Classroom Observations
Measuring Teachers' Professional Practices

For classroom teachers, observations are the most intensive and most influential part of an evaluation and support system that they experience. When classroom observations are done well—by trained observers who provide teachers with immediate and actionable feedback using high-quality observation tools—they can improve instruction and boost student achievement.[1] But when done poorly—in a "drive-by" fashion once or twice a year, without a strong rubric or adequately trained observers—observations become mere compliance exercises. This is why many states and districts are working so hard to develop the crucial systems and supports that enable evaluators to conduct high-quality observations.

What do high-quality classroom observations look like? And what must states and districts do better if they want to improve teachers' skills? This brief answers these questions, culling from research and the experience of leading districts and states to show how school systems can make high-quality classroom observations a reality.

PREREQUISITES TO HIGH-QUALITY OBSERVATIONS

States and districts should carefully assess their appetite for reform before undertaking this challenge. High-quality observations take time and hard work, and states and districts committed to success should be prepared to:

- **Prioritize observations** as the most important measure in the first years of implementing new evaluation and support systems;
- **Have ongoing conversations with teachers and observers** about instruction and student learning to ensure that educators see observations as part of a continuous improvement cycle; and
- **Align their evaluation efforts with other reforms,** especially new college- and career-readiness standards, so that teachers and observers understand how evaluation and support systems will help improve instruction and raise student achievement.
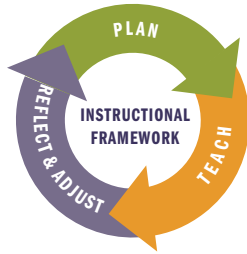
RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure systemwide understanding of effective practice.

Design or select high-quality teaching frameworks and rubrics. Use teaching frameworks and rubrics that establish a systemwide understanding of effective instruction. A teaching framework defines effective practices through a set of critical skills or competencies that teachers should demonstrate in the classroom. These skills and competencies help guide observers while assessing classroom teaching. Strong frameworks, such as those from Chicago Public Schools and Baltimore City Public Schools (see figure), have the following characteristics:

- **Concise and distinct criteria that are easy for teachers and evaluators to understand and use.** The indicators should be specific, narrow and observable in a 15-minute classroom visit. Competencies that co-vary, or measure the same aspects of instruction, should be condensed into a single competency.[2]

- **Strong, tight links to Common Core State Standards.** Explicit references to the Common Core help educators connect the dots between new evaluations and Common Core by clarifying how to look for evidence of Common Core instructional shifts in the classroom.

- **Clear differentiation of behaviors at each performance level.** Distinct, leveled indicators help observers assess performance and give teachers specific ways to improve. Researchers recommend that observation rubrics have at least four different performance levels.[3]

- **Externally validated and research-based.** Rubrics should be tested in classrooms before being used.

T1 Communicate standards-based lesson objectives

T2 Present content clearly

T3 Use strategies and tasks to engage all students in rigorous work

T4 Use evidence-dependent questioning

T5 Check for understanding and provide specific, academic feedback

T6 Facilitate student-to-student interaction and academic talk

T7 Implement routines to maximize instructional time

T8 Build a positive, learning-focused classroom culture

T9 Reinforce positive behavior, redirect off-task behavior and de-escalate challenging behavior

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools. Available at http://bit.ly/1kort98.

Engage teachers in the selection and implementation of frameworks and rubrics. Teachers who feel they are part of the process of selecting and implementing a new observation framework tend to view observations as an opportunity to improve their practice (rather than as a "gotcha" moment). Constantly solicit feedback on frameworks from educators and explore other proven engagement strategies such as piloting rubrics in a no-stakes environment; convening focus and advisory groups to review and refine rubrics; using teacher leaders to advocate for the new evaluation and support systems and lead professional development; and engaging union leadership in the creation and rollout of new observation tools.[4]

Support principals in their role as instructional leaders. Principals must view themselves as instructional leaders and see observations and feedback as the primary mechanism for improving instruction in their building. Yet early evidence indicates that most principals have not developed essential skills, such as accurately assessing teacher performance and providing high-quality feedback.[5] And many principals are ill equipped to have difficult conversations with low-performing teachers.

Moreover, studies show that most principals spend only 8 to 17 percent of their time on daily activities related to instructional leadership, such as informally coaching teachers, creating and leading professional development and using data to inform instruction.[6] However, research also shows that student achievement is higher in schools where principals spend more time on day-to-day instructional leadership activities. If principals are going to be true instructional leaders, it is imperative that they allocate more time to this role.

