

Multiple Measures of Teacher Effectiveness in Hillsborough County Public Schools: The Roles of Peers and Mentors

In looking for a comprehensive multiple-measure approach to measuring teacher effectiveness, Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) turned to the people who knew teaching best – experienced teachers. Recruiting respected and expert educators as peer and mentor evaluators was central to the overhaul of the district’s teacher evaluation system. Collaborating closely with the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, the Tampa, FL-based district developed a more balanced approach to teacher evaluation, one where the observations of instructional experts – peer and mentor teachers – played as important a role as that of principals in determining teacher effectiveness.

Previously, the principal had sole responsibility for a teacher’s evaluation and the system more often than not produced evaluations that were vague, subjective, and varied little from teacher to teacher. Most recently, over 99 percent of the district’s teachers were rated satisfactory or outstanding by principals. The revamped evaluation system contained three areas of input: student achievement data (40 percent), principal evaluation (30 percent), and peer or mentor evaluations (30 percent). A rubric developed by teaching expert Charlotte Danielson and revised for the needs of HCPS provided an objective framework for focusing observation and feedback during the peer and mentor (and principal) observation cycle: pre-observation, observation, and post-observation.

Peer and mentor evaluators were drawn from the teaching ranks, so teachers had a supportive, understanding, and classroom-experienced evaluator identifying areas of strengths and needs. When combined with student achievement data and the insight of a principal’s observation, a more comprehensive, reliable, and evidence-based picture of teacher effectiveness was ultimately produced. In addition, the new system brought professional development to the forefront by providing teachers with specific, actionable feedback linked to professional development opportunities.

Peer and mentor evaluators served different roles in the new system. All veteran teachers in HCPS were provided a peer evaluator, a subject-specific instructional expert with at least five years of experience. Mentors were assigned to any teacher new to the profession. They formed close relationships with the new teachers, not only helping them learn how to meet students needs, but also showing new teachers how to navigate within the district. For new teachers, mentors in the classroom meant a collaborative partner who provided focused feedback and guided reflection, in addition to professional development resources.

The Peer: An Experienced and Supportive Observer

Peer evaluators played a prominent role in the new system. The district’s 74 peer evaluators handled a full caseload of experienced teachers, usually around 170 to 180 teachers, and were largely charged with conducting the observation cycle: pre-conference, observation, and post-conference.

The Role of Peers and Mentors

The number of observations required for each teacher depended on the teacher's previous year's evaluation score and length of time in the profession. For example, a teacher new to HCPS (but with experience in teaching) was required to have a minimum of two formal peer observations in the course of a year. A teacher with experience at HCPS rated outstanding on his or her previous year's evaluation was also required to have two formal peer observations (in addition to a principal's observation). The number of required peer observations increased based on a teacher's needs; for example, low-performing teachers were required to have at least eight observations per year. These repeated observations served as one component in a system of support for the struggling teacher. The goals were for each observation to lead to reflection, feedback from the peer evaluator, and targeted professional development.

The pre-observation step of the cycle consisted of teachers responding in writing to seven questions, designed to let teachers reflect on and explain the lesson's objectives, the materials and resources being used, strategies to be employed, and tactics for differentiation. (see **Figure 1** for example questions). The teacher then sent those materials to the peer evaluator at least 24 hours before the scheduled observation. Questions or clarifications regarding the pre-observation content were often addressed over email, phone, or in person.

During the observation, the peer used the Charlotte Danielson evaluation rubric, consisting of twenty-two components spread across four domains: Planning and Preparation, The Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities. Importantly, the principal was responsible for most of the components in the Professional Responsibilities domain, so the peer was looking at sixteen components across the first three domains and one component from the fourth domain. For each component, a teacher was rated – from lowest to highest – as either Requires Action, Developing, Accomplished, or Exemplary.

The evaluation framework required peers to focus on student learning, not just teacher behavior, as with the previous evaluation system. Peers were not confined to the back of the room; they were free to engage students, even occasionally – although unobtrusively – ask about their understanding of lessons and instruction, all the while taking detailed notes to provide specific data for the evaluation and for the teacher. As one peer evaluator explained, “We interact with students if it's appropriate. Oftentimes, we'll ask questions that reflect communicating with students, whether or not they understand the objective. 'Is it a repeat lesson? What are you doing? What does the teacher want you to know at the end of the day?'" As another peer noted, “We're not there to watch the teacher. We're there to watch learning.”

