



## Here's another opportunity to talk about teaching

Teachers are in the spotlight. More than ever, people know how important teaching quality is to a student's learning experience.

Not surprisingly, the conversation about teachers isn't all necessarily productive or supportive. Recently, *Time* magazine stirred up quite a furor with its cover of an apple about to be smashed by a gavel, accompanied by the words, "It's almost impossible to fire a bad teacher."

While the article that the cover promoted could be part of an important conversation about teacher quality, the cover image contributed to what is already a tense atmosphere around how we talk about teachers. So what if, instead of talking about teachers, we talk about teaching instead?

We know that teachers are implementing new student standards — often while using new curriculum resources. We know they're concerned about upcoming assessments and striving to use technology in meaningful ways. And they're juggling all of this, as they always do, with myriad daily demands that are part of each day in a school.

So it's no wonder that teacher evaluation is a hot topic. Districts across the country are implementing or developing new evaluation systems

•  
**Tracy Crow ([tracy.crow@learningforward.org](mailto:tracy.crow@learningforward.org)) is director of communications for Learning Forward.**

for educators. Within this issue, you can read about systems that are finding ways to use evaluation to support teacher improvement. You'll also learn about strategies for how to approach evaluation so that feedback is useful and leads to deep learning.

When we look at examples of schools and districts that are able to turn evaluation processes into learning processes, we see one commonality even as different districts use different systems: Deep learning happens when educators have an opportunity to talk openly and frequently about teaching.

What if, when we talk about teacher evaluation, teacher quality, or teacher professional development, we reframe the conversation to how to improve teaching, not how to fix teachers? Let's talk about the act of teaching, and let's get really specific in those conversations.

When principals observe teachers in helpful ways, when coaches support job-embedded growth, when learning teams discuss a lesson, the possibilities for improvement happen when the discussion turns to the specifics. For example, when one teacher uses questions that have particular qualities, more of his students engage and respond, and their participation seems to have a positive impact on subsequent student work. What would it take for that teacher to ask those kinds of questions consistently? What does he need to understand to be able to use that strategy at the appropriate times in differentiated ways for particular



students? What skills will help him apply his knowledge of this strategy in other relevant situations?

To have those kinds of precise conversations, we need to consider and address many factors, whether in contexts that are labeled as evaluative, developmental, or collaborative. Such conversations happen most reliably when participants have trust, time, common language, shared goals, access to student data, and supportive supervisors and coaches. Comprehensive learning systems that are integrated with other district departments are essential to creating environments where talk about teaching can happen habitually.

Finally, talk about teaching is most meaningful when coupled with talk about learning. Effective teaching, by definition, leads to learning. That measure is always part of the equation if teaching talk is achieving its ultimate purpose. ■