

Instructional Improvement Through Personnel Evaluation

Long-range planning, top-level commitment, and broad-based staff involvement helped a Chicago-area school district improve instruction by emphasizing formative evaluation.

Hinsdale Township High School District 86 is a two-high school system serving 3,700 students in west suburban Chicago. By both qualitative and quantitative measures, it is an excellent school system. Test scores are high, most students go on to college, a high-quality professional staff includes individuals considered to be leaders in their respective fields, and the district's facilities and resources are sufficient to support excellent instructional programs. For several years, however, Hinsdale teachers and administrators had not been satisfied with the personnel evaluation program. Largely summative, it consisted of a set of categories combined with a point system for placing personnel on a reduction-in-force list.

During the 1981-82 school year, a planning committee made up of the superintendent of schools, administrators, and selected teachers met numerous times to examine evaluation systems that might better meet district needs. Their deliberations resulted in development of the Instructional Improvement/Personnel Evaluation (II/PE) program, which the district adopted during the 1983-84 school year after a successful pilot. Here we describe the program, share our experience with it, and discuss its important and continuing effects on education in the district.¹

Program Components

District 86 developed the II/PE program to address the needs of administrators, teachers, and special personnel. After piloting the program in three phases for each group, district staff developed a handbook that would give continuing direction to the entire program. Development and implementation activities for each component are summarized below.

• *Administrator improvement and evaluation.* During the first program phase, in the summer of 1982, central office and building administrators developed functional position descriptions, created goal-based work plans, and studied important leadership processes.

At the first staff development session administrators reviewed the new evaluation program and attended a workshop devoted to writing functional position descriptions. After drafting their position descriptions, administrators attended a second workshop in which they developed work plans for three or four goals that were a high priority for themselves as well as for the district. The administrators' supervisors reviewed the position descriptions and work plans during the first semester of the school year.

The first improvement and evaluation conferences were held with ad-

ministrators in January 1983. A member of the consultant team, which the superintendent had selected to help the district develop the evaluation process, monitored conferences, taking note of their focus and offering constructive feedback to participants. Subsequently, supervisors and the consultant team monitor met with administrators to respond to their questions or concerns, as a result they were able to recommend improvements for the entire administrator phase of the program. Concurrent staff development sessions for administrators addressed leadership processes such as communication, decision making, conflict management, and personal renewal. The administrator phase of the II/PE program was completed when the program guidelines and procedures were finalized and published in the program handbook.

• *Teacher improvement and evaluation.* In June 1982 a team of district administrators and department chairs met to study the teacher's phase of the II/PE program. Whereas the primary goal of classroom supervision is to improve instruction, a secondary goal is to develop a collegial relationship between the classroom teacher and the supervisor. Supervisors devote approximately two-and-one-half hours per teacher in each observation cycle,

consisting of a preobservation conference, a classroom observation, and a postobservation conference.

During the preobservation conference, the supervisor learns about the class and students to be observed and helps the teacher focus on desired teaching objectives. It is also the first step in the development of a mutual trust relationship between the observer and the teacher.

While observing in the classroom, the supervisor collects objective data relating to teacher and student verbal or physical behaviors. During the post-observation conference, which is always held before the class meets again, observer and teacher analyze the entire lesson. They identify which behaviors helped the teacher accomplish the day's objectives and then mutually agree on any changes. (For a complete description of the program, see Bellon and Bellon 1982.)

The first training workshop for teacher improvement included administrators, department chairs, teachers representing all departments, and members of the planning committee. During this two-day session, participants learned strategies for effective conferences, instructional observation techniques, observation data analysis, and how to identify staff development needs.

Administrators and department chairs then practiced using the new processes in the workshop with teachers. Thereafter, all district teachers and supervisors attended staff development orientation sessions on the improvement program and effective teaching research. Other staff development sessions for supervisors focused on interpersonal communication, time management, conflict management, and decision making.

Consultant team members observed and gave feedback as department chairs and building administrators conducted complete observation cycles. The observations were videotaped and made available to faculty members.

Program activities during the 1983-84 school year included additional monitoring/coaching cycles for some supervisors, along with individual and small-group sessions to discuss specific aspects of the program.

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● *Special personnel improvement and evaluation.* Participants in the special personnel phase of the program included instructional materials staff, guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, deans, and nurses. Like activities for those in the administrator phase, this group focused attention on developing position descriptions, creating work plans, and learning leadership processes. Refinements continued until the program was finalized in 1984-85.

● *Handbook development.* During early program planning, district personnel decided to create a handbook detailing the processes, procedures, and expectations to guide all three phases, after each had been successfully piloted.

Three committees spearheaded the project at the beginning of the 1983-84 school year. Committee members shared information with the groups they represented and revised the handbook nine times before all three groups accepted it. The final product includes implementation principles, complete descriptions of the processes and procedures for each phase, and the instruments to be used. By the time the district adopted the handbook in the spring of 1984, all personnel had experienced the processes it contained.

