

9 QUESTIONS ABOUT

PERSONNEL EVALUATION SYSTEMS

What to ask when selecting, developing, or implementing personnel evaluation systems

1 What is the primary purpose(s) of your personnel evaluation system?

The first step in selecting or developing a new evaluation system is defining its purpose. If your goal is to measure teachers' and principals' levels of performance, your purpose is *summative*. Summative purposes might include:

- * Rating and ranking teachers when implementing merit pay programs
- * Identifying and rewarding high performers
- * Improving the quality of the workforce by identifying and removing low performers

Alternatively, another purpose might be *formative*, or to improve performance by helping staff progress along a continuum of professional practices. Formative purposes of teacher and principal evaluation could include the following:

- * Guiding improvements in teacher performance to support student achievement
- * Providing teachers with real-time feedback on their professional practice
- * Focusing everyone in the system on better execution of research-based practices
- * Helping personnel identify next steps and plans for professional development

Personnel evaluation systems also can serve important *organizational* purposes, such as these:

- * Improving working conditions by ensuring fairness and consistency in performance reviews
- * Focusing everyone in the organization on practices most likely to result in high levels of student learning and achievement
- * Supporting a culture of continuous improvement across the entire system

Personnel evaluation systems can accomplish more than one purpose, but it's important to identify the primary purposes and translate them into a list of priorities. For example, you might identify these key priorities for your system:

- * Supported by related professional growth and developmental resources
- * Ongoing and systematic
- * Incorporates analytic rubrics that are supported by organizational systems and related educational resources to help everyone improve their professional performance
- * Clearly articulates performance expectations

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Does your approach align with your stated purposes?

Once you've specified the primary purposes of personnel evaluation, you can review your approach (or a new approach under consideration) to make sure it is aligned with your specific purpose(s).

For example, if a primary purpose of teacher and principal evaluation is to provide formative feedback, you might ask yourself these questions:

- ✦ Will this approach provide clear guidance for professional growth?
- ✦ Do teachers and principals know what they need to do to improve their performance?
- ✦ Do our models of professional practice clearly align with the performance expectations of our evaluation system?
- ✦ Do we offer professional development that aligns with the performance expectations of our evaluation system and helps staff improve their practice?

If your primary purpose is summative, you might ask yourself these questions:

- ✦ Does our chosen approach help differentiate and distinguish levels of performance?
- ✦ Are we confident that different ratings for teachers and principals truly and consistently differentiate levels of performance?

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Does your approach include observable behaviors and/or practices with objective rubrics that help to differentiate high from low performance?

Once you've articulated your purposes, it's time to consider whether your performance descriptors are clear and objective. Specifically, you should ask these questions:

- ✦ Are descriptors (i.e., behaviors) observable? Could someone walk into a classroom or school and see them occurring or see evidence of their existence through artifacts, professional collaboration, or dialogue?
- ✦ Are performance descriptors objective? Are different evaluators likely to observe and assess them in the same way (e.g., "aligns lessons with standards and identified learning objectives")? Or are they subjective and open to interpretation (e.g., "believes all students can learn")?
- ✦ Do your descriptors clearly articulate the difference in educator performance from one rating to the next and (if your purposes are formative) help personnel understand what to do to raise their performance to the next level?
- ✦ If your purposes are formative, do your ratings reflect a growth-oriented view of professional practice? That is, does the wording of your rubrics reflect a positive assumption that all teachers, even low performers, are not "deficient" or "unsatisfactory," but rather, developing new skills and knowledge as they move towards higher levels of performance?

If evaluation criteria or rubrics are vague or too subjective, they can be interpreted in many different ways, leading to inconsistent and unfair evaluations. A simple check to perform is to consider whether two individuals who are clearly at opposite ends of the performance continuum would receive reviews accurately and consistently reflecting their performance. Or, could a *high* performer receive *low* marks and a *low* performer receive *high* marks in your current approach or the one you're considering?

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Are the behaviors on which teachers and principals will be judged strongly correlated with high levels of student learning and achievement?

