

**PRINCIPAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHER GROWTH**

- **CREATE** a shared vision of classroom practices before school starts.
- **PROTECT** professional learning community time.
- **ALLOCATE** funds for substitutes.
- **SUPPORT** teachers who get an ineffective rating.

# FROM 'GOTCHA' TO GROW

HOW PRINCIPALS PROMOTE LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHER EVALUATION

## HOW DO YOU SUPPORT TEACHERS THROUGH THE EVALUATION PROCESS?

**"Teachers are allowed to make decisions about their visions, and opportunities are provided so teachers can take risks and grow and learn from mistakes. This is not a 'gotcha.'"**

— High school assistant principal

**By Janice Bradley**

**I**mplementing teacher evaluation systems across the United States has created both challenges and opportunities to improving teacher quality.

Lessons learned at the state level illustrate a wide range of challenges with system implementation, including value-added growth scores, implementation timetables, and human capital demands (McGuinn, 2012), but what are we learning about teacher evaluation at the school level?

During a recent professional learning session, a group of K-12 teachers reflected on their interactions and experiences about campus principals and teacher evaluations. This question launched the conversation: *"How is the principal promoting your professional growth using teacher evaluation?"*

From that came this exchange:

**A: It depends on the principal.**

*Q: What do you mean?*

**A: The principal either talks with teachers like evaluations are a "gotcha" or a "growth."**

*Q: What is the difference between "gotcha" and "growth"? What does that sound like?*

**A: "Gotcha" means that my principal finds everything wrong during the evaluation and tells me to improve. "Growth" means that I know what my strengths are, yet there is room for improvement. Also, there are opportunities at school to learn to get better. I'm encouraged and hopeful and know I'm not alone.**

What principal actions and behaviors cause teachers to perceive evaluation as "growth," not "gotcha"?

When several teachers described teacher evaluation as a growth place at their school, it was time to dig deeper



into how principals intentionally promote the creation of a culture that supports teachers' growth.

After interviews with four principals and two teachers at each school, two themes emerged:

1. Supportive conditions exist for professional growth; and
2. Teachers are empowered to choose learning designs connected to the classroom.

Let's look at the actions of principals who structured schools to create supportive conditions for teacher growth aligned to the evaluation system and empowered teachers to make decisions about selecting learning designs. Their words and actions are real, although the names are not. From this, we can identify the effects of those actions in the classroom.

Principals' actions are supported by research on effective principals (Fullan, 2014) and from the Leadership and Learning Designs standards of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

#### **CONDITIONS FOR GROWTH**

Principals who got it — meaning they supported teacher growth — recognized that if teachers were to become ef-

fective as defined by their state's teacher evaluation rubric, they needed to create structures for job-embedded professional learning, along with developing whole-staff capacity for shared ownership in the teacher evaluation process.

Strategies included creating a shared vision of classroom practices before school starts, protecting professional learning community time, allocating funds for substitutes, and supporting a new teacher who received an ineffective rating after her first evaluation.

#### **Create a shared vision.**

Christina Valant, an elementary principal, activated teachers' core beliefs and values by asking at the beginning of the year, "What are five practices that should be in every classroom every day to support student learning?"

Teachers individually wrote five practices on sticky notes, shared with a small group by clustering everyone's sticky notes into themes, and agreed on the five practices at small table groups. Each table posted its practices, then

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staff came to group consensus on five.

Practices whole staff believed should be in every classroom every day included:

- High levels of student engagement;
- Language-rich environment including content vocabulary;
- Use of high-level questioning by both students and teachers to elicit evidence of understanding;
- Development of problem-solving and thinking skills; and
- A collaborative learning environment where students are respectful and have ownership of their learning.

How did teachers know that the five practices from their beliefs and experiences were the ones that support student learning? Teachers aligned the five practices with the teacher evaluation rubric's effective/highly effective indicators and discovered that every one of the five practices was described in three domains: planning, learning environment, and instruction.

"Teachers were asked what they valued first, then aligned their core beliefs and experiences to the teacher evaluation rubric," Valant says. Staff co-created the schools' shared vision, then embedded professional learning aligned with teacher evaluation into the school — an action exemplifying the Leadership standard (Learning Forward, 2011).

### Protect professional learning community time.

Marissa Becker, assistant principal at a high-performing high school in a high-poverty rural district, said the most important action she took to create supportive conditions was to protect teachers' professional learning community time. External forces, such as school scheduling and district restructuring, threatened common time for the math department to continue meeting weekly in its professional learning community.

"Amidst constant change and new initiatives, the professional learning community served as a growth place over several years, allowing the math teachers to take charge and grow as a group," she said. "The professional learning community is the one place teachers can learn, reflect, and move forward."

Becker protected the structural conditions, time, place, and resources for the math department to meet, one of the research-based dimensions of professional learning communities as well as the Learning Communities standard (Hord, 2009; Learning Forward, 2011).

### Say yes to substitutes.

Valant and Maria Kaldas, also an elementary principal, granted teacher requests for substitutes to engage in learning designs connected to the classroom despite minimal funds.

"When the teachers asked for substitutes, we made that happen and did not say no," Valant says. "The staff genuinely loves learning and getting into each other's classroom with a purpose. It is exciting for them and for us as administrators."

