

# Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION: EXCELLENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EVERY DAY

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# Lesson observations and peer feedback

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Educators experience many benefits when they invite colleagues to observe lessons and offer feedback. This peer learning practice capitalizes on and amplifies the expertise that exists in a school and develops educators' self-reflection skills in a non-evaluative environment. The practice also brings another pair of eyes on instruction without the added pressures of a supervisor visiting the classroom. Such open exchange of ideas and perspectives empowers teachers to collaborate and be active participants in the school learning community. Finally, when colleagues are vulnerable and open their classrooms to each other, they authentically model for students that their teachers are learners too.

Teaming up and taking turns as observer and observee can improve the skills and strategies of all educators involved. The observee identifies a specific area for growth and hears the feedback of a trusted peer. The observer shares experiences and resources and acts as a thought partner to address tricky spots in instruction. In turn, the observer sees another classroom in action. Just that simple act alone, a rare opportunity for most teachers, gives observers new ideas and insights for their own students and instruction. Observers also experience taking careful notes and giving feedback, actions that can inform work with students and valuable practice for those interested in moving into a formal leadership role.

At the same time, the practice of being observee one day and observer on another can present some challenges. It's important that educators teaming up for this practice have open and honest communication about what their expectations are — what they hope to get out of the observations, in addition to anything they don't want

to happen. In addition, at first glance some schools may not have the schedule flexibility to allow for peer observation. Colleagues may need to work with administrators and/or specialist teachers to arrange to engage in peer observations, get coverage for classes, or adjust schedules.

The tools and steps that follow can support any educators eager to work hand-in-hand with colleagues to improve their practices. These were developed as part of a project for mentor teachers and have been adapted here for less formal peer learning contexts. (See box below for more information about the project.)

### Step 1: Plan

To begin, decide who will first observe and who will be the observee, knowing that both educators will get a turn to experience each role. To set up the observation and feedback process for success, participants will establish expectations together. There are several key components that help a classroom observation and debrief conversation go smoothly.

Start by confirming the day and time of the observation, including how long the observer will stay in the classroom. It is also helpful to establish ahead of time where the observer will sit during the classroom visit. The observer should be close enough to the action to see and hear everything and interact with the students if appropriate, but shouldn't become a distraction to the students. The observer should be familiar with the lesson he or she will observe as well as the lesson's instructional goal.

In addition, the observee needs to identify the specific skill or instructional practice he or she is hoping to improve. This will help the observer to focus on what matters most to the teacher. For example, the teacher being observed may want some feedback on providing wait time after asking

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questions. This helps narrow the focus of the observation for the observer and sets the observer up to prepare “look-fors” ahead of time. The observer may need to do some research about the focus area before the observation to understand what matters most for the focus area and know what to look for.

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More students achieve when educators assume collective responsibility for student learning.

The observer will also confirm with the observee what data to gather during the observation such as student work, notes on student discussion, video, and so on. This data collection will support the debrief conversation by providing concrete evidence for study and discussion. Discuss the importance of the trust within this collegial partnership and decide what, if anything, to keep confidential

to enable authentic growth. Together, confirm a day and time for a debrief conversation. It’s ideal to talk within 48–72 hours to ensure that the lesson is fresh in both colleagues’ minds, the observation notes and feedback shared are still pertinent, and support can be provided as soon as possible.

#### Step 2: Observe

Next, the observer will watch the teacher in action with his or her students, writing down notes. Prior to the observation, the observer completes the focus and “look-fors” sections of the observation tool based on the collegial planning conversation. Writing out the “look-fors” ahead of time will guide the observer in looking for evidence and data to help determine the colleague’s strengths and areas of need in the focus area. The observer uses his or her own knowledge and research to determine 3-5 best practices to look for in the focus area during the observation by answering the question, what does strong teaching for the focus area look like?

For example, if the observee wants to practice providing wait time after asking questions, the observer may jot down such “look fors” as, the teacher waits multiple seconds before repeating or rephrasing a question, pauses after a student answers the question so other students can process the answer and add on or ask their own questions, waits longer for questions that require higher-order thinking, and gets responses to questions from a wide variety of students.

