



Creating a Peer Observation Process to Support Educator Growth

Problem:

Berkshire Hills has used Peer Observation in the past, but we were lacking a systematic process to *define* clear action steps connected to each peer observation session. Our schools are tight-knit, supportive communities, and the positive relationships between educators can make it difficult for them to engage in honest and sometimes challenging feedback.

Solution:

2014-2015 was the first school year that we chose to connect peer observation to the Supervision and Evaluation process. By **supporting peer observers**, and **incorporating a well-structured system for clear, constructive feedback**, we planned to accomplish the following:

- Provide opportunities for educators to receive honest feedback from sources other than primary evaluators.
- Create more empowerment for educators in the evaluation process, supporting the teacher voice.
- Further support a culture of peer collaboration within our schools.

STEPS

1

Identify priority elements

We began by identifying clear, priority elements in our evaluation rubric at the beginning of the year. Choosing distinct elements allowed us to focus our work with the hope of establishing clear action steps after each observation. Two of the four elements specifically related to classroom instruction and would serve to guide our peer observation work. They were:

- Deliver well-structured lessons.
- Differentiate based on student needs.

2

Review existing norms

We reviewed and deepened our work with the “Seven Norms of Collaboration,” a system of norms introduced into our district a number of years ago. We have found that a shared commitment to these clearly outlined expectations provides a safe and solid framework for having frank conversations. The “presumption of positive intentions” reminded us that constructive feedback is intended to *help* us improve in our work. “Pausing” reminded us to listen carefully to what is being said before forming a response. Each norm provides a path to honest conversation and clear understanding.

3

Develop norms for peer observation

In a staff meeting in October 2014, we developed a new set of norms to be used specifically for peer observation. The norms were discussed and decided upon by the teaching staff; everyone committed to using them to help guide the conversations that would precede and follow peer observations.



Rural regional public school district in Berkshire County. Level 2 District.



Let the observed speak first: One of the key norms identified in the process was to always let the person being observed speak first. This provides the demonstrating teacher the chance to reflect on what happened prior to getting any outside input. We have found that, when allowed to speak first, teachers will often have insightful things to say about both what worked and what *didn't* work in the lesson. We found that this provided a comfortable entry point for the observing teacher to offer feedback for improvement. The observing teacher is able to build on what the demonstrating teacher has said, without fear of being perceived as harsh or "attacking." Perhaps more importantly, the simple opportunity to speak first opened the door to rich self-reflection on the part of the demonstrating teacher.

"A driving vision for our schools is that we are all learners."

*Principal Mary Berle,
Muddy Brook Regional Elementary School*

Focus the work: At Muddy Brook Regional Elementary School, we have worked this year on using clear Writer's Workshop mini-lessons in the classroom. Our norms reminded us to focus on the core instruction happening in the class. We have found that focusing the observations on clear instructional moments has helped to generate clear and articulate action steps for moving forward.

4 Revise the evaluation schedule
Principal Mary Berle, of Muddy Brook Regional Elementary School, created a framework to incorporate the peer observation process into the Supervision and Evaluation schedule. She specifically pushed to have the peer observations take place *first*, prior to evaluative observations. This gave teachers the opportunity to discuss their work and address particular challenges before more formal, evaluative observations began.

5 Conduct a cross-site visit
Union 28 came to visit and sit in on our peer observation process. This offered a critical opportunity to have concentric circles of observation. A demonstration teacher was observed by peers and by our visiting educators. The visiting educators were able to experience both the pre- and post-observation meetings. Finally, the visiting educators were invited to offer their observations on the demonstrated class and the follow-up conversations. So much of the work that we want to develop and improve is related to the conversations that *follow*. It was illuminating to hear a group of knowledgeable professionals provide their insight regarding our challenging conversations.

6 Keep the focus and follow-through
At this point, all classroom teachers and learning specialists have participated in peer observations over the course of this year. We have found that the norms crafted by the teachers and principal have helped focus the work.

Reflections on the Process:

We have made great strides in improving how our peer observation process fits into the Supervision and Evaluation system in our schools. We've also improved our skills in translating the peer observation process into clear action steps for teachers moving forward. We learned the following:

- Crafting the Supervision and Evaluation system should be seen *primarily* as a tool to support teacher growth; that it is a long-term project.
- Peer observations have proven to be an effective tool to advance that process. These observations have further helped us develop a culture of collaboration for growth in our schools. It is helping us make critical feedback a regular *habit* that engages everyone in our staff.
- Students, teachers, administrators, support staff... all of us have room to improve, grow, and learn. The more we can support continuous critical feedback, the more we can all embrace our roles as learners. Principal Mary Berle has been adamant that a driving vision for our schools is that "we are all learners."

