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Peer Mentoring:

In my seven years in this role at IASA supporting new superintendents, I have discovered one important finding. Those new superintendents who ask questions, have an informal or formal mentor, seek peer relationships within their region and continue professional relationships with administrators they respect and look up to continue to be the most successful first-year superintendents.

It is very important to establish a peer-to-peer relationship with at least one other school superintendent and hopefully with several other superintendents. For teachers we call this Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Administrators need PLC's also. Participate in your local IASA Region meetings and make connections with area superintendents. Hopefully you have formalized a relationship with a "mentor" for your first year and, if not, perhaps you can contact past administrators that you have worked with or know. It's important to have someone with experience that you can bounce ideas off or gather information from when making critical decisions.

The most important point of this discussion is to ask multiple people questions about the same topic so that you can gather as much information as possible before making important decisions or recommendations. Reaching out to others for advice and support increases the lifeblood for success as a school superintendent.

Peer Consulting Teacher Program

I have been working with the Rockford School District for more than a year on another peer program. It is titled PCT, or Peer Consulting Teacher. The Rockford administration has collaborated with the Rockford Teacher Association to institute a new and innovative way to improve teaching. The parties agreed to hire two tenured teachers as PCT's. These teachers had to pass the Illinois Teacher Evaluation training and also had to attend the IASA Advanced Danielson training. All Rockford teacher evaluators had to complete the same two programs.

The PCT's, along with the building level administrators, work with Rockford teachers who have been rated Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory with the goal of raising the teacher's

performance to Proficient. The Rockford PCT's are expert teachers and have exhibited great skills in helping teachers reflect on their own performance and in turn improve their teacher practice. Rockford Deputy Superintendent Matt Vosberg and PCT Amanda Shuga and I will be doing a session *Involve Peer Teachers in Teacher Evaluation* at the Triple I Conference concerning this program. I believe involving expert teachers in the evaluation process can greatly increase the level of teaching within a school district.

How does a teacher evaluator have time to adequately observe teachers for the new performance-based teacher evaluation system?

Performance-Based Teacher Evaluation will be very complicated and also it will require new fundamental due process for teachers. By my last estimation there will be seven legal documents that your district will wrestle with in this new system. They are 1) Teacher Collective Bargaining Contract; 2) Teacher Evaluation Plan; 3) Reduction in Force (RIF) Joint Committee Document; 4) PERA Joint Committee Document; 5) District Work Rules; 6) School Board Policy Manual; and 7) Part 50 Rules.

Administrators will need to be aware of how the information in these documents effect performance-based teacher evaluation. The burden of proof will be much greater on the administrator to correctly operationalize all the processes related to teacher evaluation and then as a cumulative act, rate the teacher. The legal concept that a tenured teacher can now lose their position due to their summative rating is a major change from past procedures.

In addition to the legal challenges to this evaluation work is the idea that staff development and improvement of teaching has been and will continue to be a major emphasis of the teacher evaluation process. I wrote a blog post how we need to concentrate on improving teaching not rating teaching. We need to provide professional staff development and training in the areas that individual teachers do not earn high summative ratings. Teacher evaluation needs to transform into an intellectually engaging experience for the teacher. The evaluator needs to be skillful in the use of reflective questioning to get the teacher to commit to a personal professional development plan for improvement.

Teacher evaluation will change from a mostly "compliance" issue to a "growth" issue with legal intended and unintended consequences.

Classrooms need to be intellectually engaging experiences for students. No longer will it be proficient for classrooms to be teacher centered. The days of teachers lecturing and students taking notes are history. Students must be "minds on" not "hands on." Education is about "learning" not about "doing."

Teacher evaluators can no longer schedule one formal observation, which I often characterize as the "The Dog and Pony Show" and one informal observation and think that this will suffice for possible teacher reduction under the new PERA act. It never was sufficient and it is even less so now that teacher tenure and teacher employment has changed.

So how does the administrator find the time to observe teacher's multiple times during the evaluation cycle? There is only one way I know how to accomplish this goal. The administrator has to schedule time to conduct the observations. In addition to the observations, it is my opinion, that the administrator must follow each observation with a "reflective conversation" with the teacher if either expects any change to occur based on the evidence collected in the observation.

Using simple math to do the calculations I will use the following as an example. Assuming a teacher evaluator has 20 teachers to evaluate and using the Voltz Protocol of 10 observations per teacher per cycle (eight informal and two formal) then the evaluator has to schedule 200 (10 X 20) observations in a two-year cycle for a tenured teacher. Assuming all the teachers are tenured, the evaluator would have 252 (176 X 2) school days to do this work, not quite one per day. However, if each observation is followed by a reflective conversation between the teacher and the evaluator this evaluator would have 400 time slots to schedule or 1.58 per day. Again, we have made major assumptions such as the evaluator being able to be available every day to observe and/or reflect. Let's assume the evaluator cannot work on teacher observation/reflection on 10% of the available days, this reduces the total of days to 227 days. The new daily schedule will require 1.76 or 2 observations/reflections per day.

Another major assumption is that the administrator has two full years to conduct the observations/reflections. We know for sure that the non-tenured teachers will need the protocol every year and we are also making a huge assumption that observations/reflections can be conducted every school day. This will entail a major shift in the evaluation cycle and reporting of summative evaluation scores, a topic for another blog post.

