

Choice-Based Evaluation Driving Differentiation

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Weckstein, D. K. & Hewitt, K. K. (2010). Choice-based evaluation driving differentiation. *The School Administrator*, 67(10), 12-13.

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Abstract:

The fact that they have to put those goals within the evaluation process is probably the most significant difference between this job here and my previous district. Because writing meaningful goals is a talent that individuals don't always possess, a team of Oakwood teachers and administrators developed a few tools for guidance during the goal-writing process.

Keywords: Teachers | Students | School districts | Meetings

Article:

An elementary art teacher differentiates instruction for advanced drawing students using video podcasts. A veteran junior high English teacher creates a flip book of differentiation strategies for new teachers. Math and science teachers provide online simulated labs using Gizmos.

What role does the evaluation process in our school district play in driving such instructional innovation?

Like many school systems, the Oakwood City School District, located just outside of Dayton, Ohio, supervises teachers through various methods. Throughout the year, our administrative team conducts informal walk-throughs using Carolyn Downe's approach from her book *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through* as part of our administrative professional learning community, and we debrief as a group afterward. Additionally, we conduct walk-throughs regularly in our own buildings.

Our second method involves teachers participating in supervision cycles based on Charlotte Danielson's 2007 work, *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, which includes two cycles of pre-observation conferences, formal observations and post-observation conferences. Those teachers not scheduled to participate in the Danielson model in a given year are evaluated based on goals they develop and work toward during the school year. One hundred percent of our teachers are evaluated each year. The number who participate in the Danielson model varies each year, based on the experience level of the teacher or whether a teacher has been selected to participate because of some need or concern.

An Embedded Focus

What may set Oakwood's approach apart from other school districts is the fact we have embedded differentiated instruction into our evaluation process. As such, all 162 teachers are required to write professional goals for each school year, and at least one goal must be related to differentiation. This is a nonnegotiable expectation across our district.

Paul Waller, principal since 2009 of Oakwood's 695-student high school, says the districtwide requirement makes a significant difference in the classroom.

"At my previous district, we talked about differentiation and it was a focus, but I think that having teachers come up with their own goals [relating to differentiation] really helps drive the whole pedagogy," Waller says. "The fact that they have to put those goals within the evaluation process is probably the most significant difference between this job here and my previous district."

Because writing meaningful goals is a talent that individuals don't always possess, a team of Oakwood teachers and administrators developed a few tools for guidance during the goal-writing process. Our differentiation goal forms are accessible on the district's website (www2.oakwood.kU.oh.us/~cia/CIA/Differentiation_Goal.html).

Visitors to this site also can view a video podcast that walk educators through the process of writing a sample differentiation goal. Our teachers use this resource in their goal writing.

In addition, principals and teacher-leaders review details and sample goals at the opening faculty meeting of the year, and goal-writing workshops are offered to staff at convenient times.

Teachers' Tools

The first tool, the differentiation rubric, is a self-assessment that gives teachers the opportunity to select specific areas of differentiation where they want to improve. That area becomes the subject of their goal.

Once the goal is written, the teacher develops an action plan by selecting from the options listed in the second tool, the differentiation choice board. Teachers use this tool - itself differentiated - to select ongoing professional development, collaboration and classroom visitation. The teachers are required to choose at least one option from each category. For instance, the visitation category includes an array of options for a teacher to spend time outside of his or her classroom, possibly doing walkthroughs in other classrooms, modeling a lesson before another teacher or participating in a field visit at another school or district.

And because the evaluation process is a model of differentiation, teachers are free to come up with their own options under each category.

Every goal needs a method of evaluation, and the choice board provides a list of opportunities for what we call "sharing out." Whether it involves reviewing what was learned at a department- or grade-level meeting or sharing findings at a faculty meeting or through a professional forum, all teachers are required to share reflections on their learnings of what they acquired throughout the year.

Kathy Battalo, principal of the early childhood program and an eighth-year administrator in the district, believes strongly in the merits of the sharing aspect because it contributes effectively to professional growth. "The interaction between staff as they wrote their goals and as they shared their goals are probably the areas that I saw as most beneficial," she says.

Not only does the sharing teacher grow from the experience, but those on the receiving end also benefit.

As part of the evaluation process, teachers meet early in the school year to review their goals with their principal, benefiting both. Teachers can articulate exactly what they plan to accomplish during the year or use the opportunity to ask the principal for help in developing or fine-tuning the goals. For the principal, these meetings allow detailed conversations with teachers about their direction for the school year and often yield individual topics the principals can observe during their walk-throughs.

Unannounced Visits

Walk-throughs in Oakwood are structured, five-minute, unannounced, nonevaluative classroom observations. They require the principal to be watchful for several things, including student engagement (orientation), instructional goals, what students are expected to be doing, teacher

decisions/teaching practices, level of thinking required of students (Bloom's taxonomy), safety issues and use of physical space in the classroom ("walking the walls").

In addition, the principal looks for examples of differentiation. We don't always see clear examples of differentiation during each five-minute observation, and that is okay. Walkthroughs familiarize the principal with classroom practice and help to develop the ability to analyze instruction. Furthermore, our walkthroughs often serve as a springboard for reflective discussion with the observed teacher.

Administrators in the Oakwood district are expected to conduct regular walk-throughs of the classrooms in their buildings. However, even with the best intentions, it can be difficult to conduct walk-throughs on a frequent basis. Keeping a log and making a point to step into classrooms, even if it is on the way to and from meetings, can greatly increase the frequency of walk-throughs.

Goals Discussions

The culminating piece of evaluation in Oakwood is the teacher's final goals conference with the principal at year's end. During this meeting (as well as the sharing aspect), teachers showcase the progress they have made. They discuss the impact of the goals on their students using achievement data, survey data and anecdotal information. These meetings honor the professional growth and diligent work of each staff member.

What makes our evaluation system powerful and meaningful to teachers and administrators is the non-negotiable spotlight on differentiation as a goal for all teachers. As Battalo says, "It always helps to focus attention on a specific thing because then you tend to do it more. And you tend to have other ideas about how you can do it better."

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