

# THE LEARNING System

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

## Inside

- Serve up a pie chart to illustrate investment in professional learning, p. 2
- Disjointed professional learning calls for building a strong foundation, p. 3
- Tool: Learning-focused conversations, pp. 6-7

Summer 2012

Vol. 7, No. 4

## THE ART OF FEEDBACK

Support observers with a system that ensures  
learning-focused conversations

By Anthony Armstrong

**W**hen Jeffery Pestrak, chief academic officer for Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia, Pa., was assigned as a principal at a struggling school in need of turnaround, he quickly discovered that providing observational feedback to teachers was more complicated than he first imagined. “I would give the teachers feedback about their practice, and they might value it or they might not. Sometimes they would flatly disagree with what were best practices or what was getting results with students. I realized at that time that I was observing and giving feedback without conveying what I would be valuing.”

This type of disconnect about how to define quality instruction is just one of many complex considerations for feedback that Pestrak has addressed over the years. Now, in his role as chief academic officer, Pestrak understands the importance of creating an effective feedback system and makes it an important part of Mastery’s three-day coaching institute every summer. Mastery also conducts other observation learning throughout the year. These include calibration events, where observers make sure their feedback is consistent from one person to the next, and peer leader-



ship reviews that bring observers from different campuses together to conduct a simultaneous observation and share their feedback with each other.

### START AT THE SYSTEM LEVEL

For Laura Lipton, co-author with Bruce Wellman of *Learning-Focused Supervision* (in press) and co-director of MiraVia, a publishing and professional development company, effective feedback is learning-focused, complex, and an integral part of a learning system: “Feedback that

*Continued on p. 4*



Your membership in Learning Forward gives you access to a wide range of publications, tools, and opportunities to advance professional learning for student success. Visit [www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org) to explore more of your membership benefits.

*Continued from p. 1*

leads to growth and improvement is data-driven, is based on shared definitions and understandings between parties, acts as a foundation for conversation, and sets goals and improves practice by naming strengths and gaps in relation to a clear set of standards.”

Professional learning leaders often draw distinctions between coaching feedback and evaluation feedback, citing the need for coaching feedback to be nonjudgmental and unattached to the pressures and consequences of an evaluation process. However, the systemic foundation and framework for both types of feedback are almost identical for Lipton. “Whatever the label is, they both have to have a preponderance of types of evidence that substantiates descriptions of practice,” she said. “You can be an evaluator and still have a learning-focused conversation that produces greater learning, forward movement, and problem solving. It is a matter of clarity of purpose and skillful communication.”

**“Feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. If these conversations are done well, they will shift the culture to start having data-driven, inquiry-based conversations between colleagues about improving practice.”**

These conversations are often sources of anxiety for those receiving the feedback, so *how* the feedback is delivered is as critical as *what* is being delivered. According to Lipton, this anxiety comes from being judged on one’s frailties or weak points and can hinder the learning and improvement process. “This is why skillfulness in providing feedback needs to be deep and sophisticated,” explained Lipton. “Evaluators need to believe that they are growth agents. They need a developmental mindset that tells them the purpose of the feedback is not to judge or be the end of a conversation. Feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. If these conversations are done well, they will shift the culture to start having data-driven, inquiry-based conversations between colleagues about improving practice. This shift gives everyone permission to give each other feedback and ask tough questions about what’s happening in the school.”

#### **BUILD A SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

According to Lipton, feedback is only as good as the

opportunity to make meaning from it and apply that meaning to the receiver’s own practice. To do that, Lipton says, the relationship between the giver and receiver of feedback needs to be clearly developmental and growth-oriented. This means there is a culturally shared belief that everyone can move forward to improve practice, and the feedback conversations establish a baseline and clarity about desired

growth and desirable practice. “The system’s values can be conveyed clearly and modeled congruently by the system leader and others,” said Lipton. “The on-the-ground person can be clear by naming some of the outcomes of the conversations, the use of feedback, the desired qualities of the supervisor-teacher relationship, etc.

“Strategizing together helps the receiver increase capacity to self-monitor and self-modify — based on the same set of standards. This way, the language choices made by the evaluator become the internal talk of the teacher.”

While coaches will often cite the need to establish strong relationships first before providing feedback, Lipton feels that it is possible to relate to someone in a way that helps them feel safe and emotionally secure, if one pays attention to the psychological and emotional aspects of providing feedback. Learning skills to establish psychological and emotional safety is critical for engaging in these types of conversations, said Lipton, and feedback providers should learn how to use verbal and nonverbal practices to demonstrate an underlying belief in the exploration of practice.

