Hard Choices in Hard Times

School districts should involve teachers and administrators in developing a fair system of evaluation, carry it out as planned, and make sure it is visible and accepted.
teachers are also aware of the excellent teachers in their midst. This knowledge comes through informal channels and is based on informal criteria, most of which are familiar to those who have spent time in schools (Neufeld, 1980).

In general, administrators rely on feedback from a variety of people, including department heads who report on the teachers in their departments. Teachers know which of their coworkers have noisy classrooms, or never contribute to departmental discussions, or consistently pass unprepared students on to the next year’s teachers.

Students also contribute informally to teacher evaluations. If a teacher doesn’t teach, students complain to their parents. Teachers, too, gain impressions of other teachers from students, although they qualify the amount of faith they place in student judgments.

Administrators also gather information in more direct ways, by observing, for instance, whether a teacher is late to class, whether the class appears orderly, and whether learning appears to be going on. These observations supplement administrators’ other sources of information. This knowledge, rather than information from the formal evaluation process, alerts the principal to possible sources of trouble in the school.

The Role and Limitations of Evaluation in Schools

Recognizing the importance of informal knowledge and the apparent inadequacies of the formal system, what purposes does formal evaluation serve? Two seem particularly important. First, evaluation fulfills legal and cultural requirements for accountability. We expect and demand school systems to monitor the quality of their staffs. Formal evaluation meets that demand. Second, evaluation provides procedural documentation that a school system must have in order to prove incompetence or to defend teachers who may come under attack from the community.

As pressures for staff reductions increase, demands for linking evaluations to decisions will escalate. What is more, future decisions will need to be made among teachers considered competent. We have no evidence that existing evaluations can inform these delicate decisions. And, at the same time school systems must find better ways to help teachers and administrators improve.

Some Pitfalls in Improving Evaluation Practices

School systems try to improve evaluation systems in a number of ways, most of which advocate more rational approaches. But the instant appeal of certain changes may be an illusion of rational values. Many of these new practices come to schools from business and industry. Putting education on a “business footing” is a common trend, even though evaluation in business differs significantly from evaluation in schools.

“Evaluation in business differs significantly from evaluation in schools.”

The unwelcome consequences are now being experienced in school districts. One school committee, for example, tied salary increases to evaluation ratings. Tightening the evaluation criteria and ranking teachers meant specifying clearly what each teacher was doing and how that activity was to be rated by the evaluator. But teaching is too vaguely understood to withstand such careful specification. It is common knowledge that a teaching strategy that works well for one teacher may fail with another. Individual differences must therefore be tolerated, encouraged, and formally recognized. The attempt to standardize and rank teachers had serious consequences for the morale of both administrators and teachers.

Using evaluations to rank teachers also disturbs reciprocal relationships within a school. Ordinarily teachers are not formally ranked. Principals and teachers may know informally the best and the least effective teachers, but this knowledge is private and not the basis of formal decision making or written reports. Evaluation systems generally deal with the performance of the individual teacher without regard to the other teachers in the school. The assumption is that all teachers work cooperatively for the good of the school. Evaluation schemes that rank teachers disturb this system, threaten the organizational cohesion of the school, exacerbate adversarial relationships that may exist between teachers and administrators, and negate potential support for professional growth.

Tightening evaluation systems and linking results to dismissal decisions also undermines the important supervision relationship between depart-
The sense of reciprocity and teamwork is threatened when the department head is placed in a position of rating teachers. In Neufeld's study (1980), department heads reported that teachers were afraid to ask for help and to admit their problems. They feared that admitting inadequacy would weigh negatively in future retention decisions.

There have been attempts in other districts to expand rather than tighten criteria on which teachers are ranked. For example, one district uses three categories: seniority, teacher's academic preparation, and local needs of the school. While seniority is self-explanatory, teacher preparation refers to the level of certification the teacher holds. An English teacher who is also certified to teach social studies, for example, is more desirable than one certified to teach only English. Local needs refer to both tangible and intangible factors; the teacher who coaches the swim team is needed, as is the Chicano teacher who serves as a role model for Chicano students. All three criteria are considered equally important and it remains within the discretion of the building administrator to make the final decisions. However, focusing on schoolwide needs may place a strain on individual teachers, who feel pressed to make a contribution to the school that will permit them to stay.

