



# Support for Growth

## How States Can Improve the Quality of Post-Observation Feedback

May 2015

### Introduction

The primary purpose of any teacher evaluation and support system is to increase student learning by improving classroom instruction. Targeted and actionable feedback provided to the teacher following a classroom observation is essential to this instructional improvement. As States have rolled out new systems of evaluation and support, they have often focused on simple compliance activities, such as the submission of ratings to appropriate managers, and more advanced objectives such as ensuring the accuracy of evaluation results. They have found, however, that in order to improve teacher practice and student learning, they must also focus on the quality of feedback and support delivered by observers.

In July 2014, the Reform Support Network (RSN) brought together leaders from nine States to discuss how they have successfully achieved more accurate ratings and addressed new priorities and challenges. Much of the discussion focused on how States can address inconsistencies in district support of teacher growth. As Tim Matheny of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) noted, "There are very few districts that lack the will to do this well, but the biggest gaps lie in their lack of capacity – having the bodies or knowledge – to do this work well." In fact, State leaders participating in the July convening identified as their highest priority the need to ensure that districts, through their principals and other observers, deliver to teachers high-quality feedback, resources and support as a

result of evaluation. Without high-quality feedback, participants suggested, teachers will not know how to change their practice in ways that improve outcomes for students.

During the convening, these State leaders generated strategies to help district leaders and principals achieve the primary objective of evaluation: to increase student learning by improving instruction. In particular, they focused on strategies to accurately assess the performance of all teachers and provide them with specific and actionable feedback. These strategies include:

1. Teaching principals how to deliver high-quality feedback
2. Monitoring the quality of feedback to teachers
3. Creating networks of districts and providing targeted support
4. Evaluating principals on their ability to deliver high-quality feedback
5. Building capacity at the district level to collect, analyze and respond to data
6. Working with principal preparation programs to produce principal candidates who know how to provide high-quality feedback

This publication summarizes these six strategies and provides examples of their implementation in the field.

**The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.**

## Strategies to Improve Feedback to Teachers

### Strategy #1: Teach Principals How To Deliver High-Quality Feedback

#### Supports to Observers and Districts

State leaders noted that principals struggle to deliver specific and actionable feedback to teachers for several reasons. First, many principals feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities – they find it difficult enough to conduct observations and post-observation conferences, complete the required pre- and post-observation paperwork and enter evaluation data in addition to their other responsibilities. Second, many principals do not yet have the knowledge and skills to accurately assess teacher performance and provide high-quality feedback. These principals need support. States acknowledged that they need to tailor professional development and support systems to individual principals' skills and knowledge. Several ideas emerged for how States can help districts and principals provide better feedback to teachers:

- **State Training:** One opportunity for States to build district capacity is observer training and certification. Some States have shifted their training focus to the delivery of high-quality post-observation feedback. In training, observers discuss characteristics of high-quality feedback, learn how to give constructive feedback to teachers, and identify key practices that will most dramatically improve instruction and student achievement. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) provides an outline for principals to use as they conduct a high-quality post-observation conference and create an action plan in partnership with the teacher. “We’ve taken a tight approach on providing a script for the post-observation conference. You can riff on a template, but it gets people in a rhythm. The constructive piece can be hard for people, especially if they saw something but don’t know what to do about it,” explained Sara Heyburn, formerly of TDOE.
- **Tools and Guidance:** Although districts are primarily responsible for training observers, States can support them by providing guidance, tools and resources, such as post-observation conference protocols. Several States noted that they manage an online repository of these materials for easy access by districts. TDOE and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) developed websites that house all observer training materials. The New York State Education Department developed a **guide** for effective post-observation conferences. The New York City Department of Education created a **video portal** of effective observation practices. The Louisiana Department of Education, although not a part of this convening, has published **videos** of exemplary post-observation conferences that are models for other States to emulate.
- **Coaching:** Convening participants discussed as an additional strategy the deployment of State or regional coaches to assist principals who need help. TDOE has successfully implemented this strategy. It created regional Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) coach positions to support school leaders whose prior evaluations of teachers showed a significant gap between classroom observations and student growth ratings.<sup>1</sup> This support includes co-observations, role plays between the principal and “teacher,” and data analysis to uncover misalignment between student growth and observation data. TDOE has set a high standard for the skills and experience that TEAM coaches must have. For instance, they need to be able to give teachers high-quality feedback and coach observers to do the same. They must develop positive and productive relationships with the principals they support. As a result of their work

<sup>1</sup> TDOE determined that an acceptable degree of alignment between student growth and observation ratings is component scores that are within two performance levels of each other on a four-tier rating scale. For example, if a teacher earns a rating of “3” on observations, one would expect to see a student growth rating of “2,” “3” or “4.” On the other hand, if a teacher earns a rating of “4” on observations but “1” on student growth, the difference in ratings of three performance levels would be outside the acceptable range. Patterns of misalignment at the school level indicate to TDOE that a school leader may need support from a TEAM coach.

with TEAM coaches, few principals require coaching beyond one year. “Where our TEAM coaches have gone in, alignment gets better, so teachers are seeing a relationship between student growth and observations. In those schools, we’ve seen objective growth in student achievement [based on test scores] that outpaces state growth,” Heyburn said.

