

# THE LEARNING Principal

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## THE POWER OF OBSERVATION

5 ways to ensure teacher evaluations  
lead to teacher growth

By Valerie von Frank

A teacher and principal were meeting after the principal had conducted a post-observation conversation as part of the teacher's evaluation. As the two looked over the freshman algebra students' assignments quizzes, the teacher was distressed to find that at least half the students didn't know that a negative number multiplied by another negative resulted in a positive.

"This is horrible," she said. "I keep going over this fact, but the kids just can't remember."

As the two continued their discussion, the principal asked the teacher about next steps.

"After school today, I'm going to go poll my colleagues on how they've taught this concept," the teacher said. "I don't want to wait for our next learning team meeting. I'd love to observe a successful lesson, but I want to try to re-teach this concept and reassess the students next week."

The principal made a note to check back the next week.

When he followed up in a brief visit to the classroom, he found that students overwhelmingly had remembered



the rule on the quiz — and they were able to explain to him why the rule worked.

That kind of progress in a teacher's instruction is significant, said Jon Saphier, founder of Research for Better Teaching, who related this fictional example. The teacher's ability to assess student learning, analyze outcomes, and adapt instruction to meet student needs may not always

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## Real change requires a focus on implementation

**A**t more than 1,000 locations throughout New York City, it is illegal to honk your horn unless it's an emergency, and fines for violating this rule can be as much as \$350. While I don't know the history of how the



city came to adopt this policy, here's what I do know. It's not working. Anyone who has been to New York City recently understands that the car horn is almost an appendage for taxi drivers and others who lack even a few grains of patience. It's one of

the few places I've driven where people behind you at a traffic signal blow their horns before your light even turns green.

As I said, I don't know how this policy came to be, but here's what I imagine:

1. As the city became more congested, drivers became increasingly more impatient and began blowing their horns to release some of their frustrations.
2. Concerned residents petitioned for some type of ordinance to stop the noise, which well-intentioned city leaders passed.
3. City administrators waged a public-awareness campaign to change behaviors.
4. The horn blowing has continued; behaviors have not changed. Unfortunately, a lot of change efforts and professional learning efforts

suffer the same fate. They are well intentioned, but simply don't bring about the kinds of changes in practice their designers envisioned. The Implementation standard tells us that successful implementation begins with adult learning and change process research; provides ongoing support for individuals, teams, and schools in a variety of ways; and includes "constructive feedback and reflection to support continuous improvement in practice."

Often, one or more of these critical elements are left out, and the change efforts bring disappointing results. For example, look at the school system policies that require a certain number of hours each year for professional learning. On the one hand, it is wonderful that schools and systems recognize the need for professional learning as a vehicle for increased educator effectiveness. However, these hour-based systems often have little space for job-embedded forms of professional learning where teams apply research-based strategies, continue to learn collectively, or engage in constructive reflection and feedback.

Also consider the example of the administrative meetings many districts hold for their principals and other system leaders at the beginning of the year. Simply presenting information without providing opportunities for leaders to process what they've learned; collaborate with others as they make use of their new learning; and experience support from coaches, mentors, or supervisors as they attempt to implement this new information

### RESOURCE

**Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005).** *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature.* Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network.

will often yield the same results: little change in practice. Without a focus on the key attributes of the Implementation standard, schools often get haphazard changes in practice with little hope for taking changes to scale and almost no hope for sustainability.

There are lots of resources out there about implementation theory. One of my favorites is *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, and Wallace, 2005). The authors outline several useful frameworks, including their Stages of Implementation Process, which consists of exploration and adoption, program installation, initial implementation, full operation, innovation, and sustainability.

So when planning your next professional learning policy or experience, please make sure to consider the Implementation standard before you start blowing your own horn. Believe me, you'll be glad you did.

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## Teacher leader voice and capacity building lead to student growth

By Ingrida Barker

When I started recruiting potential teacher leaders for the school's leadership team, I looked beyond the formal departmental titles and identified teachers who were well respected by their peers and could lead their departments in a school improvement process. Over the last two years, these teacher leaders have become a collaborative team that helps administration make decisions within the school improvement process and create structures and processes to build the capacity of teachers. Trust and mutual accountability within the team have not solidified overnight. To help teachers become active participants in leading our school to success, I use six levers of the West Virginia Continuous Improvement Process. Of these, two of the levers that have made the biggest impact are establishing a focus and coherence and maximizing capacity.

### ESTABLISH FOCUS AND COHERENCE

When creating a collaborative school culture, it is vital to involve teachers in decisions concerning the school's mission, vision, and goals. During the previous year, the collaborative teams were mostly led by me or our school improvement specialist. This resulted in the teams completing the work, but without an intrinsic dedication to collaboratively dissecting student data and seeking solutions to facilitate student achievement. This

year, I have encouraged my teacher leaders to guide the work of their collaborative teams and build structures for mutual accountability, relationship building, and instructional decision-making through best practices, analysis of student data, evidence of teacher and student learning, and a guided focus on student learning. These practices have helped us turn some of those who were new to the system into believers in our core values and alleviate the daily struggles of those who were burned out or overwhelmed.