**Restoring Faith in Evaluations and Schools**

The current emphasis on evaluation and accountability in education needs to be viewed in the context of a general decline of faith and confidence in American institutions. When people believe in institutions, they support them without much question. We once visited the doctor, received treatments, and assumed we would get well. But we're asking hard questions of our institutions these days—particularly those with ambiguous or spiritual missions. Answers beam back downright disheartening. Doctors, we've learned, make mistakes and often don't know how to treat disease. The dilemma in the schools is that evaluation activities are encouraged and mandated, but the results often undermine confidence and trust even more. Schools have to walk a tightrope between refusing to develop new systems for evaluating personnel or plunging ahead with vigorous new approaches only to find later that the rational avenues of improvement are bordered by poison ivy rather than primroses.

The key to being responsive without being irresponsible may lie in doing evaluations—but not too seriously (Sapolsky, 1972; Floden and Weiner, 1978). In this view, we need to give as much attention to the faith and confidence of internal participants and external constituencies as we do to the technical details of evaluation.

Several questions need to guide the improvement of evaluation. Do people understand the evaluation system? Do they accept it? Do they have confidence in it? Is the process visible? Does it conform to local expectations about what sound evaluation practice should be? Is the procedure technically sound? An effective evaluation process needs to be seen as legitimate and needs to inspire belief and confidence. Evaluation needs to connect with our souls, hearts, and
the right side of our brains as well as with rational dictates that it "makes sense." In this view, efforts to improve evaluation need to consider several guidelines.

1. Creating the System. If different constituencies participate in developing an evaluation system, they will more likely feel a sense of ownership and have more faith in what is produced. Administrators may argue that "Teachers won't ever be happy with an evaluation system. If we ask them, all we'll get will be their gripes." Yet teachers want an effective evaluation system; one they believe will help them or protect them from unfair or capricious decisions. If the process of developing an evaluation system permits conflicts to surface, be confronted and resolved prior to the time it is put into action, the chances for success are far greater than if a current of discontent and disagreement remains and smolders beneath the surface.

2. Broadcasting the System. Spreading the word, and the rationale, for an evaluation system is crucial. In one school district, an evaluation process was "in place" for two years without many teachers, parents, or students knowing of its existence or rationale. An outside team was commissioned to develop a report on the advantages and disadvantages of the system. But the main contribution of the study was to let people know what the "founders" had in mind, and to identify the gaps between intention and reality. The study let people know what the original evaluation procedure intended to do—something they did not know before.

3. Doing Something. Once people know about a plan or process, they want to know that it is more than rhetoric. They want to see some activity. If teachers are supposed to be observed regularly, are they in fact being observed? If parents can write letters to influence a teacher's evaluation, how do they know their letters matter? If students write evaluations of their teachers, how do they know their input is taken seriously? People look for activity as an indicator of how well plans are carried out. Calling attention to activity in the area of evaluation signals that something is being done.

4. Looking Good. People need to see activity that means something, which means that what is seen must support symbols that have meaning within a district. Symbols are a shorthand way of conveying a great deal of information; they represent an aggregate of feelings and beliefs. Particular aspects of evaluation will have different meanings to different people and to different districts. Competency-based teacher evaluation may signify all that is good to some; to others it is a symbol of a failed education system. Thus the particular evaluation system adopted and the symbols that are embodied within it must generate positive meanings. Participation helps assure a district that its particular system will convey positive meanings to its constituents.

5. Staying Alive. If it is to remain vital, an evaluation process must do more than look good; it must produce results. An evaluation system that may be seen but has no force won't foster belief in the system. A high school principal recently lamented that, after following all required procedures to dismiss an ineffective teacher, his recommendations were disregarded by the school board. He
Big Dreams Start Small

As children we all have dreams of what we want to do in our life. Even though over the years this may change from cowboy to fireman or doctor, the seed of that dream still began when we were young.

The children pictured above have these same dreams, only they seem just a little more urgent. To see their dreams of the future come true, they must first win their battle with the killer diseases that have invaded their young bodies.

These children are all patients at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital undergoing the most advanced cancer treatment programs. The continuation of these research programs is crucial for their dreams to become realities. Since 1962 the long term survival rate of children with acute lymphocytic leukemia has increased from less than 5% to over 50%.

Danny Thomas had a dream back in 1940 to develop a facility that could help children who were stricken with catastrophic diseases. His dream has more than come true. In less than 20 years this clinic has become one of the top ten cancer research centers in America and it is still the only one devoted solely to research on the killer diseases of children.

The children pictured above are all patients treated at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. They come from all over America and 21 foreign countries. They have dreams of their futures. Help keep these children and their dreams alive. Support the research at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

Danny Thomas, Founder

ST. JUDE CHILDREN’S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

References


