Implementation Spotlight: Educator Evaluation with Teacher Teams is a Powerful Combination

Erin Dukes is a middle school science teacher and T3 Teacher Leader at Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School in Roxbury, MA, and a 2013 winner of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science. Read on to learn about Erin’s experience with the new evaluation system (also featured in the Huffington Post).

When my school — the Orchard Gardens K-8 in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston — piloted the new Educator Evaluation system, I was optimistic about the changes. My past evaluations at other schools had been minimally helpful. I often heard critical feedback for the first time in June, which meant I had lost many months of opportunity for improvement. Other times, my evaluators named areas for improvement that didn’t feel accurate. Evaluation became a “she said, she said” conversation, rather than the discussion my evaluator and I had both hoped to have about how I could be a better teacher for my students.

Now, in my third year of the new Educator Evaluation framework, I feel that evaluation is making me a better teacher. Evaluation is working for teachers and students at my school because it provides a framework for the work that teacher teams have been doing since our school was designated a turnaround school in 2010. Teams of teachers collaboratively set goals, track progress toward these goals, and problem-solve to support students. Our teams are led by teacher leaders, but our evaluators participate actively in our meetings and provided additional individual support outside of meetings.

Here is how it works at my school: As leader of my school’s science team, I facilitate a goal-setting conversation at the start of the school year. We analyze data from the MCAS and teacher-created assessments from previous years to set a goal for student achievement, and teachers on the team typically adopt this goal as one of their individual evaluation goals. It is a difficult process of compromising on a goal and measures of progress — and that leads to high levels of investment by team members.

During weekly meetings, we track our progress toward the goal and problem-solve together. Each week our team analyzes evidence of student learning and plans collaboratively to help each other meet our year-long student achievement goals. These meetings are the most important reason the evaluation system works to help students learn more.

For example, last week, pairs of teachers used recent test results to identify a group of students who were not meeting our team’s student achievement goal. Then teachers developed strategies to support these students. During this time, a colleague helped me adapt an instructional strategy from his classroom to help my students. Pulling a small group of struggling learners later in the day, I gave each group a set of cards my colleague and I created. Each card showed pictures representing astronomy terms, and I asked the children to explain how pairs of cards were related to each other. I listened and coached as they developed a stronger understanding of the relationships between stars, solar systems, galaxies, and the universe. All of our students benefit when we collaborate around our evaluation goal.

Our conversations are always based on evidence of student learning. Early in the year, we create a calendar for sharing formative and summative assessment results with the team. We record student achievement data in a shared spreadsheet, and then bring and discuss student work that adds meaning to the numerical data. This spreadsheet becomes our most important artifact for evaluation because it helps us publicly and frequently discuss students’ progress.

But uploading this spreadsheet as an artifact to Boston’s Educator Development and Feedback System is a formality. Our evaluator has worked alongside the team to analyze our data, consider lessons and student work behind the numeric data, and strategize new ways to help students learn. It’s the way we use this artifact to improve our instruction that really determines our evaluation results.

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The evaluation system, with its goals and artifacts, supports and validates work that is already important to the teachers on our team and the students we teach. Knowing our team’s work is tied to our professional evaluations encourages us to stay accountable to the team. We also know our work will be formally recognized at the end of the year in our evaluations.

The science team’s use of evaluation to support student learning is typical of the teams at my school. Our administration designed structures so teacher teams will be successful, and these same structures have also supported smooth implementation of the new evaluation system. Our class schedule allows for ninety uninterrupted minutes of weekly team meeting time. The school’s partnership with Teach Plus’ T3 Initiative helps select and coach teacher leaders to be effective team facilitators. When I hear the concerns of dedicated teachers at other schools and districts about the beginning the new evaluation system, I wish more leaders to be effective team facilitators. When I hear the concerns of dedicated teachers at other schools and districts about the beginning the new evaluation system, I wish more leaders to be effective team facilitators.

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On February 12, 2014 ESE and WestEd convened 31 CVTE administrators to process and discuss key content, review collected assessments, share their current assessments and discuss how these assessments could be adapted for use as DDMs (e.g., modified to measure student growth). The experts did a wonderful job generating ideas for leveraging current assessments, most notably performance assessments, for use as DDMs. In addition, all participants left the session with action steps to support DDM identification and development back at their schools.

On February 12, 2014 ESE and WestEd convened 31 CVTE administrators to process and supplement the information collected from the teacher experts. Their charge was to consider various approaches to identifying or developing DDMs that will result in assessments that are aligned to valued content and will provide teachers with meaningful information about their students. The administrators shared and further refined their plans for implementing DDMs in their schools and districts.

ESE and WestEd will be synthesizing the recommended approaches and ideas generated at these two meetings in order to provide CVTE schools and districts with resources to support local DDM identification, development and implementation. These resources will include example assessments and indirect measures, recommendations for how to modify assessments to measure student growth for potential use as DDMs and suggestions from CVTE administrators on DDM implementation strategies and will be available in early April.

Do you have highlights or success stories about your work to implement the new evaluation framework that you would like to share? To submit your story, email EducatorEvaluation@doe.mass.edu.
Questions from the Field

1. How can districts request an extension for implementing District-Determined Measures (DDMs)?

The template for districts to submit DDMs Implementation Plans is now available. Districts should email completed plans by June 1, 2014 to EducatorEvaluation@doe.mass.edu. As indicated in the Commissioner's August 15, 2013 memo, at the time of submission, districts may request a one-year extension for specific grades/subjects or courses for which DDMs have not yet been identified. Such extensions will be conditioned on ongoing district progress in implementing DDMs and a clear plan for utilizing the extension. The extension request form is included with the template (see the blue tab). Download the template here.

2. Can a DDM assess student growth in behavioral, social, or emotional domains?

Yes. DDMs must be related to curriculum frameworks (see the definition of District-Determined Measures in 603 CMR 35.02). Therefore, when behavioral, social, and/or emotional learning is an explicit part of an educator’s curriculum, such as in the case of certain special educators and support personnel, a DDM assessing growth in one or more of those areas would be appropriate. However, it would not be appropriate to use a measure like this when behavior, social, or emotional skills are not directly taught as part of a curriculum. ESE recommends that where such an educator also provides academic instruction, the measures reflect this dual responsibility, i.e. one DDM assesses academic growth and the other assesses behavioral/social/emotional growth.

More information on identifying appropriate DDMs for special educators will be provided in an upcoming Implementation Brief, which will be published the first week of April.

Questions or Comments are always welcome at EducatorEvaluation@doe.mass.edu

Contact the Educator Evaluation Team

Claire Abbott, Evaluation Training Program, Implementation Support, Student and Staff Feedback
Susan Berglund, Evaluation Liaison to Level 3 and Level 4 Districts
Kate Ducharme, Implementation Support, Student and Staff Feedback
Kat Johnston, Communications, Peer Assistance & Review, Implementation Support
Simone Lynch, Assistant Director, Office of Educator Policy, Preparation and Leadership
Ron Noble, Evaluation Project Lead, District-Determined Measures, Student & Staff Feedback
Samantha Warburton, MA Model System, Evaluation Training Program, Data Reporting
Craig Waterman, Assessment Coordinator, District-Determined Measures

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