After the observation, peers and teachers scheduled a post-observation conference, intended to last up to thirty minutes. The peer evaluator used an observation summary form to lead the discussion, which detailed strengths, areas for development, and next steps, including prescriptive professional development. This key part of the observation allowed teachers to reflect on their practice and to gain the counsel and resources of a peer. The peer was in a position to recommend trainings, videos, materials, and techniques that could take a teacher from Requires Action to Developing, or even from Accomplished to Exemplary. Armed with specific observation data, resources, and strategies for instructional improvement, and an approach that empowered teachers rather than judge them, a productive relationship between peers and teachers was often formed. As one peer evaluator described, “I can't tell you the countless e-mails I got, 'Oh, my god, I went back and tried this, and it really, really worked.' And that's where they're starting to see that this was a collaborative. It wasn't a gotcha. It was something to help our kids and to help me improve. And they're finding that that conversation is so much more beneficial in this process than what we used to do before.” One new teacher has noticed the impact of post-observation reflection on his teaching:

“Some days it’s just, like, ‘Phew. Got that lesson done. Next.’ But this is actually, ‘How did I do? Did my kids actually learn? Did this work?’”

After the post-observation conference, the evaluator rated the teacher on the components in Domains 1, 2, 3, and 4a (Domain 4a is “Reflecting on Teaching”). Importantly, the peer used data from the pre- and post-observation conference as well as the observation itself to rate teachers. For instance, the pre-conference informed the evaluator’s scoring of the teacher’s planning and preparation (Domain 1), and the post-observation conference illustrated a teacher’s ability to reflect on teaching (Domain 4a). After scoring, all observational data – the completed rubric and observation summary sheet – were uploaded into the online Lawson Talent Management system, usually within at least one week of the post-conference. The uploaded evaluations were instantly available for teachers to see and use; in addition to showing a teacher’s “score,” evaluations also linked to resources for professional development: district trainings, seminars, online classes, books, videos, and other materials.

The Mentor: A Critical Friend in the Classroom

The role of a mentor was quite different than that of a peer evaluator. For teachers who were new to the profession, the mentor provided a critical friend in the classroom. The mentor was there to observe and support new teachers, who had less experience with tested instructional practice, let alone handling the day-to-day struggles of issues such as classroom management and discipline. Mentors, who each handled a caseload of 15 new teachers, spent at least 90 minutes per week working with each new teacher, observing classes, having face-to-face meetings, and answering various questions about pedagogy, context, and classroom management.

A mentor’s work with each new teacher was individualized, but the mentor’s role typically included observing mentees and providing feedback, modeling lessons, co-teaching, planning standards-based lessons, analyzing student work, modeling reflective practice, and providing mentees with support in navigating the system. Mentors used a Collaborative Assessment Log, a form provided by the New Teacher Center, to focus conversations after an observation (see **Figure 2** for an excerpt). The form provided a structured way of providing feedback about what went well during a lesson, what challenges and concerns might have come up during the lesson, and what the next steps were for the teacher and mentor. At the bottom of the form, bullet-pointed capsules from the four domains of the Danielson rubric served as prompts for looking at areas of emphasis.

To conduct evaluations, mentors “swap” with another mentor’s caseload, so the evaluations were not prejudiced by the existing relationships with mentees. While stressful, new teachers were receptive to the process, part of the openness to evaluation and development that was a goal of the mandatory two-year program. According to one new teacher, “Yes, it is very nerve-wracking because it’s something that’s tied to your performance, to your pay, to maybe how you get hired later on down the line. So I know it’s a stressful thing, but I welcome it. I want to know what I can do to make my classes run better.” After a swap mentor’s evaluation, the regular mentor and mentee met to discuss the evaluation: what went well, what emerged as a challenge, and what professional development resources were available to help improve on the next evaluation.

There were several things mentors did not do: cover classes, work at duty sites on campus, or document teachers who were on development plans. The mentor was strictly a means of support for the new teacher and an evaluator of new teachers. So, the guidance of a mentor meant a supportive relationship that could help new teachers meet the high expectations for student learning set by the district. As higher expectations for students translated into higher expectations for teachers, the relationship between mentor and teacher – the observation and evaluation process – was about

empowerment, not criticism. In the words of one mentor, "I want them to say, 'okay, I am an empowered educator. I know what I'm supposed to do.' I really feel like our job is to empower them to know where to go when they don't know something and not be afraid to ask for help when they need it."

