

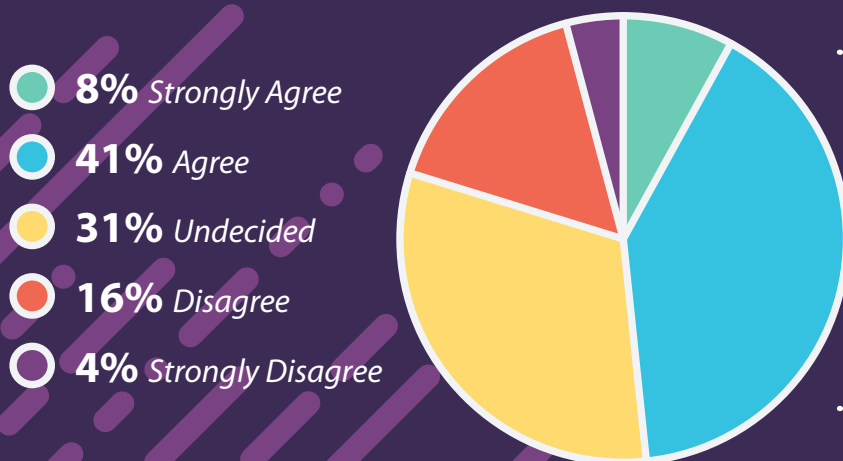


# Building a Culture of Trust


*Collaboration, Transparency and  
Growth in Teacher Evaluations*

Teacher evaluations: when done well, they're a valuable tool to improve schools and teaching practice, leading to greater student growth. But too often they're seen as necessary evils — exercises mandated by the state — contributing little to teacher growth.

In a recent survey of principals across the United States, fewer than half could say with confidence that their evaluation systems were effective at helping teachers improve their skills as teachers. And one in five definitively said that they were ineffective.



*"Our teacher evaluation processes are effective at helping teachers improve their skills as teachers."*



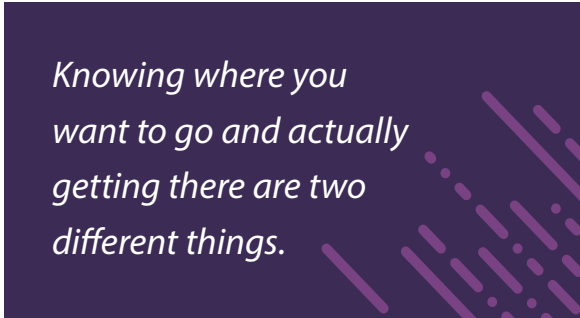
# Making the evaluation process more meaningful

Thanks to the work done by the Measures of Effective Teaching project, we know that multiple measures make for more valid and reliable evaluations. By promoting the use of multiple measures and encouraging evaluator/evaluatee collaboration, the MET project advanced the idea of an educator-driven evaluation process focused on improving practice, not simply grading teacher performance.

That's the theory — and for the most part, educators are on board. But knowing where you want to go and actually getting there are two different things.

Many evaluators continue to wrestle with how to understand the evidence collected during evaluations, how to make meaningful decisions based on that evidence, how to manage multiple pieces — and multiple years — of data. And they often wonder how to give meaningful feedback and provide professional learning that aligns to the educator's professional goals, student growth goals and evaluation evidence.

Those are important issues worth considering. But before building the skyscraper, the foundation must be laid. That foundation is trust.



*Knowing where you want to go and actually getting there are two different things.*

# The importance of trust in engaging teachers

Much has been written about school culture, and rightly so — its importance can hardly be overstated. A report on research on Chicago schools has noted,

*“In improving schools, where trust and cooperative adult efforts are strong, students also report that they feel safe, sense that teachers care about them, and experience greater academic challenge. In contrast, in schools with flat or declining test scores, teachers are more likely to state that they do not trust one another, and both teachers and students report less satisfaction with their experiences.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Without trust, employees will take part in evaluations simply because they're required to.*

Trust — both professionally and personally — is key for evaluation to be an effective component within a continuous growth cycle. Genuine collaborative reflection between teachers and administrators is impossible without it. Otherwise, how can teachers possibly be expected to be open to the process and receive and implement feedback? Without trust, employees will take part in evaluations simply because they're required to.

