



# One Teacher at a Time

By Ronald Williamson and Barbara Blackburn

## PREVIEW

A three-step supervisory model enables principals to help teachers improve their instruction individually.

Before the observation, the principal and the teacher discuss goals so that the principal understands the upcoming lesson.

After the observation, the principal and the teacher reflect on the teacher's instruction and plan next steps.





**N**o task is more important for a principal than to ensure that every student receives a high-quality education. The ability to work with teachers—those who are successful and those who struggle—to improve their instructional capacity is key to a successful principalship. Every school district has an established teacher evaluation process that has been shaped by local policy, state law, and collective bargaining agreements. Although specific requirements vary, every state recognizes differences between tenured and nontenured teachers.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for a principal is to balance the procedural requirements (e.g., number of observations, conferences, and reports) with his or her desire to engage every teacher in a process that prompts teachers to reflect on their teaching and promotes teacher growth. Skilled, experienced teachers as well as less skilled, novice teachers value the opportunity to think about their teaching, to analyze their lessons, and to strengthen their capacity for success with every student.

### **Principal as Instructional Supervisor**

Effective supervision is characterized by six factors:

- Recognizing that teachers are adults and respond well to adult learning strategies
- Supporting the needs of teachers at various stages of their career
- Accommodating the varied role of teachers
- Considering the context of each individual school and classroom
- Helping teachers learn from their experience
- Using supervisory strategies that are motivating, engaging, and empowering

Teachers are adults and respond well to adult learning strategies. For example, teachers want to be active partners in the process. They should be involved in determining the focus of any observation. Similarly, any post-observation conference should provide ample opportunity for the teacher to talk about his or her lesson guided by

thoughtful open-ended questions.

Teachers are also at various phases of their careers and their supervisory needs will vary. There may be vast differences between a novice teacher and a veteran teacher.

## A Model for Instructional Supervision

One of the most prominent models for instructional supervision is the clinical supervision model, which was first suggested in the mid-1960s. Most districts use some variation on this approach. The model typically includes three components: a planning or pre-observation conference, an observation, and a post-observation conference. Each step has an identified function. During the pre-observation conference, the focus is on planning and creating the conditions for a helpful classroom visit. The observation is focused on collecting data about the lesson and the teacher's teaching. Finally, during the post-observation conference, the principal and the teacher analyze and reflect on the lesson and identify how to strengthen and enhance the teacher's instructional effectiveness.

### Planning or Pre-Observation Phase

During this phase, the teacher and the administrator meet to discuss any planned observation, including sharing information about the lesson, contextual information about prior learning or about students, and the focus of the observation. Teachers value the opportunity to talk about their work. The pre-observation phase is important because it builds trust and a strong foundation for further discussion about the lesson and instructional strategies.

Because the clinical supervision model is built on the premise that teachers can analyze and reflect on

their own learning, it is important that the teacher have an opportunity to identify the data that he or she wants the principal to collect and discuss how it will be collected. For example, one teacher we worked with wanted data about the distribution of response opportunities among her students. The principal used a seating chart to create a visual map of teacher-student interactions by recording the times that the teacher called on or interacted with each student during the lesson.

**Conditions for success.** To ensure that a pre-observation conference is successful, the principal and the teacher should:

- Meet at mutually agreed-upon time and in a mutually agreed-upon location
- Presume positive intentions
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the context (e.g., about students, prior lessons, and where the lesson fits in the curriculum) and the lesson [the principal]
- Arrange seating around a table or in a way to promote conversation
- Avoid distractions—put all calls, pagers, and cell phones on hold
- Listen attentively and authentically.

**Discussion prompts.** The following discussion prompts can help the principal set the tone for a successful observation:

- Thank you for meeting today to talk about the upcoming visit to your classroom. To plan for the visit, I would like to talk with you about your students, your lesson, and the ways that I may be of help to you during the observation.
- I always enjoy the opportunity to visit classrooms. What sort of data might I collect during my visit that would be helpful to you?
- Tell me about your students. What is important for me to know about

them? About their learning?

- Talk with me about the curriculum for your class. What skills have students been working on? How is this lesson connected to prior learning?

