

Ensuring Accurate Feedback *from* Observations



• PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE •
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Three Areas for Action

1. Build Observers' Capacity

2. Create Conducive Conditions

3. Monitor & Ensure Quality

As states and districts design new teacher evaluation systems, they are keeping classroom observations as a core component. But the observations are being redesigned to provide better feedback that can help all teachers improve. To accomplish that goal, school systems are replacing the crude “observation checklists” of the past with more sophisticated instruments that allow teachers and observers to identify strengths and opportunities for growth on multiple dimensions of teaching practice.

New research suggests that accurate feedback based on such observation instruments can be a powerful resource for improving teaching and learning. One recent experimental study found that giving secondary school teachers frequent observational feedback based on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (or CLASS) boosted their students’ achievement by the equivalent of moving from the 50th to the 59th percentile on Virginia’s state tests (on a 100-point scale).

However, feedback that *inaccurately* classifies observed practices as strong or weak can entail significant opportunity costs for both teachers and their students. Therefore, school systems adopting new evaluation systems face a common problem: How to ensure observers’ feedback and coaching avoid major errors in classification and instead are based on a *reasonably* accurate judgment of a lesson.

The full-length brief offers examples and lessons from leading states, districts, charter management organizations (CMOs), and other education organizations working to provide teachers with accurate feedback from observations. We identified three broad areas for action: Build observers’ capacity to conduct accurate observations, create conducive conditions for observing accurately in the field, and monitor observations periodically to ensure quality.

1. Build Observers’ Capacity

Make sure that observers are well equipped to conduct accurate observations by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and tools to do the job well.

► Provide observers with intensive training.

Most school systems are contracting with external consultants to design and deliver the first round of training while building internal capacity to provide it in the future. Many are discovering that observers can struggle to transfer skills to the field if training relies exclusively on video-recorded lessons, so they are building in more opportunities for “live practice” in local classrooms.

► **Conduct a certification assessment and require periodic re-certification to confirm skills have not deteriorated.**

Some school systems grade observers on a pass-fail basis depending on whether they can score within a certain range of a “gold standard.” Others include a middle category, “conditionally certified,” to identify staff members who can observe with additional supervision and who need extra support to reach full certification by the following year.

► **Offer useful tools, including an observation instrument that supports reliable measurement of teacher and student behaviors.**

Observation instruments need to be comprehensive enough to capture a robust vision of effective teaching without becoming so extensive that they become unmanageable for observers. Based on lessons learned during pilots or first-year implementation, school systems are clarifying language, adding more precise descriptors, and streamlining instruments by collapsing redundant dimensions. School systems also are providing additional tools to support accurate observations, from LiveScribe audio pens to example-laden evidence guides.

► **Help observers reinforce their skills after training.**

School systems are finding that observers can experience “drift” following training and certification, so they are using a wide range of strategies to help observers maintain and improve their skills. Strategies include:

- **Deep-dive training** for groups of observers focused on specific dimensions of the observation instrument;
- **One-on-one coaching** provided by school system leaders or expert consultants;
- **Paired observations** of live or video-recorded lessons; and
- **Group calibration** sessions based on live or video-recorded lessons, sometimes using videoconferencing, to allow large groups to view, score, and discuss a live lesson together.

2. Create Conducive Conditions

Even the most highly trained and rigorously certified staff members can fail to conduct accurate observations if they encounter significant obstacles in the field.

► **Ensure that observers have manageable caseloads given their other time commitments.**

Asking principals to conduct too many observations might force them to cut corners in ways that undermine accuracy. Some school systems are reducing the number of observations for experienced or effective teachers, the required time for some observations, or the number of dimensions to be scored in some observations. Others are certifying additional administrators or groups of teacher-leaders who can share the burden for conducting formal observations.

► **Promote a positive culture for accurate observations and feedback.**

School systems are providing teachers with meaningful opportunities to understand and improve on the effective practices embedded in the observation instrument and ensuring that principals know how to align evaluation with professional development in their

schools. Strategic communication is necessary and useful, but deep culture change happens when school systems provide tangible opportunities for teachers to learn from, and grow from, classroom observations and other measures of effective teaching.

3. Monitor and Ensure Quality

School systems are taking the extra step to audit the accuracy and reliability of observations to identify potential problems.

- **Analyze data from observations to flag patterns that suggest problems with accuracy.**

Data systems can be expensive, but school systems that invest in them for warehousing and analyzing observation results cite the ability to keep frequent tabs on inter-rater reliability and possible problems with accuracy.

- **Audit evidence collected by observers to confirm that it aligns with the scores they assigned.**

School systems that audit evidence from observations say that it also offers an opportunity to provide observers with feedback on how to improve their evidence-collection and evidence-analysis skills.

- **Conduct a reliability audit based on additional observations in a sample of classrooms.**

The MET project has outlined an auditing procedure that a school system could use to monitor reliability by conducting additional observations in a sample of classrooms.

One thing is clear: Ensuring accurate feedback from observations presents a complex challenge for school systems. Leading states, districts, and organizations have learned that simply providing initial training for observers is not a sufficient solution. Therefore, school systems must design a robust solution involving multiple strategies tailored to their own unique circumstances. But those that make such an investment are likely to reap significant dividends. Students benefit greatly when teachers are provided accurate, actionable feedback that helps them improve classroom practices.

Possible Strategies for Ensuring Accurate Observations	Before School Year	During School Year	After School Year
1. Build Observers' Capacity			
Training	✓		
Certification	✓		
Tools	✓	✓	
Reinforcement		✓	✓
Recertification			✓
2. Create Conducive Conditions			
Culture change	✓	✓	
Caseload		✓	
3. Monitor & Ensure Quality			
Data analysis and evidence audits		✓	✓
Additional observers		✓	

The figure to the right shows how school systems can select and deploy strategies that promote accuracy at key points before, during, and after the school year. For more information, please see the [full-length brief](#).

