Core Function: School Leadership and Decision Making

Effective Practice Align classroom observations with professional development

Overview: Classroom observations conducted by principals, colleagues, and teachers themselves are an important data source in determining teacher strengths and areas in which they need professional development. Observation instruments must reflect research-based instructional practices, and all teachers need shared understanding and common language for these practices, as well as plenty of time for reflection and dialogue about how they can improve. Principals and peer observers will likely need training in how to conduct observations, as well as how to link data to professional learning and/or collegial support structures. Teachers must also self-assess their instruction; the process of creating video-recorded lessons can serve as a reflective tool to deepen teachers' analysis of their instruction and encourage them to share and seek feedback from colleagues to improve practice.

Evaluate Your Practice: Do your teachers develop individual professional development plans, and are classroom observations used to inform the plans? What process is used for obtaining observations, reflecting on and discussing the results, and formalizing plans for professional development? Do observation tools reflect research-based teaching, and are teachers and observers using a common language to describe these processes? Are principals and peer evaluators provided with training in how to conduct classroom observations and help teachers link results to professional development? Are teacher self-assessments included within individual professional development plans, and is self-assessment linked to opportunities to share results and seek suggestions from colleagues? How does the principal encourage an atmosphere of de-privatization by encouraging teachers to observe each other's teaching, share practices, and engage in collaborative discussion on improving instruction?

Introduction

Using data collected with validated observational tools anchors feedback in teachers' practice along dimensions of teaching that are meaningful and has been shown to improve student achievement (Steinberg & Sartain, 2015; Taylor & Tyler, 2012). Data from these observations can be used to develop individualized professional development plans that address teachers' instructional need areas. Danielson (2011) suggests that classroom observations that facilitate teacher improvement require: 1) a consistent definition of good teaching; 2) a shared understanding of this definition so that observers and teachers have a common language; 3) skilled evaluators/observers (principals, peer coaches, etc.) who are capable of recognizing the components of effective teaching; and 4) plenty of opportunity for reflection and dialogue that also helps the teacher refine their practice through professional learning. Principal and peer observations and teachers' self-observations provide multiple lenses through which to assess teachers' use of effective instructional practices and provide a picture of teacher strengths and weaknesses. A discussion of best practices to align classroom observation data with teachers' professional development plans follows.

How can principals and peers conduct observations that facilitate teachers' professional learning?

Systematic classroom observations by principals and peers that yield evidence of research-based practices in the classroom are a tool to link evaluation information to both schoolwide and teacher-specific professional learning needs (Redding, 2007). It is important to note, however, that multiple measures of teacher effectiveness are necessary including classroom observations, student learning growth, portfolios, student surveys, and work samples in order to ensure a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of teacher strengths and weaknesses (Goe, Biggers, & Croft, 2012; Hill & Herlihy, 2011). Classroom observations by administrators and colleagues provide an important piece of the puzzle by producing valuable data on teachers' performance within an aligned teacher evaluation/professional

growth system. These observations should be undertaken within an atmosphere of trust; teachers should know that they are valued members of the school community and that observations are intended to improve teaching and learning (Stuhlman, Hamre, Downer, & Pianta, n.d.). Any observation measures selected should directly and explicitly align with good teaching and teaching standards, include protocols and processes that make sense to teachers, allow teachers to participate in or co-construct the evaluation, allow ample opportunity to discuss results with other colleagues, and align with professional development opportunities (Goe et al., 2012). Observers and evaluators should receive ongoing training to effectively implement observation systems, and training to interpret results and make professional development recommendations should be included within this training (Goe, 2013; Goe et. al., 2012; Hill & Herlihy, 2011).

