

THE LEARNING System

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Evaluations serve as pathways for professional growth

Teacher-led teams help build evaluation system that promotes learning

By Valerie von Frank

For teachers in at least six New York districts, evaluations mean a lot more now than a piece of paper filed away in a manila folder in the main office. These educators are using evaluations to mark the path of professional growth in a new system created *by* teachers *for* teachers.

The New York State United Teachers association began work that would lead to the Teacher Evaluation and Development system, known as TED, even before the 2009 Race to the Top and the federal School Improvement Grant programs spurred district and state initiatives across the nation to overhaul how teachers are evaluated. Teams of teachers and district administrators from six districts — Albany, Hempstead, Marlboro, North Syracuse, Plattsburgh, and Poughkeepsie — came together over several years to research and design a new strategy, supported by grants from the American Federation of Teachers and the U.S. Department of Education.

The intent, according to Carolyn Williams, educational services and project coordinator for New York State United Teachers, was to involve teachers in creating evaluations that would develop into meaningful dialogues and plans for continued professional learning. Past evaluations, she said, had not provided constructive feedback that teachers could use to take action.



“There was clear agreement that the old teacher evaluation system had no impact in terms of helping teachers in their practice,” Williams said. “Most teachers received no support to develop their own effectiveness and capacity.”

The teams set out to transform the old system of evaluation that involved sole administrator observations, what some termed “subjective drive-by evaluations,” to more comprehensive, meaningful reviews that involve multiple measures of teacher performance and are designed to promote teacher learning and growth.

“TED’s strength is that it brings practitioners in to analyze their own practice, which is the critical component to making instructional shifts,” Maria Neira, the union’s vice president, said in a statement.

DEVELOP AN APPROACH THAT DRIVES IMPROVEMENT

Williams said the first need before developing a differ-

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ent evaluation was to have clear standards to define effective teaching. Existing professional development standards were “not anchored in a coherent definition of what teachers need to know,” she said.

With clear, common standards for effective teaching, and using research and the input of noted national experts, the union’s teams then created a rubric for evaluation that meets state requirements for performance reviews. The research-based evaluation tool was field-tested and sets out specific, measurable, observable behaviors that demonstrate effective teaching practices.

When evaluations are done well, they can drive teacher improvement (Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2011). The evaluation and development system’s developers say the system clearly links evaluation to professional learning by asking not only, “How well are you doing?” but then having teachers ask themselves, “How can I improve?” The system integrates meaningful, targeted professional learning, goal setting, and career development into the evaluation. The system’s handbook (NYSUT, n.d.) states, “TED defines evaluations not as culminating events, but as stepping stones to continual professional development” (p. 13).

A good evaluation system should not only measure a teacher’s effectiveness but also help improve the teacher’s ability to be effective, researchers say. “Professionals take charge of their own growth and development by constantly seeking to strengthen teaching effectiveness and the quality of their teaching and that of their colleagues” according to Cogshall et al. (2012, p. 14), who go on to define well-designed evaluation systems as:

- Helping teachers and school leaders develop a common understanding of effective practice and performance expectations.
- Providing evidence-based feedback to teachers to help them reflect on and improve their practice.
- Measuring and accounting for teachers’ learning and collaboration.

The evaluation and development system works to ensure a process that advances teacher growth — and thus student learning — through a cycle that includes self-reflection, pre-observation and classroom observation, dialogue, and individualized professional learning.

ESTABLISH CONSTRUCTIVE SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection begins with a teacher self-reflection in which the teacher analyzes her own practices, objectives, and beliefs, usually in writing, to discuss with an evaluator and peers. Teachers complete a form as the groundwork for

setting goals. Questions include:

- How do my plans for this year reflect the specific needs of my incoming students?
- How has any recent professional learning informed my understanding of teaching and learning for this year?
- Are there any professional development strategies or opportunities that might be especially appropriate for my professional growth needs in this academic year?
- Based on my self-reflection, what adjustments do my goals or professional learning plan require?

INCLUDE MULTIPLE MEASURES

The second phase includes a pre-observation conference with the evaluator to talk about the teacher’s self-reflection and his or her lesson plan, student learning objectives, and instructional strategies for the lesson to be observed. The teacher and evaluator discuss how these elements relate to specific teaching standards. Only after the teacher and evaluator have discussed the preparation does the evaluator observe in the classroom.

