

CAPTURING THE LEARNING POINTS

Developing Effective Observations That Are Reliable and Result in Professional Conversations



In describing their experiences implementing new teacher and principal evaluation systems, the Washington TPEP pilot districts were very clear that to be successful, a lot of time needed to be spent ensuring that the new evaluations resulted in meaningful professional conversations between educators and their evaluators. Moreover, intensive training to ensure accurate teacher and principal ratings was a must. Rater agreement is considered a “huge” issue that is intertwined with educators’ trust in the system.

This document includes four real-life Washington pilot district perspectives on these changes to their observation and rating systems, some successes that were apparent across all pilot districts, and some practical ideas for your consideration.

Kennewick School District: Kennewick Superintendent Dave Bond described how superintendents can lead by example by opening up about their own evaluation and growth experiences:

“When you look at the rubric, it’s important to understand that a 4 is really challenging, an aspirational score. I am not a 4 as a superintendent, but I’d like to think I am a strong 3, and every day I try to be a 4. The goal of trying to be a 4 is just as important as being a 4.”

Betti Gregg, NBCT, a Consulting Peer Educator at Kennewick, elaborated on the rewards of the transformation from the teachers’ perspective:

“No one walks into the classroom and says, ‘Yay! I’m satisfactory.’ It’s exciting for teachers to have the opportunity to be truly proficient, to have a specific set of goals and some really specific components to work toward for being distinguished. So, for the teachers that I have spoken with, one of the most meaningful parts for them is that opportunity to talk with their evaluator in a reflective manner about how they can improve their own practice. I’ve heard the same thing from administrators. They love having those conversations with teachers, where they can really dig in and look at what can I do to get better, so it’s very exciting.”

North Mason School District: After engaging deeply with the new instructional framework, Rachel Stites, a teacher from North Mason School District, shared this:

“Previously, there wasn’t really any conversation about what the next steps would be to improve. Now, the rubric gets you thinking even before you meet your evaluator, and it’s more focused on what you’re doing. It helps you pull out evidence and be honest with yourself because you can’t change the language that’s there. The reflection piece is the most important part—it helps you take a good look at your instruction and what you need to do to improve.”



This document is part of a series of five documents to share tools and best practices for implementing Washington’s new teacher and principal evaluation legislation. These ideas have been drawn from interviews with district leaders, principals, and teachers who have participated in the Teacher/Principal Evaluation Pilot (TPEP) project. The hope is that the lessons learned from their experiences will address some of your concerns and lead you toward greater success. The other four topics in the series are as follows: *Early Decision Making and Engaging Stakeholders in Educator Evaluation*, *Measuring Student Growth*, *Time-Saving Strategies for Principals*, and *Implementing New Evaluations: A Teacher’s Perspective*. These ideas are the result of interviews with the leadership of five pilot school districts (Kennewick, North Mason, Anacortes, Pullman, and Medical Lake) and Educational Service District 101.

Anacortes School District: From the principal's perspective, Peter Donaldson has seen great things emerge from the experience, too:

"I just finished with a teacher, for example, who is easily a 3 but probably a 4. She said the process made her more conscientious, more intentional in her teaching, and more reflective about her practice. She has learned to do more—while doing it better—as a teacher this year compared to her past 17 years in the classroom. Once I run this whole system through a building, I will know these teachers better than ever. I will know their tendencies and practices, and if I am really good at what I do, I'll get them the resources they need when they need it. As a result, teaching will improve and students will learn. It really is amazing."

As the new evaluations unfolded in Washington's pilot districts, educators were able to document tremendous successes that resulted from the new approach to teacher observation. These successes included the following:

- Schools saw a shared vocabulary emerge among teachers and leaders.
- Educators felt increased camaraderie and a greater shared sense of purpose.
- Teachers became much more specific when describing their practice, and this specificity led to better conversations about teaching and learning and to greater results.
- Schools witnessed richer, more purposeful discussions about all aspects of school life.
- Support systems "up and down" became apparent as staff began seeking and receiving support in both directions.
- Feelings of "us versus them" among the educators in the school buildings disappeared as people engaged in the process as a team.

The following suggestions and questions for consideration from the Washington pilots were gathered to help you achieve reliable observation systems that result in more meaningful professional conversations:

- Provide extensive evaluator training, particularly around rater agreement. Washington pilot participants found the anxiety about the new educator evaluation system was far greater than anticipated, and at the heart of this was concern over equity in observations across school buildings. Rigorous, high-quality evaluator training is often seen as the only approach to address this widespread concern.

KEY QUESTIONS: How much support is there from district staff and school directors for this rigorous training? (Often there is more than you may think!) What resources would be needed to provide high-quality, ongoing evaluator training, and can they be secured early on?

- Include educators in the evaluator training on rater agreement so that they feel confident that their evaluators have undergone rigorous training to conduct accurate observations. This may include watching teaching videos as a group and talking about where the practice fits in the instructional framework.

KEY QUESTIONS: Which training topics and activities should be inclusive of all educators, and which should be limited to evaluators only?

- Look beyond your district. Hire an outside expert to assist in training evaluators on observing against the frameworks to increase rater agreement and on engaging in professional dialogue based on evaluations. Visit other schools with other administrators to further ensure rater agreement.

KEY QUESTIONS: What support do you have from district staff and school directors to hire external assistance? Is it possible to create efficiencies by partnering with neighboring districts? What types of cross-school or cross-district collaborations are practical in your context? Can these be combined with other collaborative activities you have planned to save time?

- Only tackle one portion of the framework at a time during staff trainings. Have these conversations when no one is being evaluated so that staff can gain fluency and a shared understanding of the material. Show your teachers and principals numerous examples of excellence.

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the staff training schedule, and what is the appropriate sequence of topics?

- Design purposeful questions for pre- and postconferences (especially postconferences) to ensure that the meaningful and rich conversations also are not unduly lengthy. Share documents between discussions so that everyone has read the materials before the conversations.

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the appropriate length of time for postconferences, and how many topics can reasonably be covered in that time? How much input should those being evaluated have in determining what will be covered or whether additional time for conversation is needed?

- Consider creating “learning walks” where small groups of educators go into a variety of classrooms over a short period of time together. Then have a conversation afterward about what they saw, which deepens their understanding of the rubric and allows them to practice assessing in the same way. Learning walks are not a formal part of evaluating the teachers being visited; rather they serve as a professional tool for the people on the walk.

KEY QUESTION: Are there logistical or cultural challenges to overcome?

- Set up monthly meetings at the start of the year for representatives from all parts of your community to have purposeful conversations about how observations are unfolding in practice. Give all parties a chance to discuss progress and make midcourse adjustments during the year if needed.

KEY QUESTIONS: Who is best placed to lead these conversations to make sure that all parties can openly discuss their concerns and that steps can be taken to address issues that are arising?

- Consider more than the mandatory two observations to increase the reliability of the evaluation.

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the ideal number of observations for teachers? For principals? Does this vary depending on whether they are new to the field or the position?

- Know that evaluators will likely embrace rather than feel burdened by training to reduce or eliminate bias in their evaluations of teachers. In the words of one Washington evaluator, “As much as I admire every single person that’s in my building, maybe sometimes I might be [too generous in my evaluations] because I know how hard they’re working and how committed and dedicated they are. So to have somebody else come in and have another perspective helps keep it very consistent.”

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the outlook in your context? What are the hopes and worries around developing effective observation systems that raise the level of professional conversation among your staff?