



BEYOND 'SATISFACTORY': A TEACHER EVALUATION PILOT FOCUSED ON PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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Sixth-grade teacher Jennie Beltramini, Anacortes Education Association president

Evaluations that tell teachers "You're OK" or "You're good enough" say little about actual classroom practice and provide no targets for professional growth. But that's the evaluation system that pervades Washington State education – a system that the Center for Educational Leadership, in partnership with the Anacortes School District, is working hard to overhaul.

The question, say project leaders, is not whether you're good enough but how you can get better. "This critical initiative will be a real leap forward in terms of acknowledging the complex and sophisticated craft of teaching," said Stephen Fink, executive director of CEL, a nationally recognized, research-based, non-profit arm of the University of Washington's top-ranked College of Education.

For more than two decades, most principals in our state have evaluated teachers with rankings of "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory." Few teachers ever fail. In 2009-2010, only 459 of the state's 59,481 teachers – less than 1 percent -- were ranked "unsatisfactory." The rating system itself got a failing grade from policymakers and educators. "Judged by today's standards, the system is neither fair nor meaningful," said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn.

The Washington State legislature passed a law in 2010 requiring that all districts implement a state-approved evaluation system that addresses multiple

facets of teaching by the 2013-2014 school year. Managers leading the reform warned that the state must resist the easy distraction of "something shiny, shallow, and off the shelf."

Eight districts were selected to pilot experimental new systems, including Anacortes. Union leaders there were already calling for change in a system where, they said, evaluations were too often done "to" teachers, not "with" them. "We saw the evaluation process as problematic and so did the district. We sat down with them and, collaboratively, we started brainstorming," said elementary school principal Peter Donaldson, former president of the Anacortes Education Association and board member of the Washington Education Association.

With the state's two-year, \$200,000 development grant secured, the district turned for help to their partners at the Center for Educational Leadership. "We wanted that research base, and we wanted the best that was out there," said Chris Borgen, superintendent of the Anacortes district, which had adopted CEL's rigorous instructional framework, the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning, several years earlier.

"CEL delivers its model in a very in-depth way, with a specificity that really helps districts and schools grow," Borgen said. "It gives a common language on what works best, how to get there, and what we should see teachers demonstrating. It's very powerful."

Teachers agreed. They said they liked the reflective, thoughtful aspect of 5D, the depth of it, the common sense of it, and how solidly it was linked to student achievement. And they urged that the 5D framework be used in the new evaluation pilot. "5D is a very respectful document. It asks professional questions and clearly acknowledges the complexity of trying to help students learn something new," said Cindy Simonsen, director of learning and instruction for the district.

It was that very complexity that made CEL initially hesitate to join in. The center's leaders weren't sure an evaluation instrument could capture the sophisticated nuances of quality teaching. But they soon decided their high-level 5D tool – already operative in more than 50 districts in the state -- needed an equally high-level assessment process. "Our instructional framework supports teachers in enhancing their instructional expertise and we realized it was equally important that the evaluation system also emphasize continuous improvement so that every teacher knows not only how they rate in the 4-tier system, but also has feedback that details specific areas for their ongoing learning," said Stephanie Wood-Garnett, CEL associate director.

Teachers, principals, administrators, and CEL partners rolled up their sleeves and went to work building a reliable, comprehensive, boots-on-the-ground observation tool based on the 5D framework. "This is not just a pilot, it's also a creation," said Simonsen. "We're starting from scratch and so is the state."

Under old-school evaluation systems, principals might rank teachers on how often they smiled, how quiet their students were, and the quality of their pre-packaged hand-outs. Too often principals who thought teachers were "OK" were witnessing really mediocre teaching, said Fink. "They should have been spending a lot more time working with their staff."

The new pilot-in-progress in Anacortes is a world

apart. It takes a fine-grained look at the quality of instruction in a classroom, identifying specific areas where a teacher may need guidance. "The clearer teachers understand the expectations, the fewer problems you will have," said Simonsen.

Principals use a four-tiered rating system – poor to exemplary -- to assess 24 separate measures on the 5D framework, which focuses on purpose, student engagement, curriculum & pedagogy, assessment for student learning, and classroom environment and culture. Teachers may discover they are a "4" in holding high expectations for students, but a "2" in pushing for depth of understanding in struggling students. They may rate a "3" in classroom environment, but earn a "1" for instruction that is not relevant to what students are supposed to be learning.

The rubric paints an in-depth portrait of teacher practice that is designed to encourage professional self-reflection, with assists from principals asking: "Where do you see yourself now?...What do you want to work on?... Where do you want to grow?"

The tool provides everyone in the evaluation process with an objective vision of what constitutes "gold standard" instruction. "For a long time, principals varied on the feedback that the same teacher might receive," said sixth-grade teacher Jennie Beltramini, current Anacortes Education Association president. "With our new rubrics and tools, it won't be unclear anymore what a teacher should be doing."

Anacortes now has a busy team of 12 teachers, principals, administrators, and association representatives working to finish the evaluation pilot, adding multiple measures such as achievement results, peer assistance and review, and student surveys to the observation work. Ultimately, the pilot's evaluators will look at 47 different pieces of information to help identify teacher strengths and areas for growth. That's a far cry from "unsatisfactory"

and “satisfactory” measures, say pilot developers.

“Our teachers are craving information on where they are performing and how to improve,” said Beltramini. “We are so excited about what CEL has offered us.”

The pilot will be field-tested in 2011-2012 throughout the district. The Anacortes team is currently developing teachers as “site leaders” to introduce the new system to peers. “It won’t be principals bringing the tool to teachers, it will be teachers bringing the tool to teachers,” said Donaldson, who recognizes staff may be “a little anxious” about the new process, even though it will not affect teacher compensation. “It’s important to remember that our teachers and school professionals have helped develop this model – it’s not someone in Olympia saying ‘This is what you have to do because we said so. We have an opportunity to really make this work for teachers.’”

Educators and policymakers in Washington and across the country are watching from the wings to see how the pilot evolves and what kind of meaningful, transportable national model CEL will build from it. Everyone knows the research: Studies consistently show that the quality of teaching is the No. 1 factor in student achievement. But, until now, there has been little consensus on what constitutes quality instruction or how to properly and reliably evaluate it.

The new pilot in Anacortes has the potential to fill that void with a system that pushes even the best teachers to do better. “An evaluation system that truly builds the capacity of our teachers will lead to better practice, which ultimately will result in greater learning for all students,” said Fink.

The eight criteria for a new teacher evaluation system in Washington State are:

1. Centering instruction on high expectations for student achievement
2. Demonstrating effective teaching practices
3. Recognizing individual student learning needs and developing strategies to address those needs
4. Providing clear and intentional focus on subject matter content and curriculum
5. Fostering and managing a safe, positive learning environment
6. Using multiple student data elements to modify instruction and improve student learning
7. Communicating and collaborating with parents and school community
8. Exhibiting collaborative and collegial practices focused on improving instructional practice and student learning

