

How Do Principals Really IMPROVE SCHOOLS?

Instead of micromanaging teachers, principals should lead efforts to collectively monitor student achievement through professional learning communities.

Rick DuFour and Mike Mattos

Prin cipals are in a paradoxical position. No Child Left Behind admonished educators to use “scientific, research-based strategies” to ensure that all students learn. Likewise, Race to the Top requires educators to use “research-based” school improvement models. Unfortunately, the core strategies of both of these reform initiatives largely ignore this call for practices grounded in research. Principals are being asked to improve student learning by implementing mandated reforms that have consistently proven ineffective in raising student achievement.

The current emphasis on using more intensive supervision and evaluation of teachers to improve school performance illustrates this irony. According to Race to the Top guidelines, this more rigorous supervision process should influence a teacher’s professional development, compensation, promotion, retention, tenure, and certification. Ultimately, the evaluations should reward highly effective educators with merit pay and remove those deemed ineffective.

Faulty Logic

At first glance, this approach to improving schools seems to make sense. After all, research does say that teacher quality

is one of the most significant factors in student learning. Further, there’s almost universal agreement that the current system of teacher evaluation in the United States is ineffective. Three of four teachers report that their evaluation process has virtually no impact on their classroom practice (Duffett, Farkas, Rotherham, & Silva, 2008). Like the children of Lake Wobegon, almost all teachers are deemed to be above average, if not superior. Tenured teachers are almost never found to be unsatisfactory. As a comprehensive study (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009) of the current system concluded, “Teacher evaluation does not recognize good teaching, leaves poor teaching unaddressed, and does not inform decision-making in any meaningful way” (p. 1).

So why not make tougher evaluation of teachers a cornerstone of school improvement? Why not require principals to spend more time in classrooms supervising and evaluating teachers into better performance?

The premise that more frequent and intensive evaluation of teachers by their principals will lead to higher levels of student learning is only valid if two conditions exist. The first is that educators know how to improve student learning but have not been sufficiently motivated to do so. The second is that principals have the time and expertise to improve each



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teacher's professional practice by observing that teacher in the classroom. Neither of these conditions exists.

Do Carrots and Sticks Motivate Teachers?

We can find no research to support the assumption that educators choose to use mediocre instructional strategies and withhold effective practices until they receive increased financial incentives. As former principals with almost six decades of experience working with teachers, we found that the members of our faculty, almost without exception, started

each day with honorable intentions, worked tirelessly on behalf of their students, and used the best strategies they possessed to promote student success. Further, there's little evidence to support the idea that offering stronger rewards when educators move in the right direction and applying more dire consequences when they don't—dangling crunchier carrots and wielding sharper sticks—spurs teachers to better performance.

Research has consistently established that merit pay does not improve student outcomes or change teacher

behavior in a positive way, that it may actually contribute to declines in student learning, and that it's typically abandoned within a few years of implementation (Fryer, 2011; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Springer et al., 2011). A research-based program for improving schools would not be tied to merit pay.

As for wielding sharper sticks, in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink (2011) presents compelling evidence that this approach has a decidedly negative effect on the performance of knowledge



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workers like educators. This is not new information. In 1986, W. Edwards Deming argued that leaders must “drive out fear” from their organizations because appeals to fear resulted in short-term thinking, fostered competition rather than collaboration, and served as a barrier to continual improvement. A research-based program for improving schools would not be tied to sanctions and punishments intended to generate fear.

The National Center for Education and the Economy (Tucker, 2011) couldn’t find any evidence that the carrots-and-sticks strategy leads to improved student achievement in the United States or that any of the world’s high-performing school systems use such strategies. The American Educational Research Association declared that “neither research evidence related to growth models nor best practice related to assessment supports the proposed requirement that assessment of teachers and principals be based centrally on student achievement” (Viadero, 2009). A research-based approach to school reform would not define

improvement solely as higher scores on an annual standardized achievement test.

