

Joe Zmikly
7/10/09
Dr. Brian Clark
Ed. Leadership 540

Teacher Evaluation Critique

This paper will summarize selected aspects of the latest thinking on teacher supervision and evaluation. Additionally, it will critique Oxford Community Schools' policies and practices in this area. The sources for the pertinent information regarding Oxford's policies and practices that will be used in this paper are the Master Contract and the district's official 32-page teacher appraisal document, entitled "Professional Staff: Teacher Performance Appraisal Process." Oxford's appraisal process was recently revamped in January 2008, per the teacher contract.

The best place to start in this analysis is the purpose for teacher evaluation and supervision, which all the experts agree is twofold: to assess a teacher's competence and to provide a means for professional development and improvement of the teacher's craft. Oxford's purpose is in concordance with this, as according to the Master Contract, the district's appraisal process is in place for the purpose of "assisting and appraising the success of both newly employed and experienced personnel."

According to Charlotte Danielson (2001), an effective teacher supervision and evaluation process should utilize differentiated systems, meaning different teachers with different experience and proficiency levels should be evaluated differently. Oxford's appraisal policy agrees with this in principle, calling its policy a "differentiated system of performance appraisal," citing "variations in the process based on whether a staff member is tenured or probationary." However, in practice, the method for evaluating untenured teachers is identical to

the method for evaluating tenured teachers, except for frequency; untenured teachers must be evaluated every year, whereas tenured teachers are evaluated every three years. Danielson also calls for multiyear cycles, meaning tenured teachers should be doing something to be accountable for the purposes for evaluation in the “off-years” when they are not formally evaluated. Oxford’s process allows tenured teachers to do this, saying that tenured teachers “may continue in the goal setting process...if both staff member and Administrator think it would be useful.” Clearly, this is far from mandated.

Kim Marshall (2008) suggests that to encourage professional growth and assist in the appraisal process, administrators should take advantage of “mini-observations,” or walk-throughs. Oxford’s policy supports this, as the appraisal plan says, “The administrator will make every effort to conduct informal observations or walk-throughs during the year that will be used as sources or information for the summative performance appraisal.” I am unsure how often these walk-throughs actually happen, although I have not seen them happen very often. Marshall also calls for instructional coaching from either administrators, peers, or a combination of both. Oxford’s Master Contract affords this for untenured teachers, stating that neophytes will be mentored by tenured volunteers, along with the Individual Development Plan to be completed with an administrator. However, tenured teachers have no contractual access to instructional coaching from peers. The district’s new teacher-leader program may address this area, but the program is too young to know yet.

Danielson (2001) and Marshall (2008) both suggest that teacher rubrics would aid in effective teacher supervision, and in this area, Oxford has implemented a detailed system of evaluation. Oxford’s appraisal policy includes a yearly summative evaluation form, listing four domains of individual development, along with several elements of teaching for each domain.

This is accompanied by a detailed rubric for each element of teaching, with a rating system consisting of varying levels of performance: unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished. Each element is described by each level of performance, making for a very detailed and clear performance rubric. In fact, some may criticize it as being *too* thorough, but no teacher could argue that concrete expectations are not clear.

Kenneth Peterson (2006) offers that multiple and variable data sources should be used in the appraisal process. He argues that a couple formal classroom observations per year do not amount to substantive data-gathering regarding a teacher's competence, nor do they provide enough information to give effective feedback to the teacher. For the most part, Oxford's method of teacher evaluation is primarily (and some could argue solely) formal classroom observation. It is the only method specifically cited in the Master Contract. To be fair, the appraisal process document does list different methods of data-gathering, such as walk-throughs and "professional growth projects," which are taken into account when the administrator writes the summative evaluation. (The professional growth project is one area of flexibility in the goal-setting process, allowing teachers to substitute one of their IDP goals with a project that revolves around one of several options, including creating a professional growth portfolio, researching a teaching strategy and implementing and presenting it, and developing the school's curriculum.) This does leave open the possibility for complementary methods in addition to the classroom observations. The contract states that teachers shall be provided a year-end performance appraisal based "at least in part" on a minimum of two written observations. Clearly, formal observations are mandated, whereas other alternative methods of data-gathering are optional.

In contrast to some of the aforementioned congruence between Oxford's policies and the experts' recommendations, there are yet some areas of discord. These areas are where the rubber

meets the road, so to speak; that is to say, although many of Oxford's theoretical rationales for its practices are taken from experts such as Charlotte Danielson, some of its actual practices are taken from more traditional methods of teacher evaluation. For example, there is really no provision for utilizing student achievement, as suggested by researchers such as Danielson (2001), Marshall (2008), and Peterson (2006). These researchers, along with others like Richard DuFour (2009) make the point that since the purpose of teaching is to promote student learning, it seems logical that student learning would be one of the primary indicators of good teaching. Nowhere in Oxford's contract or appraisal policy document is there a utilization of actual student achievement as a means of evaluating a teacher. Oxford's teacher evaluation rubric does make mention of a teacher's assessment of student learning, but this is only in reference to a teacher's ability to assess, rather than using the students' work to demonstrate a teacher's competence in teaching.

Oxford Community Schools has taken strides to include the latest thinking in teacher supervision and evaluation in its teacher appraisal process, but there are still some areas of discord. While Oxford attempts to differentiate its process for untenured versus experienced teachers, the reality is that the only difference in how teachers are evaluated is the frequency. Perhaps true differentiation (especially for experienced teachers) might include alternative data sources in place of, rather than in addition to, formal classroom observations. Oxford might also do well to include some sort of peer-coaching program in its aim to "assist the success" of both new and tenured teachers, since it is difficult if not impossible for administrators to act both as coach and judge; perhaps the new teacher-leader program will aid in this. Expectations for teachers are clear and spelled out, due to Oxford's exhaustive rubric, yet it might be improved by more explicitly including backward mapping (Marshall, 2008). Probably the most glaring area

for improvement is the emphasis on formal classroom observation in the appraisal process.

While other data-gathering methods are afforded to teachers, some may argue they are almost rendered obsolete, based on the reality that only observations are required by teachers and administrators. It would be interesting to find out to what extent teachers in Oxford know about and/or take advantage of the alternative data sources. I would speculate that few teachers make use of them because they are required to do the classroom observations regardless, and many teachers might view it as just extra work. Finally, Oxford would do well to include student achievement in its teacher supervision model, as student achievement is the ultimate goal of teaching in the first place. While Oxford has not perfected the teacher supervision and evaluation process, the philosophical groundwork is in place for substantive change to take place. The rationale for practices such as using alternative sources of data, walk-throughs, and true differentiation of appraisal is already embedded within the philosophy stated in the teacher appraisal document. Structural change does not occur easily or quickly, and Oxford may be ahead of many districts in the process to make change in teacher appraisal a reality.