Teachers already feel under pressure from all sides: parent requests, constantly-changing policies, standardized-test scores to maintain, a heavy workload that demands evening and weekend hours — it's no wonder many schools suffer high teacher turnover. And because evaluations, at least in the mind of the public, have been primarily used to determine teacher salaries, promotions and firings<sup>2</sup>, that perception

<sup>1</sup> Sebring, P. B., & Bryk, A. S. (2000, February 1). School Leadership and the Bottom Line in Chicago. *Phi Delta Kappan*.

<sup>2</sup> Connally, K., & Tooley, M. (2016, March). Beyond Ratings (Rep.). Retrieved March 11, 2016, from New America website: [https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12744-beyond-ratings-3/NA\\_BeyondRatingsPaper\\_deba47a82ff04af2833cebdbeed0c3ab.pdf](https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12744-beyond-ratings-3/NA_BeyondRatingsPaper_deba47a82ff04af2833cebdbeed0c3ab.pdf), 2.

must change if evaluations are to support an ongoing cycle of growth.

If a school or district is successful in building a culture of trust, the rewards will be substantial. Teachers will buy into the evaluation process when they know that it's valid, knowing they and the leadership are "in this together." Tense, anxiety-producing processes now have the chance to become constructive, ongoing dialogues, where observations, reflections and feedback translate into meaningful conversations about instructional practice and student growth.

## School leadership and a culture of trust

These changes don't come quickly or easily. Trust must be earned. On top of that, teachers (and school leaders) may find it difficult to tear down well-established boundaries: principals wanting to make sure their school runs well have sometimes relinquished authority at a classroom level in exchange for teacher support at a school level.<sup>3</sup>

Change must begin with the school (and district) leadership. A survey of evaluations conducted in Colorado revealed that "teachers' confidence in the system's fairness was correlated with how they rated their school leaders, no doubt related to the quality of their observations and feedback." The same publication goes on to say, "Building strong school leaders is key to ensuring that the evaluation and development enterprise leads to targeted feedback and professional learning for teachers at the individual, group and school levels."<sup>4</sup>

The foundations of good leadership are the same for K-12 as they are elsewhere: integrity, communication and supporting your people, to name a few. Bringing teachers into the decision-making process, listening to all views (even opposing views), being accessible, building personal

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district) leadership.*

<sup>3</sup> Murphy, J., Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2013, July 30). Leading via Teacher Evaluation: The Case of the Missing Clothes? Retrieved March 11, 2016, from <http://ecs.force.com/studies/rstudypg?id=a0r70000003ql6SAAQ>, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Connally, 27.

relationships with teachers and making sure your educators know that you have their backs — without compromising a need for quality — are all necessary to building trust with your staff.<sup>5</sup>

## Transparency and a common understanding

In the context of evaluations, the first step is to establish a common understanding of what effective practice looks like. Broadly, this means taking steps to communicate and bring teachers on board with the mission and vision of the school. Specifically, performance evaluation criteria based on frameworks like Danielson’s Framework for Teaching or the Stronge Effectiveness Performance Evaluation System can help by providing shared and open terminology to describe effective teaching.

But simply choosing a framework isn’t enough. Transparency and collaboration in the process are critical if evaluations are going to effectively encourage teacher growth. Otherwise, “the result of an assessment could be perceived as a ‘gotcha’ moment, one that has little value to the educator.”<sup>6</sup> **Put another way, to be most effective, the evaluation process must be transparent to teachers from start to finish, with as much teacher involvement as possible.**

### At the beginning

When laying the groundwork for how evaluations will be conducted, bring teachers into discussions from the start. Answer questions, be open about how it will work and address any concerns that are voiced.

