

Jon Saphier and Kim Marshall on Supervision and Evaluation: Many areas of agreement, a few areas of disagreement

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Jon Saphier and Kim Marshall are close friends who have discussed and debated the issues of supervision and evaluation for almost 30 years. While some who know Jon and Kim believe there are sharp differences in what they advocate, it turns out that those areas are few and far between. This document spells out their common ground on supervision and evaluation, and then presents a few areas of disagreement.

On teacher supervision, Jon and Kim agree that:

- The improvement of teaching and learning is the heart of the principal's job.
- School leaders must be experts in instruction, assessment, and student learning so they know what to look for in classrooms, can analyze what they see, and are articulate in sharing their observations.
- Frequently observing all teachers is essential, but many principals are so harried and desk-bound that they default to the minimum number of contractual evaluation visits and do superficial “drive-by” classroom visits without giving meaningful feedback to teachers.
- The best way for principals to get out of this rut is making several short (5-15-minute) unannounced mini-observations each day. A savvy, focused principal can learn a great deal during a short classroom visit, and keeping up this pace will result in seeing every teacher 10-12 times a year, which can give a good sense of what’s going on in classrooms.
- Mini-observations should be informal, low-key, and non-bureaucratic – no elaborate checklists or write-ups.
- Nevertheless, principals should try to answer five questions during each mini-observation:
(a) Precisely what are students supposed to be learning or getting better at? (b) Is the lesson objective “worthy” and actually being carried out? (c) Do students know and care about the objective? (d) How well are students learning what they are supposed to be learning? and (e) What confusions and mistakes are getting in the way?
- The best way for principals to give each teacher feedback after a mini-observation is in a face-to-face conversation, ideally within 24 hours. Whether the feedback is positive or critical, it’s important that the principal be candid and specific.
- An important virtue of face-to-face conversations is that teachers can fill their principals in on the portions of the class the boss missed, put the lesson in the context of the curriculum unit, and push back on any erroneous impressions the principal may have formed. It’s much less likely that this kind of dialogue will occur if the principal gives feedback in a note or e-mail.
- Another advantage of face-to-face conversations is that principals can more accurately gauge how much criticism a teacher can handle at a given moment in time.
- For teachers, regular face-to-face talks with someone who knows good instruction can have more impact than infrequent write-ups clouded by the anxiety of official evaluation.
- “Walkthroughs” should not to be confused with mini-observations. Sometimes called “learning walks”, walkthroughs are tours of the entire school by a team, usually looking for particular items,

followed by general feedback to the principal and staff. Walkthroughs conducted 3-4 times a year can be a useful way for the principal and others to get an overview of the quality of instruction – but they are not nearly as powerful as mini-observations for improving teaching and learning.

- Mini-observations are an excellent supervision strategy, but someone in each school – ideally instructional coaches with a high level of pedagogical content knowledge – should regularly observe lessons from beginning to end and give teachers detailed feedback, perhaps using videotaping.
- Instructional coaches are a vital part of every staff, and they need to work in partnership with the principal. One effective practice is for a principal and coach to visit classrooms together, comparing notes and developing a shared vision of good teaching and learning. During these joint visits, the coach can “tutor” the principal on certain aspects of content-specific pedagogy on which he or she may not be an expert.
- The principal and coaches should also work together to develop a schoolwide culture of non-defensive examination of practice, encouraging teachers to observe each other’s classes and talk candidly about effective practices and student learning.
- In conversations with teachers and teacher teams, principals and instructional coaches should strive to shift the conversation to *results*. Everyone needs to focus on what students are learning by looking at student work and interim assessment results, analyzing errors and misconceptions, reflecting on effective and ineffective instructional strategies, and deciding on appropriate follow-up with struggling students. One of the most important parts of the principal’s job is orchestrating “professional learning communities” – teams of same-grade/same-subject teachers in which there is clarity on what students need to know and be able to do, common assessments, and immediate follow-up. This low-stakes supervision of results should not be part of the teacher evaluation process.
- Another powerful way of improving teaching is for principals and/or instructional coaches to work with teacher teams on backwards planning of curriculum units. Critiquing and discussing unit plans is a better use of principals’ time than inspecting lesson plans.

On teacher evaluation, Jon and Kim agree that:

- Evaluations are a core part of the principal’s job. It’s essential that school leaders check that all teachers meet high minimum standards, follow up with those who do not, and provide accurate documentation for teachers’ permanent files.
- Even principals who are fully committed to using mini-observations must be proficient at conducting full-lesson observations, analyzing what they see, and communicating their claims, evidence, interpretations, and judgments to teachers. This is especially important when documenting the performance of marginal and ineffective teachers, writing improvement plans, and (if it comes to that) making the case for dismissal.
- Principals must guard against getting an inaccurate impression of teachers’ performance in glamorized lessons put on for the principal’s benefit (the “dog and pony show”). Year-end teacher evaluations should never be based on a single classroom observation; to write fair and accurate evaluations, principals must make frequent unannounced classroom visits and draw on multiple sources of data to get a sense of what’s happening in classrooms during the 99.5% of the time when teachers are on their own with students.

