



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators. The focus this month is on common sense ways to ensure that we do not lose sight of the role the supervision and evaluation process should play in teacher professional growth and in increased student learning.

Supervision and Evaluation: Let Common Sense Prevail



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

One of the hottest topics being debated in the field of education today is the best procedures to follow in the supervision and evaluation of teachers, with the sub-text being how to ensure that teachers are held accountable for the progress their students make. As states, districts, and schools wrestle with revising and implementing systems to include a strong accountability component, new standards are being written which require a “value-added” feature in a teacher’s performance rating. Put succinctly, part of a teacher’s evaluation must include student growth as measured in varied ways including standardized test scores. While many individuals feel that this is heavy-handed and potentially harmful, others feel it will ensure that teachers focus their work on real learning and improved student performance. Most jobs have accountability measures; in education, however, there is a dimension of frustration and confusion as we attempt to determine exactly how to accurately measure it.

As districts revise their supervision and evaluation procedures, they have formed task forces to study the issue, poured over research to determine if there are tried and true practices that have been successful, and completed searches to determine if there are some ready-made programs that can be purchased to fill the bill. With the pressure on districts and schools to put an accountability model in place, the marching orders seem to be to have it ready for liftoff ASAP. We should have learned by now that rushing into new initiatives does not work; instead, we should be asking ourselves some very important questions including:

- What are the overall purposes of our supervision and evaluation program?
- What outcomes do we want to achieve?

The answer should not be so that we can fill in a state or federal report. It should not be so that we can satisfy district requirements to get reports written or checklists completed. In our efforts to meet outside requirements, we can easily lose sight of the big picture. Whatever program we adopt or whatever process we choose, we must remember that all of our collective efforts should be aimed at ensuring that our

teachers are the best they can be and helping our students learn as much as they can. With these important considerations in mind, the essential overriding question that should guide our decisions is:

What is the role of the supervision and evaluation process in promoting teacher growth and student learning?

As I consider this important question, I am struck by the realization that we've been here before! As I harken back to my days as an administrator and principal during the 1980's and 1990's, I am reminded that many of the same questions we debated (and worried about) then are the same topics causing stress and anxiety today. As schools determine the best way to implement their teacher supervision and evaluation process, the input from veterans who have been through this before should be taken into consideration. The old adage "everything old is new again" just might ring true. We should learn from our past, think deeply about the real reason we are doing this work, and, as described below, let some good old-fashioned common sense prevail as we move forward.

Leaders are teachers.

The supervision and evaluation process administrators follow has a great deal in common with the teaching and learning process teachers follow as they work with their students. Leaders expect teachers to meet students where they are, to be transparent about how learning will unfold, to treat each student as an individual, to provide growth-producing feedback, and to interact with students on a frequent basis to improve students' confidence and comfort level. By interchanging the words administrators for teachers and teachers for students, we can easily surmise that the good practices teachers adhere to as they work with students should be the same procedures administrators follow in their work as supervisors and evaluators.

Trust is earned.

Leaders cannot expect teachers to automatically trust them because they have a title after their name. Just as teachers must earn the respect of their students, administrators must earn the respect of their teachers. Faith and reliance on a leader's competence and judgment is gained when the leader is true to her word. When real trust is established, positive relationship building is a by-product. Trust is derived from frequent, honest, and positive interactions. If and when the administrator must deliver a difficult message in her role as a supervisor/evaluator, it is much more likely to be accepted with the proper spirit because trust in judgment and word has been established. Finally, trust is a two-way street. Honest, open dialogue should result in improved performance on the part of both parties.

One-on-one staff development is an important key to success.

A consistent ingredient in a planned observation is the planning conference, sometimes called the pre-conference. The purpose of this interaction is for the teacher to explain the lesson that the supervisor is going to observe. When the teacher shares the plan for the observation, it is frequently well thought out with all the essential components for a successful learning experience clearly delineated. For others, however, the lesson may be flawed or have missing pieces. A veteran principal once shared with me that he firmly believes that the pre-conference setting is the perfect opportunity to provide one-on-one staff development. He sees his role not as someone who will make suggestions for improvement in the post-conference, but another set of eyes prior to the lesson to help the teacher ensure the plan is solid. As he concluded, "Students' learning is at stake. My job is to make sure they receive solid instruction." By asking reflective questions, he helps the teacher rethink the lesson, fill in the missing pieces, and make adjustments to the lesson's elements.

Student learning is the goal.

When administrators conduct classroom observations, they approach the task in a variety of ways depending on the observation training they have received or the district expectations for how an observation should be conducted. For some, the observation requires the supervisor to record detailed notes capturing all of the teacher's moves and decisions. Others may be required to use a checklist to determine which lesson

components are addressed. Other observers may not only watch the teacher but interact with students to determine if real learning is occurring. Regardless of what process is used, the essential information to be captured can be narrowed down to answering the questions posed on the Just ASK SBE Ovals:

1. What are students supposed to know and be able to do?
2. How do the students and the teacher know if they have learned it?
3. What learning experiences, aligned with the desired outcomes, are used to facilitate student learning?
4. How does the teacher use data to plan and revise this lesson and future lessons?