Implementation

Cultivating a workforce of dedicated, highly-experienced peer and mentor evaluators was a time-consuming and deliberative process. Beginning in early 2010 with e-mail "pop-ups," newsletter bulletins, forums, and word of mouth, the peer and mentor positions were advertised to the district's teaching community. Potential peers and mentors applied for the positions for a variety of reasons: an empathy for the challenges faced by new teachers and a love of mentoring, a dissatisfaction with sometimes-negative portrayal of the profession, a desire to make a positive impact, and a draw to different career opportunities within education without having to leave the classroom entirely behind. For many, the focus of the new teacher evaluation on student learning was a major attraction. One new mentor described a natural fit in terms of priorities: "The emphasis was on exactly what I felt the emphasis should be on. So for me it was just, this is exactly what I believe too, the emphasis should be on the classroom."

With 656 applicants for just over 100 positions, the selection criteria and process was rigorous. A committee composed of a teacher, administrator, representative from Curriculum and Instruction, and the peer and mentor program director screened responses to a series of essay-style application questions. The questions asked potential peer and mentor evaluators to describe their leadership experience and their experience acting as a resource for other teachers. On the basis of this screening, 300 teachers were selected for interviews. A large and diverse committee of teachers, administrators, and representatives from the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association winnowed the applicant pool further and selected candidates to interview.

Interviewees watched a video of classroom instruction, then role-played evaluation and mentoring scenarios with interviewers. This unusual style of interview was deliberate. As one mentor noted, "They wanted to see how you were going to start this conversation with this teacher. What are you going to say? Looking back at it now, not even thinking about it, it was just like a nervous, 'Oh, my gosh, I have to do this. This is going to be so crazy, role-playing.'" Later, on-the-job experience as a mentor quickly proved the value of that "crazy" interview style: "Then it was, like, oh, okay, I get it now, that's what we do all day. We sit with a teacher and have a conversation all day about their instructional practice. That's what we do all day. Wipe some tears sometimes." In addition to strong interpersonal and communication skills needed to build relationships, interviewers were looking for a series of qualities: sound knowledge of pedagogy and instructional best practice, excellence as a professional role model, commitment to professional growth and learning, the ability to work collaboratively with colleagues, and the capacity for leadership. While mentors were expected to be generalists, and were selected across the elementary, middle school, and high school levels, peers needed to be subject-specific and have deep content and instructional expertise.

Eventually, 46 mentors and 75 peers were selected. Some applicants went through a second interview while others were hired on the basis of the first. Before they could step foot in a classroom as an evaluator, though, peers and mentors spent the summer engaged in rigorous training designed to ensure inter-rater reliability and provide evaluators with extensive practice observing in real classrooms and rating teachers based on evidence collected.

Training was conducted in coordination with Cambridge Education and the New Teacher Center. Peers and mentors completed a six-hour online prerequisite course on the four domains of the

Charlotte Danielson rubric. They spent two days in face-to-face training, learning how to script and use the rubric to make judgments about teaching and learning. Two days of shared observation practice in real-life classrooms with a coach gave peers and mentors on-the-job training. And one full day of coached observation training with pre-observation, observation, and post-observation served as a certification process for evaluators. Additionally, evaluators spent half a day doing paired observation calibration exercises and another half day of Lawson Talent Management training and Tablet PC training. Overall, the comprehensive and exacting sessions deeply impressed participants. One mentor explained: "I said when I walked away from there, 'We know how to do this job.' They have trained us and trained us and prepared us. There is no way that we walked out of there not prepared to work with these new teachers. It was unbelievable the training that we received."

Progress So Far

Teachers were understandably apprehensive about changes to long-standing evaluation practice. Peer and mentor evaluators served as the face of the program in many ways, and they were instrumental in communicating the new system to teachers. As one mentor explained, "Ninety-nine percent of our job is relationship building, at least in the beginning, getting them to really trust that we haven't been sent in as spies or anything like that. We are really here as your ally." Another mentor noted, "It's a paradigm shift, and I know I wanted to make sure that my mentees knew, hey, this is about making you the most effective teacher that you can be." The relationship hinged on the idea of empowering teachers to better their practice, not on judging them as "bad" teachers. One mentor explained, "It's constructive. It's about making them grow. It's not about catching them doing the wrong thing. It's not about saying they're a bad teacher, and I'm coming in here to mark you."

