TURN ON THE LIGHT

OBSERVATION TOOL CONNECTS TEACHER PRACTICE WITH STUDENT LEARNING

By Lori Renfro

Tiffany Baldwin, 1st-grade teacher in the Alhambra Elementary School District in Phoenix, Arizona, stood in front of her class ready to begin a language arts lesson that would assist her students in understanding the word "adventure" by comparing and contrasting characters within a story.

She felt fully prepared. She had identified a possible misconception the students might have about the word, and she had a backup plan in case the lesson didn't go as anticipated.

As the lesson progressed, Baldwin realized that most of the class was struggling to understand the concept, and she immediately implemented her backup plan. She repeated the definition, showed additional examples, asked her students to think about a ride they had been on and how it made them feel, and asked specific questions to guide their thinking.

As the lesson concluded, they had a new understanding of the word "adventure." Her backup plan had worked.

Baldwin knew how to plan for possible student misconceptions because of her district's implementation of a new growth-oriented teacher observation tool. The tool

Studying the Learning Observation Instrument in 2011 were, from left, Veronica Vasque and Brenda Catlett from the Tolleson Elementary School District in Tolleson, Arizona.

Photo by JOHN LUTZ

helps communicate the message: *"This is what we believe is effective instructional practice, and we will support you in developing these competencies."*

The Alhambra district, along with 11 other districts in Maricopa County, have forged an alliance to implement a performance-based evaluation system that supports teachers in attaining, maintaining, and enhancing core competencies aligned to a common vision of instructional improvement.

At the heart of the system is the Learning Observation Instrument, co-developed by Maricopa County Education Service Agency and six Maricopa County school districts as part of the Rewarding Excellence in Instruction and Leadership initiative funded by a U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund grant.

Teachers in these school districts participate in four to five observation cycles over the course of a school year and engage in professional learning focused on the Learning Observation Instrument. After four years, the districts have surpassed state requirements for teacher evaluation processes and procedures in order to reduce the gap between professional learning goals and student outcomes.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Beginning in fall 2010, the districts worked together to establish a first draft of the Learning Observation Instrument. Two big ideas guided the work: The instrument had to provide a picture of effective teaching that aligned with Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards, and it had to effectively measure educator and student performance in order to support teacher professional learning.

What instructional practices would the observation tool include? The developers examined existing district instruments, reviewed other instruments and resources from the field, and collected input on effective instructional practices from teachers and principals.

InTASC's Model Core Teaching Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011) served as standards outlining what effective teachers should know and be able to do. Guided by these standards, the group created an observation tool that includes 21 elements organized in five rubrics (content, formative assessment, instructional strategies, learner engagement, and learning community), with an optional professional responsibilities rubric.

In addition, these elements contain descriptors aligned to six performance levels to show increasing levels of proficiency.

The observation tool's dual role — as a tool to guide the teacher observation process and as an instructional framework to support day-to-day classroom instruction and student learning — has an added benefit. As teachers learned the skills articulated in the instrument, their

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instructional autopilot disengaged, turning the planning process into job-embedded professional learning.

The observation tool pushed teachers to a new level, requiring them to understand and articulate the lesson content and select formative assessments that supported monitoring student progress.

Feedback is an essential part of the process. At the end of each observation cycle, the evaluator identifies specific elements teachers can focus on in order to move to higher proficiency levels. At least twice a year, teachers participate in observation cycles with an external peer evaluator who provides content-specific feedback.

Evaluators — including central office staff, building-level administrators, and peer evaluators — participated in 60 hours of professional learning, including 30 hours in the field, to prepare for their role. Teachers also engaged in professional learning before beginning the process and received ongoing support at school.

IMPLEMENTATION

In 2011-12, the first year of implementation, partner districts increased observation cycles, with most teachers going from one observation to participating in two to three observation cycles over the course of the year.

In 2012-13, teachers participated in four to five observation cycles per year, with peer evaluators conducting two to three of those cycles.

Maricopa County Education Service Agency staff supported implementation by creating a lesson planning framework, an objective writing template, and professional learning modules aligned to elements from the observation tool that could be used in the field. These include scripts, slide presentations, workbooks, and videotaped classroom teaching episodes.