*Helping your teachers understand what measures will be used, and how you’ll ensure inter-rater reliability, can help alleviate concerns about bias and build confidence in the system.*

<sup>5</sup> Brewster, C., & Railsback, J. (2003, September). Building Trusting Relationships for School Improvement: Implications for Principals and Teachers. Retrieved March 14, 2016, from <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/trust.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Paraskeva, J. M., & LaVallee, T. (2015). *Transformative researchers and educators for democracy: Dartmouth dialogues*. Rotterdam: Sense.



## During the process

What data will be used in evaluation, how that data will be collected and how it will be documented needs to be clear to everyone. This data must be valid, reliable and consistent. Inter-rater reliability is a key piece, especially when making personnel decisions. Helping your teachers understand what measures will be used, and how you'll ensure inter-rater reliability, can help alleviate concerns about bias and build confidence in the system.

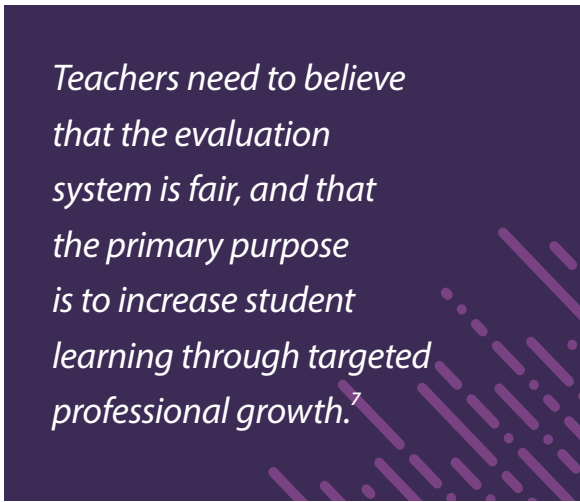
Also, giving teachers access to their own data will give them a window into their own performance and provide supervisors the opportunity for constructive formative feedback.

## When discussing results

Once the process has been completed, educators need to fully understand how multiple measures will be factored into a summative rating (especially how data around student growth is incorporated) and how that rating will impact pay, promotions, certification, discipline and other district-defined outcomes.

The need for transparency comes down to this: teachers need to believe that the evaluation system is fair, and that the primary purpose is to increase student learning through targeted professional growth.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, communication is key: your teachers need to know what's happening and why. To get maximum reach and support, use multiple channels to convey information as well as answer questions. Communicating in person with staff in a particular building, as well as using the district website, newsletters, mass emails, guides for your staff and FAQ documents for a broader audience, can all work together. But the message is more important than the medium: also anticipate questions that will be asked, address myths and misinformation and respond to concerns from your teachers as quickly as possible.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> Connally, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Engaging Educators: A Reform Support Network Guide for ... (n.d.). Retrieved March 14, 2016, from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/initiatives/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/engaging-educators.pdf>, 4.



# Listening to your teachers

Of course, one of the most important steps to building trust is to stop talking and start listening. Ask how your teachers and staff feel about evaluations, and what their concerns are. Get ongoing feedback throughout the process. Be sure to take their concerns seriously, articulate their points back to them and follow up with those who have voiced them. *Engaging Educators: A Reform Support Network Guide for States and Districts* says it well: “There is nothing more disengaging than for feedback to be ignored by those collecting it.”<sup>9</sup>

## Working with unions

Involving teachers and union leaders on an Evaluation Advisory Committee can also be a good way to bring teachers into the process and communicate what’s happening in an effective way.

Unions have often sat on the opposite side of the table from school and district leaders. Kim Marshall, a former teacher and principal who now coaches new principals, writes,

*“The legendary klutziness of school administrators has motivated unions to work overtime to negotiate ‘principal-proof’ evaluation formats and procedures to protect their members from unfair evaluations. Districts, on the other hand, push for evaluation tools that make it possible to build a case to dismiss incompetent teachers. The resultant evaluation tools are rarely conducive to fostering an honest, open, and pedagogically sophisticated dialogue between principals and teachers.”<sup>10</sup>*

*Identifying leadership opportunities for outstanding educators can yield incredibly useful results.*

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, K. (2005, June 1). It’s Time to Rethink Teacher Supervision and Evaluation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 727-735.



