

AFT ISSUES '85 OVERVIEW: TEACHER EVALUATION

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"Teacher evaluation presently is an underconceptualized and underdeveloped activity." So concludes a Rand study of effective teacher evaluation practices (Wise, et al, 1984). Yet evaluation, increasingly the focus of reform efforts throughout the country, has traditionally been characterized, if present at all in school systems, as lacking reliability (the consistency of measures across evaluators and observations), validity (the accuracy-comprehensiveness in assessing the quality by defined criteria) and effectiveness. Over one-half of U.S. school districts do not have teacher evaluation systems. While recognizing the value of sound, fair and objective evaluation, teachers generally report that they do not know the criteria for evaluation, that they are rarely observed, and that evaluation feedback is scarce (Darling-Hammond, et al, 1984).

Studies verify that teachers would prefer fair and equitable evaluations on a regular basis which provide specific feedback on their work, recognize their strengths and indicate with concrete examples how they might improve. Yet the state of the art is fairly primitive. The problems associated with teacher evaluation, as found in the Rand study, include the fact that school authorities "do not agree on what constitutes best practice with regard to instrumentation, frequency of evaluation, the role of the teacher in the process, or how the information could or should inform other district activities." Other major problems found include the lack of uniformity and consistency of evaluation within a school system and inadequate training for evaluators.

WHAT WE KNOW

Teacher evaluation processes have increasingly become the subject of collective bargaining agreements. Darling-Hammond, et. al., note that between 1970-75, the percentage of contracts that contained teacher evaluation provisions increased from 42 to 65 percent. This figure should increase as state and local school systems attempt such reforms as career ladders which are predicated on a sound evaluation system in career advancement and salary decisions, and as new approaches to teacher evaluation, such as peer assistance and review are initiated.

Unfortunately research has not identified a teacher evaluation method which is unvaryingly successful. The Rand report cites the generally low levels of reliability, generalizability and validity and suggests that unidimensional approaches for assessing competence performance or effectiveness are unlikely to capture enough information about teaching attributes to completely satisfy any of the purposes of teacher evaluation. *

Evaluation serves a dual role—it can be formative (for the improvement and encouragement of teacher performance) or it can be summative (to be used for personnel decisions and accountability). Different requirements are necessary for each. The former requires specific detail of individual strength and weakness, with highly specific recommendations for the teacher to follow. The latter,

especially relative to demotion or dismissal decisions, requires standardized and objective criteria for defensible decision-making. To be defensible, such procedures have to be clearly articulated, fair, reasonable, valid and reliable.

Because of the complexity of the teaching process and the difficulty in boiling the process down into a set of discrete and measurable skills, highly prescriptive evaluation requirements are inadequate. The Rand report notes that "the teaching performances advanced as having consistently positive effects on student achievement are relatively broad constructs rather than discrete, specific actions of teachers." It finds little evidence that single teaching performance variables can be essential for effective teaching, but that differences in patterns contribute to learning. They note that effective teaching behaviors "vary for students of different socio-economic, mental and psychological characteristics and for different grade levels and subject areas and that the more complex and variable the educational environment is seen as being, the more one must rely on teacher judgment or even insight to guide the activities of classroom life, and the less one relies on generalized rules for teacher behavior." It is becoming commonly accepted that single measures of teacher performance are inadequate to provide a complete picture of competence and effectiveness. * *

APPROACHES

So what has been found to be effective? The Rand study of effective teacher evaluation practices has made a significant contribution to our knowledge in this area. The authors surveyed the evaluation practices of 32 school districts and selected 4 case study districts representing diverse teacher evaluation processes and organizational environments: Salt Lake City, Utah; Lake Washington, Washington; Greenwich, Connecticut; and AFT local, Toledo, Ohio. (The Toledo Plan, the only plan of its kind, involves experienced teachers in a form of peer review system for teacher interns and for teachers who require assistance in their classrooms.) While district approaches varied with respect to who evaluates and who is evaluated, the major purposes of evaluation, the instruments used, the processes by which judgments are made and the link with other organizational activities, there were certain common practices which set these systems apart from the less successful ones:

1. Organizational commitment
2. Evaluator competence
3. Teacher-administrator collaboration
4. Strategic compatibility

MAJOR ISSUES

A key obstacle to successful evaluation is lack of time: time to observe and confer with teachers, time for providing feedback and assisting teachers who need help. Organizational commitment includes the allocation of the time and the necessary resources. In the most successful districts, the teachers' union collaborated with the school administration in the design and implementation of the teacher evaluation process. *

School districts have to ensure the reliability and validity of their process. The personnel decisions need to be the most reliable since issues of tenure and

dismissal involve one's basic rights. Thus, the evaluation criteria must be **standardized and consistently** applied by the evaluators in these summative decisions. **Unreliability** may occur in the variability of a single evaluator's inconsistent use of criteria, or a group of evaluators operating under different criteria. Wise, et al also note that the criteria, the process for collecting data, and the competence of the evaluator contribute to the validity of the process. The criteria for judging minimal competence must be standardized, generalizable and uniformly applied but finer distinctions among good, better and outstanding teachers require nonstandardized, differential criteria.

Successful evaluation builds in due process and other protections for the teacher. Procedural due process is a guarantee of the 14th Amendment concerning life, liberty or property. Careful documentation of unsatisfactory teaching is necessary to ensure a valid and fair process. The more effective systems require multiple observations and opportunity (and support) for the teacher.

Teacher involvement in the evaluation design and development is crucial. The system can either reinforce the idea of teaching as a profession or it can further deprofessionalize it. Teachers have to be treated like professionals if they are expected to be professionals. A vision of the teacher as professional creates new frontiers for the profession. This new vision calls for vital new alternatives and opportunities for the teaching role. Concepts such as peer review and assistance and self evaluation are just some of the ways that the evaluation process can be made more meaningful for practitioners. This vision involves input, involvement and decision-making responsibility for teachers particularly in relation to decisions directly affecting them. That the Rand study found teacher and teacher organization involvement as characterizing more effective teacher evaluation programs is a significant finding. *

AFT POSITION/ACTION GUIDELINES

The AFT continues its stand for fair and objective evaluation procedures for teachers. Effective evaluation should be part of an overall commitment to improving school effectiveness and enhancing professional skills as well as a mechanism for identifying teachers experiencing difficulty. The AFT position calls for:

- fair and objective teacher evaluation with valid and reliable measures designed to improve and enhance professional skills
- a shared understanding of the criteria and evaluation processes
- organizational commitment as part of a total approach to school improvement
- teacher-administrator collaboration in the collective bargaining process
- multiple evaluation criteria to reflect the complexity of the teaching role