The process requires at least one formal observation and a second observation that may be formal (including pre- and post-conference discussions) or informal. The evaluator collects evidence during the observation, such as teacher and student interaction, procedures, pacing, instructional and questioning strategies, and so on. Evaluators receive extensive training in what data to collect and how to structure meaningful conversations about the evidence. They practice and their results are compared with other raters to generate inter-rater reliability.

In a post-observation conference soon after the observation, the teacher and evaluator review and discuss student work and the success of the lesson. They may review other evidence. Teaching artifacts might include lesson plans, unit plans, teacher presentations, slide shows, diagrams, reflective journal entries, parent contact log, action research projects, surveys, interviews, survey data, discipline data, or other documentation (photography, audiotape, videotape, transcripts of student presentations). The teacher and evaluator analyze areas of strength and areas for growth, then plan next steps.

The evaluator prepares a report that summarizes the evidence of the teacher’s practice, meeting with the teacher to discuss scores and the rationale for each. The state requires teachers to be given a composite score based on a 100-point scale:

- **60%:** Multiple measures of effectiveness from the first phases of the process.
- **20%:** Student growth on state assessments or a comparable measure of student growth (increased to 25% if a value-added growth model is used).

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Learning Forward BELIEF

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- **20%:** Other locally selected measures of student growth or achievement (decreased to 15% when a value-added growth model is used).
Teachers are rated highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective.

CREATE INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS

The teacher and evaluator use the information they have gathered to create an individual professional learning plan that lays out what learning opportunities the teacher may have to advance her practice, with individual goals tied to school and district goals.

The plan outlines specific professional learning and how it will be documented.

This goal-setting allows individuals to differentiate based on their needs. Some teachers may need to focus on areas for growth if they had lower scores, while others who were rated highly effective may build on areas of interest.

The teacher and evaluator meet after the formal observation to talk about the teacher's progress toward individual goals, and may meet more often as needed. The evaluation report also details the teacher's work toward meeting individual learning goals.

INCORPORATE EVIDENCE-BASED FEEDBACK

Feedback from evaluations helps create more meaningful learning experiences for teachers. Good evaluations can guide and support professional learning (Curtis & Weiner, 2012).

McGraw describes the evaluation and development system as akin to having a physical. She said the data gathered describe the condition of teaching at the moment, and the next step is to review what actions will benefit the individual's current "health."

"Professional development provides the treatment plan" for individuals, she said. "We craft the professional development around what is needed as opposed to using big brush stroke professional development where we just say, 'Everybody come.'"

"We have a system that's linked to student achievement," Williams continued. "Districts are going to have to think differently about their professional development. It's how you take the information (from the evaluations) and help teachers to grow and develop that is what TED is all about. We are always going back to what this means in terms of professional development and how well we ensure that this is a growth-producing system."

BUILD ON TRUST

John Kuryla, president of the North Syracuse Education Association, said beginning to use the new evaluation

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Goe, L., Holdheide, L., & Miller, T. (2011, May). *A practical guide to designing comprehensive teacher evaluation systems.* Available at www.tqsource.org/publications/practicalGuideEvalSystems.pdf.

The New Teacher Project. (2010, October). *Teacher evaluation 2.0.* Available at <http://tntp.org/publications/issue-analysis/teacher-evaluation-2.0>.

TeachPlus. *Teachers' views on measuring effectiveness: Principles for implementation of state and district reforms.* Available at www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1294359253_Aspen%20NLNS%20brief.pdf.

"wasn't all roses," because of the amount of planning and packaging involved. Still, he said, the reliability of the results and the emphasis on teachers' learning rather than a punitive system make the challenges worthwhile.

"All of this work is predicated on trust," Kuryla said. "It's not a gotcha system intended to highlight areas of deficit and use that to destroy the ineffective."

Teacher Dearl Topping, who participated in the group developing the evaluation, is a veteran teacher in A.B. Schultz Middle School in Hempstead (N.Y.) Public Schools. On a United Teacher's video about the system, she said the new evaluation is beneficial.

"It gave me a feeling of: This should have been in place a long time ago," Topping said.

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