

# Redesigning Evaluations to Build Capacity

Teachers and principals are the most important factors in student achievement, according to research. Together, they form the core instructional team within a school's learning community, and it's no secret that all great schools have great principals and teachers. What's less clear is how best to measure the things that make them great.

Teacher and principal evaluations have emerged as imperative elements of school reform initiatives. States and school districts around the country have rushed to implement new teacher and principal evaluation systems, because, as Linda Darling-Hammond writes, "[E]very aspect of school reform depends for its success on highly skilled teachers and principals." Although a handful of pilot evaluation programs are showing promise, many principals are acutely concerned about quick-fix measures to address teacher quality through flawed evaluation systems.

Designing principal and teacher evaluations are difficult processes, and each presents its own challenges. But meaningful measurement tools for both principals and teachers are the keys to building educators' capacity and unlocking success in schools.

## Principal Evaluations: Focus on Leadership

In NAESP and NASSP's *Rethinking Principal Evaluation: A New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice*, principals put forth a set of guidelines for districts and states on how to structure valid, fair, and accurate principal evaluations that take into consideration the complex nature of their role. An important theme of the publication is that the effectiveness of school leaders should encompass an array of areas for which principals are responsible. While principals expect to be held accountable for student achievement, they believe they must also demonstrate strong leadership skills in setting the school climate, handling discipline, and being effective communicators. Further, as instructional leaders, principals are responsible for their school improvement plans, professional growth and learning, student growth and achievement, school planning and progress, school culture, and stakeholder support and engagement.

While instructional leadership is a key area of a principal's responsibility, teachers are relied upon to deliver instruction and to develop the relationships with students that are essential in motivating them to learn. Students benefit the most from principals who build good relationships with teachers, nurturing their growth and professional



development, and set the tone and climate for the school that embraces continuous learning.

## Teacher Evaluations: Feedback Is Key

Unquestionably, evaluating teachers is one of a principal's most important—and complex—responsibilities. All principals *want* to do this part of their job well. But as a profession, we

have a lot to learn about how to evaluate teachers. Early in their careers, principals need to be able to identify quality instruction and its components in order to provide teachers with constructive feedback toward building their capacity in their classrooms. Principals also need to know how to use multiple measures and evaluation options (such as repeated walkthroughs, observations, and portfolios) to assess quality instruction. Effective principals know how to generate meaningful feedback that is constructive, objective, understandable, and can be used to improve teacher performance. Then, they provide continuous follow-up to ensure and reinforce that the teacher is making positive steps forward.

Great principals serve as mirrors for teachers by mentoring, coaching, modeling, and guiding teachers' growth, just as a teacher guides student growth. Principals who make it a priority to be visible and visit teachers' classrooms frequently, even if only for a quick walkthrough, have the definite edge. With frequent observations, principals are more likely to have a good understanding of their teachers' true skills, provide more meaningful feedback, and lead teachers to reflect more deeply about their classroom abilities.

## Evaluations and a Culture of Learning

The stakes for designing effective principal and teacher evaluation systems have never been higher, especially as ratings are used more and more to impact compensation and promotion. But, more importantly, evaluations are essential for reinforcing a school's climate of learning. An ongoing, positive evaluation process for both teachers and principals opens lines of communication. Well-designed measurement systems allow teachers to ask questions and engage in discussions, and also encourage principals to seek feedback from stakeholders—teachers, students, even parents—on their own performance. Thus, evaluations, when done wisely, involve timely and appropriate professional development for both teachers and principals, leading to an enhanced culture of learning for the adults in a school as well as for students.

The road to planning and refining strong evaluation systems may be arduous, but it's a worthwhile trek that culminates in tools that equip educators to be their best. Principals and teachers deserve evaluations that help them build their competencies in providing the best possible education for our nation's students. **P**