

# A Team Approach to Supervising the Marginal Teacher

Intensive assistance provides the resources and data the supervisor needs to help marginal teachers or to move for dismissal.

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**W**e may well remember 1983 as a milepost in stemming the so-called "rising tide of mediocrity" in American education. While no sector of the educational enterprise has escaped unscathed, much of the rhetoric has focused on the unsatisfactory performance of America's teachers. Curiously, the proposed solutions are themselves symptomatic of a condition often discussed in the supervision literature: a lack of attention to problems associated with the marginal teacher.<sup>1</sup> What we need is a reliable and accurate method for identifying teachers who are not performing up to standard and a systematic process for helping them improve.

## Recognizing the Marginal Teacher

Data obtained from more than 750 principals provide a blurred but distinguishable portrait of the marginal teacher. The principals observe that a marginal teacher is one who appears to have

sufficient command of subject matter but whose lack of classroom management skills gets in the way of student learning. Put more bluntly, the marginal teacher often butchers a lesson, failing to effectively check for understanding, use modeling appropriately, or attend to student motivation. The principals also report that the marginal teacher tends to use questioning for control purposes and seems afraid to "dipstick," lest the feedback be negative. They also observe two affective characteristics worthy of note: tacit hostility toward supervision and "up and down" personalities (extremely gushy or gloomy).

This portrait, though somewhat instructive, offers little help to those who

must draw the line between satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance in the classroom. Although admittedly difficult, the task can be successfully accomplished if one has the proper guideposts and procedures in place. These include a rating scale with criteria based on effective teaching, lesson analysis in conjunction with pre-conferencing and skillful classroom observation, written job improvement targets, and provision for coaching and counseling. After completing an evaluation cycle including several observations, the principal must ask the \$64,000 question, "Does this teacher meet the district's standards?" While the courts have provided a general standard or guide by supporting dismissal efforts of school districts that were able to provide valid evidence of "good cause," the principal must be convinced that the teacher's nonperformance is, "in a reasonable sense, detrimental to the students being taught." Current effective teaching research pro-

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vides the framework for decision making. After several observations, a supervisor must ask:

1. Does the teacher teach to an objective?
2. Are the teaching/learning activities designed to reach that objective, and are they appropriate for the students?
3. Is the “presentation” of what is to be learned efficiently and effectively delivered?
4. Are there provisions for assessment and diagnosis of student?
5. Does the teacher provide for enrichment and remediation?
6. Does the learning environment promote student learning?

Aren't these judgment calls? Yes; that's why the supervisor must know a great deal about effective instruction. But how many of the principles can be violated and to what extent? Same answer. There is no recipe or equation for making the decision; it's a judgment call on the part of the supervisor. In truth, if, after careful examination of data gathered by wide and narrow lens techniques, the supervisor answers “no” to any of the six questions above, then the students probably aren't learning and the teacher in question is marginal. To be effective, a supervisory system must provide (1) the teacher with time and help to get better, and (2) the school

organization with sufficient data and a process for implementing personnel decisions. Intensive assistance can do both.

#### Help for the Marginal Teacher

Intensive assistance is a helping routine that serves as a subsystem of the school organization's evaluation system. It is designed to help marginal performers improve sufficiently to meet district standards. It is not intended for either the super teacher or the average teacher—nor for the teacher who has adequate classroom skills but does not follow employee rules. When working the latter, we recommend a series of supervisory strategies called progressive discipline. To illustrate how intensive assistance can be used, let's use a hypothetical case study approach, with you playing the role of principal. The object of your concern is a teacher we'll call Ed.

Ed is a pleasant, likable fellow who has been on staff for ten years. He was given tenure by your predecessor some time ago. He has always been cooperative and capably carries his share of the load in handling extracurricular and other school activities. Yet, informal data from parents, students, and even other teachers are disquieting. “Boring” and “confusing” come from his students; “ineffective” comes surreptitiously from his colleagues. You have a rather disturbing feeling that Ed may not be an effective teacher. You formally observe him three times and find a familiar pattern; his lessons lack organization, are dull, and have no purpose. Ed does virtually nothing to motivate his students. Following each visit you share the observation data with Ed, who is very receptive. However, despite a mutually agreed-upon plan for improvement, subsequent visits to the classroom reveal little improvement. You appear to have three choices: (1) forget it, and abrogate your responsibility; (2) begin dismissal procedures, and abrogate your commitment to ethical, procedural, and substantive due process; or (3) turn to intensive assistance, and fulfill your responsibility by providing Ed with the time and help to improve.

#### The Intensive Assistance Process

The first step in the intensive assistance process is to provide more frequent formal observations. Ed needs to know that

there is concern and that you are serious about helping. But don't make this common mistake: “Ed, we are going to work on this *together*.” The monkey is on Ed's back (to improve); your responsibility is to provide assistance. Let's assume that over a four-week period you observe Ed's lesson six times, and although there is minor improvement he still has a long way to go.

