Strategies for Training on a Teacher Practice Evaluation Instrument:

Advice from New Jersey's Teacher Evaluation Pilot Districts[1]

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According to the TEACHNJ Act and proposed regulations, New Jersey school districts are required to implement new teacher evaluation requirements in the 2013-14 academic year. Currently, districts are expected to have selected a teacher practice evaluation instrument, and by the end of the summer both teachers and observers/evaluators are expected to be trained on the instrument. The successful completion of this training is a major undertaking, critical for the smooth, accurate application of the observation instruments that are a crucial part of the new evaluation requirements.

Since January 2011, the RU-GSE has been assessing the implementation of new teacher evaluations in 25 pilot districts (10 districts started in 2011-2012 with 15 districts added in 2012-2013). Through this assessment, we learned from teachers and administrators about implementation practices they thought worked well to train teachers and observers on the district-selected teacher practice evaluation instruments. In this brief paper, we share the feedback that New Jersey educators provided, which is summarized in several key points elaborated below:

1. Teachers and observers develop significant knowledge about the **procedures** governing teacher evaluation as they refine their understanding of the **concepts** in the teacher practice evaluation instruments. Most educators have command of the procedures by the end of the first year of implementation and many have learned something about the concepts, but they still have more to learn in subsequent years.

2. Teachers and observers report learning more through contact with **well-informed trainers** than with unsupported video training. However, **some types of video training can be quite effective as long as questions get answered**. For instance, teachers find the opportunity to score videotapes of model lessons very helpful. **Turnkey training** can also help when turnkey trainers are well informed.

3. After initial training, observers say **follow-up training through group observations** (like walkthroughs or "instructional rounds") and reliability training helps them develop deeper understanding of the teacher practice evaluation instrument, more flexible application of the

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During the first year of New Jersey's Teacher Evaluation Pilot, the RU-GSE assessment team surveyed teachers and administrators in 10 pilot districts throughout the state to obtain their perceptions of the new teacher practice evaluation instrument. The assessment team also visited six pilot districts and spoke with district administrators, principals, and focus groups of teachers to get a deeper insight into the implementation of the new teacher evaluations.

During the second year, we are visiting ten of the 25 pilot districts. To date we have visited eight, including three districts from Cohort 1 and three from Cohort 2. At each visit, we spoke with the superintendent, the project director, and other district administrators responsible for administering various parts of the pilot, principals, and teachers. An important goal in all of our discussions is to learn what type of training both teachers and observers are getting on the teacher practice evaluation rubric and what aspects of that training work best in each individual's view.

A site visit report was prepared after each district visit summarizing findings from all interviews on a set of standardized topics, including training. For this report, we carefully read over the sections of the site visit reports addressing training of both teachers and observers. We then synthesized respondents' comments. Where possible, we referred to interviews conducted in the first year of the pilot to see how they confirmed, challenged, or elaborated findings from these second-year reports.

evaluation criteria, and perhaps greater reliability. **Teachers report that the post-conferences can help them improve their instructional practice** if the post conferences are timely, provide concrete feedback, and are conducted in an atmosphere of trust.

The following sections briefly describe how we conducted this assessment and why we think people involved in training design and organization should consider these points.

What Teachers and Administrators Learn

The learning curve for schools and districts implementing the rigorous teacher practice evaluation instruments required by law is steep in the first two years, although it eases somewhat in the second year. Even districts with some past experience with systematic forms of teacher observation have a great deal to learn. Our observations suggest that both observers and teachers develop two kinds of knowledge. One is **knowledge about the concrete procedures** and steps that must be accomplished to do a job or solve a problem. **The other knowledge is more conceptual** and promotes a flexible grasp of the ideas that the procedures operationalize. Conceptual knowledge helps observers use greater skill and more refined judgment in applying the procedures they have learned through training. It helps teachers understand how to use their knowledge of the evaluation instrument to improve their teaching.

Procedural knowledge includes a basic understanding of the kinds of observations--e.g., short and long, announced and unannounced--that teachers must have each year, the formal steps required of each observation, and the steps necessary to complete an observation using a teacher practice evaluation instrument. This knowledge includes **how to enter data into the data system** in which the observation process is recorded. It also includes knowledge about nuances of how observational criteria in the teacher practice evaluation instrument are applied – for instance, knowledge of what to do if a teacher does not demonstrate proficiency on a component of an observational domain during a short observation because there was no opportunity to observe the relevant component occurred is procedural.