- Teachers should be involved in their own evaluation through goal-setting and self-assessments at the beginning of the year, input before the final evaluation write-up, and candid exchanges with the principal on unit planning and student learning throughout the year.
- When evaluating teachers, principals need to guard against a checklist mentality. Beyond certain basics, there is no one right way to teach; it's all about each teacher finding the right match between the situation, the subject matter, a number of possible instructional strategies, and the students. Principals should not evaluate teachers on compliance with a long list of "correct" teaching practices, but look at what's producing measurable student learning.
- It's also important for principals to keep teacher evaluation in perspective. The research indicates that evaluative write-ups have low to medium leverage on influencing teaching and learning (except when firing an ineffective teacher). In addition, full-dress evaluations are very time-consuming. The principal's priority-management challenge is doing evaluations as quickly and efficiently as possible and saving prime time and energy for other powerful drivers of student learning, including professional learning community work, curriculum unit design, error analysis on interim assessments, improving instructional coaching, and teacher hiring.

Points on which there is disagreement:

- Kim thinks it's essential for principals to set a daily goal for mini-observations – for example, five a day – and constantly push to keep up the pace so that every teacher gets 10-12 mini-observations a year. Kim believes that if principals don't have a specific, measurable number to strive toward each day, their good intentions will be swallowed up by HSPS (Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome).
- Jon agrees with Kim's point, but is reluctant to recommend numerical targets. He believes that the quality of the visits and expertise of the principal are what counts.
- Kim thinks that if principals are too busy to stay 15 minutes or more in each classroom, they can still learn enough in five-minute visits to have meaningful follow-up conversations with teachers, provided that they widen their window by having face-to-face follow-up talks with teachers and participating in the unit planning and interim assessment process.
- Jon thinks principals need to stay at least 15 minutes to form a meaningful impression of instruction in a classroom and answer the five questions about objectives and student learning.
- Kim believes that, with contractual permission, the data collected in short observations can be aggregated into the end-of-year evaluation, dispensing with formal, announced evaluation visits.
- Jon has no problem with using data from mini-observations as part of teachers' summative evaluations, but believes that there should also be full-lesson observations with detailed notes to complete a quality year-end evaluation of a teacher.
- Kim believes that teacher evaluation rubrics (he has designed a set) are the most time-efficient and effective way to conduct year-end evaluations.
- Jon believes that rubrics are very useful for discussing and forming common images of what good teaching looks like, but that it is a serious mistake to use them to rate teachers or as paper records for

teacher evaluation. He says that we do not have the capacity to make valid distinctions between Level 3 and Level 4 on a rubric. Principals can use claims and evidence to credibly and convincingly document any real teaching problem.

- Jon believes that principals and coaches conducting planning conferences with teachers is a powerful intervention – perhaps preferable to observations and feedback for some teachers.
- Kim agrees that collaborative lesson planning can be productive, but worries that it’s difficult to do on a frequent basis. He thinks working with teacher teams planning units and looking at interim assessment results are more time-efficient and have greater potential to bring about classroom improvements.
- Kim believes that principals should do mini-observations of all teachers every year to keep tabs on each teacher’s effectiveness with students and give them constant feedback.
- Jon agrees on mini-observations every year, but for formal evaluation, he favors a four-year cycle in which teachers rotate through in-depth observations, action research, critical friends groups, and other professional development activities. This somewhat reduces the bureaucratic/paper load, at least for tenured teachers.
- Kim believes that there are seven reasons why it’s a bad idea to evaluate teachers based on students’ standardized test scores. He thinks evaluations should be based on the principal’s best estimate of each teacher’s proficiency in the classroom, supplemented by low-stakes supervisory conversations about interim assessment results.
- Jon believes that student learning results (measured in various ways, not just standardized test scores) can be made part of the teacher evaluation process. He has suggested this in the third essay in his book, *John Adams’ Promise*.
- Jon and Kim agree that the following elements form a powerful, research-based strategy for bringing all students to high levels of achievement:
 - Frequent classroom visits;
 - Candid follow-up talks;
 - Teacher analysis of interim assessment data and student work in “professional learning communities”;
 - Effective unit planning;
 - A constant schoolwide conversation about student learning.
- Kim thinks that the interim assessment component is more powerful than any of the others.
- Jon disagrees, saying that constant observations, conversations, planning conferences for digging deeply into content, and the development of a culture for non-defensive self-examination of practice are just as powerful. All are necessary.