

Let's cancel the dog-and-pony show

Improve teacher assessment by replacing the announced, long-form evaluation visit with as many as 10 shorter, unannounced visits fortified with timely, valuable, face-to-face feedback.



By Kim Marshall

Reading the voluminous literature on teacher supervision and evaluation over the last few years, I've been struck by a major blind spot among virtually all researchers and reformers: the dog-and-pony show. In most schools, by contract or by tradition, administrators give advance notice of their formal classroom observations and teachers quite understandably take their performance up a notch or two. In addition, students usually behave better when there's a suit in the room.

The New Teacher Project's *Widget Effect* study in 2009 found tremendous grade inflation in teacher evaluations across the country — for example, 25,332 Chicago teachers were rated superior, 9,176 excellent, 2,232 satisfactory, and 149 unsatisfactory during a recent five-year period. But people haven't zeroed in on the most obvious reason: A lot of teachers put on a special show for the announced visit and administrators play along.

When I make this point to educators around the country, they occasionally



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push back. “I want to see what the teacher is capable of,” said one former superintendent. Fine, but it’s much more important to see how well she teaches day by day. “I can see right through the dog-and-pony show,” said a seasoned principal. Perhaps, but can you document that in a credible way? “I need that preobservation conference for feedback on my lesson planning,” said a teacher. Come on, how helpful is discussing a lesson plan once a year — especially if it’s atypical?

Of course, not all scheduled evaluation visits are off base. But in my experience in all kinds of schools over 43 years, it’s all too common for teachers to put on a glamorized lesson, masking less impressive day-to-day performance. There’s a lot of mediocre teaching out there, and most of it is flying under the radar. This contributes directly to America’s widening achievement gaps, since students with any kind of disadvantage desperately need effective teaching.

Why are so many educators willing to give cre-

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dence to observations based on announced visits? Perhaps it’s avoidance — observing a plausible lesson allows administrators to get the evaluation off their desks and skirt difficult conversations about mediocre and ineffective teaching. Perhaps it’s a failure to distinguish between good teachers and good teaching — seeing a good lesson makes us feel like we know the teacher, and we trust he or she will be like that all the time. This is called the fundamental attribution error.

Or perhaps it’s because of the way the conventional teacher evaluation model limits administrators’ options. Supervisors are usually required to have a preobservation conference with each teacher, sit through a whole lesson, write it up, and then have a postobservation conference. All of this takes at least four hours, and, because administrators have so many other things on their plates, visiting each teacher more than once a year is very difficult. The idea of making a single annual evaluation visit unannounced strikes most people as unfair. That’s why districts, even without union insistence, have administrators schedule their formal observations in advance.

This process might seem benign and unavoidable, but it has serious consequences. If evaluations don’t accurately describe day-to-day classroom performance, everything else falls apart: Effective teach-

ers don’t get authentic praise, subpar teachers don’t get targeted coaching and support, and more than a few ineffective teachers are still in classrooms harming children’s futures. To put it bluntly, an evaluation process that relies on announced visits is inaccurate, dishonest, and ineffective.

A growing number of principals are experimenting with an alternative to the dog-and-pony show — an approach that can win teachers’ trust, make better use of administrators’ time, enhance instructional leadership and collegiality, and usher in improvements in teaching and learning. It has three layers: changing the structure, improving the human dynamic, and managing the details.

Changing the structure. The first step is shifting classroom observations from announced, infrequent, and full-lesson to unannounced, frequent, and short.

- *Unannounced* — There’s only one way a principal can look parents and other stakeholders in the eye and assure them of the quality of day-to-day teaching: regularly dropping into all classrooms without advance notice. Here’s how this works in a different venue. New York City has 24,000 restaurants, and the Health Department conducts thorough, unannounced inspections (using known criteria) and requires restaurants to post a large A, B, or C right by the front door. As a result, restaurants have a powerful incentive to be meticulous about cleanliness *all the time* — not just when the inspector is coming. Since this policy was introduced in 2010, the rate of food-borne illnesses among the city’s restaurant-goers has declined significantly, and more and more restaurants are earning A’s.

