

VIEWPOINT

Delivering Impactful Feedback to Teachers

BY SHEEBA JACOB



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As a principal, what goes through your mind when you're providing feedback to teachers? Do you think, for example: Can I be direct with teachers? How can I provide feedback that doesn't overwhelm them? How can I ask the right questions, using the right tone so that they don't become defensive? What can I say that will help them change their teaching? Truth be told, the relationship between principal and teacher is as much an art as it is a science.

In his 2014 book *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, Michael Fullan says, "Realize that by far the most effective and telling feedback that teachers will receive is that which is built into the purposeful interaction between and among teachers and the principal."

Instead of evaluating teachers for accountability's sake, effective principals grow teaching practice. This purposeful interaction among teachers and the principal is critical to improving instruction and student achievement. At the root of this interaction is the principal's ability to build teachers' capacity based on the underlying belief that teachers can grow in their practice. When teachers know that the principal wants them to grow, their trust increases, and they can be more vulnerable in their teaching practice.

Building Professional Supports

Teachers come to schools with specific strengths, but they need additional supports to truly meet the diverse needs of their students. Effective principals are worried less about compliance and are

more concerned about learning opportunities for their teachers.

By collecting data and analyzing trends across the school, a principal can strategically create a plan to support the improvement of teaching practice and student learning. Part of this plan should include developing a common school goal related to student learning needs. If, for example, schoolwide data shows that students need to learn how to justify their thinking in math, the principal can identify specific professional supports that will lead the staff in providing students the tools and resources they need to be successful.

Professional supports can include:

- Providing teachers with instructional coaches
- Providing time for grade-level team meetings
- Creating professional learning communities based on student priorities
- Offering district-based professional development
- Allowing teachers to visit other teachers' classes
- Providing targeted feedback based on a teacher's specific area of focus

Not every teacher will need all of these professional supports. Principals can work collaboratively with teachers to identify what they need (while always keeping students at the center of these decisions). This kind of leadership, in which principals support teachers, can have powerful effects on student learning.

At the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, we teach leaders how to provide teachers with effective feedback. Gone are the days when instructional leaders step into a classroom

PRINCIPALS CAN PROVIDE TARGETED FEEDBACK BY MAKING SURE IT IS:

Actionable. Instead of several suggestions, offer one or two pieces of specific feedback that the teacher can implement immediately.

Evidence-based. Instead of general statements like “Great job!” provide descriptive and specific observations based on what the teacher is saying and doing and what the students are saying and doing.

Part of a larger context. Develop a system within the school where teachers receive a variety of different supports. Feedback should be part of a larger context where teachers decide upon an area of focus, and the principal and teacher together engage in a cycle of learning based on this focus.

once a year for 45 minutes and offer feedback like, “Great lesson!” “Your students seemed engaged.” “Keep up the great instructional work.” Today’s principals carve out time for frequent classroom observation and want to learn how to provide meaningful feedback.

Evaluation systems are put into place to provide the ratings principals give teachers. A rating is an opportunity for a deeper conversation, but it does not take the place of feedback. “Identifying the difference between ‘proficient’ and ‘effective’ differentiation, for example, isn’t worth much if you can’t support a teacher in understanding how this plays out in the classroom and what would make a positive difference to his or her students,” according to an article in *Education Week*.

Teaching is a sophisticated endeavor. So, how do principals give feedback that is not just a rating, but is structured as a meaningful conversation related to what is happening in the classroom? How do they provide feedback so teachers are clear about what they are doing effectively and what they can do to improve their practice?

Characteristics of Effective Targeted Feedback

Consider giving “targeted feedback”—comments based on a specific area of focus. This area of focus should be driven by the students’ learning strengths and challenges in relation to the teacher’s instruction. If, for example, a teacher identifies a challenge in his or her classroom that revolves around how students find and share evidence from a text, the teacher may provide students with structures to support this skill. The principal could then support the teacher by providing targeted feedback on this specific focus.

Creating the environment for these kinds of professional supports is a powerful way to leverage teacher learning and student growth within a school. One partner teacher said after being asked about how targeted feedback cycles worked with her principal, “I actually find it [feedback] really helpful. She is coaching my practice, not my lesson.” 

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