Leading states and districts are developing innovative and promising solutions, such as:

- **Providing additional administrative support.** Training other school and district personnel—including front office secretaries, assistant principals and district staff—as well as adding administrators when feasible to handle non-instructional tasks can free up principals' time to focus on instructional leadership activities.[7] Alternatively, teachers can take on greater responsibilities in the observation process. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools have introduced career pathways that empower teachers to increase their school's capacity to conduct high-quality classroom observations.

- **Redefining principals' roles.** Principal supervisors need to emphasize to principals that they should focus their efforts on instruction over noninstructional tasks. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) revamped its expectations for principals to emphasize instructional leadership. To help principals focus on this work, TDOE has cautioned principal supervisors to limit how often they pull principals out of their buildings.[8]

- **Using technology.** Tablet applications can save time by helping principals record evidence from observations quickly, enter it into observation forms, and share it instantly with teachers.

Build credibility by certifying observers and providing teachers with high-quality feedback.

Certify observers, and train them to give high-quality feedback. Frameworks and rubrics alone will not help teachers improve. Observers must be trained to use frameworks and rubrics to accurately assess teacher performance and provide teachers with high-quality feedback to improve. Many states and districts currently certify observers by requiring them to demonstrate proficiency in applying an observation rubric to evaluate a sample lesson.

To make observer certification more rigorous, school systems can require observers to show how to prioritize areas for teacher development, provide actionable feedback and identify resources to help teachers improve. States and districts are beginning to incorporate these skills into initial observer certification, as well as to provide observers with ongoing development in these skills over the course of the year. TDOE, for example, provides observers who need additional support with school-based opportunities—such as paired observations and one-on-one coaching—to practice and reinforce their observation skills.[9]

Establish protocols and procedures for teachers to receive feedback from observers. Give teachers and observers time and space, such as post-observation conferences during the school day, to discuss feedback that teachers can immediately incorporate into their instruction. Several states, districts and charter management organizations

have created resources that show what high-quality feedback conversations look like. For example, Uncommon Schools, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and the Louisiana Department of Education have developed a repository of videos showing observers delivering clear feedback grounded in observation rubrics. NYCDOE and Uncommon Schools also have developed standardized templates for observers to share feedback with teachers.

Source: Louisiana Department of Education. Available at http://bit.ly/1gi6ByF.

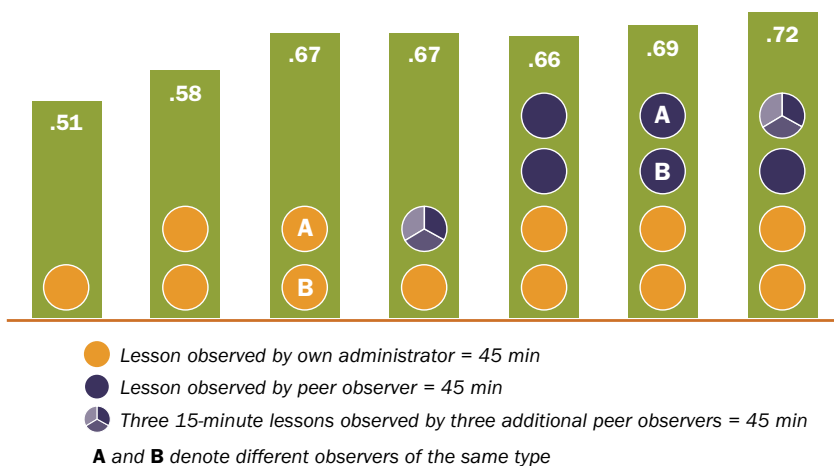## Make observations useful and manageable for teachers and observers.

Change policies that prescribe who observes and the number, type and duration of observations: Highly prescriptive observation policies are the norm in many states and districts, but these policies often do more harm than good. Some common flaws (and fixes) in observation policies are:

- ➲ **Barring observers from using short, informal observations in teacher evaluations.** Replace the traditional, but unproductive, paradigm of formal and informal observations with policies that permit frequent, shorter visits to classrooms followed by written or verbal feedback. Denver Public Schools now allows observers to use evidence from frequent, short observations to complement longer observations when assigning a teacher's overall observation rating.[10]

- ➲ **Requiring unannounced observations.** Notifying teachers prior to observations does not change the distribution of observation ratings. This practice could reduce anxiety among teachers and make scheduling observations easier for observers.[11]

- ➲ **Limiting who can be an observer.** Rather than relying solely on principals and school-based administrators to conduct observations, expand the pool of observers to add capacity and improve the reliability of ratings. In DCPS, teachers are observed by their principals and by external observers called "Master Educators." In Hillsborough County, Florida, teachers observe their peers and provide them with feedback, a process they find mutually beneficial. This strategy makes observations more manageable, enables teacher leaders to share their instructional expertise with others, and fosters collaboration among staff.[12] Research also shows that having multiple observers leads to more reliable and valid observation and evaluation results. Better results yield better strategic decisions at the state and district level, and bolster teachers' confidence in the data that inform those decisions.