Do Principal Observations Improve Teaching Practices?

But even if we set the research aside, questions remain: Do principals have the time and expertise to enhance student learning through classroom observations? Is this the best way to improve a school?

To answer these questions, consider Tennessee, one of the first states to receive a Race to the Top grant. The Tennessee model calls for 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation to be based on principal observations, 35 percent on student growth, and 15 percent on student achievement data. Principals or evaluators must observe new teachers six times each year and licensed teachers four times each year, considering one or more of four areas—instruction, professionalism, classroom environment, and planning. These four areas are further divided into 116 subcategories. Observations are to be preceded by a pre-conference, in which the principal

and the teacher discuss the lesson, and followed by a post-conference, in which the principal shares his or her impressions of the teacher’s performance. Principals must then input data on the observation using the state rubric for assessing teachers. Principals report that the process requires four to six hours for each observation.

No doubt these requirements are well intentioned, but we’re convinced that advocates of this approach fail to recognize the crushing demands on the contemporary principal. A synthesis of research has identified 21 different responsibilities that principals must address in an environment where any or all of those responsibilities may suddenly be put on the back burner by crises over which the principal has little control (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

What We Learned As Principals

But beyond the time demands, the premise behind the policy of having principals observe teachers and help them improve is fundamentally flawed. We were both award-winning principals who devoted massive amounts of time and energy to trying to improve teaching through our different systems’ supervision and evaluation processes. We typically found that teachers were unpersuaded by our recommendations. After all, previous principals had found them satisfactory, if not exemplary.

Further, as middle and high school principals, we often observed teachers in content areas in which we were clueless. As former social studies teachers, we were not prepared to help a Spanish teacher improve when we couldn’t understand what he or she was saying. We were ill-equipped to enhance the pedagogy of an industrial arts teacher when we were mechanically inept. Because we frequently were unable to determine the appropriateness of either the content or the level of its rigor, we had to resort to generic

observations about teaching and apply what we knew about effective questioning strategies, student engagement, classroom management, and so on.

We don't mean to imply that the process was without benefits. As a new pair of eyes in the classroom, we were sometimes able to help a teacher become aware of unintended instructional or classroom management patterns. We could express appreciation for the wonderful work a teacher was doing because we had witnessed it firsthand. We observed powerful instructional strategies that we were able to share with other teachers. We increased our own knowledge about what constitutes effective teaching.

So classroom observations can be meaningful and beneficial to some extent, but principals should not use them as their key strategy for improving their schools. Perhaps intensive supervision of teaching would be a viable strategy for improving student learning—if good teaching could be reduced to a single template, rubric, or checklist aligned to program fidelity. However, there's no such thing as a universally effective teaching strategy; the effectiveness of any given strategy can only be determined by evidence of its effect on student learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The checklist approach to providing feedback to teachers doesn't enhance their pedagogical expertise. As Marzano (2009) notes, it's "antithetical to true reflective practice... [and] is profoundly anti-professional" (p. 37).

The Case for the PLC Process

If principals want to improve student achievement in their school, rather than focus on the individual inspection of *teaching*, they must focus on the collective analysis of evidence of student *learning*.

Of course, teaching and learning are not divorced from each other. The key to improved student learning is to

ensure more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time. The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning, however, is not by micromanaging instruction but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community (PLC).

Studies conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995); the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Carroll, Fulton, & Doerr, 2010); the Annenberg

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Institute for School Reform (2005); the Wallace Foundation (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010); and the American Educational Research Association (Holland, 2005) provide just a small sampling of the research base that confirms the positive effect of the PLC process on both student and adult learning. As a review of the research on PLCs concluded,

The collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning

increases when teachers participate in professional learning communities. The answer is a resounding and encouraging yes. (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 87)

This finding is not limited to the United States. In a study of high-performing school systems throughout the world, researchers concluded that successful systems structured their schools to function as PLCs to provide the teacher collaboration vital to powerful professional development (Barber & Mourshed, 2009). A report from the International Academy of Education (Timperley, 2008) concluded that the key to improving teaching was ensuring that educators "participate in a professional learning community that is focused on becoming responsive to students."