However, the most significant impact the leadership team has had is on those teachers who were actively resistant to the changes. They have been encouraged to try new strategies and collaborate with others in creating common assessments and aligning pacing guides thanks to a culture of data-based decision making and accountability for student success.

### MAXIMIZE CAPACITY

In today's world, strong leaders cannot be autocratic. Effective leaders establish cultures where all stakeholders are personally invested in the success of the school, creating a legacy of their leadership by maximizing the capacity of teachers to continue school improvement processes even after these leaders are gone.

Our teachers use data collected from culture and climate surveys, conduct instructional practice walk-throughs, and plan professional development sessions based on the learning needs of teachers and students.

A period of time in the schedule is devoted to the leadership team, with the teacher leaders working with the novice teachers, discussing goals and progress, and working with other teachers to support personalized learning for students. Initially, the principals set the agenda and led the work for leadership team and collaborative team meetings, developed meeting protocols and behavior expectations, and relied on teacher leaders to be in supportive roles rather than in leadership roles. Now, teacher leaders take on leadership roles within the team meetings in terms of following protocols, providing data and student work samples for discussion, and peer support within the school improvement initiatives. Thus, teachers feel more invested in the work outlined by their peers rather than passively following the administrative directives.

We are growing not only as individual professionals but also as a system. Last year's achievement data reflected an average 10% growth in student scores, which is a tremendous accomplishment.

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show up on a state standardized exam, but is a good indicator of the teacher's effectiveness, he said.

Principals who pay attention to different measures of teacher effectiveness and hone their abilities to be effective, objective observers provide more meaningful teacher evaluations that promote teacher growth, experts say.

"It may be that by the end of the year, many of these kids still are not at grade level in math, but there are five or six things (the teacher) did that show (she's) moving kids from believing they don't have the math gene to thinking they actually could be competent in mathematics," Saphier said. "And some may have decided they can take a class in summer school to get back on track with the college-bound kids.

"On a standardized test the state gives," he continued, "the students still may not do very well, but other data show that teacher does get student results."

It's up to the principal, Saphier said, "to figure out what else to record besides numbers to show evidence of the teacher's ability to impact student results."

Saphier and Kim Marshall, a former Boston principal who now works for New Leaders, a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders, provided several areas in which principals can concentrate to ensure a quality evaluation that leads to teacher professional growth.

### **Unpack the rubric.**

Principals can review the district's evaluation rubric early in the school year with teachers to develop a shared understanding of how the district is defining good teaching, Marshall said. Districts can help principals with this understanding as well, he noted.

Saphier said most teacher evaluation rubrics include a large number of items, and principals would do well to discuss with staff what he called "five big rocks" in the assessment to focus on at one time to avoid being overwhelmed. As the principal and teachers look at these items, they should talk about what each would look like in practice, he said.

Marshall also suggested having teachers self-assess, and then aggregating the results and using the information to plan professional learning for the school year.

### **Move beyond state standardized test scores.**

Rather than stressing about student standardized test scores, Saphier said, broaden the definition of student results. Decide alternative ways to represent student results, such as the teacher in the example who showed professional growth and understanding in adopting a new instructional

method that helped students on the classroom assessment. Marshall pointed out that research has demonstrated that student surveys are another source of valuable data, in conjunction with student learning data from a variety of sources and observations.

### **Have teachers provide data.**

Teacher evaluation systems in some states require that teachers provide their own evidence of student results. (See "Students talk back: Opportunities for growth lie in student perceptions" in *The Leading Teacher*, Winter 2013. Available at [www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org).) Saphier said principals can use that approach to develop a clearer picture of teacher effectiveness. The system lessens the burden on the administrator of finding evidence for each teacher and allows teachers to come up with different ways to demonstrate their effectiveness. The teachers "have to think about how they're making progress and what data don't show up in tests—and be the educator of the principal," he said.

### **See daily practice — daily.**

Announced observations create unnatural situations in which teachers may spend too much time preparing the lesson they think the administrator wants to see, according to Saphier and Marshall. Frequent, casual observations, on the other hand, give the principal a better idea over time of how the classroom and teacher function routinely. Marshall said the principal making daily routine visits to classrooms could result in 10 or so short observations a year for a teacher, allowing the teacher to become more comfortable with making her practice public and enabling the principal to get a broader perspective on the teacher's abilities. "You're not scoring" the teacher in these observations, Marshall said. "You're forming an impression." He said each visit, followed by an informal, brief conversation with the teacher, is a combination of supervision, coaching, and evaluation.