It is now time to go to step two—the intensive assistance team. Its primary function is to provide the principal and the teacher with support and assistance. Enlisting the aid of a support team doesn't mean that you have given up on Ed. You are committing every available human resource to the improvement effort. The manner in which these resources are deployed is defined by the school organization's size and staffing pattern. Small districts may utilize line administrators in assembling the team; others may use curriculum specialists, subject matter supervisors, personnel workers, and other central office personnel. Once again a fixed recipe eludes us. The “best” team has three or four staff members who are willing and able to help a teacher grow. Although the composition of the team and the procedures it employs are best determined by the school district, two guidelines anchor the activity: (1) the team members provide assistance; the principal is the prime evaluator and decision maker; and (2) the team is there to provide help, not evidence.

Now that you have an intensive assistance team, how do you proceed? You meet with Ed, share the analysis of the observation data, and offer him help through the support team. You make sure that Ed understands the benefits of the process. This is a time to utilize sound conferencing techniques and to call on all your interpersonal skills. It's also a time for tough love. You have to clearly communicate to Ed where he stands, but in a way that doesn't strip away his pride and cause intense resentment. Ed, like most teachers, will eventually welcome the help, but his initial reaction may be embarrassment and withdrawal. He will need patience from you and time to reflect.

Following the initial conference, you meet with Ed and develop a four-part improvement plan. This includes a problem statement that clearly specifies the deficient area(s) and specific objec-

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tives for improvement. It also outlines the procedures that will be followed during the improvement effort as well as the appraisal method. Finally, it contains timelines, review dates, and a target date. To be on solid legal ground and to do the job right, it is advisable to allow a minimum of six months and as much as two years for the improvement effort.

Next, you meet with the team, carefully review intensive assistance procedures, and examine the improvement plan. You share lesson plans, observations, and other data and bring the team up to date. The team then meets with Ed for an in-depth discussion of the plan and how the team will provide help throughout the process. (In small districts the principal should chair the support team; in larger districts we recommend that a principal on special assignment serve as chair.) The team chairperson conducts the meeting emphasizing the helping role while exhibiting sensitivity and caring.

During the intensive assistance period several activities must be carefully monitored. You must coordinate the classroom observations, the team meetings, and the team's discussions with Ed. At each team meeting the members share data, assess progress, and refine plans. They meet regularly with Ed and pro-

vide him with a written evaluation of his progress through the *assistance team log*, which summarizes what took place in the meeting. There is a tendency at this point to "gild the lily." While Ed needs all the support he can get, only an honest valid assessment is fair to him. In addition, gratuitous written praise will kill the school organization that may eventually decide to move for dismissal. Finally, the principal has another responsibility—to keep an up-to-date status report complete with dates, summaries, composites, reviews, and documentation sources.

A word about the use of other evaluators. They increase the reliability of the performance evaluation and, concomitantly, strengthen your case in litigation. Two or three evaluations by other district administrators are helpful to the teacher and to the school organization.

#### The Final Decision

The intensive assistance period is over and so is your final meeting with the committee. The team's evaluation is of great value, but as Harry S. Truman said, "the buck stops here." You must choose from three options. The first is to *discontinue* the intensive assistance if Ed is performing up to par. The second is to *continue* intensive assistance if his performance is up to standard but still needs considerable reinforcement. In that case, you reconvene the support team and build a plan for continuing assistance. Third, if Ed has not reached the mark, you must *consider dismissal*.

You may have a tendency to be swayed by the fact that Ed has improved somewhat in one or more areas. While this is, of course, laudatory, the decision hinges on the extent to which he is effective in the classroom. If, after a reasonable period of intensive assistance, Ed is still performing below standard, your concern for student achievement should govern your decision. Let's assume that Ed has not hit the mark, his performance in the classroom is detrimental to student achievement. We suggest that prior to moving for dismissal you convene an "action team" to examine the situation. Typically, this team consists of the principal (or prime evaluator), the school organization's personnel officer, and the school attorney. The team examines the evaluation data and the documentation. Their task is relatively straightforward. You know

you have an excellent case; the action team must confirm that there is a legal case.

#### The Outlook Is Positive

Intensive assistance is not a legal process, and it is obviously not a quick fix. It is a total systems team approach, which brings to bear the skills, knowledge, and support of the administrative staff. What's more important, it works! Of 30 teachers who recently opted for intensive assistance in the Des Moines Independent School District, 12 have hit the mark and nine are currently working with the team. Perhaps a statement of one of the content area supervisors best describes the impact that intensive assistance has had on the district:

I feel the assistance teams are one of the most positive things we have done for teachers who need assistance, both in terms of public relations with staff and improving the overall quality of instruction in the school district.

"The future," said Samuel Johnson, "is purchased by the present." Even the most fortunate organizations, be they public or private, support a range of performers—the excellent, the satisfactory, and those who function at the margin. To disregard those whose contribution is marginal is unrewarding and productive. Intensive assistance provides a vehicle for making full use of our human resources. It does not come cheaply; time, human energy, and pervasive caring are precious commodities. The price of success, however, appears cheap when compared to the cost of failure. □

*Supervising the Marginal Teacher* is a 1983 ASCD videotape package, featuring Richard P. Manatt. The 60-minute videotape includes a comprehensive leader's guide and an instructional materials booklet, and is designed as a staff development activity for practicing supervisors and students of educational administration. It may be purchased from ASCD by members for \$225 and by nonmembers for \$260. For more information, contact ASCD, Publications Fulfillment, 225 N. Washington St., Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

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