Kaldas said, "Teachers love to get to see each other at work and to learn from each other. You have to draw on innate teach-

ers' passions, abilities, and beliefs. Teachers need to be encouraged to develop on a positive note. They must have passion and spark and something to get excited about in the current system. It's hard for everyone right now, and we have to support the teachers."

In a context of mandates and directives, Valant and Becker said yes to teachers for time to collaboratively design lessons, share lesson enactment in the classroom, collect data (artifacts of practice such as student work, iPad pictures, and anecdotes), and analyze student data to assess student understanding of the standards.

These principals maintained a persistent focus on teacher professional learning as indicated in the Leadership standard as they enabled teachers to have time to learn in the instructional core (Learning Forward, 2011; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

### Support teachers who get an ineffective rating.

Carla Stenson, an elementary principal, gave a rating of "ineffective" to Alesia Soltero, a first-year teacher, on her first evaluation. In order to support the teacher, Stenson requested that Soltero participate in a school-based professional learning design where the grade-level team planned a lesson, one teacher facilitated the lesson while other teachers observed, then reflected and revised the lesson based on students' engagement.

Soltero observed, learned strategies, then practiced in her class. One week later, her next evaluation received a minimally effective rating — one level forward with room to grow.

What would have happened to Soltero's self-confidence and motivation toward teacher effectiveness had Stenson not provided her with support to learn how to teach differently? As a supporter of professional learning, Stenson applied her understanding of human needs to create the conditions for Soltero to be successful, an action supported by the Leadership standard (Learning Forward, 2011).

### TEACHERS' CHOICE

Principals intentionally structured their school to align job-embedded professional learning with the teacher evaluation domains and empowered teachers to select learning designs where they could develop a deeper understanding of effective practices in a collaborative setting with peer and coach feedback.

Teachers selected a learning design at the beginning of the school year based on where they could learn to be effective or highly effective on one of the five agreed-upon practices aligned with teacher evaluation domains.

A menu of nine learning designs — co-created by teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and a university partner, and informed by the work of Lois Easton (2008) and the Learning Designs standard — was offered to staff.

Teachers selected a design and committed to implementing two design cycles — one in the fall and one in the spring before

the state testing window, totaling nine to 12 hours of focused, job-embedded professional learning.

A collaborative design cycle consists of one hour planning, one hour enacting in the classroom, and one hour assessing or reflecting on results. Design choices included:

- Studying video with application;
- Vertical team study;
- Collaborative planning, teaching, and assessing;
- Lesson study;
- Peer teaching;
- Intentional practice with feedback;
- Using technology;
- Creative and innovative teaching; and
- Sharing classroom learning with teachers, coach, and principal.

As a result of participating in two cycles of the vertical team learning design, Cathryn Minson and Bobbi-Lyn Davila, two of six 1st-grade and kindergarten teachers who participated in vertical team study, say they recommend vertical team to others. “Vertical team allows for focused conversations, develops a shared goal with the team, and gives us an opportunity to learn and see practices aligned to teacher evaluation that we put into practice with other teachers,” they report.

Valant, the principal, says, “Teachers have choices as to what and how their learning takes place. I saw teachers selecting learning designs as a way to connect professional development to teacher evaluation, put it in the classroom, and sustain that learning over time so we can see the effects in the classroom and with students — the place where you want to see the biggest impact of professional development.”

Using the Learning Designs standard for direction, teachers’ choices of learning designs promoted active engagement in their own learning, meaning teachers interacted with focused content and learned collaboratively with one another.

### IN THE CLASSROOM

Using evidence from classroom walk-throughs and formal teacher evaluations, principals and teachers are seeing changes in the classroom, specifically focused on the five practices chosen by staff at the beginning of the year.

For example, one elementary principal says she sees higher levels of student engagement from the team engaged in the vertical team study design, where teachers intentionally studied strategies through case studies and video that promoted student-to-student discussion.

Another principal observed more frequent use of higher-level questioning during lessons from the group studying and intentionally practicing questioning strategies. The high school assistant principal observed students using more content vocabulary in their small-group math interactions.

An instructional coach says, “Our principal supports giving teachers the confidence to know that they can be effective, and

we are seeing changes in their teaching.”

A 2nd-grade teacher reports, “We are spending more time studying videos from our lesson study and learning how to differentiate and make changes for students.”

### PRINCIPALS ARE KEY

In the current context of teacher evaluation, principals serve a key role in shifting the punitive “gotcha” school climate to a culture of growth and excitement for teacher learning by creating supportive conditions so teachers develop confidence and competence as effective educators.

Principal actions supporting teachers include:

- Begin the year with teachers creating a shared vision of what should be in every classroom every day;
- Honor teacher professionalism by aligning their five practices to the teacher evaluation rubric;
- Protect time for teacher collaboration;
- Empower teachers to select learning designs; and
- Structure school so teachers have time and resources to implement the designs.

Teacher evaluation is well-intentioned, with visions of promoting teacher effectiveness, yet implementation of new teacher evaluation systems can be stressful and anxiety-producing for educators at all levels of a school system.

Teacher evaluation is also imperfect, complex, and evolving and may not be the quick fix to ensuring there is an effective teacher for every child. Yet there exist knowledgeable, thoughtful, and compassionate principals who design schools so teachers can learn deeply, passionately, and meaningfully.

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