Nearly 12,000 observation cycles – pre-conference, observation, post-conference – had been completed, and peers and mentors were settling into the process, even with some occasional challenges. For instance, peers described inputting data into the Lawson Talent Management system as laborious and time-intensive due to the speed of the system, with data occasionally being lost before being saved. However, peers also described this system as steadily improving. Scheduling observations could also be complicated. Peers sometimes faced a significant challenge in juggling such an intensive schedule, with three meetings for each observation for each teacher, and with a caseload that takes some peer evaluators to as many as twenty-six schools.

Continued evaluator calibration, supported by Cambridge Education, was proving critical, as a key to ensuring the collection of useful data was reliable and valid ratings. Trainers from Cambridge tracked data, and occasionally a peer evaluator was called in to recalibrate another evaluator if trainers noticed unusual ratings patterns. Cambridge also provided evaluators with printed reports that let them see the percentage breakdown of their ratings and how that breakdown compared to district averages, allowing peers to reflect on and self-monitor improvements to their approach.

Future challenges included the need to continually communicate the change process and work to make the peer and mentors initiative sustainable. Peer and mentor evaluators were the frontline face of the new evaluation system, and they needed to continue to be clear, transparent, and supportive in describing program goals and processes. In terms of sustainability, the peer and mentor training was conducted by outside organizations, contributing to high start-up costs. HCPS was working to develop in-house training for future evaluator cohorts, saving on training costs while building a legacy of institutional know-how. In addition, an effective peer and mentor evaluator program could contribute to savings through reduced teacher attrition. Finally, high-quality instructional practice might also lead to fewer inappropriate special education referrals and placements.

The Role of Peers and Mentors

Challenges aside, peers and mentors continued to exhibit a high level of enthusiasm for their work. As one peer evaluator described, “I have never been in a faculty, I have never been in a school site where there’s so much commitment, passion, talent towards an initiative. The group is not reflective of those who simply want to put another notch on their resume. The group is not a group that, ‘Oh, I just wanted to leave the classroom.’ They are individuals who are so committed to bringing about a positive change in a classroom that I – and I mean this with all sincerity – I’ve never witnessed that before.”

Evaluation as a Means to Empowerment

The peer and mentor component of teacher evaluation has meant nothing less than a systemic change, including the hiring and training of over 100 professional evaluators, the implementation of a data system with links to professional development resources, and, importantly, the changing of human behavior. For new teachers, the presence of a mentor has meant the hands-on attention of a fellow professional dedicated solely to helping them succeed in the classroom and grow as a professional. With evaluation no longer zeroed in exclusively on teacher behaviors, the focus has been rightly centered on student learning. With reflection on effective teaching built into the system, teachers learn how to learn from themselves and their experiences in the classroom. The system encouraged reflection, collaboration, and the relentless pursuit of best practices – in short, empowerment.

Figure 1: Sample Questions from Pre-Observation Form

Learning Goals and Objectives
1. What is/are your lesson objective(s)? (Components 1A, 1C)
2. How is/are the lesson objective(s) aligned with state curriculum standards? (Components 1A, 1C)
3. What data did you use to design this lesson? How did the data influence the planning of this lesson? (Components 1B, 1C, 1F)
Assessment
4. How will you know if your lesson objective(s) was/were achieved? (Component 1F)

Source: Internal Hillsborough County Public Schools Document

Figure 2: Excerpt from Collaborative Assessment Log Used by Mentor Teachers

What's Working:	Current Focus—Challenges—Concerns:
Teacher's Next Steps:	Mentor's Next Steps:
Next Meeting Date: _____ Focus: _____	

PP: Planning and Preparation

- Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy
- Demonstrating knowledge of students
- Setting instructional outcomes
- Demonstrating knowledge of resources
- Designing coherent instruction
- Designing student assessments

CE: Classroom Environment

- Creating an environment of respect and rapport
- Establishing a culture for learning
- Managing classroom procedures
- Managing student behavior
- Organizing physical space

IN: Instruction

- Communicating with students
- Using questioning and discussion techniques
- Engaging students in learning
- Using assessment in instruction
- Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness

PR: Professional Responsibilities

- Reflecting on teaching
- Maintaining accurate records
- Communicating with families
- Participating in a professional community
- Growing and developing professionally
- Showing professionalism

Source: Internal Hillsborough County Public Schools Document