Conceptual knowledge includes a clear understanding of the idea of good teaching that is operationalized by a teacher practice evaluation instrument, the distinctions between different levels of quality of teaching (highly effective, effective, etc.), contextual factors

that might affect teaching performance that an observer might have to consider, and ways to communicate what has been learned after an observation to offer the most help to the teacher.

Teachers and observers spend the first year of implementation developing significant procedural knowledge and some conceptual knowledge, usually at the level of understanding the basic definitions of observation criteria and factors differentiating various levels of performance on each criterion. They focus on procedural issues because **learning to operate the mechanics of a system is extremely time consuming**. Moreover, learning basic procedures continues after training has been completed and during the first few months of actually conducting observations and providing and receiving feedback. Procedural knowledge appears to provide a foundation for more conceptual knowledge. Moreover, to teachers, consistent application of procedures is required for fairness. Teachers wish to ensure fairness and consistency of implementation: they want everyone to have the required number of long and short observations, and want to be sure that the various domains and components of a system have been applied in the same way. A teacher must be assured that the observation process is fair to be open to learning from the feedback provided through observations. The teacher learns procedures in part to assess that fairness.

Training Strategies

Districts use several strategies to train teachers and observers. These include the initial introduction to the instrument, follow-up training for observers, post-conferences built into the observation process for teachers, and focusing observations on just a few teacher practice criteria to build facility with them.

Initial Training. Initial training focuses on procedural knowledge to help teachers and observers understand what they must do and to help teachers understand what to expect. Three different modes of training have been used for this initial delivery. **The ideal form may be to conduct training with experts in use of the teacher practice evaluation instrument.** These people usually have deep procedural and conceptual understanding of that instrument and substantial experience in helping teachers and observers learn to use it. This deep knowledge helps to make the system very clear to both teachers and observers, and this approach has been positively reviewed by those who have experienced it. **However, the trainers are expensive, they may not be available at the right time, and it may be expensive and complex to get everyone together.**

For some teacher practice evaluation instruments, **a second mode is video training materials**. These have been developed by designers of some teacher practice instruments and appear to be helpful supplementary materials when users can get questions answered. Among the districts visited, one made extensive use of these videos without supplementing them with face-to-face training. This approach worked somewhat differently with observers and teachers. Observers were told that they had to pass a certification test at the end of training to access the online system for recording observation data and completing observations. They were given time to do the complete online training. With that time and the understanding that they could only do their work if they passed the certification test, observers reported developing their own learning teams to watch and make sense of the videos. Teachers were given some time at faculty meetings to view the videos. Whether the time was adequate is subject to debate, but **teachers reported that the videos were not**

self-explanatory and that they needed additional clarification to develop the necessary understanding of the system.

A third strategy is to use turnkey trainers. Usually, a cadre of staff--primarily teachers--is trained by experts in the use of the teacher practice evaluation instrument. They then provide both formal training and informal coaching to their colleagues. Turnkey training is convenient. It is easier to schedule and less expensive than bringing in outside experts. Turnkey training has received both positive and negative reviews. **Sometimes, teachers report that turnkey trainers are helpful. In others, trainees report that turnkey trainers are still learning about the teacher practice evaluation instruments so they cannot explain what to do or provide good examples in a wide variety of situations.** In still others, because of trust issues among teachers, some teachers think that giving their peers turnkey training gives them an unfair advantage when evaluated.

However initial training is delivered, **the observation criteria of the teacher practice evaluation instruments sets a high standard for the training teachers receive.** When teachers are learning that they must "provide explanations that are clear, with appropriate scaffolding, and, where appropriate, anticipate possible student misconceptions,"[2] and ask questions that "cause students to think and reflect, deepen their understanding, and test their ideas against those of their classmates"[3] they report becoming impatient with presentations that do not model these characteristics. **In some districts, teachers objected that initial presentations did not model the pedagogy that will be expected of them.** They are especially critical of lectures that require them to passively absorb information.