I’m not in favor of making teachers’ evaluations public, but I believe the only way school leaders can give honest quality assurance — and push teachers to use effective practices all the time — is to shift to unannounced classroom visits.

- *Frequent* — Of course, judging a teacher’s performance on one surprise inspection a year would be unfair. What if it’s a bad moment or the visitor disrupts the normal routine? Making *numerous* visits is essential for getting a representative sampling of teachers’ work and convincing them to trust the fairness of the system. How many? From my own experience leading a Boston school and my coaching of principals in recent years, I’ve concluded that 10 observations per teacher per year are enough to get a sense of the different classes and/or subjects teachers handle and how they’re doing with the beginning, middle, and end of lessons, the morning, mid-day, and afternoon, and different parts of the week and month.

At first blush, this strikes principals as impossible, but when I have them do the math (multiply the number of teachers they supervise by 10 and divide by the number of days in the school year), most find that it comes to only two or three classroom visits a day. Some administrators still think 10 is an unrealistic target because they won't be able to get into classrooms during the super-busy opening and closing days of the school year and during standardized testing. But the first two weeks of school are by far the most important for seeing if classroom management is off to a good start; many rookie teachers need early redirection and support. Testing weeks are a great time to visit art, computer, music, library, and physical education teachers. And in the final days of the school year, principals need to make sure teachers are giving students their money's worth right up to the last bell.

- *Short* — Clearly, the only way administrators can get to each teacher 10 times a year is if visits are less than a full class period and not accompanied by time-consuming pre- and postobservation conferences and write-ups. Unannounced 5- to 15-minute classroom visits are surprisingly informative. When I speak to educators about teacher supervision and evaluation, I always show them a 10-minute classroom videotape. People are struck by how much goes on in a classroom in that amount of time; two or three “teaching points” invariably jump out.

When observations are unannounced, frequent, and short, the supervision dynamic changes dramatically. School leaders have a much better sense of what's going on in classrooms, and teachers find the process less stressful and believe their bosses *get* what they're doing with students. In addition, administrators' increased presence in classrooms, corridors, and stairways prevents many problems.

The human element. Frequent classroom visits are important, but to have real impact on teaching and learning, the follow-up needs to be face to face, humble, honest, and linked to teacher teamwork.

- *Face to face* — I believe it's a *must* for administrators to meet with teachers as soon as possible after an observation — ideally, within 24 hours — for a brief, informal conversation. Every time administrators talk with a teacher after a short visit, they learn something new, widening their observational window and improving trust.

It saddens me that so few school leaders take the time to talk to teachers after classroom visits. One of the more dubious practices in U.S. schools these days is administrators dropping into classrooms with clipboards, laptops, or tablets, filling out checklists or rubrics, and sending them to teachers. This kind

of one-way feedback is superficial, bureaucratic, annoying, and highly unlikely to make a difference. Another ineffective practice is giving teachers a score on each short observation (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory or 4-3-2-1). This increases the teacher's anxiety level and is the opposite of good coaching. Sure, it provides administrators and central-office staff with lots of data, but how will it improve teaching and learning?

One of the more dubious practices in U.S. schools is administrators dropping into classrooms with clipboards, laptops, or iPads, filling out checklists or rubrics, and sending them to teachers without any human contact.

- *Humble* — Administrators' comments after short visits can't be all knowing because they haven't seen the whole lesson. Follow-up conversations often contain comments like “I'm curious about what happened after I left” or “Tell me more about that student's reaction.” The ideal place for these five-minute chats is the teacher's classroom when students aren't around. Being on the teacher's turf changes the power dynamic, and there's the additional advantage of seeing student work, curriculum artifacts, and other reminders of what was happening during the observation. During these conversations, administrators need to slow down, take a deep breath, and be good listeners, taking the time to hear what's on the teacher's mind.