The discussion prompts are just suggestions. They should be appropriately modified for each teacher. For example, the questions might be quite different for a less experienced teacher or one with performance concerns.

### Observation Phase

During the observation, the principal gathers data. It is important to be clear about the data that the principal will collect and ensure that the teacher is comfortable with the instrument that the principal is using to gather data during the pre-observation phase.

At the end of the observation, the principal and the teacher should agree on a time and location for a post-observation conference. The principal should also begin to analyze the data and think about the questions that he or she will use to elicit reflection and guide the discussion about the lesson during the post-observation conference.

**Conditions for success.** The principal should adhere to the following conditions to help ensure a successful observation:

- Arrive at the agreed-upon time
- Ask the teacher where to sit so that he or she doesn't distract from the lesson
- Focus on and observe the agreed-upon area
- Gather sufficient data
- Avoid being distracted from the focus of the observation
- Remain for the agreed-upon time
- Thank the teacher for the opportunity to observe
- Suggest a tentative time for a post-observation conference.

# Three Steps

## Pre-Observation Conference

- Plan the observation
- Select an area of focus by determining the data to be collected
- Gather data about the students, the curriculum, and the lesson

## Observation

- Collect agreed-upon data
- Begin initial analysis of data
- Identify time for post-observation conference

## Post-Observation Conference

- Share data and elicit the teacher's thinking about the lesson
- Reflect back on teacher's comments to clarify his or her thinking
- Solve problems; discuss ideas and options
- Develop a follow-up plan

## Post-Observation Phase

Perhaps the most important part of this instructional supervision model is the post-observation conference. It is easy to shortcut this phase of the process, particularly with successful, soaring teachers. Don't. Often your most skilled teachers are most interested in an opportunity to reflect on their teaching and consider ways to grow professionally.

During the meeting, the teacher reflects on the data that the principal collected during the observation and analyzes and reflects on the lesson and his or her teaching. One important part of the post-observation conference is to identify teaching strategies that should be affirmed and continued as well as those that should be modified. It is as important to reinforce effective teaching as it is to develop new instructional capacity.

The meeting should conclude by the principal and the teacher agreeing on appropriate next steps.

**Conditions for success.** To ensure success, the principal and the teacher should:

- Meet at a mutually agreed-upon time and location
- Presume positive intentions
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the lesson and the teacher's thinking about both the design and delivery of the lesson [the principal]
- Arrange seating around a table or in a way that promotes conversation; avoid using the desk
- Listen attentively and authentically; use reflective listening practices to indicate understanding
- Summarize and identify appropriate next steps.

**Discussion prompts.** The following discussion prompts are a loose script for the principal to follow during the post-observation conference:

- Thank you for meeting with me today. I would like to spend some time talking with you about the lesson.
- Let's talk about your planning. When you plan a lesson, what are the things you consider in its design?
- What strategies do you use to ensure that each lesson is linked to students' prior learning?
- Describe the ways you monitor whether or not your students are learning what you are teaching.
- Talk me through the process you use to plan a lesson. What do you consider? How do you proceed?
- Occasionally, I've been in the middle of a lesson, and I know it is not working the way I would like. When that happens to you, how do you adjust your teaching? What data or information do you use to guide adjustments?
- Talk with me about the strengths of the lesson. What would you describe as its strengths? What evidence do you have to support these strengths?
- Let's spend some minutes analyzing this lesson. How do you critique the lesson and how you implemented it?
- When you teach this lesson again, what adjustments might you make in its design?

- Let's think about next steps. What additional support may I provide for you and your teaching? What data can I collect? During my next visit, what area of instruction would you like me to focus on?

## Final Thoughts

The most successful principals recognize the importance of improving instruction and the value of working with all teachers—the most skilled and those in need—to think about, analyze, and reflect on their practice. The three-step supervisory model discussed here provides a structure for thoughtful, engaging conversation about the most important work in schools—improving teaching and student learning. **PL**

**Authors' note:** This article is adapted from *The Principalship From A to Z* by Ronald Williamson and Barbara Blackburn (2009, Eye on Education).

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