

For the Love of Learning

Volume III: The Educators

Chapter 12 - Section C: Evaluating performance

Figure 1 shows our proposed plan for teacher education, from undergraduate preparation through initial certification and on to continuing professional development.

What are the issues?

Many of those who spoke to the Commission addressed teacher evaluation: parents, students, and other members of the public tend to believe that schools and school boards do not give enough attention to evaluating teachers and principals, or to acting on the results of such evaluation. Students believe that they have important information to offer in the teacher evaluation process, and want to be asked for feedback on their experiences with their teachers. Parents, too, want their views to be taken into account.

Many people who made presentations to the Commission focused, perhaps understandably, on dealing with teachers they saw as incompetent or as failing to treat students with respect and care. Many members of the public appeared to believe that more attention to teacher evaluation would be a relatively simple solution to such problems, particularly dealing with unsatisfactory teachers.

From the perspective of the school system, the issues related to performance appraisal are complex, and there appear to be no simple solutions. High teaching standards must be maintained, but teachers must also be protected from arbitrary judgments.

Administrators do not usually consider identification of ineffective teachers the issue (principals and superintendents believe that they know quite well which teachers are having problems), but find that dealing with such teachers is difficult and time consuming.

The teachers' federations are responsible for protecting teachers' rights, and making sure their members are fairly treated. To this end, they have negotiated procedures that guarantee due process to teachers, ensure that teachers are given notice of problems, provided with assistance, and protected against arbitrary action on the part of school personnel.

An Ontario research study in the 1980s showed that few people in school boards thought that performance appraisal was a useful process.⁽³⁶⁾ Rather, people were "going through the motions" with little or no indication that any improvement in performance resulted.

One difficulty is the lack of agreement on clear and meaningful definitions of good teaching and how it might be assessed. If, as was the case for many years, teaching is seen as a relatively simple matter of using standard methods of transmitting basic knowledge and controlling a class of students, assessing performance is also relatively simple, depending primarily on judging the extent to which teachers follow prescribed procedures. When effective teaching is seen as involving complex professional judgments that are based on broad knowledge and skill related to content, teaching strategies, and children, assessing

performance becomes more difficult.

If professional judgments of performance depend on shared professional knowledge, there may be limits to what can be expected from principals and vice-principals in evaluating subject expertise - for instance, an administrator with no knowledge of physics evaluating a physics teacher. Some principals would argue that in-depth knowledge of the subject is not necessary, but many teachers would disagree.

When it comes to subject-specific issues, colleagues with similar subject specialization are probably the best sources of feedback. Arranging such feedback, however, is difficult except on a purely voluntary basis, such as a team teaching arrangement, because federation regulations do not allow teachers to make evaluative comments about the performance of other federation members. Ideally, this feedback would come from the department head.

No one source of information offers definitive answers to how well someone is teaching. Just as we need a variety of indicators for assessing programs and school systems, so too do we need a variety of indicators for assessing teaching. Observation by principals or vice-principals is one source of information. Measures of student learning provide another. We believe that student feedback is necessary to provide a perspective that otherwise might not be heard.

Students may not always be aware of the intentions, the planning, and the explicit strategies teachers use. They are, however, well aware of classroom climate, the extent to which teachers treat students with respect and care, and their own perceptions of how much they are learning. Parent input can also be valuable, with an understanding that parents are not being asked to evaluate teachers' performance, but simply to give feedback concerning their experience and that of their children. Rating forms, similar to those in universities, could be used in secondary schools and with parents, while a simpler questionnaire should be devised for elementary school students.

Purposes of performance appraisal

Accountability

First, performance must be monitored for purposes of accountability, to ensure that standards are maintained. Internally, schools and school systems want to be certain that staff are performing well. Just as we have recommended systematic data-gathering about a range of indicators in schools and school systems, it is important to gather data systematically about the work of teachers and administrators, to satisfy the public and others that schools are doing what they are supposed to do.

Improvement

Yet another purpose is important: assessing performance so people can continually get better at what they do. Evaluation thus is a recognition of what is being done well, and a boost to even higher levels of performance.

Teachers and principals, for instance, need prompt and relevant feedback about how well they are teaching and how well the school is operating. Ideally, teachers and administrators jointly set objectives and priorities, rather than these being imposed from above. Again, given the complex and difficult work of teaching, teachers' own professional judgments are important. In evaluating how well objectives are being met, the perceptions of parents and students are relevant, as are data on how well students are

learning.

Decisions about probationary employees and promotion

Performance appraisal is necessary when decisions must be made about new teachers, who are hired on probationary contracts. That contract becomes permanent after the beginning teacher has taught successfully for two years, or after one year for those who have taught in another board.

When candidates are interested in promotional opportunities, they are evaluated according to current job performance and their suitability for promotion. In both cases, it is especially important that those being evaluated know clearly what the expectations are, and what criteria will be used to evaluate them.

