The power of observation: 5 ways to ensure teacher evaluations lead to teacher growth
Principals who pay attention to different measures of teacher effectiveness and hone their abilities to be effective, objective observers provide more meaningful teacher evaluations that promote teacher growth.

Unpack the rubric

• Review the district’s evaluation rubric early to develop a shared understanding of how the district is defining good teaching.
• Discuss with staff where to focus.
• Talk about what each element of the rubric would look like in practice.
Move beyond test scores

• Broaden the definition of student results.
  • Student surveys
  • Student learning data
  • Observations
  • What else?

Have teachers provide data

- Teachers in some states provide their own evidence of student results.
- Have teachers think about how they’re making progress and what data do not show up in tests.

See daily practice, daily

- Announced observations create unnatural situations.
- “You’re not scoring the teacher…You’re forming an impression.”
- Follow each visit with an informal, brief conversation.
- Get a cross-section of information about instruction throughout the school to develop whole-faculty professional learning.

Develop observation skills

- Notice what’s important.
- Know what to expect.
- Co-observe to develop skills.
- Take literal notes.
- Avoid technology.
- Invest in professional learning.

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 lead to the best results. 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 to explore more of your membership benefits.
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