- *Honest* — In the course of these unannounced visits, administrators will see lots of wonderful teaching, but they'll also stumble across mediocre and ineffective practices: a teacher catching up on email during class, students doing inane busywork, homophobic comments allowed to go unchallenged, spelling mistakes on the board. School leaders need to say something to these teachers afterward, and it won't be easy. This is where practice, role-playing with other principals, and developing a clear set of shared values about good teaching are so important.

And then there is persistently unsatisfactory teaching. When administrators see serious problems and things don't improve after suggestions and coaching, they need to shift gears and get into a more formal process: full-lesson observations (unannounced, of course), a detailed diagnosis and improvement plan,

lots of support, and repeating the cycle until the teacher improves or is dismissed.

- *Linked to teacher teamwork* — The only downside to short-observation-conversation process is that administrators are dealing with teachers one by one. The remedy is to link short observations to the work of teacher teams as they backwards-design curriculum units (clarifying where instruction is headed at a deep level) and analyze interim assessment results (using data to see what students are struggling with and to identify which teaching strategies are most effective). This sharpens administrators' observational "eye" and boosts the power of teacher teamwork.

Ten short visit-and-follow-up cycles would total 300 minutes for the year – only a little more than the four-hour (240-minute) traditional process for the teacher but so much more productive.

Management details. With structural changes and good human dynamics in place, there's still the operational side to get right. For maximum impact, short observations need to be systematic, documented, and linked to end-of-year evaluations:

- *Systematic* — Keeping track of visits with a staff checklist is essential to being fair and equitable about getting into every classroom, consistently giving feedback to all teachers, and keeping up a steady pace. Making classroom visits a top priority, setting a target for the number of daily visits (usually two or three), and keeping track of the data is the best way to get 10 visits per teacher by the end of the year. If a building has more than one administrator dividing up the staff is key. Members of the leadership team should also regularly check in with each other about what they're seeing and occasionally visit a classroom together to compare impressions.

- *Documented* — In the nine years I did short classroom observations as a Boston principal, my feedback to teachers was exclusively face-to-face and that seemed to work well. Since then, I've been persuaded of the value of writing a brief summary after each visit and conversation and sharing it with the teacher. Prompt written follow-up helps reinforce points the administrator made in the conversation and also creates a paper trail that's more thorough and informative than lengthy write-ups of dog-and-pony shows.

The sequence is important: talking and listening *before* writing also gives administrators a chance to correct their own mistaken impression or decide on a different main point before giving the teacher something in writing. To keep track of all of this, explore the variety of available software packages. Look for something that provides options for writing a memo to yourself and the teacher about the observation and keeps a record in an archive. The program I like best includes rubrics for self-assessment, goal setting, and summative evaluation.

How much time would an average administrator spend on these visits, conversations, and documentation? Each classroom visit, on average, might last 10 minutes, each follow-up talk five minutes, and each brief write-up 15 minutes. That's a total of 30 minutes per teacher. If a principal did two teachers a day, that's an hour. Should a principal spend 60 minutes a day on this kind of instructional leadership? You bet! Is this challenging? Absolutely. Will there be crazy days with no classroom visits? Of course. *But this is the work.* Every administrator's priority-management challenge is getting to it almost every day, amid all the other stuff, and keeping up the pace. Here's an amazing fact: Ten short visit-and-follow-up cycles would total 300 minutes for the year — only a little more than the four-hour (240-minute) traditional process for the teacher but *so* much more productive!

Superintendents can play a big part in making all this manageable. They need to clear away as much unproductive bureaucracy and paperwork as possible — including the traditional evaluation process — make sure each building has enough instructional administrators, provide support and training for classroom observations and feedback, check in on how it's going when they visit schools, and hold principals accountable.