The key points made in this blog are that the teacher evaluator needs to conduct multiple observations/reflections with his/her teachers and will need to dedicate part of every school day to get this done. The administrator will need to block out times to schedule this work in order to make sure it gets done.

What is Engaged Learning?

Those who have attended formal Danielson training understand that the relative importance of the various 22 Components within the Framework is very important. Danielson teaches that Domain 3, Instruction, is the heart of the Frameworks and Component 3c. Engaged Learning is the "heart of the heart" of the frameworks. Danielson defines engaged learning, as "The student is intellectually involved in the work." She goes on to state that if an evaluator cannot tell if the student is intellectually involved then the teacher performance at best is "Needs Improvement" and it is probably "Unsatisfactory."

When I lead Danielson training sessions I stress this concept. I have participants relate the best lesson they have ever observed as an evaluator. In virtually all (a Danielson term) of the lessons that the administrators restate in their own words, the students are doing the work. I often ask the question; "How you can tell what students are intellectually doing if the teacher is lecturing"? The answer is you cannot unless the students are interacting with the teacher's lecture by asking questions, entering into discussions, answering teacher questions, etc... The key to Danielson is

this, “Are the students intellectually doing the work?” If an evaluator cannot observe this then the teacher is at best “needing improvement.”

I challenge you, as educational leaders in your districts, to visit classrooms and determine who is doing the work in your classrooms. Is it the teacher or is it the students? If the answer is not obvious to you the instruction needs to change in that classroom.

Tell Your Public about the Positive Things Happening in Your District

We often hear of the negative things happening in K-12 public education. It is your role and the role of your staff to get the positive news communicated to your community. A great way to communicate is via social media and your district website. Have you thought about using Twitter or Facebook to communicate with your community? Some districts are using audio and/or video Podcasting. Talk with your administrators and find out what the schools are doing now and discuss these new Medias.

Crisis Planning

There have been several instances of students bringing guns or weapons into schools over the last several years. I would advise you (as you are new to the district) to review your school crisis plans. Each of your schools should have a school crisis plan on how to handle situations that endanger student and staff safety. We are entrusted to keep the children of the community safe at school. If an unfortunate incident should occur in one of your schools, your goal is to keep everybody safe.

After you have reviewed the crisis plan, I would suggest that you convene a meeting with your local law enforcement, fire department, and emergency response personnel to get their recommendations on how to handle various emergencies. Representatives from these agencies are the experts in your community and they understand your community. Other school administrators, resource officers (if you have any), and representatives from the teacher and support staff associations should also be included.

One of the issues I have noticed when reading newspaper accounts of incidents is that some parents are critical that the administration at the school did not notify them of the threat to safety. In one article, a parent was quoted as saying the school knew how to tell the public when they were dismissing school due to heat or canceling school due to adverse winter weather; they wanted to be notified when there was a threat at the school.

In my opinion, the reason this becomes such a big problem so quickly is because of the availability of cell phones and popularity of social media. Even though most schools do not allow students to carry cell phones while in school, we all know that many students still carry cell phones. As soon as an incident occurs, students start calling parents. Thus, it makes it difficult for administrators to try to deal with the critical crisis issue at hand and also deal with parent notification.

Some districts have purchased calling services that can instantly notify all parents of a situation, whether that is closing school due to adverse weather, notification of a crisis, or notification of an upcoming parent-teacher conference day. As a former superintendent, I can tell you that I would want to make sure I notified parents as soon as possible. A call-out system seems like a good solution, if your district can afford the expense. If you cannot afford a calling system try to get a grant to pay for the hardware. At the least, you should have personnel available to call the news media — including radio and television stations — to get your message out the same way you would for inclement weather. I have found it good practice to have a secretary trained to do this because administrators are usually busy with the crisis at hand.

Again, in my opinion, it is important to ensure the safety of your students and staff. If an unfortunate incident should happen in your school district, you will eventually be facing the media and explaining what you did to keep students and staff safe. The more prepared you are in this regard, the better the school district will look in the eyes of the parents and the public.

Tip of the Week

Paul Houston (past AASA Executive Director) and Doug Eadie have published *The Board-Savvy Superintendent*. In the book they state, “The old-time passive-reactive school board that merely responds to finished staff work cannot provide the leadership that the times demand: in making truly strategic decisions, in selecting key district innovation targets, in monitoring district educational and administrative performance, and in building district ties to the wider community.”

The point they are making is that the old adage of the Board making policy and the Superintendent managing the school district is not an accurate depiction of board-superintendent relationships. I totally agree with these writers. In my experiences as a superintendent, I never served a school board that wanted to devote itself entirely to policy and left the leadership and management of the school district up to the administration. The board members I served with were professional people who were intelligent, active community members. They were concerned about the education of all students. They had great *leadership* and *management* ideas that we were able to learn from and implement.

In your role as a new superintendent, use the talents of your school board members to maximize the educational opportunities you can give to your students. The relationship between the Board and the Superintendent is not distinct. The relationship is constantly changing and superintendents need to adapt to the needs of the Board and the community. Involve your board and your community in determining the mission, vision, and goals of their schools.