“If you look at the neurology of the brain,” Lipton explained, “people shut down and do not have the capacity for complex thought when they feel threatened. This can happen if they feel they are being judged, or if they think that the evaluator feels they are not up to the task. To prevent this, the evaluator must learn to avoid questions that can be threatening. Inquiries must be exploratory and not have a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ dynamic. For example, when the evaluator asks, ‘Can you think of...’ the question itself expresses the potential doubt that the receiver can think of something. Instead, the question can be phrased as ‘What might be some ways to...’ which invites exploration of the topic at hand. Instead of asking ‘What might be *the* cause of...’ which implies that there is one right answer, one could ask

*Continued on p. 5*



*Continued from p. 4*

‘What might be *some* causes of...’ which implies that there is more than one correct answer.

“Therefore, the feedback giver is continually making intentional choices about verbal and nonverbal communication that leads to creating an environment of emotional safety, which gives the receiver the capacity to have cognitive complexity in the conversation.”

## PROVIDE SUPPORT

Pesttrak understands the importance of making sure teacher evaluators are skilled in providing high-quality feedback and builds it into the system’s professional learning schedule. “We do a significant amount of training on providing feedback and conducting observations and coaching,” said Pesttrak. “During our summer institute, Molly Eigen, our deputy chief academic officer, who is the brains and execution behind our coaching model and training, makes sure our coaches also study effective teacher practice, conduct modeling and norming activities — where we compare observation notes from different observers, review data to look at trends, review teacher thoughts on coaching and observations, and examine input from the supervisors of our observers.”

To provide coaches and other observers with a solid foundation for delivering quality feedback, Mastery starts with the links between instructional models, coaching, and evaluation and how that alignment drives professional learning for teachers. “At the core of our instructional system is our instructional standards document,” said Pesttrak, “which we use to drive induction, orientation, and ongoing professional development for teachers. When our coaches coach, everything they use comes from it, such as observation tools, targeted feedback, and classroom visits. Everyone knows what expectation is — what we consider quality instruction.”

The summer learning Pesttrak provides is then supported throughout the year. “Everyone has a supervisor who provides coaching and support. They co-observe, calibrate, and review observations. We also have regional directors and directors of teacher coaching that can support principals and assistant principals as well. We routinely collect formal observation data, look for trends, and talk with people about what we see in the data. We will have assistant principals and principals from several schools gather in one school to co-observe one teacher. They will record and review their observations collectively. We might also watch videos of teachers to calibrate our observational practices. So there is this constant conversation about the feedback that administrators and coaches provide to ensure they are

improving and in alignment.”

Helping facilitate these constant feedback conversations, said Pesttrak, is Mastery’s value-based culture. “We have a culture of open doors where teachers and administrators talk to each other. Everyone should feel comfortable in talking to each other. One of our values is straight talk, which means that we should be able to talk with each other in a direct and nice way.”

Mastery schools use formal observations that are based on their five instructional standards and require both a rating and a narrative. “We have our observers rate the teachers on each of our five instructional standards and the accompanying specific strategies we expect to see being used to implement the standards,” said Pesttrak. “The observers then write comments for each that form a narrative of the observation, like ‘The lesson was conveyed clearly and was highly focused. Could use more checking for understanding and cold calling.’”

Because Mastery’s instructional standards and expectations are the basis for observation and feedback, the process is assured alignment, a common language, and clear goals for moving forward. “All of our professional development, induction, teacher coaching, and performance-based evaluation system is directly tied to our instructional standards,” said Pesttrak. “The ideal that we work towards is transparency as to what the observer is looking for; training to prepare the teacher for such an instructional approach; agreement among all that those key standards and focus areas are valued; and the confidence that our observers know how to evaluate. These have all contributed to our improvements in practice and gains in student achievement.”

According to Lipton, the importance of ensuring that evaluators can provide the right quality of feedback and deliver it with psychological and emotional skill cannot be overstated. “Without high-quality feedback, people will stagnate — there will be no growth. When people engage in rich conversations, it changes the culture to one of collective efficacy. Shining spots of distinguished practice are not enough to produce rich learning for all kids. Teachers and administrators need to talk with each other, learn, be willing to learn, and see each other as resources so that we are all moving forward in improving practice.”

•  
**Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor at Learning Forward.** ●

## Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

See  
 pp. 6-7 for  
 tools that help  
 structure feedback  
 conversations.