Research shows that educators in schools that have embraced PLCs are more likely to

- Take collective responsibility for student learning, help students achieve at higher levels, and express higher levels of professional satisfaction (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

- Share teaching practices, make results transparent, engage in critical conversations about improving instruction, and institutionalize continual improvement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

- Improve student achievement and their professional practice at the same time that they promote shared leadership (Louis et al., 2010).

- Experience the most powerful and beneficial professional development (Little, 2006).

- Remain in the profession (Johnson & Kardos, 2007).

Research has also established that simply providing time for educators to meet will have no effect on student learning unless their meetings focus on the right work (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). In traditional schools, the question of who will

determine what constitutes the right work becomes a question of power: Will the principal or teacher teams have the authority to determine what will happen at team meetings?

However, in a professional learning community, principals and teachers engage in collective inquiry to decide on the work that will most benefit their students. To help more students learn at higher levels, team members ask themselves,

- What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should all students acquire as a result of the unit we're about to teach?

- How much time will we devote to this unit?

- How will we gather evidence of student learning throughout the unit in our classrooms and at its conclusion as a team?

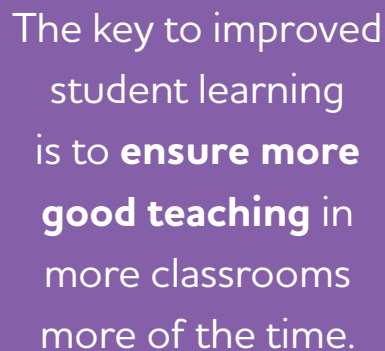
- How can we use this evidence of learning to improve our individual practice and our team's collective capacity to help students learn, to intervene for students unable to demonstrate proficiency, and to enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

To foster school cultures in which PLCs flourish, principals need to focus on five key steps (see "Five Steps to Success on the PLC Journey"). They can start by forming teams in which members share responsibility to help all students learn essential content and skills, providing teams with time to collaborate, helping to clarify the work that teams need to do, and ensuring that teams have access to the resources and support they need to accomplish their objectives.

For example, a team that attempts to create a unit assessment would benefit from an overview of the research on the power of common formative assessments to improve both teaching and learning, a brief article on keys to writing good assessments, access to released sets of assessment items for the skill they're teaching, and examples

of the assessment frameworks used by their state or province to ensure they become familiar with the format and rigor of those assessments. For performance-based assessments, team members might need recommendations from content experts on the criteria they should use in assessing the quality of student work as well as time to practice applying those criteria until they're able to provide students with consistent feedback.

But the most vital support a principal



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can give these collaborative teams is helping them use evidence of student learning to improve their teaching. When members of a team make the results from their common assessments transparent, analyze those results collectively, and discuss which instructional strategies seem most effective based on actual evidence of student learning, they're using the most powerful catalysts for improving instruction (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2010; Hattie, 2009). This ongoing, collective analysis of learning is far more likely to improve teaching practice than a principal stopping by a classroom a few times each year to see whether the teacher is making the right moves.

The PLC process also promotes shared leadership by empowering

teams to make important decisions. Teachers have a voice in determining the content they'll teach, how they'll sequence the content, which instructional strategies they'll use, and how they'll assess student learning. At the same time, principals ask their teams to be accountable for results, and they publicly recognize and celebrate incremental progress. Principal acknowledgement and appreciation are vital to sustaining a continual improvement effort (Heath & Heath, 2010).