What We Learned

Our experience implementing the IL/PE program is consistent with the Rand Corporation's findings from its

effective evaluation programs study (Wise et al. 1984). Although the following findings may not surprise others who have engaged in similar activities, they may reinforce what they have learned and improve the chances for successful change in a school district.

1. *Any new program must be consistent with the goals, needs, and organizational structure of, and community expectations for, the school district.* A committee of teachers, administrators, and the superintendent (acting as the chair) studied evaluation systems that would meet District 86's instructional improvement expectations, emphasize the qualitative aspects of instruction, and continue to foster the excellent programs already found in most of the departments.

2. *Top-level commitment and resources are critical to program success.* By chairing the planning committee, the superintendent obtained direct feedback about the values, perceptions, and feelings of the professional staff. The information enabled him to select a consultant team whose philosophy and beliefs were consistent with district needs. By being involved in all aspects of the program, the superintendent was able to demonstrate his program commitment to the board of education, and keep the board informed and supportive.

3. *District personnel should agree on the important purposes of a new program and then develop processes to meet them.* As a result of committee deliberations and informal discussions, the professional staff suggested that the district should focus on instructional improvement and develop an evaluation process consistent with that focus. The IL/PE program is based on the assumptions that:

- a. the primary purpose of evaluation is to improve performance,
- b. the entire professional staff is responsible for instructional improvement,
- c. people want to improve,
- d. commitment to staff development is critical, and
- e. instructional improvement processes are more important than forms or checklists.

The IL/PE program makes formative/interactive feedback a high priority, assuming that professional staff take responsibility for instructional im-

provement when they are provided the rationale for it. The improvement process began with the administrative staff, who modeled the commitment to developmental and renewal activities that would be expected of teachers and special personnel.

4. *Comprehensive planning is critical to program success.* The district's long-range plan included three major components to be phased in over a three-year period. The plan outlined the goals and objectives, supporting activities, target dates, and necessary resources.

A District 86 administrator served as project director and liaison with the consultant team to ensure that systematic planning and feedback kept the project on target.

5. *Representatives of the professional staff should be involved throughout the entire process.* Teachers, administrators, and special personnel all participated in the planning committee. Improved communication about program purposes and processes was the most important payoff from having a high level of staff involvement. The resulting feedback to the project director and the consultants helped them to adjust implementation activities as needed.

6. *Staff development should be the major focus of an instructional improvement and evaluation program.* Everyone involved in planning, developing, and implementing a new program is engaged in personal renewal. The district's highly interrelated training and follow-up activities began with presentations that were grounded in current research and successful practice. Simulation sessions provided participants with an opportunity to practice using the information. Consultant team members then observed them one-to-one and provided individual feedback about performance. The staff development components, similar to those Joyce and Showers (1983) recommend, also included sessions based on the research on effective schools and effective teaching. Administrators participated in leadership training workshops.

7. *The development and implementation of a comprehensive improvement program affects a district's total organization.* Immediately after implementing the program, District 86 con-

ducted a necessary review to determine the status of all aspects of the curriculum. This study resulted in a series of curriculum revision activities that is still in progress. Implementation of the II/PE program had a number of other effects on the district. For example, one school's interest in the research on teaching stimulated staff members to initiate a peer coaching program during the 1986-87 school year. Volunteer teachers participate in information and training sessions and then apply the research findings in their classrooms while being observed by a peer coach. Teachers and their peer coaches then cooperatively analyze the program's impact on instruction. They use the observation system developed for the II/PE program to collect data for the postobservation conference analysis process.

Impact of the Program

As a result of the program's focus on instructional improvement, district, school, and departmental goals have been reviewed, revised, and updated.

Many teachers have used the effective teaching research to guide their continued development. They have become students of the teaching process, regularly self-analyzing their work. Even the peer coaching program initiated this year in one district high school developed as a result of the attention given to the effective teaching research. All district staff development activities are now organized to meet individual as well as group needs identified by the II/PE program.

Administrators are modeling the behaviors expected of their staff members and are highly visible in the classrooms. Improvement efforts have become self-directed.

Special personnel have clarified their instructional support functions. The important role that they play in many areas of the total instructional program has helped to create and maintain a unity of purpose for the entire professional staff.

A number of staff members have developed expertise in various aspects of the II/PE program and have provided assistance to colleagues in other districts and made presentations to state and national professional associations. These opportunities have

helped staff maintain enthusiasm for continued professional development and renewal.

An Ironic Reversal

District 86's Instructional Improvement/Personnel Evaluation program has met many of the expectations of the original committee and the professional staff. The district has made instructional improvement a priority, emphasized the positive aspect of formative evaluation, and replaced the summative point system with an anecdotal report that helps determine staff development needs. However, during the past year the State of Illinois has mandated a personnel evaluation system that includes a process for rating teachers that has many of the attributes of the evaluation program that District 86 has phased out. Categorizing teachers from "superior" to "unsatisfactory" based on a list of expectations is contradictory to the nature of the program described above, and will not be welcomed by teachers nor administrators. □

1. Each coauthor played a different role in the program's implementation. Thorson is district superintendent, Miller is a high school principal and the project's director, and Bellon is a university professor who served as a consultant to the project.

References

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