The madness of teacher evaluation frameworks

The rush toward absurdly elaborate teacher evaluation frameworks is the most recent in a legion of ill-considered and ill-fated education remedies.

> The clouded language of educational theorists hinders thought and understanding.
> — *Richard Mitchell*

Once again, we're rushing headlong to embrace yet another unproven, hastily conceived innovation in the hope that it will improve school quality. We've seen this happen before with "strategic planning," the development of state standards, the worst aspects of No Child Left Behind (some were good), and with so-called school turnarounds.

All of these are good ideas gone bad, and they have the same essential features: They were overly complex, unproven, and premature. They were implemented on a national scale before they were sensibly piloted, then refined on the basis of early, small-scale implementation. They suffer from what Jay Matthews calls "all at once it is" — our pathological insistence on launching all aspects of an innovation simultaneously, everywhere, in the absence of evidence that it works. No one asked the obvious questions: Does this innovation have a track record? Could it have unintended consequences or could it displace much higher priorities that would guarantee a better education for all, e.g., ensuring that every teacher is furnished with a decent, coherent curriculum, without which effective teaching is difficult or impossible?

Our silver bullet du jour is teacher evaluation (a good thing) — on steroids (a bad thing). It is being driven by popular, time-gobbling, anxiety-inducing evaluation "frameworks." Don't misunderstand me: I have always been a fan of simple, effective teacher observation and evaluation, which I'll describe in a moment. Good teacher evaluation is a critical force for improvement. I'd even like to see carefully piloted inclusion of assessment scores in evaluations, but only if the assessments truly represent legitimate, curriculum-based knowledge and skills for each respective course. (We've never had this; we don't have it now.)

My complaint is with the frameworks themselves — their sheer bulk and their sloppy, agenda-driven language. They're absurdly long; teachers are desperately trying to design lessons to meet criteria described in as many as 116 categories (Anderson, 2012). Administrators are expected to use these unwieldy instruments to conduct up to six full-period observations per teacher per year and to conduct both preobservation and postobservation conferences for each observation with every teacher.

Much of the criteria itself is both misguided and am-

MIKE SCHMOKER (schmoker@futureone.com) is a writer, speaker, and consultant. His most recent book is *FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning* (ASCD, 2011).

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biguous — written in that thoughtless, tortured prose that continues to mar the education profession. For example, one framework calls for lessons to include "simultaneous multisensory representations" and "facilitation . . . that results in students' application of interdisciplinary knowledge through the lens of local and global issues." Teachers must "facilitate content accessibility" by assembling or modifying curricular materials at the "individual and subgroup level" — even though the best teachers do no such thing (Poplin et al., 2011). The effective educator is supposed to "solidify learning after constructed experience with clear labels" and with "articulation of metacognition" (among the murkiest words in the education lexicon).

The designers of another popular framework defend their similarly elaborate instrument with talk about "proximal processes" based on "multi-level, latent structure" and "varying degrees of molarity/discreteness." The instrument purportedly "reflects the developmentally relevant construct of heterotypic continuity" in the pursuit of (the ever-present) "metacognitive skills."

I don't know about you, but I'm very nervous entrusting our children's futures to people who write — who think — in this fashion.

Would it work?

Another popular framework puts teachers on notice that lessons must "accommodate prerequisite relationships among concepts and skills," as well as "reflect understanding of prerequisite relationships among topics and concepts and a link to necessary cognitive structures." And, again, despite the absence of anything like an actual curriculum in most schools, teachers are to develop multiple sets of curriculum materials with lessons adapted for each individual student and subgroup. This is a *requirement* — despite the absence of any evidence of the effectiveness of this approach, which Willingham and Daniel rightly call "hyperindividualization" (2012).

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The instrument goes on to insist, with no hint of irony, that teachers frequently avail themselves of ongoing training, including university-based professional development. This, regardless of that teacher's current effectiveness or the fact that professional development as it is currently constituted is often only weakly connected to evidence or to improved educational outcomes (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). Often as not, it merely supplants a focus on what should be the heart of improvement efforts and effective evaluation: the conscientious implementation of a content-rich curriculum — provided by the district and largely built by its own teachers — that abounds in purposeful reading, writing, and discussion in each course. This would have an immediate, positive effect on instruction itself.

The few, well-known elements of effective instruction are so powerful that Robert Marzano, among many others, insists that they should be "routine components" of every lesson in every discipline: A clear learning objective, introduced so as to arouse anticipation and readiness for learning, taught through multiple short cycles of teaching and modeling, guided practice, and continuous checks for understanding — with each cycle followed by strategic adjustments to instruction (2007).

These well-known, proven elements matter more than all else. And because these concepts are fairly familiar, clear, and few in number, they're eminently easier to clarify, monitor, and evaluate than the dozens of confusing boxes and bullet points found in popular evaluation frameworks.

Performance invariably improves when training and evaluation focus on a severely limited number of crystal-clear criteria, which inspire confidence and competence — not fear and confusion (Buckingham, 2005). This is especially so when we routinely remind practitioners of the indisputable evidence that these elements will work — swiftly and significantly.

When will we learn? For Grover Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution, this new model of teacher evaluation is grossly premature. Once again, whole states are "racing ahead based on promises made to Washington . . . that prioritize an unwavering commitment to unproven approaches" (Anderson, 2012, p. 2).

Less. Is. More.

Less. Is. More. As Marcus Buckingham found, the more criteria we try to manage and evaluate, the less effective — and imaginative and focused — our employees will be (2005). For a time, let's ferociously monitor and evaluate for our clearest, highest instructional priorities (described above). Such a focus will deliver, at long last, the results we want: an ever-increasing level of good teaching and, as a result, an inexorable rise in the proportion of students who are truly prepared for college and careers. We can count on this.

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