Finally, effective principals are willing to confront those who fail to honor the commitments to their team and their obligations to their students. These principals make it clear that an individual teacher cannot disregard the team-developed curriculum, dismiss the sequencing of content, refuse to administer the team's common assessments, or opt out of the collaborative team process in any way. They are willing to use their authority to break down the walls of educator isolation and create new norms of collaboration and collective responsibility for student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

A Culture of Collective Responsibility

Both research and our own experience as principals have convinced us that this PLC process is more likely to improve instruction than classroom observations. An algebra teacher has a better chance of becoming more effective when he or she works with other algebra teachers weekly to improve student learning than when he or she is observed by a former social studies teacher four times a year.

Further, the PLC process has two powerful levers for changing adult behavior: irrefutable evidence of better results and positive peer pressure (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2010; Hattie, 2009). When team members see that students in a colleague's classroom consistently perform at higher levels

on team-developed assessments, they become curious about the conditions and practices that led to those better results. Further, if a team is consistently unable to achieve its goals because the students in a team member's classroom are repeatedly unable to demonstrate proficiency, there's more pressure on the teacher in that classroom to try new practices.

So what's a principal to do when confronted with state or district policies that mandate a more stringent approach to evaluation? Although principals may be stuck with punitive accountability policies, they don't have to be stuck with a punitive mind-set (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). A highly effective principal will look for ways to align the process to a culture of collective responsibility for learner-focused outcomes.

For example, the principal can repurpose the individual teacher goal-setting process to focus on team goals. Rather than establishing goals for individual teachers that focus on teacher activities ("I will improve my ability to use differentiated instruction"), they help teams establish collective goals that focus on student learning ("Last year, 84 percent of our students demonstrated proficiency on the state assessment. This year, we will help at least 90 percent demonstrate proficiency"). These results-oriented goals help create the interdependence and mutual accountability vital to effective teams.

Principal observations can provide feedback to team members who implement new strategies as part of their action research. For example, a team may decide that members need to focus on checking for student understanding more frequently and effectively to improve achievement in a unit that has traditionally proven difficult for the students. The principal could focus on that aspect of instruction during observations and work with teachers to expand their strategies in that area.

Finally, many new evaluation tools have components related to teacher collaboration. An effective principal will use that aspect of evaluation as a catalyst to strengthen the team process.

Asking the Right Question


If current efforts to supervise teachers into better performance have proven ineffective (and they have), the solution is not to double down on a bad strategy and demand more classroom observa-

tions, tighter supervision, and more punitive evaluations. The effort to improve schools through tougher supervision and evaluation is doomed to fail because it asks the wrong question. The question isn't, How can I do a better job of monitoring teaching? but How can we collectively do a better job of monitoring student learning?

Today's schools don't need "instructional leaders" who attempt to ensure that teachers use the right moves.

Five Steps to Success on the PLC Journey

- 1 Embrace the premise that the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels and enlist the staff in examining every existing practice, program, and procedure to ensure it aligns with that purpose.
- 2 Organize staff into meaningful collaborative teams that take collective responsibility for student learning and work interdependently to achieve shared goals for which members hold themselves mutually accountable.
- 3 Call on teams to establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum for each unit that clarifies the essential learning for all students, agree on pacing guidelines, and develop and administer common formative assessments to monitor each student's learning at the end of each unit.
- 4 Use the evidence of student learning to identify
 - Students who need additional time and support to become proficient.
 - Students who need enrichment and extension of their learning because they're already highly proficient.
 - Teachers who help students achieve at high levels so team members can examine those teachers' practices.
 - Teachers who struggle to help students become proficient so team members can assist in addressing the problem.
 - Skills or concepts that none of the teachers were able to help students achieve at the intended level so the team can expand its learning beyond its members to become more effective in teaching those skills or concepts. The team can seek help from members of other teams in the building with expertise in that area, specialists from the central office, other teachers of the same content in the district, or networks of teachers throughout the United States that they interact with online.
- 5 Create a coordinated intervention plan that ensures that students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, precise, and most important, systematic.

Instead, schools need learning leaders who create a schoolwide focus on learning both for students and the adults who serve them. 

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The PLC process is more likely to improve instruction than classroom observations.

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