New Jersey and Delaware have also deployed coaches to work with districts. At the request of districts, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) deploys state development coaches to assist individual school leaders with post-observation feedback. Similarly, NJDOE hires former principals and superintendents to visit high-priority schools, teach principals observation skills and, in some cases, coach teachers directly.

States can use other mechanisms to teach district and school leaders how to provide high-quality feedback. For example, TDOE identifies principals who excel at delivering high-quality feedback to teachers and pairs them with those who need more support. This supplements the work of State and regional coaches.

## Strategy #2: Monitor the Quality of Feedback to Teachers

States must monitor the quality of feedback to identify districts and school leaders who are struggling and need support, convening participants agreed. Observer training provides an early opportunity to monitor the quality of observer feedback to teachers. Before certifying observers, TDOE evaluates the quality of their feedback to teachers through an online assessment developed by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. Similarly, DDOE requires observers to watch a video of a lesson, rate the teacher and answer multiple-choice questions designed to assess observer skill at delivering high-quality feedback.

TDOE trained and certified 6,000 observers in person prior to the first year of implementation of its new evaluation system. Now, TDOE administers an observer assessment online to determine whether observers need additional training. Observers who pass become certified, while those who need more intensive support attend in-person training with department

## Sample Questions to Assess Quality of Feedback

### From the Delaware Department of Education

*Observer watches a video of a teacher's lesson and responds to the following questions:*

1. For this lesson, which of the following areas for educator development/growth warrants the most targeted feedback during the post-observation conference?
  - a. Efficacy of transitions and impact on instructional time
  - b. Pacing of the lesson
  - c. Instructional outcomes/objectives with appropriately aligned practice/activities
  - d. Enthusiasm for the content and relationships with students
2. Which of the following is the most appropriate action to be taken based upon this educator's performance in the lesson observation?
  - a. A Commendation for the sophisticated use of assessment throughout the lesson
  - b. A Recommendation for the teacher to continue to work collaboratively with colleagues to develop cross-curricular activities
  - c. An Improvement Plan focusing on the organization of physical space
  - d. An Expectation focusing on high-level questioning and opportunities for practice

staff. The State training model ensures that observers across the State are evaluated in a consistent manner and allows State staff to devote their limited and valuable time to those who need it the most.

Convening participants also suggested that States can set up systems to monitor the quality of feedback during the school year. State officials, they suggested, can conduct random site visits to observe post-observation conferences and assess the quality of principals' post-observation feedback. States may want

to invite principal supervisors to join these conferences and provide feedback to supervisors on how well they coach principals. States can also monitor the quality of observation reports from afar: NJDOE has developed a simple **rubric** that State officials use to assess individual school leaders' observation reports.

States that developed alignment indices to assess the accuracy of evaluation ratings, including TDOE and NJDOE, also find that data showing the misalignment between student growth scores and observation ratings helps identify observers struggling to provide high-quality feedback to teachers. For instance, if a principal tends to rate his or her teachers "highly effective" when his or her students' growth is below average, the principal is likely not giving that teacher the feedback he or she needs to improve. "If we see a school with a pattern of misalignment, we know we need to dig in and look further. That means a teacher is receiving mixed messages about her effectiveness," Heyburn said. Rhode Island joins New Jersey and Tennessee in working to address patterns of misalignment. RIDE sets up regional meetings with superintendents to review evaluation data and identify misalignment between observation and student growth data. In addition, eight States as part of their work with RSN's Quality Evaluation Rollout work group developed questions to help them assess how well their evaluation systems are performing. Included are questions that help States identify areas of misalignment and improve the quality of feedback (see page 3 of *Promoting Evaluation Rating Accuracy: Strategic Options for States* for a list of the questions).