Peer evaluators and master educators also conducted school-level and grade-level information sessions and workshops based on the needs of individual educator groups. Building-level administrators and peer evaluators received ongoing support in observing and conferencing with teachers.

Throughout implementation, building-level administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers collaborated to understand the observation tool elements in individual, small-group, and whole-group settings.

In many schools, staff engaged in professional learning focused on specific elements. For example, Isaac School District

principal Kendra Moreno and her staff used data from instructional rounds to identify teacher-to-student interaction as their instructional focus for the year and ensured teacher professional learning focused on how to elicit student participation, ensure mandatory participation, and ask questions that require covert thinking and extended responses.

Teachers also worked individually and together in grade-level teams to grapple with observation tool elements. Tiffany Baldwin worked early during implementation to make sense of the student-to-student interaction element: "When it came to the discussion or conversation between my students, the Learning Observation Instrument encouraged me to find ways for my students to interact effectively with one another," she says. "I incorporated activities that held each student accountable for their individual role in their work. I also organized partner roles to be very specific to each student, so that my proficient students could accomplish a more difficult task as opposed to my developing students."

Baldwin realized she could pay specific attention to subgroups — not just to identify them, but also to interact with them effectively. She increased the time she spent on guiding questions, vocabulary, sentence stems, and how certain words or phrases might change based on the individual level of students.

Grade-level and content-area teams also worked together to discuss the observation tool elements and incorporate them into practice. Nadaburg Unified School District teacher Holli Taylor says that her 1st-grade team worked on how to include more cross-curricular content into daily lessons. They also delved into the instructional approach element in order to make improvements to their lesson delivery.

In the Tolleson Elementary School District, a 6th-grade team used the observation tool to look differently at data, examining performance relative to subgroups and individual students and possible misconceptions of students.

In the Isaac Elementary School District, Pueblo Del Sol's 1st-grade team used the observation tool to break down content into subobjectives and plan higher-order thinking questions. In Alhambra, the district's physical education teachers, concerned that the observation tool was not aligned to their instruction, engaged in content-specific professional learning to understand how the instrument's elements could measure the effectiveness of their instruction.

Observation cycles, coaching sessions, and professional learning with peer evaluators were essential parts of implementation. April Castillo, field specialist for Nadaburg Unified School District and Tolleson Elementary School District, witnessed the impact of teachers and peer evaluators working together to become fluent with grade-level content standards and implement new classroom techniques. One example: In Nadaburg, a peer evaluator worked with a teacher to implement a system that would help students gauge their interactions with each other in order to increase expectations and help students realize their individual roles in collaborating with each other.

Theresa Hullihan, a peer evaluator specializing in music instruction, works with teachers who have participated in little, if any, professional learning differentiated for their content area. In spring 2014, a post-conference session resulted in a light bulb moment for a music teacher when she realized she had assumed that a critical subobjective was taught in the general education class. Because of this, students weren't making progress on the lesson objective, and many had even moved backwards. At the post-conference, the connection between student progress data and critical subobjectives that needed to be part of the lesson became clear.

Since implementing the observation tool, teacher practice has changed. Peer evaluator Julie Waters says, "Some veteran teachers were used to a 'teach the unit, give the test, and move on' kind of philosophy. Now teachers are preassessing students and doing informal assessments along the way."

District field specialist Amanda Jelleson says the preconference process has had an impact on teacher planning. "Teachers are considering many more factors now when planning a lesson," she says. They consider data such as preassessments, literacy levels, student work, standards, and observational artifacts.

Building-level administrators have used what they learned to better support teacher planning. Isaac School District principal Kendra Moreno found she was having difficulty articulating the meaning of an element of the instrument to teachers. "It wasn't until I witnessed a teacher explain how her student achievement data influenced her lesson and assessment selection that I realized how to prompt teachers to reflect on this element," she said.