But what if there were genuine trust between unions and school leadership? Dialogue with unions, especially early in the process of building an evaluation system before decisions are made, can go a long way to establishing trust. When that happens, unions can be a powerful ally by lending a trusted voice to your efforts to communicate with your teachers about evaluations.<sup>11</sup>

## Teachers in leadership roles

Highly effective teachers tend to be well-respected by others in the school. Identifying leadership opportunities for outstanding educators can yield incredibly useful results. For example, you might consider training them as peer observers, if allowed by your state, or by having them train teachers and staff about the new evaluation system.<sup>12</sup>

## Well-trained evaluators

For an evaluation system to be effective, teachers need to move beyond simply trusting school and district leadership and the design of the system. They need to trust the implementation of that system, because even the best rubrics won't lead to teacher growth if used by an untrained or unskilled evaluator. Making sure observers can accurately collect and weigh evidence is important, but offering feedback that can help a teacher improve in practice is even more so.

The state of Tennessee, for example, requires evaluators to undergo a strict training process, where observers collect evidence from videos

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<sup>11</sup> Engaging Educators, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

of teacher instruction, score the lesson and give feedback, including creating a professional learning plan based on the results. They must pass a certification test and are recertified annually. All of this is done with the aim of supporting evaluators to “rate practice effectively, provide effective feedback and coach [teachers] toward growth.”<sup>13</sup>

As a result, teachers know their evaluators won’t be giving assessments off-the-cuff. They know that all evaluators have been through the same training. Providing trustworthy evaluation data builds trust in the system.

## Supporting quality instruction

But evaluations don’t stop at simply providing data. While most educators believe that evaluations should be a tool for improving instruction, unless a school gives legs to that idea, it won’t get far. To be truly effective, schools need to provide support to their teachers in implementing feedback.

In large part, this means cultivating a team environment where it’s safe to ask questions and take risks. In “How to Create a Learning Culture,” Robert J. Grossman addresses the wider business world, but the point is well-taken within education as well. “Encourage candor and dissent. Learning cultures feature flat hierarchies, high levels of engagement and openness. Tough questioning is welcomed.”<sup>14</sup>


Taking it a step further, growth happens within cultures that embolden educators to try new ideas. Grossman continues to say that taking risks is a good thing within certain parameters, and that organizations that desire healthy learning cultures should encourage risks and even mistakes — provided that they lead to further growth.<sup>15</sup> Then, together,

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<sup>13</sup> Connally, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Grossman, R. J. (2015, May 1). How to Create a Learning Culture. Retrieved March 18, 2016, from <https://www.shrm.org/publications/hrmagazine/editorialcontent/2015/0515/pages/0515-learning-culture.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



reflect and learn from the successes as well as the failures — keep doing what works, and stop doing what doesn't.

## Results: greater growth and trust

While most of this discussion has centered on using school culture to make evaluations more effective, the reverse is also true: evaluations can actually improve school culture. Trust breeds trust, growth breeds growth. As teachers and administrators work together in evaluations, as all parties are open to — and seek out — growth through collaboration, as teachers take ownership of their learning and receive support from their leadership, the results are often greater trust and greater growth. From Dr. Susan Abelein, a veteran teacher, principal, administrator and consultant: “In a school and system where trust is established and supports are provided, administrators and teachers who engage in reflective practice and professional development thrive.”<sup>16</sup>

*While most of this discussion has centered on using school culture to make evaluations more effective, the reverse is also true: evaluations can actually improve school culture.*

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<sup>16</sup> Abelein, S. (2015, November 16). Using Teacher Evaluations—and Trust—to Improve School Culture - Catapult Learning. Retrieved March 14, 2016, from <http://www.catapultlearning.com/using-teacher-evaluations-and-trust-to-improve-school-culture/>

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