

Teacher-Controlled Evaluation in a Career Ladder Program



Park City's "permissive" evaluation system encourages teachers to choose evidence to document their value to the district and make them eligible for promotion.

In 1984, the Utah legislature gave each school district in the state the go-ahead for setting up a teacher incentive career ladder program under state office of education guidelines. Such a program would provide monetary rewards to teachers for additional duties or for excellence in classroom performance. The challenge facing the Park City School District and their University of Utah collaborators was to develop a teacher evaluation system that was believable by teachers, community members, legislators, parents, and researchers in what sociologists have described as a hostile workplace climate for such activity. As in other parts of the country, district teachers were responsive to the idea of an evaluation system for promoting and rewarding teachers, but they were skeptical that it could be done.

A major assumption of the Park City system was that observation by principals should not be overused in teacher evaluation because of its substantial limitations. The district decided to continue to use the valuable evidence currently provided by principals but not to stretch their role with fantasies about increasing their observation time and heightening their discriminatory powers.

The system planners also realized that quality teaching can be recognized in a variety of forms, or lines, and is not confined to a narrow collection of strategies or competencies. The lines of evidence, an emergent approach to evaluation, document and acknowledge teacher performance from several different points of view.



Based on the assumption that no single line of evidence can disclose the value of *all* teachers, the approach incorporates evidence from a number of different perspectives, such as results of a parent survey, or pupils'

scores on standardized tests (see Figure 1).

To orient teachers to the complex procedures and requirements of the evaluation system, the district provided inservice courses and technical advisors. Pretests given to the teachers indicated that they lacked the required knowledge and attitudes to participate successfully. Posttests following the teachers' orientation to the system revealed encouraging growth.

How the System Works

The lines of teacher evaluation evidence are crucial to the Park City system. A dossier, usually containing a minimum of four lines of evidence and ranging in length from 15 to 30 pages, is kept for each teacher. This dossier represents the teacher's best evidence of his or her value to the school district.

The teachers begin by selecting several lines of evidence for accumulation. They develop each line over time, giving careful attention to the research literature, to their own rationale for selecting a particular line of evidence, and to the ease with which the evaluation panel will be able to use the evidence to paint a coherent picture of their performance. Which evidence the teachers pursue depends upon its appropriateness and availability, but teachers understand that they will later need to give it to a panel governing promotion.

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Figure 1. Lines of Teacher Evaluation Evidence

- Pupil report
- Parent survey
- Peer review of materials
- Teacher tests
- Systematic observation
- Administrator report
- Student gain data
- Professionalism
- Special service
- Other

Park City assists teachers in learning to use district forms to gather evidence and to organize it in their dossiers. For example, a teacher might call for a pupil report near the end of the year. A time is scheduled for an impartial data-gatherer to visit the teacher's classroom for five minutes, during which the teacher leaves the room. The data-gatherer uses the appropriate form for taking evidence from the teacher's students. The results are tallied on two copies of the form, one of which is given to the teacher to inspect. If the teacher approves of the results, the other copy is placed in the teacher's promotion dossier. If not, the teacher may retain both copies of the form. This procedure is used for all lines of evidence, even administrator visits.

The dossiers are evaluated by a panel on promotion, which consists of four teachers, two administrators, and two parents. The panel is not aware of evidence teachers have chosen *not* to include. Their overriding concern is, "Does the dossier present compelling evidence that justifies a promotion?" Five out of the eight panel members must vote favorably for the teacher to be promoted, and the panel may identify and reward truly exemplary practice as evidenced in the dossiers. Promotions are not competitive, and there are no quotas.

Promotions are valid for five years, during which time principals conduct routine evaluations. At the end of this period, teachers must be reviewed

again to stay in place or to advance on the career ladder. Promotions do not require additional duties but make teachers eligible for a small number of optional job enlargement opportunities, such as writing curriculum or handling some piece of state Department of Education compliance business. Teachers given the opportunity to execute these responsibilities are remunerated on the basis of a contract.

The Permissive Nature of the System

The Park City evaluation system is "permissive" in that teachers control which evidence to present to make their best case. Observers external to the district have criticized this permissive approach, but teachers, familiar with evaluation procedures that permit choice, have adopted it. Some observers have also objected to teachers selecting evidence. For example, teachers who think parents have little to contribute to teacher evaluation do not need to use that line. Similarly, those who regard teacher tests as irrelevant need not report scores. Such a nonthreatening beginning has given teachers confidence with the result that they are currently using more lines of evidence than are being used in any other career ladder plan. Nearly half of the teachers use teacher tests, student and parent surveys are common, and pupil achievement data are included in more than half of the dossiers.

The system's permissive nature has also increased the number of acceptable lines of evidence. Lines required of all teachers must have nearly unanimous support. Few lines enjoy such acceptance. Discriminating use of lines of evidence avoids logical traps, for example, creating difficult-to-defend prescriptions for all teachers on the basis of specific instances of teaching excellence.

Finally, the Park City system encourages professional behavior. It is the teachers' responsibility to demonstrate their value, and they have become involved in each other's assessments and in discussions about what constitutes value.



Photographs by Nari Schalos

Program Difficulties and Benefits

The Park City design is not without problems. It is a relatively cumbersome system, especially at first, with many unfamiliar details. For example:

- All lines of evidence were not fully developed.
- Introduction of data gathering and accompanying instruction can be expensive.
- Use of multiple lines of evidence requires teacher sophistication.
- Necessary teacher support requires that benefits be seen, not just described.
- Initial use threatens teacher security because of independence from familiar support of principal and colleagues.
- Teachers not electing to participate report feeling isolated.
- The design is not especially effective for diagnosing problems in teaching and prescribing improvements.

On the plus side, Park City teachers

have realized nonmonetary rewards in addition to promotions. Many have reported the satisfaction of what Lortie (1975) called "authoritative reassurance" about their work, which comes from documenting their impact. The results of a number of the lines have gained publicity in the community. For example, NTE scores of the teachers electing to take the exams were quite high, and parents have appreciated being asked for their perspectives.

The Park City administrators realized that the decision to use evaluation to document good practice would have significant consequences. By making professional expectations explicit, the program has been able to document the value, impact, and merit of good teaching. At the same time, it has relieved pressure on principals by easing their responsibility as sole judges of teacher value. Now that parents, legislators, and critics know the good things that are going on in the schools, both they and principals can

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The Park City approach has shown how teacher evaluation and promotion can affect the sociology of the teaching workplace. Providing teachers with a shared professional hurdle has also heightened their sense of shared professional identity. □

References

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