

NEW SUPERINTENDENT UPDATES

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I'm Back

I returned to work the week of January 16th from my shoulder surgery. The surgery went well but the rehabilitation is difficult and painful. My advice to you is to be very careful when exercising or working to make sure you do not hurt your shoulder or bicep tendons.

While I have been recuperating and rehabbing due to surgery it has allowed me to reflect on this "Work-Life Balance" question. I do not want to be self-promoting but I really recommend this new academy I am leading titled "Moving From Vision To Action: Learn How To Become An Essentialist." In this academy you will learn how to prioritize your actions for both work and life. You will learn when you should say no if the request does not fit your overall goals and objectives. This process fits you as an individual and also you as a leader of your school district.

If you are interested in hosting this academy in your region please contact me at rvoltz@iasaedu.org.

Do you use these three PLC questions when observing?

I recommend that teacher evaluators ask the following three critical Professional Learning Community (PLC) questions each time they observe teaching either during an informal observation or a formal observation:

1. The PLC question is "What do students need to know and be able to do?" I convert this question into the following and ask a minimum of three students, "What is the lesson goal?"
2. The second PLC question is "How will we know when they have learned it?" The converted student question is, "How will the teacher know you have learned it?"
3. The third PLC question is "What will we do when they haven't learned it?" The student question is "What will the teacher do if you do not learn it?"

It is vital that all students know the learning goal. In my observation of classrooms I keep data notes of what percentage of students know the answer to the first question. Seventy to eighty percent of the time the students can generally tell me what they are learning that day. However, if the teacher has made it a practice to put the learning goal on display in the classroom, then 100% of the time the students will answer correctly by either reading the goal to me from the display or paraphrasing the goal in their own words.

Student answers to the second and third questions are far less successful. Often the students do not even know what I am asking. They seldom have been asked these questions before and have to think about the answer. Most students will refer to some type of summative assessment the teacher will give for the lesson or unit of instruction but it is obvious they have not thought of this concept before I ask them.

Answers to the third question are very interesting. Students rarely say the teacher will keep working with the student to master the learning goal.

These questions can be very powerful tools for a teacher evaluator to use when conducting observations. I record each student's answer and then have a reflective conversation with the teacher about their answers. Imagine how these questions could drive your conversations with teachers and how teachers would change their communication with students if they know you will be asking students these questions.

Act of God Days

A first year superintendent recently asked about "Act of God" days. Act of God days are determined by ISBE but not until the school district has used up all the scheduled "emergency days" in the official calendar.

Most school districts declare five emergency days per year, thus after school has been cancelled for five days then the district can apply for the Act of God days through ISBE.

As a superintendent, I used to recommend putting more than five emergency days in the school calendar. The reason behind scheduling more than five days is to insure a full 176 student attendance days in the school calendar. In years such as this when there are many bad weather days school gets cancelled regularly. By placing ten emergency days in the calendar I assured the district's students that the district was maximizing the school attendance days.

"Reflection" with the Person Being Observed

Whether you are a principal or assistant principal evaluating a teacher or a superintendent evaluating a principal, both of these processes need time scheduled to reflect with the person being evaluated. Observations without reflection/discussion have very little value.

In the old teacher evaluation system many teacher evaluators would schedule one formal observation with the teacher. The two parties would conduct a pre-observation conference and discuss the lesson to be observed. The teacher would explain what unit he/she is teaching, what he/she hopes to have the students know and be able to do as a result of the lesson, they might discuss the learning or behavior needs of some of the students he/she has in the class and the teacher might even request that the evaluator take notes of certain aspects of his/her teaching such as equitable response opportunities, quality of questions asked or perceived engagement of the students. Then the evaluator would observe the teacher on the predetermined date and schedule a post observation conference during which the evaluator did most or all of the talking and the teacher "endured" the process.

Where is the reflection or the coaching in the above-mentioned process? Reflection is the process of the person being evaluated offering careful thoughts about their teaching. Reflective questions such as: What could I do differently? What worked well? What could I do better? What did I expect students to know and be able to perform as a result of this lesson? Did the students meet my expectations? How do I know? What do I do with the students who did not meet expectations? What do I do with the students who already knew the concept? In this reflective process the teacher asks and answers these open-ended questions and the evaluator listens and provides input when needed or appropriate. The key action for the evaluator is to listen.

After the person being observed has reflected then it is time for that person to work on a plan of action to improve their teaching. This plan should be determined by the person being evaluated and the evaluator should be a facilitator and direct the conversation toward an action goal including specific statements that can be measured and are attainable, establish a timeline for completion or checking on the goal and finally affirmation by the person being evaluated that they will follow through and the evaluator will check back on the progress. Many of you will recognize this as the SMART goal process.

The following are some procedures to follow as you reflect/coach the people you are evaluating. This is written as if the evaluator is reflecting/coaching a teacher but you could insert principal for teacher below in each strategy.

- Listen deeply to discern the key issue and make a preliminary assessment.
 - What really is the issue?
 - What has the person previously done to improve his/her teaching?
 - In what area do you think the person needs coaching?
- Listen for the person to commit.
 - What does the person want to improve?
 - What does the person want to have happen as the result of this improvement?
 - Does the person seem committed to improving?
- Clarify the facts, separate the facts from interpretation, and share your own observations.
 - What does the observational evidence state?
 - What does the teacher think about what happened?
 - Has the teacher done anything prior to improve this action?
 - Share your views on how you think the teacher should handle this situation.
- Generate possibilities.
 - Explore what possibilities are available for solutions.
 - Try to get the teacher to think “outside the box” when thinking of possible solutions.
- Design an action plan.
 - What specific action(s) is the teacher willing to take? By when?
 - What ongoing support is needed?

Coach, Mentor, Director: It Depends on the Situation

The previous article I wrote on coaching a teacher or a principal was designed when working with veteran teachers who have exhibited the capacity to change. Unfortunately, there are other employees who resist change, who may be incompetent or who are new to the profession and do not have the wisdom and/or knowledge to lead their own change.

For new teachers or principals who do not have the wisdom and/or knowledge to lead their own change, evaluators need to mentor these individuals. In a coaching situation a veteran teacher can draw on past experiences or knowledge to help them determine their own improvement goal and strategy. Many new teachers do not have the capacity to do this so the evaluator becomes more of a mentor in these situations. The evaluator may suggest or even demand certain improvement practices. The danger in this type of approach is that the teacher does not internalize the improvement. This will require frequent follow-up by the evaluator to make sure the suggestions are implemented.

When dealing with a teacher who has been rated or will be rated “Needs Improvement” or “Unsatisfactory” the evaluator becomes more of a director. Certainly the teacher will participate in the required “Professional Development Plan“ (PDP) for “Needs Improvement” rated teachers and the “Remediation Plan” for “Unsatisfactory” rated teachers. However, the evaluator becomes more assertive and prescriptive with these teachers. Specific teaching behaviors had to be evidenced by the evaluator during the classroom observations or meetings with the teacher and reduced to writing and shared with the teacher. These behaviors then need specific remedial strategies and recommendations.

Tip of the Week

As you progress forward in your career and in your life, remember that everything you do, every action you take, and every comment you make defines your legacy in the eyes of others.

Prior to your regularly scheduled school board meetings, upload your school board agenda and item descriptions online to allow the community to be informed of school district business.