



Fixing the Teacher Evaluation Mess

By Mike Miles, superintendent, Harrison School District Two

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It did not require more work or effort from teachers. It did not require an infusion of money or impact the budget. It did not require numerous hours of professional development or the need to bring in an outside consultant.

No decision, however, was as significant to the initial transformation of the Harrison School District as the one to open the classroom doors when we teach. At the same time, no other decision created as much emotion and cognitive dissonance among the staff. It was a key first step in creating a culture of instructional feedback and improving the quality of instruction.

In many ways, that anecdote describes both the challenges of our profession's broken teacher evaluation system and what it will take to fix it. The system is certainly complex and repairing it will not be easy, but it can be done. For despite the multiple reasons for the dysfunction, most of what is wrong with the teacher evaluation system comes down to a failure of leadership and a failure to act upon our collective beliefs.

At-risk youths are particularly ill-served by our unwillingness to evaluate teachers fairly and accurately, to invest in teacher development, and to remove poor performing teachers. If we assign mediocre teachers two years in a row to a student who is academically behind, in many cases we have doomed that child to a poor future, prison, or worse. That is how serious our task is; that is how urgent the situation.

Until leaders of all stripes—school board members, superintendents, principals, union officials, teacher leaders, and legislators—acquire this sense of urgency and move to action, efforts to improve teacher quality will remain largely in the realm of lip service.

The first step in transforming our teacher evaluation system is to develop a culture of instructional feedback, starting with regular and consistent classroom observations. Even though numerous studies conclude that teacher effectiveness has the most impact on student success, in most districts classroom instruction is rarely observed except during the once-every-three-years check-the-box formal observations.

How serious can any leadership team be and how effectively can any reform initiative be implemented if instructional leaders are not giving regular and consistent



feedback on instruction? What is our true commitment to students and to high quality instruction if we are allowed to close our doors, teach in isolation, and not be held accountable for good, or at least proficient, instruction?

Developing a culture of instructional feedback and a commitment to excellent instruction is not easy, to be sure. However, schools and districts can take initial steps right away and do not have to spend a lot of money to make a huge difference. Leaders have to step up.

The obstacles can be overcome: principals can find the time to be in the classroom; union resistance can be overcome; teachers can feel the instructional feedback is helpful; the administrators can be trained to be instructional leaders; unhelpful policies and practices can be changed; and the teacher evaluation system can be made more real and effective.

If we are going to improve the evaluation system, schools and districts need to be led by instructional leaders, educators who can describe good quality instruction and who have the skills to help teachers to improve instruction. This is important because an evaluation system is irrelevant (and not legally defensible) if the people assessing the quality of instruction cannot be clear and specific about instructional practices.

Principals and assistant principals who are not instructional leaders are more likely to conduct perfunctory evaluations or inflate them. I suspect that the lack of knowledge around good instruction is one of the reasons why there are numerous examples of poor performing teachers with exemplary evaluations.

Teachers, too, have to get past their anxiety around being evaluated. The notion that one can only be observed during specific times as determined by some master agreement is neither effective in raising the quality of teaching nor worthy of a true profession. Also, leaders have to stop apologizing for monitoring and assessing what is working well and what is not working well in the classroom. That's the job.

In the Harrison School District teachers know that they will be observed often by instructional leaders, that they will be provided support to improve, and that the numerous observations will be used to help assess their overall proficiency. As a result, evaluations are both accurate and perceived as fair.

In the end, there has to be a commitment by all the stakeholders in the system to provide our children with great teachers. This also means that there has to be a



recognition that some teachers need to be developed, some remediated, and some removed.

Teaching is an important and complex profession and not everyone can teach at a proficient level. If we have an evaluation system that rates 99% of all teachers as proficient, then we are not serious about a commitment to students or to excellence. If we have an evaluation system which protects tenure despite performance, then we are not serious about a commitment to students or to excellence.

We need to find the leadership and courage to do what it takes to change the present system. Our students deserve better.

Mike Miles is superintendent of the Harrison School District Two in Colorado Springs, CO. To learn more about the district, visit www.harrison.k12.co.us/about.