PARTNERS
WITH A PURPOSE

**DISTRICT AND TEACHERS UNION CREATE AN EVALUATION SYSTEM
THAT NURTURES PROFESSIONAL GROWTH**

By Kathleen Pham and Amanda Heinemann

What is — or should be — the purpose of a teacher evaluation system? To compare teachers? To inform the public? To help teachers improve?

Legislators might say that a teacher evaluation system's purpose is to remove bad teachers. Administrators might say that it is to assist them in matching teacher skills to specific groups of students. Parents might say that it is to provide information about a particular course. Teachers might say that it is to increase their effectiveness in the classroom.

As states and school districts experience the growing pains of changing their evaluation systems, determining the purpose of the teacher evaluation system is essential.

When we started our positions as peer reviewers in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, we decided to explore this idea. We found interesting research on the two purposes of teacher evaluation. "An evaluation system that fosters teacher learning will differ from one whose aim is to measure teacher competence," says Robert Marzano (2012).

This analytical statement provides the foundation for our thinking about the role of peer reviewer. While some legislators and administrators might say that an evaluation system's purpose is to measure teacher competence, we disagree. To illustrate, we present Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Instructional Performance Evaluation and Growth System, which is an example of a teacher evaluation system that integrates professional learning.

HOW IT BEGAN

Miami-Dade's teacher evaluation system is the result of a joint effort between the district and the local teachers union. The two organizations have worked together over the last nine years to create, pilot, and implement the system.

The vision for teacher evaluation was to move from the former system, which included an extensive checklist, to a standards-based system that includes both student achievement and teacher reflection. That proactive thinking put the district, for better or for worse, into the forefront of the national movement toward using test scores to evaluate teachers.

Originally designed to uphold its main purpose of increasing teacher effectiveness, the new system also included student learning measures to satisfy those who wanted to use

the system to evaluate teachers. The purpose was further complicated by legislative mandates, but as much as possible, both the school district and the union have worked to maintain the new teacher evaluation system as a tool whose primary purpose is to nurture professional growth.

WHERE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FITS IN

Professional learning comprises the core of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Incentives for Highly Effective Administrators and Teachers (iHEAT) program, funded by a Teacher Incentive Fund grant.

The district's 26 peer reviewers work with teachers at nine schools to help align their practice with the educator performance standards in the teacher evaluation system. The overall goal is to improve student outcomes. Peer reviewers facilitate professional learning in five ways: individual job-embedded instructional coaching, professional learning communities with an instructional focus, lesson studies with focus on student thinking and learning, instructional strategies workshops, and official observations.

Two aspects of the iHEAT program distinguish it from other coaching models or peer assistance programs. The first is that the informal coaching is totally teacher-directed. The participating teacher decides on an area of focus for professional growth, and together the teacher and peer reviewer determine the type of collaboration and support that will occur. Other coaching models include required elements generated by the district or school. No such mandates exist in this program. The second distinctive aspect of the program is that all teachers in these schools — not just new teachers or those in need of assistance — are eligible to participate.

Once teachers elect to participate, they receive informal coaching and an official formal observation from a peer reviewer. The informal coaching takes many forms. With early career teachers, the focus is often on the basics, such as monitoring student learning or developing meaningful lesson plans. With more experienced teachers, the focus may be on incorporating appropriate technology or increasing student engagement. The informal coaching serves to help teachers elevate their practice and also helps teachers prepare for the official teacher evaluation observations.

PREPARATION FOR THE iHEAT PROGRAM

At the school we serve, the iHEAT support team consisted of three peer review teachers, one each with certification in English, math, and science. The peer review teachers received extensive training in topics such as coaching, the teacher evaluation process, data analysis, facilitation skills, Common Core State Standards, district professional learning guidelines, adult learning principles, professional learning community practices, and protocol use.

Teachers were enticed into iHEAT participation with incentives for participating in professional learning and receiving highly effective ratings. When teachers opted in, they agreed to allow peer reviewers to conduct one additional formal observation beyond those required by the teacher evaluation system. The goal was to convince teachers to become more transparent in their practice.

After peer reviewers' initial conversations with the faculty and then with the 54 teachers who opted into the program, they divided the group into three teams of 18 teachers each. Participants engaged in written surveys, group meetings, goal-setting reflective writing, and one-on-one oral interviews to begin the coaching and support.

PEER REVIEWER PERSPECTIVE

A primary form of professional learning throughout the year is the informal teacher-directed coaching cycle (i.e. preobservation conference, observation, and post-observation conference). When a teacher is ready to invite a peer reviewer into the classroom, the teacher and peer reviewer decide on a time for the observation, a specific focus, and a data collection process.

With each teacher, the peer reviewer collects and analyzes the data and creates a data display. The data display is used during the post-observation coaching conversation, where peer reviewer and teacher decide together on strategies and practices that may be added or modified as a result of the data.

