



Streamlining the Educator Evaluation Process

Problem:

A review of Northbridge's Educator Evaluation processes and documents in July 2014 revealed a daunting evaluation process, marked by a minimum of six observations per educator per year, as well as evidence binders two to three inches thick. In addition, the tools and forms used by both staff and evaluators throughout the cycles were excessively long, lacked focus, and failed to offer an opportunity for authentic and actionable feedback. As a result of the burdensome and unfocused system that was in place at this time, 99% of teachers in the district were rated as proficient or exemplary in the end of year report, which was not necessarily an accurate measurement of effective instruction in the district at the time.

Solution:

We needed to develop a district-wide focus based on observed areas of need. From there we needed to revise and align all of our forms, processes, and professional development (PD) using our new focus – the **Northbridge Norms**, thereby reducing the quantity of information being collected and shared and increasing the quality of our feedback. We wanted all of the hard work that people were doing throughout this process to mean something more than "checking the box" and just "getting it done." We needed the process to provide us with authentic data that would ultimately improve the quality of instruction in the district. Less is more ... in our case.



**Suburban public school district in Worcester County.
Level 3 District.**



STEPS

1 Establish our district focus areas

Multiple meetings took place over the course of the summer among the members of the Educator Evaluation Committee, which consisted of approximately eight members including the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, all union officers, coaches, administration, and teachers from each of the district's buildings. We had candid discussions about what effective teaching does and does not look like in Northbridge. Based on our conversations, we reviewed the district's previously identified power elements, as well as the ESE teacher rubric, and made very honest decisions about what we needed to do to make our students successful in the classroom. We then selected the four elements that we felt best represented what effective instruction should look like in our Northbridge classrooms. This process was also vetted through the District Leadership Team, and the final outcome, our **Northbridge Norms** document, received unanimous approval. The norms consisted of elements selected from Standards I and II only – **Student Engagement, Well-Structured Lessons, Adjustments to Practice, and Meeting Diverse Needs**.

2 Use our norms as a vehicle to focus and revise our evaluation process/system

Our Educator Evaluation Committee, as well as our Leadership Team, continued to meet to discuss and decide how we could leverage our new norms to improve and enhance our current evaluation system, and ultimately improve instruction and student outcomes. We started with a review of our district forms for classroom observations, SMART goal setting, and action planning. The form that the evaluators were using for 10-15 minute classroom observations consisted of seven pages of check boxes for every indicator, every element, and every standard in the teacher rubric. In looking at the previous year's completed forms, it was obvious that it was

difficult to provide a teacher with any useful or actionable feedback using a form of this length and style. After developing, discussing and revising several possible new templates (focusing on our four norms), we constructed two optional forms (each less than two pages long) and loaded them into TeachPoint. We then went through the same process with the SMART goal forms and action planning forms.

*"We wanted all of the hard work that people were doing throughout **this process** to mean something more than checking the box and just getting it done."*

*Amy B. Allen-Magnan,
Director of Curriculum, Instruction &
Assessment, Northbridge Public Schools*

3 Ensure that teachers were fully prepared to accept and implement these drastic changes

The Educator Evaluation Committee, as well as our Leadership Team, met again in early September to discuss what we needed to do to ensure that teachers felt supported and appropriately equipped to implement these changes for this year. Over the course of several meetings, we developed reference materials, resources, and templates to make the new forms and processes user-friendly. We created a cheat sheet of potential evidence for each standard (that we knew were accessible in our schools); we created templates for writing student learning and professional practice goals; we created simplified templates for teacher action/educator plans; and, we developed several completed samples for each of these.

4 Forms are streamlined, now we have to streamline the process

The Educator Evaluator Committee, as well as the Leadership Team, continued to meet in early fall to discuss how we could take some of the burden off our educators and evaluators by reducing their workload, and at the same time, increase the quality of the work they would be doing. We determined that the number of required observations (six per teacher) made it almost impossible for evaluators to lead their buildings effectively, as they had to be in classrooms almost all day, every day, to conduct observations and complete forms. In addition, teachers were spending an inordinate amount of time compiling three to five pieces of evidence for each of the *indicators* in the teacher rubric (over 100 pieces of evidence per teacher). The quality of the observations and teacher evidence was minimal. With input from both groups, as well as the union, we were able to change the number of observations to six per year for non-PTS teachers and three per year for PTS teachers (who constitute the majority). In addition, we decreased the requirement for evidence to three to five pieces per *standard*, decreasing that requirement many times over. In addition, we agreed to give teachers the option of submitting their evidence electronically via TeachPoint or Google Docs, instead of turning in an actual binder.

