional development," said Frank Flynn, RIFTHP president.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten praised the system in a news release, saying, "To ensure we help all children, schools need a valid evaluation system that assesses teachers' effectiveness and gives ongoing



TEAM TOOLS

www.learningforward.org/teamtools

With each issue of *The Leading Teacher*, Learning Forward provides free sample tools from our books, newsletters, and magazines. Selections for this issue:

• Walk-through group feedback form
Tools For Schools, August/September 2006

Teams can use this tool for classroom visits as a strategy for collecting information about practices.

• Individual goals for learning
The Learning System, October 2007

The tools in this issue can assist team members in asking guiding questions to set goals for professional growth by aligning goals to student learning needs. (Available on p. 5)

• Individual learning plan
The Learning System, October 2007

This tool can help teachers develop their own individual learning plans that are aligned to both school and districtwide student learning goals. (Available on p. 6)

• Four-step reflection process
Teachers Teaching Teachers, February 2006

Teams can use this tool to assist each other in reflecting and debriefing on taught lessons.

support and assistance to improve teaching and learning. This is what the Rhode Island plan will do."

References

Danielson, C. (n.d.). *New trends in teacher evaluation.* Available online at <http://charlottedanielson.com/articleEvaluation.htm>.

Jordan, J.D. (August 6, 2009). R.I. Regents to bolster teacher evaluation. *The Providence Journal*.

Leana, C.R. (2011). The missing link in school reform. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

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