Ultimately, your evaluations should align with your organizational performance goals, which for most schools and districts focus on creating or maintaining high levels of student performance. Thus, you should consider the extent to which your personnel evaluations encourage the following behaviors that research shows contribute to high student achievement:

- * Teachers' level of content and pedagogical content knowledge
- * Teachers' ability to use effective instructional strategies in their classrooms
- * Teachers' professionalism and contributions to positive school cultures and climate
- * Leaders' ability to guide and monitor improvements in instruction
- * Leaders' ability to translate district goals into focused, school improvement plans

If your personnel evaluations assess performance on measures with little connection to student success, it may inadvertently encourage behaviors that ultimately distract personnel from what matters most to improve achievement.

5

How rigorous is the research base for your evaluation instrument and process?

Many developers of evaluation instruments claim their products are based on rigorous research. However, it's important to look closely at those claims and the research supporting them. For example, if a developer is making causal claims about an instrument—claiming that use of their tool raises student achievement—you should inquire about the number of objective, peer-reviewed, published studies that support these claims and whether the studies are about the instrument itself or simply the practices the developer claims its tool measures. The only way to establish evidence of *causality* is through rigorous scientific trial (with random design, experimental and control groups, and careful analysis of quantitative data) *of the instrument in question*. Thus, when encountering claims of causality about a specific evaluation system, ask whether that evaluation system or model was tested against a control group or other condition, using a random assignment to eliminate alternative explanations. To date, few, if any teacher evaluation systems have been subjected to true scientific study, so the next best solution is to examine the strength of the research base that underlies the system, the reputation of the program developers, and most importantly, the extent to which the system aligns with your specified purposes.

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Does your evaluation system reflect your organization's professional values?

In addition to analyzing whether your evaluation system aligns with your identified purposes and supports your organizational goals, you should consider the extent to which it reflects your organization's shared values. For example, you might want to see criteria that articulate the need for respecting students as individuals, serving the public good, upholding community values, or other principles that align with your organization's core values, beliefs, and identity. Including these principles and values in your evaluation criteria can help reinforce their importance and the culture you are seeking to create in your district. Conversely, omitting them can send a message that they are unimportant. A word of caution: with something as prone to ambiguity or interpretation as organizational values, it is especially important that your evaluation rubrics define, in clear, observable, and objective ways, how you expect staff to demonstrate their commitment to your organization's values.

7 Do your criteria articulate a continuum of professional growth?

Regardless of whether you view the primary purpose of your system as formative or summative, those being evaluated must understand what higher performance looks like and be able to use feedback from their evaluations to chart a course to better individual performance. Ideally, the evaluation itself would foster coaching conversations between educators and their supervisors that help everyone identify opportunities for growth and improvement. Thus, your teacher evaluation system should help your school or district define “basic” teaching (i.e., what at a bare minimum all teachers should know and be able to do) all the way to “expert” teaching (i.e., what top performers know and are able to do).

8 Is your approach to teacher and principal evaluation practical? Does it place reasonable expectations on teachers and evaluators?

Given the often multiple (and sometimes competing) purposes of teacher and principal evaluation systems, it can be tempting to develop or adopt an “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach to evaluation that requires too much of evaluators and those being evaluated. Systems that require too much from staff with already overwhelming responsibilities are likely to be implemented unevenly or poorly. That’s why it’s important to first agree on purposes, so you can balance comprehensiveness with a focus on what matters most to accomplish your district’s goals. The most effective instruments do not assess everything that might be important, but what truly matters most to your district, community, and students.

9 Do your processes, policies, and practices align with the purposes of your evaluation system?

Even the best instrument can be poorly used if you fail to pay attention to policies, processes, and practices required for successful implementation. Early in the process of development or adoption of your new evaluation system, it is important to address these and other practical considerations:

- * How many times do you expect principals to review teachers?
- * Which teachers should they review?
- * When should they conduct their reviews?
- * Should teachers conduct self-evaluations?
- * How will you collect reviews?
- * Who will review the reviews to ensure they’ve been conducted fairly and with quality?

If there’s a formative purpose to your evaluation, you also should determine how evaluation data will be used to guide planning and professional development for individuals and groups, and how expectations for teachers and principals will be communicated and enforced to ensure fairness and consistency throughout the process. In many ways, these actions are as important as the evaluation criteria selected or developed. The same adage that applies to most endeavors applies to personnel evaluation: Good solutions poorly implemented are no more likely to enhance system performance than bad solutions implemented well.