5 Rolling it out and ensuring staff buy-in

On our first day of school for teachers in August, we gave a presentation to every member of the district to introduce and explain our **Northbridge Norms**. All staff also received a classroom poster for the **Northbridge Norms** to remind them daily of our district focus areas. They also got a brief overview of our new evaluation processes and protocols. Then, on our first full PD Day in September, every staff member in the district received detailed and extensive training in how to write effective SMART goals and action plans using our new forms and processes. They were also given reference materials, samples and templates for all new documents and processes, as well as time to ask questions, collaborate and begin formulating ideas for their goals. During this full-day PD, we also trained all staff on how to electronically submit their evidence through TeachPoint or Google Docs, and provided staff with an accompanying reference guide. Throughout the year, the district has continued to offer follow-up evaluation PD and support at individual buildings, as needed or requested. In addition, all of our training documents, templates, and protocols are available to staff on our Teaching and Learning Page, and they are updated and supplemented as we continue to refine our system.

6 The easy fix is complete and the difficult work begins

Now that we have streamlined the process and forms, the Leadership Team continues to meet bi-weekly to address the issue of quality feedback. We began the process with some calibration exercises back in August at our Leadership Retreat (even before we began our evaluation transformation). It was evident after these meetings that evaluator capacity for effective feedback was not equitable in our district. Since that time, we have developed and implemented consistent practices and PD opportunities to calibrate our evaluator feedback and improve its quality.

We implemented district Learning Walks during which members of the Leadership Team, along with some coaches and teachers, visit each building on a monthly basis with a specific focus area – generally a well-defined part of one of our norms. The process, which runs about three hours in length, includes the following elements: a pre-walk discussion about focus area and what it looks like in the classroom; observation and recording of instructional practice; calibration of team feedback; group discussion and analysis of collected evidence; creation of a data chart depicting level of sustainability of observed practice in classrooms visited; and group consensus on commendations and recommendations for the building principal. The Director of Curriculum compiles a final report after each Learning Walk (based on evidence and data), which is submitted to the principal for follow-up PD and discussions with the staff. The Learning Walk process has been the most effective tool in calibrating the feedback of our evaluators/leaders. Everyone now sees instruction through the same lens and uses the same language in their discussions and responses.

Also, because our district learning walks were so successful from the beginning, we decided to push our administrators further by developing a process for non-evaluative walk-throughs based solely on our four **Northbridge Norms**. Several times a month, building leaders conduct brief walk-throughs of several classrooms at a time, and use simple check-off forms to gather trend data on the four norms. They submit their data monthly to the curriculum office, and create building-level graphs that show progress and/or areas in need of improvement in each of the four focus areas at each school. We discuss these trends at Leadership meetings each month and compare them to previous month's trends, as well as Learning Walk trends. The effort ensures validity, calibrates feedback, and addresses how it should be presented to staff. We also use this data to determine next steps for PD for the individual buildings/staffs.

Reflections on the Process:

It was important to look at all of the evaluation data carefully prior to embarking on changes this big in just one year. It was even more important to look at that data with a group of stakeholders that represented all schools, and all levels of staffing, as well as union representation. Everyone had to see the same thing at the same time and discuss it together. Once we realized that the evaluation system was meant to be a **useful** and **flexible** tool to help our district improve its teacher effectiveness – versus a long, complicated and time-consuming process that required us to measure every single indicator on the rubric. We were now able to breathe and use the tool the way we saw fit to help us help ourselves.

Thereafter, developing our district focus areas was crucial to every step of the process. We needed to have a laser focus, and it needed to be valuable, straightforward, defined, and chosen by people who had to live it every day because they needed to own it. We also needed to assure that every other initiative, change, and training in the district was connected to this focus. The buy-in was greater when we figured this out and started really honing in on those things that would directly affect our norms. We had to "cut the fat."

Communication has been paramount. We kept the process as transparent and wide open as possible when presenting updates, training, resources, and opportunities for questions and participation in decision-making. By bouncing every idea between the Educator Evaluation Committee and the Leadership Team before making any final decisions, we were able to create a system for which **everyone** feels responsible.

The quality of evaluator feedback has improved immensely since the streamlining and calibration processes, and there has been a steady improvement in our focus areas in each of the buildings. In addition, teacher attitudes toward evaluation have drastically changed from something that is done to them, **to** something that is done **for** them and **with** them.