However, in addition to the evaluations used to make decisions, beginning teachers need assistance and helpful feedback that is not part of the formal evaluation process. This is best offered by a supportive colleague, either a teacher designated as a mentor, or, in secondary schools, perhaps the department head, who is ideally placed to provide feedback based on knowledge of the school, the students, and the subject being taught.

Dealing with unsatisfactory performance

As we have indicated, schools and school systems must identify and assist staff members who, for whatever reason, are ineffective. If attempts to improve their performance fail, such teachers and principals may be moved to positions where they are expected to perform better, if such positions are available. However, if all these efforts fail to result in improvement, unsatisfactory employees must be dismissed.

Those who spoke at our public hearings believed that this responsibility was not being carried out as well as it ought to be. Difficult and painful as dismissal decisions are, the rights of students to a good education must take priority. Termination must be justified and defensible, with employees treated fairly. At the very least, fair treatment involves informing employees of standards and expectations; alerting them to deficiencies in their work that, if not corrected, may lead to dismissal; and giving them assistance (and reasonable time) to improve in areas of deficiency. The necessary practices are spelled out in teacher contracts. Very few teachers, however, are actually dismissed, whether or not their performance actually improves. It is impossible to get reliable data on the number of teachers who are not performing satisfactorily and who are not dismissed. Estimates suggest that the numbers are low, but we believe that even one such teacher in a school is too many.

A 1986 research study for the Ministry suggests that schools, like other organizations, resist dismissing ineffective employees because it is "too much trouble." The nuts and bolts are seen as so time-consuming and the costs so high, in terms of time and legal fees, that the effort is not worth it.⁽³⁷⁾

We are not aware that there have been any significant changes to this pattern since 1986. There is no doubt that costs associated with the dismissal process are high; we are more concerned, however, with the costs of failing to deal decisively with ineffective or incompetent educators.

First, they make the work of others more difficult. But our main concern is with students: a year with an unsatisfactory teacher may have a serious detrimental impact on a young child's learning and development. An adolescent struggling with school will find an insensitive and incompetent teacher

making the struggle even more frustrating and difficult. Furthermore, the credibility and reputation of the school and school board suffer if they do not appear to actively defend high standards of teacher performance.

We believe that through collective agreements, the defence of teachers' rights may have overridden the need for students to be protected from incompetent or uncaring teachers, who may be unable or unwilling to do a good job.

What can be done about the problem? We believe that leadership from the top is crucial: directors of education must communicate clearly that the system will make every effort to help teachers improve their performance if it is unsatisfactory, but that unless there is sufficient improvement after a reasonable time (within a year), principals will be held accountable for ensuring that appropriate action is taken.

There are situations in which teachers or administrators who are unsuccessful in one setting may be more successful in another the "fresh-start" approach. If, however, the problem re-emerges in the new setting, definitive action must be taken. Problem employees cannot be circulated through a variety of schools, damaging the education of countless hapless students.

Recommendations 77, 78, 79, 80, 81

*We recommend that all school boards make information available to the public about their performance appraisal systems, using newsletters or other means, so that students, parents, teachers, and the public are aware of the basis of performance appraisal and the guidelines being followed.

*We recommend that all school board performance appraisal systems include provision for systematically and regularly seeking input from students and parents in regard to teaching, classroom, and school atmosphere, and to related matters about which they may have concerns or suggestions.

*We recommend that beginning teachers have an opportunity to get helpful performance feedback from colleagues other than the principal or vice-principal, understanding that such information will not be used for decisions about permanent contracts. Designated mentor teachers, or in secondary schools, department heads, could provide this assistance.

*We recommend that the College of Teachers, the Ministry, and school boards emphasize that principals are accountable for satisfactory teacher performance in their schools, and that supervisory officers are responsible for ensuring that principals take appropriate action in dealing with teachers whose performance is not satisfactory.

*We recommend that the Ministry, teachers' federations, and school boards reach agreement on any changes required to ensure that policies and practices related to dismissal effectively balance the rights of teachers and the rights of students.

Endnotes (Chapter 12, Section C)

36. Stephen B. Lawton and others, "Development and Use of Performance Appraisal of Certified Education Staff in Ontario School Boards," vol. 4 (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1986).

The authors concluded:

"One of the general findings from our study, in fact, is that, while a great deal is known about what makes an effective set of appraisal policies and procedures, many school systems in Ontario have not implemented such practices consistently" (p. 5).

"While there is an enormous amount of effort put into evaluation by administrators in many boards, we could not really say that the results are used to any great effect. Personnel files are filled with thousands of reports that are never really used, once they have been written" (p.40).

37. Brian Hayman and Susan Sussman, *The Future of Performance Appraisal for Certificated Education Staff in the School Boards of Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1986), p. 111.

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