Most teacher evaluation systems incorporate some type of post-observation meeting between observer and teacher to discuss the evaluation. DeMonte (2013) suggests that post-observation conferences should serve as a launching point for specific and sequenced improvement rather than a simple summation of the teachers' instruction:

> A teacher, for example, might be told by an evaluator who has just observed his or her instruction that the teacher seemed to have trouble formulating questions in whole-class discussions that will prompt student thinking. (The ability to frame effective questions for students is an area of teaching practice on Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, and is one of the most commonly used observation rubrics.) To assist a teacher in the above example, the evaluator could direct the teacher to view video clips that show exemplary questioning techniques in a classroom. Or the evaluator could suggest that the teacher participate in some collaborative work with a master teacher who is helping design lessons featuring questioning with others in the school or district. (p. 11)

Unfortunately research on post-observation conferences generally has revealed that evaluators often are not providing teachers with the type of feedback that leads to instructional improvement. For example, studies in Chicago and Tennessee and showed that principals often dominated post-observation conferences and provided little or no depth or instruction-specific feedback, and

the observation may have been treated more as a compliance activity rather than an opportunity to help teachers learn about their practice (DeMonte, 2013). In order to provide more appropriate, personalized and robust professional learning opportunities, Demonte (2013) suggests that teacher observation/evaluation systems should include the following components:

- Ensure that teachers and evaluators have a shared understanding about the evaluation rubric prior to assessment and observation, including instructional practices included in the rubric and how they will be viewed and assessed; pre-observation meetings can clarify lesson goals and rubrics being used by the evaluator (Redding, 2007). This shared understanding is a necessary first step towards sparking conversations about improving teaching and learning.

- Administrators and/or peer evaluators should be provided with professional development in how to provide the kind of feedback that teachers need and deserve in order to improve their teaching.

- Form groups of teachers based on data to collaborate together to improve particular skills and/or content. Collegial learning and coaching can deepen the mutual respect of team members and strengthen professional knowledge (Academic Development Institute, 2012).

- Provide evaluators with knowledge about the types of professional learning opportunities available so that they can have these resources accessible in post-observation conferences. For example, districts or states can establish research-based lists of opportunities or video libraries of exemplary teaching practices paired with materials to help teachers improve their instruction.

How can teachers use self-assessment of their teaching in order to facilitate their professional learning?

Aligned teacher evaluation and professional learning systems should include teachers' self-assessment of their instructional effectiveness (Danielson, 2011; Hattie, 2009). Researchers at the Education Policy Research Center at Harvard University are currently piloting an alternative approach to traditional classroom observations for teacher evaluation. In lieu of in-person observations conducted by an evaluator, teachers are allowed to submit their own video-recorded lessons for evalu-

ation purposes as part of the Best Foot Forward (BFF) program. This study involves treatment group teachers using digital video to record and upload to a website self-selected lessons for observer review (including administrators and external content experts) followed by one-on-one discussions of the lessons between teachers and reviewers; control group teachers continue to use in-person classroom observations (Kane, Gehlbach, Greenberg, Quinn, & Thal, 2015). The researchers have concluded that BFF provided several advantages:

> In sum, giving teachers control of the video collection and submission process improved several dimensions of the classroom observation process. It boosted teachers' perception of fairness, reduced teacher defensiveness during post-observation conferences, led to greater self-criticism by teachers and allowed administrators to shift observation duties to quieter times of the day or week. Moreover, granting teachers the opportunity to self-select videos changed teacher rankings only slightly; the submitted lessons from the best teachers were still better than the submitted lessons from struggling teachers. (p. 4)

Video-based teacher self-evaluation has also been used successfully for teachers in Head Start programs (Wright, Ellis, & Baxter, 2012). An additional study by the researchers above found that the BFF program led to "instructional de-privatization." Teachers in the BFF program were more likely to share video lessons with colleagues, and administrators were more likely to broker mentoring relationships and peer support among teachers (Quinn, Kane, Greenberg, & Thal, 2015). This de-privatization has been shown in other research to improve instruction; for example, the extent to which teachers engage in collaborative discussion and seek instructional advice from colleagues has been shown to predict changes to teacher practices (Parise & Spillane, 2010; Sun, Wilhelm, Larson, & Frank, 2014; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). The principal can serve a key role in de-privatizing instruction by "establishing cooperative work structures, or by encouraging individual teachers to share resources and techniques, coach less expert peers, and observe other teachers' instruction (Quinn, et al., 2015, p. 4).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
All teachers improve their practice by responding to the principal's observations relative to indicators of effective teaching and classroom management.
All teachers improve their practice by responding to observations by peers relative to indicators of effective teaching and classroom management.
All teachers improve their practice by assessing themselves relative to indicators of effective teaching and classroom management.
All teachers develop individual professional development plans based on classroom observations and self-assessments.

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