- *Linked to end-of-year teacher evaluations* — Yes, these short observations count. They are an artful blend of supervision, coaching, and evaluation, supporting teaching and learning and, each time, giving the administrator a few more pieces of the puzzle for the teacher's summative evaluation. This is a little scary to some teachers, especially the part about short visits being unannounced. To address these jitters, I recommend posing a simple question: Which gives administrators a more accurate picture of teachers' work over the entire school year: One or two announced full-lesson observations with extensive write-ups or 10 short unannounced visits with follow-up conversations and brief written comments?

I've posed this question to many groups of administrators, teachers, and union officials, and the answer — via anonymous clickers — is overwhelm-

ingly the latter. Nobody likes to be criticized, but at the end of the day, virtually all teachers want the truth, and it's manageable when it's spread out over 10 visits and chats, with criticism interspersed with plenty of genuine praise. That's how teachers know they're good — and learn how to get better.

What's the best way to pull together all the information from observations and conversations and team meetings at the end of the year? With a good teacher-evaluation rubric — a tool that's becoming increasingly popular. Rubrics have the additional advantage of providing the whole staff with a common language about good teaching.

Here's a suggested sequence for a principal:

- Introduce the rubric to all staff at the beginning of the year;
- Have teachers self-assess and set goals (any Level 1 or 2 items on a four-point scale should be targets for improvement);
- Give feedback based on observations throughout the year, focusing especially on each teacher's goals;
- Do an informal mid-year check-in to give teachers a sense of where they stand on the rubric at that point; and
- At the end of the year, meet with each teacher and compare the teacher's current self-assessment with the principal's tentative scoring page by page, debating disagreements one by one based on the evidence.

If there is a dispute about the scoring on an item, the principal might say, "Tell me more about what you've been doing there. I might have missed something." Teachers and administrators usually agree on 90% or more of the rubric items, and those don't need to be discussed. This makes the process quick and efficient — usually about 30 minutes per teacher.

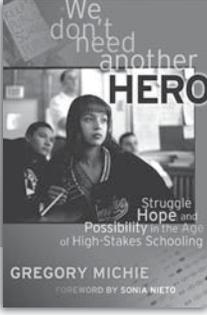
Going for broke — This approach to teacher supervision and evaluation has tremendous advantages over the traditional model, but it's not sweeping the nation. Why? There's the weight of tradition — we've always done it the old way — and a long legacy of distrust in schools — worries about "gotcha" judgments. Every teacher's worst fear is being caught at a bad moment or taken out of context, and some school leaders are, in fact, jerks.

Unable or unwilling to deal with these concerns, some districts and states are

implementing a hybrid model: Administrators do announced *and* unannounced observations. This sounds like a sensible, middle-of-the-road compromise, but it has a fatal flaw: If principals continue to spend four hours or more on each traditional observation cycle and don't get relief from other responsibilities, they simply won't have time for more than one or two short observations — and that isn't nearly enough for teachers to trust the process and for administrators to get a true sense of what's going on in classrooms. The result will be exhausted and cynical school leaders and no improvements in teaching and learning.

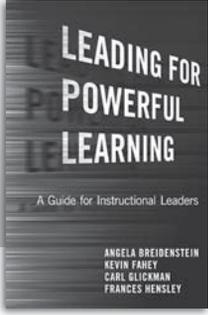
Let's face it: Announced, infrequent, full-lesson classroom visits are bogus. Half-measures won't work. We must make a clean break with the past and use an approach that will win teachers' trust, provide continuous feedback on their work, fuel teacher teamwork, and culminate in accurate end-of-year evaluations. Some path-breaking principals have already made the shift. I salute their courage, but we need this to happen at scale. Only policy makers and union leaders have the power to rewrite contracts, bring teacher supervision and evaluation out of the dark ages, and turn it into a powerful tool for improving teaching and learning. Let's see some honesty and courage at the top. Students deserve no less. **◀**

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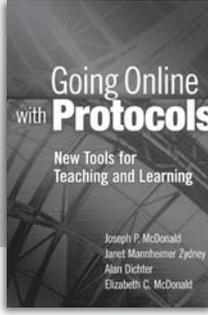
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