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Teacher Evaluation: What's Fair? What's Effective? Pages 26-30

Beyond the Scoreboard

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The key driver of teacher development isn't accurate measurement of teachers' performance. It's guidance on exactly how to improve.

Michelle is a first-year English teacher at Vailsburg Middle School, a public school in Newark, New Jersey. Michelle is dedicated, caring, energetic, and insightful—exactly the sort of person we want to keep in our profession.

This year, I had the chance to watch Michelle and her principal, Serena Savarirayan, meet for their weekly debriefing of Michelle's teaching. Serena began by praising Michelle's progress toward the goal they'd set at the last meeting—adding more wait time after asking challenging vocabulary questions. As she spoke, Serena updated the "Progress Toward Goals" section of the spreadsheet she uses to track her observations, noting that Michelle was progressing toward this target.

The focus then shifted. During her most recent 15-minute visit to Michelle's class, Serena had noticed that when Michelle solicited a whole-class choral response for a grammar question, several students did not participate. To address this, the pair identified specific responses Michelle could have made in the situation. Then Michelle and Serena did something different. Serena pretended to be a recalcitrant student and Michelle practiced moving closer and giving a quick nonverbal correction to bring Serena into the class chant. Finally, the two recorded "full participation in choral response" as the next key goal and planned to follow up later in the week.

Shifting Our Assumptions

In U.S. schools today, the kind of feedback Serena gave Michelle is unusual. With a more traditional approach, Serena's feedback would have taken the form of annual or semiannual evaluations. She and other school leaders might have spent months selecting and mastering an elaborate rubric for teacher assessment. Serena would have worked to "norm" her judgments and ensure that in each of many categories she could distinguish *mastery* from *proficient* from *working toward*. When the time came to observe Michelle, Serena might have spent an hour in her class, recording each detail exhaustively. From this recording, she'd have completed the comprehensive rubric, taking care to grade Michelle accurately and fairly. Finally, Serena would have pored over the rubric in detail with Michelle, explaining this summative snapshot to her rookie teacher.

The key question is, Would Serena have been better off using this traditional approach? More important, would Michelle have been better served? Many would say yes. The move toward sharpening our ability to evaluate teachers has gathered steam lately. In part, this stems from the work of talented education experts, who've proposed what a comprehensive rubric of teaching practice should include. Robert Marzano and his colleagues focus on 41 key strategies (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). [Charlotte Danielson](#) (2002) has suggested a framework for good teaching that encompasses a whopping 76 criteria. These rubrics and guides mark important steps in determining what makes teachers effective in the classroom.

But is this approach to teacher observation effective? Will a new teacher develop more powerfully because of normed evaluation criteria? It seems unlikely. No doubt a comprehensive rubric would give Michelle an interesting snapshot of her class and her teaching. But with 30, 40, or even 70 areas to consider, how would she know where to focus her efforts to improve?

Moreover, it's likely that any criteria-based observation of Michelle would occur toward the end of the school year. With summer approaching, she'd have little chance to put any changes into place until the next school year. And she might not know whether she was on the right track until months later, when Serena completed the rubric again. If the goal of evaluation is to grow great teachers to drive student excellence, the traditional model has failed.

Conventional teacher feedback and evaluation is based on a flawed assumption: that accurate measurement of teaching is the central goal of teacher evaluation. I call this the scoreboard model—the belief that if we grade our teachers in a truly comprehensive way, we'll drive student learning. Get the score right, and positive results will follow.

Leaders like Serena begin from a very different assumption, which I call the coaching model. For Serena, the core driver of

teacher development is not accurate scoring, but skillful coaching, working with instructors on specific concrete actions that will improve results.

Serena's in good company. The best basketball coaches don't spend the bulk of their effort parsing the most accurate way to record a "steal"—they spend it training players how to improve their footwork so they can avoid an opposing player stealing the ball in the first place. The best directors don't spend the majority of their time debating how Academy Awards votes should be allocated. They spend it developing actors to produce award-winning acting. These talent builders may find scoreboard questions interesting, but they realize that with limited time and energy, concrete improvement takes priority over developing a theoretically complete framework of effective performance.

Let's examine three ways leaders like Serena practice this coaching model.

Conduct More Frequent Observations

Serena's evaluation of Michelle wasn't a one-off "day of destiny." It was part of an ongoing process; all Vailsburg teachers are observed and coached weekly. Because the pair met weekly, Serena could gauge exactly how much Michelle had grown and see what steps she should take next. If you start from the premise that teacher evaluations are meant primarily to drive teacher development, then regular feedback is essential. The relentless loop of feedback, corrections, and improvement that builds true talent can't happen once every six months.

Is this kind of frequent coaching feasible? Absolutely. Because the purpose of feedback and evaluation is teacher development, Serena doesn't need to observe Michelle's class for an hour at a time. She can visit for 15 minutes to find the next key levers for improvement. This is an important aspect of the coaching mind-set: because you observe more frequently, you can observe for less time.