However, they found several activities to be very helpful. Significantly, t**hey appreciated the opportunity to score videotapes of classroom observations and to enter made up observation data into the online system to understand how the system works. Teachers thought model lesson scoring was especially helpful when done alongside observers to confer about how they reached their ratings.** These activities help teachers develop that conceptual knowledge that goes with the procedural knowledge that is featured in most initial presentations.

In sum, **initial presentations require enough time with informed trainers so learners' questions can be answered. It is also helpful to model the kinds of practices the teacher practice evaluation instruments are designed to create** because these practices can develop the necessary conceptual knowledge and procedural knowledge about teacher evaluation systems.

Follow Up Training for Observers. Follow up training for observers can begin before the first year is over and continue into the second year. It typically assumes that the observer knows the basic procedures. The intent is to learn to apply observation criteria more reliably and perhaps more subtly--i.e., to understand contextual factors that might affect when the teacher can actually demonstrate proficiency on a criterion. Pilot districts have used two methods to help deepen observers' understanding. The first is group observations. **Group observations often include "walkthroughs" or "instructional rounds."** The

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2   Taken from The Danielson Framework for Teaching Component 3a.
3   Taken from The Danielson Framework for Teaching Component 3b.

procedures for these activities are sometimes developed by the provider of the teacher practice evaluation instrument and sometimes by other leadership trainers. Either way, a small number of administrators visit one or more classrooms together to observe instructional practice. They then move to a more private place to discuss what they have seen. When this discussion focuses on what observation criteria were present at what level, they encourage observers to share their definitions of those criteria, rules of thumb for applying the definitions, and other information and ideas for generating accurate, consistent observations. **This sharing is especially helpful when led by someone who is well versed in the teacher practice evaluation instrument itself.** Sharing can also be accomplished using dual-observed classroom, provided the observers have a chance to dialog at some point.

The other method is **reliability training**. Often the developers of a teacher practice evaluation instrument will provide trial videos to code and some set up as tests where the criterion is earlier scores of expert observers. One instrument, developed by the Danielson Group, requires that observers attain a certain level of consistency with criterion observations to use their system. In other cases, districts use a growing library of classroom videos to develop their own training. **Observers generally find that scoring training videos and discussing the results with peers or experts helps them improve their understanding of the system.**

When most observers leave their initial training, they can still increase their skill and accuracy as observers. **Managers of a district's observation work have several ways to assess observers' competence. They can monitor observers during group observations to see how well each one performs. They can use the results of formal inter-rater reliability assessments.** These not only show whether an observer has achieved a required level of competence but also help to diagnose criteria that are systematically mis-observed. Finally, **when teacher observation databases are linked to student growth data, these two sources provide important information on observation accuracy and what criteria are most crucial for improving student performance.** At least one pilot district is already starting to identify ways to analyze classroom data to find observer strengths and weaknesses.

Post-conferences. Post-conferences are a required part of every teacher observation. They facilitate procedural fairness and allow the teacher to correct the record if the teacher thinks the observer misunderstood what happened during an observation. More importantly, post-conferences should provide an important learning opportunity for the teacher. **Teachers welcome post-conferences where a well-informed observer provides constructive feedback in a timely manner.** Our initial discussions with teachers in pilot districts suggest three characteristics of helpful post-conferences. First, **they must be timely**. NJ DOE's Teacher Evaluation Pilot Toolkit indicates that post-conferences should be conducted within seven days of the actual observation. The sooner the past conference can be after the observation the better. The teacher and observer must still have a vivid enough recollection of the session observed so they can have a meaningful conversation about the lesson.

Second, **the observer has to provide concrete feedback.** In several districts, observers report that teachers pay more attention to what they say when they report specifics of what happened in the classroom. Sometimes their records include things that teachers do not remember or did not notice. Teachers also benefit

when observers offer suggestions for what to do differently that reflect the criteria in the observation instrument. Teachers report that feedback related specifically to their content area is especially helpful.

Finally, **teachers need to trust that the system's purpose is to improve teaching.** In some districts, teachers are so worried that the teacher practice evaluation instrument will be used against them that they are unable to listen to constructive advice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, training on the teacher practice evaluation instruments has included expert face-to-face training for all members of a district, turnkey training, and video-based training. Educators from New Jersey's pilot districts report that all these approaches can be helpful. It is crucial however, that training answers teachers' and observers' questions and gives educators the chance to develop concrete experience with using the observation procedures and materials.

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