Peer reviewers' coaching doesn't always take the form of a structured coaching cycle, yet the goal is still to improve teachers' professional practices. The work can also be less structured and more organic, timely, and relevant, with impromptu professional conversations at meetings, in the parking lot, and in the lunchroom. Whether structured or organic, peer reviewers' intent is to help teachers understand the standards by which they are evaluated. The teachers are then equipped to demonstrate their highest level of effectiveness during an official formal observation.

In addition to coaching, peer reviewers work with teachers to improve their practice through other professional learning experiences. Professional learning communities, lesson studies, instructional strategies, and workshops exploring the teacher evaluation standards are all part of the process. Each teacher engages in a thorough review of the teacher evaluation process to gain an understanding of what observers look for during a formal observation.

Reflecting on the peer review process this year, peer reviewers conducted formal observations after moving through several informal coaching cycles with each teacher. Peer observations went smoothly, in part because teachers understood clearly what was expected.

Peer reviewers documented evidence of the standards and then provided specific, timely feedback, helping teachers strengthen their practice. The teachers expressed appreciation for the time peer reviewers spent observing and providing feedback.

Because the principal will use peer reviewers' formal obser-

vations as official documentation during teachers' summative evaluations, the challenge was to objectively capture effective classroom teaching practices. Peer reviewers operated with the understanding that more knowledge and better skills would lead to a highly effective rating.

As peer reviewers, we also believe that skills are developed over time if teachers are given the opportunity to try out new strategies in the classroom. By the time the formal observations occurred, the teachers with whom we had worked throughout the year were comfortable having us in their classrooms. They were confident that they understood the standards and trusted us to gather objective evidence about their practice in relation to the standards.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Professional learning communities

Professional learning communities were a positive learning experience for participants, who cited the goal-oriented focus of the work, shared leadership, and equity in participation. The professional learning communities focused on the four observable standards in the evaluation system: knowledge of learners, lesson planning, instructional delivery and student engagement, and learning environment.

The following teacher comments demonstrate the depth of learning that took place over time.
- "I am more aware of student differences and target the lessons toward different abilities and learning styles."
- "My students are taking more responsibility for their learning."
- "I have learned that some students take longer so I have to be aware of different abilities and levels. I also incorporate [the teacher evaluation system] into my lesson planning."
- "I implement more cooperative and team-building strategies, and I've learned what to do if students do not grasp an abstract concept. Now I use different strategies to reach students."
- "I now know how to get students working together to do projects and drawings. I want to interest all students and address various learning styles."
- "The smaller setting was especially helpful for updating my resources and techniques."
- "I feel that the professional learning communities provided teachers an arena where they could discuss and evaluate the many issues that they face in the classroom."
- "Working with contemporaries, I was able to see practices from different angles."
- "I was able to refine practices, adapt, and learn how to use strategies properly to interest and engage more students from all levels."
- "Now I know how to create a more project-based learning environment."

Lesson study

Another activity that contributed to teachers' professional growth was **lesson study**. The following comments from participants indicate the depth of reflection and growth that can occur when teachers are provided the time and opportunity for collaboration.
- "I learned how to do a lesson plan and was able to see how a detailed structure can help the teacher cover the most important points according to the group that you are working with."
- "I became more mindful of including ways students can reveal their thinking as well as delivering instruction and assessment to see if there is student growth."
- "The lesson study was more directed toward instruction than systemwide professional development. We had the chance to directly interact, ask questions, and discuss with the instructor and fellow colleagues."
- "In the discussion time was when we actually learned. As a result, my students are more engaged."

Informal coaching

The **informal coaching** cycles have also had a positive impact on the participants' teaching practices:
- "Having an iHEAT peer reviewer is like having an ally."
- "The feedback is important as I can use it to improve weak areas. Positive feedback is also good. It helps pinpoint things that I am doing well so I can do them a little more."
- "By the time the formal observation rolled around, I had a sense of what I should be doing. I appreciated the objectivity and felt confident since I knew it was not going to be an 'I'm going to get you' experience."
- "Since we had already been working together and had a trusting atmosphere, I had a good feeling about my colleague conducting the formal observation. I wanted to show what we had been learning. I knew [the teacher evaluation system], techniques, and my course content."
- "The one-on-one meetings to look at data have been very

way of teaching as the single best approach for all subjects, grades, and student populations.

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Inspire learning, not dread

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formation system that seeks feedback as a fundamental way of doing business. This requires that professionals understand that coming to know is a shared journey, not a fixed destination.

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helpful. We are able to analyze data that are specific to my class."

- "The experience was not negative, but it provided corrective measures that I needed. You need a flexible, open mind to advance learning and teaching skills."

- From a first-year teacher: "I came into teaching with these ideas about how I would be very lecture-based and students would keep these big notebooks. But I have learned a lot. I have kept the lecture format, but I have implemented strategies that make them more responsible for their own learning. And students have taken more of an interest in the class because they get the hands-on experience and they are learning for themselves instead of just having someone tell

them what to do."

These examples show that a teacher evaluation system with improving teacher effectiveness as its purpose and professional learning as its core can be successful at nurturing professional growth and fostering increased student learning.

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