There are steps that leaders can take to make weekly observations more realistic. By grouping several 15-minute observations into one hourlong block (preferably in classrooms near one another), principals can reduce the inefficiencies of transitioning between tasks and traveling between rooms. On Wednesdays, for example, Serena watches six teachers back-to-back in a two-hour block. It helps to lock in dates for observations and debriefing meetings with teachers far ahead of time; Serena makes a point of scheduling these meetings at the beginning of the school year.

Serena doesn't take on all the coaching herself. Other school leaders, such as department and grade-level chairs, also serve as instructional leaders and coaches for teachers.

Routine coaching using this approach still takes significant time. But if our goal is to coach and drive teacher development, this time must be spent.

Practice, Practice, Practice

One of the most striking features of Serena's feedback in her debriefing with Michelle is its focus. By limiting her coaching to one set of concrete actions, Serena ensures that Michelle knows exactly what skill to work on and what to prioritize. Moreover, by making the recommended action bite-sized—getting all students to participate in choral responses—Serena makes sure Michelle has an attainable goal. This focus on key action steps cuts through the confusion that an elaborate rubric might have created and provides a clear path.

The most important part of this debriefing, however, wasn't when Serena identified the action step Michelle should take. It took place when she and Michelle practiced the action together. Practice is an essential component of developing great teachers. Great coaches don't just talk about what throwing a ball might feel like; they coach their players to throw a ball with correct technique again and again. Feedback and evaluation won't change real classrooms unless teachers build the skills needed to make a change.

Coach for Growth—Not for Scores

Nowhere is this focus on improvement clearer than in the kinds of guidance and resources that teachers take away from debriefing meetings with their administrators. Instead of receiving a score, Michelle receives a new goal to master—and the knowledge that within the next week she can and should make concrete improvements.

At each meeting, Serena updates her observation tracking form, the spreadsheet of the skills the teacher in question has mastered and the ones he or she is still working toward (see fig. 1, p. 29). She shares this information with the teacher as she records it and sometimes sends a follow-up e-mail reviewing what they discussed at the meeting.

FIGURE 1. Observation Tracking Form

Teacher: Michelle

Leader: Serena

OBSERVATION DATE	What leader noticed:	Current development goal:	Progress toward goal observed:	Goal for next meeting:
Sept. 6	Great use of precise, specific praise for Tina's answer. Students only had a few seconds to consider the meaning of "mortified."	Add think-pair-share to encourage more of the class to think rigorously.	Think-pair-share generated great student excitement at the start of the class.	Add wait time after asking challenging vocabulary questions.
Sept. 13	Excellent new procedure for distributing student papers. Only 6 students were called on during the vocabulary review.	Add wait time after asking challenging vocabulary questions.	More wait time added before soliciting answers for meaning of "apt." More wait time added when asking whether sentence using "elude" was accurate.	Improve cold call (calling on students randomly) to engage more students.

Source: Used at Vailsburg Middle School. Printed with permission.

This is not to say that Serena skips summative assessments altogether. Twice a year, she fills out a complete report of each teacher's performance, using a rubric as an evaluation tool. Each teacher first uses this rubric to do a self-evaluation. Serena also completes the rubric for that teacher, drawing the information for it not from one observation, but from the completed observation tracker that she and the teacher built together week by week. Serena and the teacher then compare their completed rubrics and settle on a final evaluation, including setting three major professional development goals for the teacher for the following school year.

In a very real sense, teacher evaluation at Vailsburg flows naturally from Serena's coaching efforts. And because the main focus is on coaching, debriefing meetings center less on where a teacher falls on some measure than on how well that teacher is growing, adjusting, and developing the desired skills.

Making Teachers Great

What would a shift from a scoreboard mentality to a coaching mentality in evaluating teachers mean? For one thing, it would sidestep many challenges that plague other evaluation systems, such as judgments based on nonrepresentative teaching performances, evaluations relying on criteria that can't be assessed through a few observations, and resentment among faculty. More creative energy would be spent on classroom improvement. Research into motivation indicates that when workers—teachers included—sense they're making steady, measurable progress, their workplace satisfaction soars, and their performance greatly improves (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

Coaching makes teachers great. Over the past 10 years, with my fellow administrators at Uncommon Schools, I've had the chance to coach hundreds of teachers in a host of schools, many of which, like Vailsburg, serve low-income students. We've seen teachers, in just 2–3 years, achieve the kind of results—on the state test, the SAT, and advanced placement exams—that are normally seen only from master teachers.

When teachers see the concrete steps they must take to improve their practice, and when they can continually practice skills connected to those steps, transformational success comes within reach.

To improve the team, you don't study the scoreboard; you go out and practice. Considering the limited time educators have to do everything we must do, let's ask ourselves how much time we're spending looking at the scoreboard and how much we're spending in practice. We won't start winning until we do.

References

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