

# Fear and Loathing of the Evaluation Bandwagon

Very little scares me after successfully navigating 16 years as an elementary principal. I have survived and thrived beyond more unfunded educational mandates than I care to count and happily navigated the unique administrative styles of five superintendents. I successfully led my school through a complete renovation that doubled the size of my building and number of teachers and students, while our state test scores never faltered and amazingly continued to rise past the 97th percentile passing rate for all students. Recently, I hit the pinnacle of my career when my building achieved National Blue Ribbon School status as a result of our high performance over the years. What is there to be scared of at this point in my career? The answer can be found in the next education mandate being legislated by our state and many others. This education “evaluation” bandwagon is picking up speed and zooming across America, leaving scared, troubled, and confused administrators and teachers in its wake.

Coupled with this educator angst are what I now perceive to be the newest nagging questions for the principalship:

- What is an effective and fair means of evaluation for teachers?
- When and how will this merit and performance-based assessment be accomplished?
- Where will a principal find the time, in an already overflowing day, to tuck on another huge commitment?

Despite devoting 16 years to building a successful team, a committed parent community, and a climate of trust and empowerment, all while consistently maintaining attention to detail to ensure that every facet of this successful educational formula stays on track, I feel like I am on the verge of derailment.

## Focusing on Growth and Achievement

A workable answer to these principal concerns must be found and delineated in short order. Our school corporation, under the leadership of our director of curriculum, is taking a proactive stance to preserve our positive, teacher-administrator relationships while meeting state requirements

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for assessment and evaluation. As a high achieving school system, we are acutely aware of our students’ positive trend lines established and embedded within our consistent adherence to research-based best practices. There is no need for any teacher anxiety if the focus remains on individual student growth and achievement.

As educational leaders, however, principals must be cognizant of debilitating and demoralizing rumors that can undercut a team’s educational effectiveness with students, each other, and the principal. No teacher and his or her class should ever be placed in a competitive, weighted environment

based on a single year’s data points. Too many uncontrollable variables are associated with each student to guarantee a fair, unbiased evaluation of the teacher. Each teacher’s classroom includes students with a variety of academic, social, and emotional needs. Teachers, unlike those in the business sector, do not interview prospective students and possess the luxury of being choosy about who fills each of their desks.

Principals must be ready to acknowledge and empathize with their teachers—dispelling evaluation fears—while at the same time providing a pathway for continuous professional growth. I believe there has always been a concentration on student achievement in the classroom as evidenced by the data provided by state testing programs. A new focus has emerged, and teachers and principals will need to become more cognizant of individual student growth each year. The movement toward differentiated instruction will, no doubt, become more entrenched in our mainstreamed curricula as a result of the increased scrutiny of individual student growth, particularly as it relates to teacher effectiveness. The traditional educational concept of teaching to the middle will become all but extinct as the growth model approach becomes more prevalent and connected to teacher assessment. Teacher assessment related to merit pay and performance makes it necessary to look at both student achievement and growth.

## Overcoming Struggles

My teachers and I are struggling with the growth model concept. Our subgroups of exceptional learners—ESL students, distinct demographic groups, and high poverty students—in conjunction with our students as a whole, are performing at exemplary high levels. The average yearly growth of each student is the variable that is causing our stress levels to rise. We have consistently focused on the needs of each student and have

provided research-based interventions when necessary to scaffold our regular curricula. The dawn of the state-mandated growth model is demonstrating that an even more specific spotlight must be focused on each student's language arts and math achievement. Students, especially high performers, may not demonstrate sufficient annual academic growth without this microscopic focus on their individual strengths and deficits. Our focus of attention on student test scores has been effective for learning and achievement. However, the new mandates push the concept that passing rates alone are insufficient to truly understand individual student achievement. This idea, linked to principal and teacher evaluation, has created much anxiety for my team. I find myself seeking answers to some hard questions:

- Is it really possible for every student to demonstrate a year's measure of academic growth every year?
- How exactly is a year's measure determined?
- Why do many high achieving students fail to show sufficient growth?
- How will all teachers in every grade and subject area, including music, art, and physical education, be fairly represented in the evaluation process?
- What data is most representative and appropriate?
- What time frame will produce a fair evaluation of a teacher's performance?

Principals can work with their district leaders, state organizations, and national groups like NAESP in trying to ensure that fair and reasonable solutions emerge at both state and local levels.

### Ensuring Success

What can principals do to allay teacher fears, evaluate all teachers fairly and effectively, keep their school on track, maintain a positive climate, promote a plan for consistent student growth, and keep their own

sanity? The analogy to the plate spinner in the circus has never been more apropos. If any of these plates fall, an integral piece of educational progress is brought to an abrupt halt.

Educational mandates come and go, but certain constants always hold true, and may provide the answers principals seek. Without fail, a principal must make decisions based on what is best for children in all areas and provide the leadership for every team member to emulate. Never forget to value and respect your teachers and frequently celebrate their successes, being mindful that without the daily efforts of your committed team, student growth and development would quickly sink to mediocre levels. Encourage your team to consistently possess the mindset of focusing on individual student growth as well as achievement.

As educational leaders, principals must stress that all teachers contribute

to the total student outcome and are an integral piece of the educational process. No matter what form an educator's evaluation ultimately takes, focusing on individual student growth and achievement within a nurturing environment will ensure success. In retrospect, perhaps the new mandates regarding teacher and principal evaluation are not so frightening after all. ■

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### HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

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