Since student learning is the goal of any lesson, the observer's attention should be focused on data that will supply answers for those questions. These questions should not come as a surprise to the teacher in the post-conference setting but should be stated up front in the pre-conference. When the teacher fully understands that the observer will be looking for clear evidence of learning, she can plan accordingly.

Silence can be golden.

As I think back on my post-observation experiences as a teacher, I remember my administrator reviewing the lesson (often step-by-step); occasionally commenting on his observations. My role typically was to smile and nod as he recreated what had occurred. Very few, if any, questions were posed; in short, the conference conclusion was a *fait accompli*. I was fortunate that my lessons were generally well received thus avoiding any contentious or acrimonious situations. In retrospect, as I think about these conferences, I realize that they could have been so much more; I was never challenged to think about new or different ways to support my students' learning. Today's administrators have the advantage of knowing so much more about how to conduct a reflective (post-observation) conference. Whereas many of the conferences "back in the day" were one-sided with the administrators doing most of the talking, a well-planned conference today should be seen as a partnership and may include a variety of collegial interactions that fall along a continuum. As my colleagues and I explain in *Creating a Culture for Learning*, "When partners use **consultation** strategies, one partner is the expert giving advice to the other (learner). In **collaboration**, both parties share expert and learner roles. In **coaching**, teacher thinking, planning, and reflecting around classroom practices is facilitated through reflective questioning. There is a time and place for each approach." When the administrator does more listening and less talking by posing open-ended reflective questions, the teacher has an opportunity to think more deeply about teaching behaviors and decisions. As leaders quietly listen to the teacher's thoughts or reactions, the result can lead to unforeseen insights and personal growth on the part of both parties. The desired outcome of a successful conference is to have the teacher leave the setting feeling affirmed, empowered, and ready to take on new challenges because she has found many answers or directions within herself rather than simply relying on suggestions from her evaluator.

High visibility is imperative.

One daunting question a teacher might ask is, "How can my administrator fairly evaluate me when he is only in my classroom a few times a year?" Despite the demands on a very busy (and often overworked) administrator, it must be remembered that the primary purpose of a school is teaching and learning, and thus, the primary responsibility of any administrator is to be an instructional leader. One cannot be a strong leader of the instructional program without being in the environment where teaching and learning is going on. The school administrator should have a strong feel for the state of instruction at any given time across the school setting. This reality can only be achieved when the leader makes a conscious decision to escape the confines of the office; spending considerable time in classrooms, talking to students and staff, getting parents' perspectives about the state of learning, conferring with fellow administrators to gain a wider perspective on the school as a whole, and displaying an unwavering and passionate desire to be the best instructional leader she can be. Being ubiquitous should be the goal of every supervisor and evaluator.

Life-long learning is a goal for students, teachers, and administrators.

The status quo can become the enemy and downfall of a school-based administrator. A resourceful leader must fully understand that she must continue to add skills and knowledge to her practice in order to fill her

responsibilities as a professional. Strong leaders are curious, open-minded, introspective, and operate on the belief that any professional must be constantly learning and evolving. They seek out resources, learn about new ideas and fresh approaches, and engage in dialogues with fellow professionals on a continual basis. Most importantly, they become a model for learning and professionalism for the entire staff. When teachers have confidence in their leaders, they find the supervision and evaluation process much more meaningful.

The school culture must be strong.

Regardless of how hard leaders work, they might be running in place (or even losing ground) if they are not tuned in to the climate in their building. Culture has a strong influence and impact on all facets of the life of a school. Terry Deal and Kent Peterson wrote that the essential culture attributes include the following:

- The staff has a shared sense of purpose
- The underlying norms are collegiality, improvement, and hard work
- The rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation, and personal commitment
- Success, joy, and humor abound

When a positive school environment is established and maintained through careful attention and solid commitment by the leaders, the supervision and evaluation process can be a logical outgrowth of “the way we do business around here.” All that is required is a little common sense.

Where do we go from here?

As I prepared to write this newsletter, I consulted a number of publications and online sources as well as relied on some anecdotal information I had learned over time. As I thought about resources I could suggest to readers, I returned again and again to Just ASK Publications that provide a wellspring of information, insights, tools, and directions supervisors and evaluators can consult to carry out their responsibilities:

- ***Leading the Learning: A Field Guide for Supervision and Evaluation*** is replete with information on a wide variety of topics including conducting data-driven discussions, providing growth-producing feedback, conducting difficult conferences, and putting together professional growth plans for teachers. Included in the book are close to 70 pages of ready-to-use tools that will support supervisors and evaluators in their work.
- In ***Creating a Culture for Learning***, experienced administrators share their best thinking in a clear and concise manner on topics including establishing and maintaining professional learning communities, dealing with the change process, learning and using successful communication strategies, asking questions that promote thinking, developing reflective questions used in conferences, and establishing strong cultures where learning for both adults and students is able to thrive.
- Other ***Just for the ASKing!*** issues on this topic available in the online **Just ASK Resource Center** are:
 - Conferences That Make a Difference
 - See and Be Seen: The Importance of High Visibility
 - The Power of Walk-Throughs
 - Just ASK the Kids
 - Just ASK’s Non-Negotiables for Creating a Culture for Learning
 - It’s All About Relationships

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