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Evaluations of professionals in schools used to be a joke, a yearly ritual, an exchange of pats on the back. But no more. Declining enrollments, shrinking resources, and an unfavorable economy have created the need for transfers, demotions, and dismissals—based on evaluations. What participants once chuckled about has become serious business.

Linking evaluations to retention and dismissal decisions is difficult in all organizations. It is particularly tough in schools, where judging the performance of teachers or administrators is an elusive and complicated task. In theory, at least, evaluations are supposed to foster professional growth. But evaluation conducted primarily for improvement cannot be used for making personnel decisions without creating fear and suspicion. On the other hand, evaluating teachers to help them improve may not yield evaluations defensible to legal challenge.

Caught in this double vise, school districts are going to have to struggle toward a solution that fits the peculiarities of the local setting. In doing so, they may find some guidance from the research on evaluation and from experiences of other districts wrestling with similar issues.

A Profile of Evaluation

Results of research on evaluation largely reaffirm what everyone supposed anyway: the process of evaluation breaks down in a number of areas (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975). For instance, Deal and others (1978) found several weaknesses in the process used to evaluate the performance of principals.

1. Half of the principals did not know what criteria were used to evaluate their performance. Those who

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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.

did know listed vague criteria that often focused on unimportant aspects of their role, such as being innovative, keeping the "ripples off the pond," and submitting reports on time.

2. Half of the principals did not know how information used in their evaluations was obtained. Those who knew cited rumor, hearsay, and gossip as primary sources of information. Rarely were evaluations perceived as being based on direct observation of important aspects of the principal's role.

3. Personal characteristics — a good sense of humor, belonging to the right organizations, good breath, and a nice appearance—play an important role in judgments about an administrator's performance.

Thompson and others (1975) found other problems in teacher evaluations.

1. Principals emphasized the more routine aspects of teaching, such as recordkeeping and classroom control, although they said communicating subject matter and fostering character development were more important.

2. Most teachers did not know what criteria were used to evaluate their classroom performance.

3. Observations were infrequent, usually just a "quick peek" once a year.

4. Teachers and administrators left evaluation conferences with different ideas: administrators were more likely to see themselves pointing out specific areas of weakness; teachers were more likely to perceive the exchange as supportive and positive about their level of performance.

Both groups were highly dissatisfied with evaluation practices (Deal and others, 1978; Thompson and others, 1975). While teachers and administrators reported that the primary purpose of evaluation is to help them improve their practice, they agreed that evaluations, for the most part, do not achieve this goal (Neufeld, 1980).

Informal Evaluations

As one teacher said, "Principals may not know about all the poor teachers, but they know about many of them." Although they speak about them far less frequently, administrators and

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 districts 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.

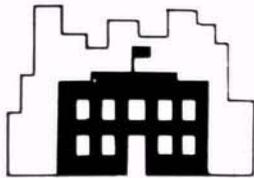
As pressures for staff reductions increase, demands for linking evaluations to decisions will escalate. What is more, future decisions will need to be made among teachers considered competent. We have no

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

"Evaluation in business differs significantly from evaluation in schools."



on a "business footing" is a common trend, even though evaluation in business differs significantly from evaluation in schools.

First, schools are highly dependent on the confidence and goodwill of local communities. When communities believe their schools are working, they are willing to provide financial and moral support. When faith and confidence in schools dwindles, so does the support. Second, whether goals are accomplished, instruction is effective, or students grow in expected ways is almost impossible to determine. Third, schools serve a number of unstated functions in communities, such as providing employment and entertainment for local residents and keeping kids off the streets. Fourth, relationships between teachers and principals are determined by informal agreements and pacts that no formal organization chart can capture.

Given these conditions, rational efforts aimed at improving evaluation have harmful side-effects. Exposing

incompetent teachers or admitting that evaluations cannot discriminate among teachers may erode public confidence. Defining goals too clearly or failing to find connections between instruction and learning may create conflict and disbelief. Dismissing an incompetent administrator or teacher whose livelihood depends on remaining in the system may cause vociferous local reaction. Expecting principals or department heads to rate teachers or to recommend who should be retained may undermine an informal working relationship essential to the successful operation of a school.

These 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-

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ment heads and teachers. 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), for example, 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 that are unclear, contradictory, and 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 tight-rope 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



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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

asked, "What is the point of my following the evaluation procedures? For that matter, why even have an evaluation system?"

In order to produce results, an evaluation system must be both reasonable and consistent. If reasonable, the process can be accomplished within local time, personnel, and financial constraints. If consistent, there are explicit guidelines and expectations so that supervisors are not left to develop their own plans and teachers are not uncertain about what is expected of them. Inconsistent methods and expectations undermine participants' belief that the results produced are fair and comparable. As a teacher in a district with no consistent methods said, "I have no faith in our evaluation; you can't compare apples to oranges and since each principal uses his own method to observe and write, that's what happens."

A key to ensuring that the process is implemented according to plan is to make sure that someone is in charge. However complex or simple the procedures, people need to know that there is one individual charged with responsibility for the process and

to whom they can go if they hit a snag. This person's visibility and actions also provide evidence that the system is working.

If evaluation procedures embody such characteristics, and if the personnel decision-making policies and the relationship to the evaluation system are clearly defined, any school system can expect the faith and support of its community. ■

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