During the lesson, the observer will record notes for these “look fors” in the teacher and student behavior sections on the tool. The notes should focus on recording exactly what the observer hears and sees from the teacher and students and be free from inferences or judgments. The observer may need multiple copies of this tool depending on how long the observation lasts and the quantity of notes. The observer should stay close to the action to



Learning Forward is supporting more than 2,000 mentors across the state of Louisiana through a partnership with the Louisiana Department of Education and the University of Texas Charles A. Dana Center. Learning Forward is designing and facilitating learning sessions and developing tools focused on effective coaching and mentoring practices. Participants are experienced classroom leaders who will mentor new teachers in best instructional practices to support the implementation of high-quality English language arts and math curriculum.

watch carefully and ask questions of students while they’re working, if appropriate. Remember to look specifically for evidence or lack of evidence of the focus of the observation.

The observer will also have a richer and more complete understanding of their colleague’s strengths and areas of need if they can borrow the student work from the lesson to analyze alongside the observation notes.

#### Step 3: Analyze

After the lesson, the observer will review observation notes and student work to determine the most helpful feedback for the presenting teacher. The observer will highlight and make additional notes, preferably in another

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Do	Don't
Stay close to the action	Hang back and miss what's happening
Watch carefully and ask questions of students while they're working	Jump in to "fix" this one lesson
Look specifically for evidence of the focus of the observation and when it occurred	Take unfocused notes on a range of topics
Record exactly what the teacher and students say and do	Only write down things that fit a preconceived idea or jump to judgments

color so that the notes are clear and easy to reference. This feedback will focus tightly on the agreed upon area of focus, including evidence or lack of evidence on the particular "look fors" noted for the focus area. The observer may find other areas for discussion, but staying focused will be more useful and actionable for the observer and will honor the plans established together before the lesson. The observer can make a note to return to the other areas at another time if appropriate.

In reviewing lesson notes, the observer looks first for areas of strength by asking the following questions: What was effective about the lesson in regards to the focus area? In which "look fors" did the observee excel? What specific actions did the observee take that enabled him or her to be successful in the focus area? What specifically were the students able to do as a result of those actions?

Then, look for areas of growth by asking these questions: What was ineffective about the lesson related to the focus area? Which "look fors" is the observee trying? Which "look fors" is the observee ready to try next? Where are there areas of missed opportunity?

After outlining several areas of strength and several areas of growth, the observer will make a judgment call to decide which area of growth will be most important for collegial feedback. Use the following questions to decide: Which area for growth could have the biggest impact on the observee and his or her students? What might the observee change or modify based on your observation? What big takeaway is most helpful for the observee?

#### Step 4: Debrief

Last, engage in the debrief conversation to share concrete and actionable feedback. Any debrief is more helpful with careful planning — what feedback does the observer have to share and what are the best ways to offer it? What questions will be most powerful for the observee to answer during the conversation?

The debrief planning tool has space to plan the conversation and also to take notes during the debrief. Keep the observation note sheet as well as any student work produced during the lesson handy to refer to during the conversation.

Powerful questions offer many benefits. They lead to open dialogue and conversation, invite the observee to do the thinking, are open-ended to allow for many possible answers, create a culture of deep thinking about practice, and require the observee to examine events from multiple perspectives. The Debrief tool on p. 7 has several questions included as examples.

Choose a couple of questions to launch the conversation rather than marching through the full list. If possible, add questions that engage the observee in being reflective when debriefing the lesson. Then, use one or more of the feedback questions to provide specific input and support the teacher in reflecting on the lesson related to the focus area. Listen for the appropriate places in the conversation to provide feedback. Being as direct and specific as possible will help learners understand the feedback and put it into practice. State exactly what the teacher did and the impact of that action on student learning and then provide a suggestion. After offering feedback, use the closing questions to ensure that the observee can take action and make changes in practice.

By the end of this process, the observee will feel supported and ready to take next steps, and eager to take on the role of observer. Ultimately both participants learn from actionable feedback and continue to increase their expertise as collegial thought partners.

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