CHALLENGES

Implementing the Learning Observation Instrument hasn't always been easy. Some teachers questioned whether the observation tool applied to their assignments. Teachers voiced concerns about the number of observation cycles, knowledge of evaluators, inclusion of peer evaluation, and the establishment of inter-rater agreement, and these became ongoing opportunities for dialogue and strategic support.

Many teachers struggled with receiving specific feedback for the first time in their teaching careers, and many administrators wondered if the instrument would be able to be successfully integrated into daily practice. Implementation also competed with other district initiatives, including the rollout of Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards.

All of these challenges have been or are in the process of being addressed. Superintendents, central office staff, and building-level administrators have joined together as part of a large-scale learning community to attend cross-district meetings and professional learning in order to support implementation. They have also worked to streamline initiatives and make connections for teachers, leaders, and governing board members.

Peer evaluators, who have conducted more than 4,700 observation cycles and provided content-specific feedback, have established relationships with teachers and principals. Building-level administrators understand that the observation tool has to become part of teachers' daily experience. Moreno explains, "To assist the teachers in internalizing the instrument, we planned professional development, informal classroom walk-throughs, and a lesson plan template all designed to encourage daily implementation of the rubrics and elements."

NEXT STEPS

Maricopa County Education Service Agency is working with districts to identify and develop resources so that all educators have access to just-in-time professional learning that fits their schedules. This includes videos of classroom instruction that allow educators to see footage of teachers exhibiting the instructional practices outlined in the observation tool.

Educators can also access online modules on the Maricopa County Education Service Agency website. Beginning this year, all teachers have developed educator goals based on their evaluation results, which will take individualized professional learning to the next level.

FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning state that the "primary goals for professional learning are changes in educator practice and increases in student achievement" (Learning Forward, 2011). Implementing a performance-based evaluation system meets these goals using strategic design as a professional learning process.

The essence of this is best articulated in the Learning Designs standard, which says that "learning designs that engage adult learners in applying the processes they are expected to use facilitate the learning of these behaviors by making them more explicit" (Learning Forward, 2011).

The evaluation process includes components that help teachers develop instructional practices to better meet student learning needs — including those students who are above grade level.

Tracey Lopeman, principal of Alhambra Elementary School District, noticed that when teachers were striving to create assessments at the correct level of difficulty, they were compelled to identify and account for all existing levels of proficiency. "More than ever, teachers are finding avenues to increase complexity and heighten critical thinking for all students because of this emphasis."

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

The instrument's post-conference elements, student progress and analysis of instruction, have contributed to student learning.

In the past, observations focused heavily on teachers rather than on student progress. Now, for a teacher to score at the proficient level on student progress, the post-conference needs to include evidence that 95% or more of students demonstrated

progress on the lesson objective.

To get to the highest level, 95% or more of students need to meet the lesson objective. For analysis of instruction, teachers have to identify strengths and weaknesses of the observed lesson, based on analysis of student work. Teachers come to the post-conference prepared to identify effective steps for increasing student learning for the next instructional episode, and, to get to the highest level, they have to speak at the individual learner level.

By making explicit the connection between teacher actions and student learning, evaluators and teachers are beginning to see individual, group, and classroom-level growth. Lupita Hightower, superintendent of the Tolleson Elementary School District, says, "When the teachers implement the elements from the Learning Observation Instrument, they are seeing immediate impact on student learning."

Student achievement data tell the story as well. At the beginning of the program, large numbers of students were not meeting Arizona's state standards. Since then, students have made steady progress. In 2012-13, participating districts met all of the established student achievement targets that are reported to the U.S. Department of Education as part of the Teacher Incentive Fund grant.

This intentional focus on student academic progress advocates for professional learning that leads to increased student learning, which directly aligns to Learning Forward's Outcomes standard. Jessica Karolevitz, a 6th-grade teacher in the Tolleson Elementary School District, says, "It was a light bulb moment when I planned for a specific student and it helped my Learning Observation Instrument score — and I saw the difference in my student's success."

REFERENCES

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Lori Renfro (lori.renfro@mcesa.maricopa.gov) is assistant superintendent for human capital management systems, Maricopa County Education Service Agency. ■