Saphier said time management and self-discipline are essential leadership skills for getting into classrooms and recommended trying to observe in three to four rooms each day. Marshall said many principals could see each teacher 10 times in a year with visiting just two classrooms a day.

Both Saphier and Marshall recommended visits of at least 10 to 15 minutes rather than shorter walk-throughs in order to get impressions of individual teachers. Shorter visits, they noted, can be useful to get a cross-section of information about instruction throughout the school to use to develop whole-faculty professional learning.

Saphier said principals can create a folder for each teacher with notes jotted from these observations that can be used at the end of the year to help with formal evaluations. Marshall pointed out that the quick conversations

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### **Learning Forward BELIEF**

Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

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after these frequent observations also help principals learn to provide productive feedback.

### Develop observation skills.

“The most important thing for principals to do is to deepen their ability to observe teaching in all its complexity,” Saphier said. “That’s a long-term study. It doesn’t come from a six-module workshop your state puts out on evaluation systems. It means long-term and continuing professional development for principals on being an acute observer.” (See sidebar below.)

Both Saphier and Marshall said that part of observing means switching focus from the teacher to students and how they are learning.

“This is not short-term, easy work for very busy principals,” Saphier said. “You don’t get (these skills) by experience. There are certain things you can’t learn just by being

thrown into the ring.”

He said those who supervise principals set the groundwork for ongoing, long-term principal development. Principals who don’t have support from the district level could form their own peer groups or use regular principals’ meeting times to focus on professional learning.

“When you have principals meetings once a month, do round-table case reviews or watch a video together and analyze it,” Saphier suggested.

“The biggest challenge,” he said, “is to not get hooked on compliance with the dizzying array of new regulations and to keep in mind the most important things for improving teaching and learning.”

•  
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### How to be an acute observer

- **Notice what’s important.** Saphier said principals need to study the rubric and have deep knowledge of exemplary teaching. They need to know what each skill looks like and sounds like in action, he said.
- **Know what to expect.** Marshall said principals who work closely with teacher teams in learning communities know what curriculum units are being planned and how learning will be assessed so they are more knowledgeable observers and prepared for what they will see when they go into a class. In addition, he said, when the principal is orchestrating the team process, teachers are analyzing data periodically throughout the year rather than waiting for annual test results to modify their practice to improve student learning — and principals get a better sense of what teachers need to learn and can target professional development.
- **Co-observe to develop skills.** Both Saphier and Marshall said observing along with another person — another principal, the coach, an administrator or the superintendent—and then discussing as observers what each saw helps hone individuals’ observation skills. Both said viewing videotapes and scoring them, then comparing notes is helpful. Marshall also suggested role playing with fellow administrators what the principal might say to the teacher.
- **Take literal notes.** Avoid opinions or generalizations,

Saphier said. Notes should describe the “actual words that were spoken or a picture of the problem a kid just wrote on the paper or a description of the movement across the classroom,” he said. “It’s totally objective, nonsubjective data.” Learning to gather impartial data is a mindshift for many people, he said.

The principal then uses that data to make a claim, such as, “You consistently boost kids’ confidence and focus on effort-based ability” and can present the evidence to support the claim, he said.

- **Avoid the iPad (and other technology).** Marshall said technology can distract from the principal’s ability to observe what’s happening in the classroom and diminish time available to interact, when appropriate, with students. “To be a good observer, you should have maybe a pad of paper,” he said. “Technology should be used for sharing unit plans and for documentation. But for the actual visit to the classroom and the conversation with the teacher, opt for low tech — a pencil, paper, and face-to-face conversation.”
- **Invest in professional learning.** Ultimately, becoming an expert observer who can analyze effective practice requires formal professional learning, Saphier said.



## Preobservation map

Teacher	Principal
Date of lesson	Time of lesson
Lesson objective:	
Standard:	
Number of students in class:	
Accommodations needed:	
Assessment method:	
Instructional strategy planned:	
Resources needed:	
Observation focus area:	
Data to be collected and reported:	
Data collection method:	
Post-conference data and time:	

Source: **Killion, J. & Harrison, C. (2006).** *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

## Questions to help evaluate the quality of student learning

Principals' observations need to focus on key details in the classroom that can provide insight into the quality of student learning and teacher instruction.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS INCLUDE:	
1.	Can the students do the work the teacher has given them? If not, what changes can the teacher make?
2.	Is the work appropriate — with enough rigor for a suitable stretch to cause learning? If not, how can it be improved?
3.	What is the instructional task and is it worthwhile? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
4.	How does the task align with the objective? What adjustments can be made, if any, to improve alignment?
5.	Is the objective worthwhile? Why or why not?
6.	How well can students explain the learning objective? Where can their understanding be improved?
7.	How well can students describe their learning?

Source: Adapted from Jon Saphier and Kim Marshall.

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