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FIRST PERSON

Downgraded by Evaluation Reforms

By Elizabeth Randall

My reaction to my annual teacher's evaluation this year was visceral, wrenching, and totally unexpected. I burst into tears. It surprised me as much as it surprised my assistant principal.



Let me be clear: These were not tears of joy. I received an "effective" rating as opposed to "highly effective," which would have qualified me for the fantasy of merit pay. (So, too, would a rating of "highly effective plus" but our administration had informed us at the beginning of the year that no one would get that.) I did not get "needs improvement/developing," or "unsatisfactory," which are the equivalent of circles of hell in the current education environment.

I was merely put in purgatory. Thus the tears. They wouldn't stop. It was embarrassing.

"It's a good evaluation," my AP insisted.

More accurately, it was the best evaluation she could muster given our district's new evaluation methodology, crafted to meet Florida legislative mandates. I'm not criticizing the AP personally; in her place, I would have been just as flummoxed. But substantively speaking, it is the worst evaluation I've ever received, and I am no slouch when it comes to the evaluative experience on either end of the desk. I was a corporate trainer and a manager for the private sector for 20 years. I've taught public school for a total of seven years, the last four at the school where I am now considered just "effective."

When I applied for a job at the high school where I now work, I thought teaching adolescents would be a meaningful way to close out my career. My first year back, I felt as though I'd been clobbered over the head every single day; I was so tired rising before dawn, managing three lesson preparations, and floating through the halls with a cart and no classroom of my own. I relied heavily on veteran teachers who were generous and encouraging. Gradually, I came into my own style and method of teaching. I found that I loved the students, and I loved teaching.

This was a high-maintenance love, entailing 10- to 12-hour days, five or six days a week, and more when I had evenings of ESOL training, an open house, parent conferences, a School Advisory Council meeting, or a student activity to chaperone. I also funneled at least \$1,000 of my paltry salary into my classes for needed supplies. I received outstanding evaluations that first year, the next, the next, and the next. There was no favoritism or buddy system to account for these strong results; a different administrator wrote each evaluation. My summers were filled with educational seminars to improve my skills and knowledge.

'A Flawed System'

But this year, my school's administration told all teachers that, due to the legislative changes, the latest evaluation was considered a "reset" of all previous years, implying that past evaluations were a mistake and at least outdated. Talk about adding insult to injury.

To be fair, I have heard through the grapevine that a few teachers at my school did receive "highly effective" ratings this year. One is retiring. The other, who has since moved to a different school, often showed up halfway through first period to unlock the door for her six or seven students. The rest may have deserved their highly effective ratings, but I doubt it was based solely on their skills. The worst rumor I heard is that a 30-year plus veteran teacher with National Board certification and a doctorate got a "needs improvement" because two girls in the back of the room were talking while she was delivering her lesson.

To me, such examples are evidence of a flawed system. To evaluate teachers under the new requirements, all of the schools in our district found the money to purchase iPads equipped with iObservation software for administrators to use for documenting their "weekly" observations of teachers. (In my case, that amounted to a little more than an hour all year.) In addition, all of the schools are training veteran teachers how to teach from a book by education researcher Robert J. Marzano titled *The Art and Science of Teaching*. The new evaluation system, based on this book and implemented by the new software on the new iPads, consists of screens and screens of teaching strategies a teacher has to demonstrate during an evaluation (including the use of technology, which my school doesn't even have the financial resources to provide—for students, that is). The book is subtitled "A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction" when, in my view, it reduces teaching to a series of artificial gestures.

Marzano endorses plainly evident strategies for effective teaching such as identifying similarities and differences in content, assigning meaningful homework, collaborating with colleagues, and rephrasing questions to enable students to "see the light." He's also big on charts, graphs, and scales. Good teachers employ all of Marzano's methods, of course. The trouble is that, when prescribed as a set regimen—and especially when used as the basis for an evaluation system checklist—they take the organic, fluid, give and take between teacher and student and reduce it to a series of steps that have to be ticked off a chart. My district administrators mark a teacher "needs improvement" if she does not provide evidence of 16 specific strategies during a 40-minute observation of an hour and 40-minute block of instruction. And she can be marked merely "effective" even if she does use all the strategies because the evaluation criteria are so hard to track and to record.

Creating Pedagogical Confusion

For the sake of fairness and accuracy, wouldn't collaboration about the evaluative instrument between administration and faculty during pre-planning make more sense? In our case, teachers had little to no input whatsoever. It was as though we were recalcitrant students and the administration was about to deliver the medicine for our own good. This is not the way professional organizations behave. More importantly, it is not the way to effect reform or improvement. Most of the teachers at my school see the new evaluation method the way a victim would regard a sniper: As a way to pick them off one by one.

My emotional outburst at the end of my evaluation stemmed largely from a sense of degradation. My hope for a raise was gone. In addition, the school had essentially rescinded its appreciation of my hard work and earlier encouragement of my efforts. This has the opposite effect of motivation.

As a teacher, I rate this new evaluative process, which I know is similar to others being implemented elsewhere around the country, as "unsatisfactory." Beyond its effect on teachers' morale, it has created professional and pedagogical confusion. A special education teacher from a neighboring district whom I recently met expressed this best. "I want to do what's best for the kids," she said. "But I don't even know what that is anymore."

The legislature, the districts, and the schools clearly have no idea, either. But that hasn't stopped them from rating the bulk of dedicated Florida teachers "effective" under the new evaluation system. Effective is a teacher who gets up in the morning, does the bare minimum and leaves. I don't know many teachers like that. However, I predict that they're all the public school system will have left when the smoke and mirrors go away.

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