### **Strategy #3: Create Networks of Districts and Provide Targeted Support**

State leaders acknowledged that one of their most critical roles is to share promising district practices with other districts. States can also promote cross-district collaboration on efforts to improve the quality of feedback to teachers. States can establish regional or content-focused networks of districts that share resources and problem-solve together

to strengthen observer feedback. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) is conducting a 5-year pilot with a group of 27 districts that have agreed to use the State model framework for teacher evaluation, provide feedback about the challenges and strengths of the model, and suggest refinements to the implementation process. As a result of this ongoing work with a subset of Colorado districts, CDE developed a **resource guide** for districts to support their implementation of the observation cycle. This guide includes suggested evidence for observers to look for and resources that districts can give teachers to help them improve their practice.

### **Strategy #4: Evaluate Principals on Their Ability To Deliver High-Quality Feedback**

Many States want to align their principal and teacher evaluation systems. However, implementation of principal evaluation has often taken a backseat to teacher evaluation. Where teacher evaluation systems are fully implemented, States are now focused on principal evaluation systems that measure a principal's ability to improve teacher performance. Principal evaluations should prioritize high-quality feedback so that principals prioritize this aspect of instructional leadership, convening participants noted. **Tennessee**, **Delaware** and **New Jersey** are all implementing new principal evaluations that incorporate the expectation that principals will deliver high-quality feedback to teachers.

Similarly, convening participants suggested, the primary responsibility of principal supervisors should be to cultivate principals as instructional leaders who can improve teacher practice and drive student achievement. Just as job descriptions and evaluations for principals should prioritize high-quality feedback, so should job descriptions and evaluations for principal supervisors. DDOE, for instance, plans to update its framework for evaluating district superintendents and other principal managers to include the expectation that principals deliver high-quality feedback. DDOE has already modified its **principal supervisor training**

to address this aspect of a supervisor's role, and TDOE checks in on principal supervisors to observe them coaching principals, "especially when we see data that's misaligned," Heyburn noted.

## **Strategy #5: Build Capacity at the District Level To Collect, Analyze and Respond to Data**

While several States are attempting to collect data on the quality of observer feedback, the current data are fairly limited in size and scope. States primarily rely on statewide surveys, such as the [TEAM Teacher Perception Survey](#) in Tennessee, or focus groups of teachers to better understand the quantity and quality of feedback that teachers receive from their observers. With limited capacity to gather additional evidence on the quality of observer feedback, State leaders expressed an urgent need to build district capacity to collect, analyze and respond to this data.

Staff from TDOE suggested that to begin building district data capacity, States should share the data they do have with their districts without penalty. Together, the State and district could compile relevant data (for instance, teacher survey data, observation scores, student growth data). The State could then help district leaders identify trends in district evaluation data, identify school leaders who need support, and work with districts to help teachers and school leaders improve their practice. DDOE has created a data analytics working group comprising data analysts from every district. A few States, including Delaware, have begun to build district-level data dashboards or scorecards for their local districts to track key data elements and manage evaluation implementation, including feedback quality. DDOE works with superintendents throughout the school year to review and analyze this data. Districts can use a similar inquiry process to help principals and their managers examine school-level data.

In some cases, States do not have the legal authority to collect evaluation data of any grain size, making it difficult for State agencies to help districts analyze and respond to data. To address this challenge, Colorado has created [Memoranda of Understanding](#) with districts that have agreed to share evaluation data with CDE in exchange for intensive evaluation implementation support, as described previously.

## **Strategy #6: Work With Principal Preparation Programs To Produce Principal Candidates Who Know How To Provide High-Quality Feedback**

Convening participants noted that States should ensure that future school leaders are equipped with skills to assess teacher performance accurately, provide specific and actionable feedback, and give teachers the resources they need to act on that feedback. To this end, States can work with principal preparation programs to produce candidates who demonstrate that they can provide high-quality feedback to teachers upon graduation or receipt of a certificate or license. TDOE has worked with local principal preparation programs to train principal candidates on how to deliver high-quality feedback. CDE, which contracts with institutions of higher education to certify principals as observers, requires these programs to use the observer certification assessment and training modules that CDE developed.

States can also provide data on principal performance to principal preparation programs to help these institutions meet the needs of districts. If States share trends in principal performance, programs can tailor their curriculum to address skill gaps and reinforce skills that produce positive outcomes for teachers and students.

## Conclusion

High-quality feedback is essential to evaluation and support systems that foster teacher development. Observers must go beyond the accurate assessment of instruction and identify specific and actionable next steps for teachers to improve their practice. And States and districts must give principals the training, support

and resources they need to help teachers improve their practice through feedback, and then hold principals accountable for doing so. The outcomes – more effective teachers, better-prepared students – are certainly worthy of this effort.

This publication features information from public and private organizations and links to additional information created by those organizations. Inclusion of this information does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any products or services offered or views expressed, nor does the Department of Education control its accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness.