

## The Assistant Principal

S. DAVID BRAZER

### The Search for Meaning in Teacher Evaluation

Administrators often describe themselves as diligent evaluators, but when I investigated teacher evaluation practices at three urban high schools, my worst suspicions were confirmed: many evaluation write-ups were shallow representations of classroom activity, with few helpful suggestions offered to the teachers who had been observed.

Why the apparent contradiction between the self-reports of administrators and the written work they actually produce? Administrators are too busy—preparing the master schedule, supervising counseling services, coordinating student activities, and monitoring student discipline—to put teacher evaluation at the top of a long list of responsibilities. The administrators I interviewed, as this comment illustrates, made this quite clear.

I don't mean to put you down, but evaluation is a big deal to you right now. It's not the biggest deal to me. I've got to get 25 evaluations done, and the time is just not there.

—Assistant Principal

Teachers understand that evaluation is something of a nuisance to admin-

istrators and, when interviewed, described the process as having little value for most of them.

It's that [administrators] have a desk full of paperwork and 400 fires to put out and meanwhile . . . this is just another fire.

—Math Teacher #1

Evaluation is nothing that anybody has ever worried about or considered in daily life. Teachers don't worry about evaluations, unless somebody is out to get them for whatever reason . . . The run-of-the-mill person does not even think about evaluation.

—Math Teacher #2

Curiously, the evaluation ritual produces an account of performance that may be valid but is of little use to teachers. With some variation across schools, a large minority of teachers at the three high schools believe that teacher evaluations are fairly accurate. Apparently, in many cases, administrators produce a reasonably faithful narrative of classroom activities and identify strengths and weaknesses that the teacher recognizes. Nevertheless, the vast majority of teachers believe the feedback they get is no help to them. They are saying, in effect, "Yes, the administrator understood what I was doing, but I did not learn anything from the evaluation."

However, two administrators in my study produced extensive analyses for the teachers they evaluated. Their narratives detailed classroom events from the moment the evaluator sat down until the bell rang at the end of the period. Their supervisory suggestions were numerous, specific, practical, and based on the collected data. Outstanding teachers received compliments supported by specific evidence from the observation. The teachers who were rated *unsatisfactory* received unusually detailed and specific analyses, as well as numerous suggestions for improvement and personal offers to help. In other words, these administrators had arranged their pri-

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orities—and their schedules—to give teacher evaluation their full attention.

As more administrators find ways to cope with the ever-demanding daily schedule, they may be able to change teacher evaluation at the margin. But to take the process from empty ritual to a means of professional growth will require a renewed sense of common purpose between the district office and school administrators. Reorganization of administrators' priorities to allow sufficient time for meaningful evaluation would be a helpful first step. Second, the focus of evaluation efforts must be shifted from meeting the demands of the district office to fulfilling the needs of classroom teachers. The district must provide staff development opportunities for teachers all along the performance continuum—from those whose classroom competence is questionable to the stars who serve as mentors for others. Then, when teacher evaluation is no longer a theater of the absurd, it can become a powerful engine of school improvement. □

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