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How's your teacher doing?

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois public school teachers are understandably anxious about new teacher evaluations that will probe more deeply into a teacher's effectiveness than before, including into the actual performance improvement of a teacher's students. And the evaluations, rather than seniority, will form the primary basis for layoffs and hiring.

The big question is whether the new teacher evaluations will be more effective at separating good from unsatisfactory teaching.

The old system was often a pro forma evaluation by the principal who asked a few questions, observed the teacher's classroom once and gave the teachers, almost without fail, satisfactory or excellent ratings. Rarely was a teacher deemed unsatisfactory.

The new evaluations—to be adopted by individual school districts and implemented no later than 2016—will most often be based upon the detailed criteria of national evaluations guru Charlotte Danielson. For example, a “distinguished” teacher “displays extensive knowledge of the important concepts in the discipline. . . .” while the “unsatisfactory” teacher “makes content errors or does not correct errors made by students.” This detail goes on for 104 pages across categories of planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities.

Most who evaluate teachers, generally the principals and assistant principals, took 40 hours of training in the Danielson method this summer.

A teacher-leader at a south suburban high school district has forged the way for other districts by testing an evaluation process developed in concert by the district's administrators and teachers.

Jake Gourley is a 37-year-old government instructor at Thornton Fractional South High School where he has taught for 15 years and is president of the local teachers' union.

Gourley saw the handwriting on the wall—the new evaluation requirements were a big deal and needed to be dealt with early. He wanted teachers to be comfortable with new evaluations, in a process that would be used collaboratively to improve teacher performance, rather than as a “gotcha” tool.

A teacher-administrator committee at Gourley's school devoted a year to developing their new process. There is a detailed pre-conference interview of each teacher, followed by both informal and formal classroom observations, and concluding with a “summative” meeting between evaluator and teacher. Then the teacher is given a “grade” of either excellent, proficient, needs improvement or unsatisfactory.

In this past year, when the new process was tested at the Thornton district, one high school's teachers gave the process a thumbs-up and the other high school in the district gave it a thumbs-down.

Gourley and his associates are now tweaking the process to meet some of the concerns. For example, the detailed, probing pre-conference interview blindsided many teachers. In the second year of process testing, teachers will benefit from advance understanding of the interview process.

The Holy Grail of the new process is how to meet the state requirement that the performance of a teacher's students comprise at least 30 percent of the evaluation. Gourley and his team have not addressed that, waiting for guidance from the state board of education.

At least one company is promoting a program to measure student and classroom performance growth. The ECRA Group in Rosemont (IL) has a program that takes available standardized testing data for each student in a teacher's class.

The performance of each student over a year is categorized as "typical growth," "high growth" or "low growth." Performance by the teacher, as reflected in her students' test data overall, is then graded according to the four levels noted above—excellent, proficient, needs improvement, unsatisfactory..

These are high stakes issues for teachers, as most are developing careers in the field and hope to retire from teaching at some point. A couple of unsatisfactory or consistent needs improvement ratings on the record could jeopardize a teacher's career now that tenure and seniority no longer govern employment.

Big questions remain. Will the state's 10,000 trained evaluators be somewhat consistent across districts? Will administrators rate most teachers proficient or better? If so, this will eviscerate a key objective of the process envisioned by state lawmakers, which for many was that of identifying underperforming teachers and moving them out of teaching, something that is all but impossible today.

School districts around the state should embark now on this grand experiment. The districts would also be well advised to take Gourley's collaborative, pre-tested approach, rather than wait until the last minute to develop a process that could elevate anxieties and generate conflict throughout a school district.

A reader pointed out my error in a recent column on China in which I inadvertently said the Chinese committed the Rape of Nanking in China, when of course it was the Japanese who did so.