- ➲ **Requiring the same number of observations for all teachers, regardless of past performance.** Differentiating the number of observations based on teacher performance allows principals to focus on teachers who need the most support. Both Hillsborough County Public Schools and the TDOE require principals to observe new or low-performing teachers more frequently than veteran and high-performing teachers.

THE POSITIVE EFFECT OF MULTIPLE OBSERVERS AND OBSERVATIONS ON RELIABILITY

Multiple observations and multiple observers increase the reliability of observations and provide opportunities for districts and school leaders to address capacity challenges. Several 15-minute observations can be just as reliable as a single 45-minute observation, and having peers and other administrators conduct observations improves their reliability.

.51   .58   .67   .67   .66   .69   .72

🟠 *Lesson observed by own administrator = 45 min*

🔵 *Lesson observed by peer observer = 45 min*

🥧 *Three 15-minute lessons observed by three additional peer observers = 45 min*

A *and* **B** *denote different observers of the same type*

Source: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (January 2013). "Ensuring Fair and Reliable Measures of Effective Teaching: Culminating Findings from the MET Project's Three-Year Study." Available at http://bit.ly/1nmvbQm.

Monitor observation results for quality and build a system of continuous improvement.

As with evaluation systems overall, strive to continuously improve observations' accuracy in diagnosing teacher performance. After the first year of implementation, there is still not enough differentiation of teacher performance to inform meaningful feedback or human capital decisions. To address this:

➲ **Look for evidence of accuracy** in observers' ratings of teachers and for observation ratings that correlate with student outcomes;

➲ **Establish feedback loops,** such as teacher surveys, to assess whether observers are conducting observations with fidelity and giving teachers high-quality feedback; and

➲ Use observation data and feedback from teachers to **identify underperforming observers** and provide them with additional support or supervision so that they can improve their skills.

CONCLUSION

High-quality classroom observations take a lot of work, but—if executed correctly—the pay-off can be substantial. Creating new observation tools is only the first step: States and districts must also commit the full suite of supports needed to implement high-quality observations—training, time, resources and new policies. By showing that they are serious about observations, states and districts can promote and implement practices that improve how teachers teach and students learn.

---

1   Taylor, E. and Tyler, J. (2012), "Can Teacher Evaluation Improve Teaching?" *EducationNext 12(*4). Available at http://bit.ly/1m8MH8F.

2   The New Teacher Project. (2013), "Fixing Classroom Observations."

3   The New Teacher Project. (2010), "Teacher Evaluation 2.0." Available at http://bit.ly/1gMm883.

4   U.S. Department of Education Reform Support Network. (2012), *Engaging Educators: A Reform Support Network Guide for States and Districts.* Available at http://bit.ly/149ZDcu.

5   Tennessee Department of Education. (2013), "Teacher Evaluation in Tennessee: A Report on Year 1 Implementation." Available at http://bit.ly/1qCSrKO.

6   Horng, L. E., Jlasik, D. and Loeb, S. (2010, August), "Principals' Time Use and School Effectiveness." *American Journal of Education.*; and Jerald, C. (2012), "Leading for Effective Teaching: How School Systems Can Support Principal Success." Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

7   Policy Studies Associates. (2009, December), "Evaluation of the School Administration Manager Project." Available at http://bit.ly/1fz9fSd.

8   Tennessee Department of Education. (2013), "Teacher Evaluation in Tennessee: A Report on Year 2 Implementation." Available at http://bit.ly/1zhSG3b.

9   Ibid.

10 Denver Public Schools. (2013), "LEAP Handbook 2013–14". Available at http://bit.ly/1hYxMR9.

11 MET Project. (2013), *The Reliability of Classroom Observations by School Personnel.*

12 American Institutes for Research Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. (2013, May), *Leveraging Teacher Talent: Peer Observation in Educator Evaluation.* Available at http://bit.ly/KjMwuY.