Providing Effective Written Feedback

Feedback to teachers must be actionable, realistic, and specific

BY JACQUELINE ZWEIG, KAREN SHAKMAN, JESSICA BAILEY, LEAH LEVINE, AND JEROME DOHERTY

A s a school leader, when was the last time you received written feedback about your practice? Did that feedback prompt you to make any changes? If so, did those changes make a difference in your subsequent performance?

Across the country, new educator evaluation policies require more rigorous evaluations of teachers. These systems typically include, among other requirements, classroom observation followed by verbal and written feedback, as well as action planning to improve practice. Researchers and practitioners have paid significant attention to developing and utilizing observation instruments to assess instruction and have crafted guidance about post-observation discussions. However, there has been less focus on the criteria for written feedback that will elicit actionable, realistic, and specific
recommendations for teachers to improve their practice.

To address this gap in the criteria for written feedback, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Office of Human Capital and researchers at the Education Development Center Inc. (EDC) developed the Evaluative Feedback Rubric to assess the written feedback that evaluators—typically school leaders such as secondary school principals—provide to teachers who have been identified as needing improvement.

A Prescription for Success

BPS implemented a new teacher evaluation system in 2012-13 that included a professional practice framework with four standards:

- Curriculum, Planning, and Instruction
- Teaching All Students
- Family and Community Engagement
- Professional Culture

Evaluators who are assessing teachers assign a rating of “exemplary,” “proficient,” “needs improvement,” or “unsatisfactory” for each standard and for overall summative performance. If a teacher receives a rating of “needs improvement” or “unsatisfactory” on any of the standards, the evaluator provides what the district refers to as a prescription. A prescription has four components:

- A problem statement that outlines the problem that needs to be addressed. For example, “<Name> does not create lessons that appropriately meet the needs of the range of learners in his class, nor does he establish measurable objectives.”
- Evidence to support the assignment of the rating. For example, “On <date>, <Name> conducted a lesson with the whole class answering in unison.”
- A prescription statement that describes action items, such as professional development or recommended practices, required of the teacher to address the problem. For example, “<Name> must submit lesson plans every Thursday that include accommodations for students on IEPs, student engagement strategies, and differentiated groupings of students. We will address the lesson plans and differentiation strategies in our weekly meeting. <Name> should observe Ms. X’s classroom, take notes, and bring these to our discussions.”

Although prescriptions, as a way of providing written feedback, may be specific to BPS, 29 states require written improvement plans for teachers who receive less-than-proficient ratings.

Testing Reliability of Evaluative Feedback Rubric

To examine the reliability of the Evaluative Feedback Rubric and identify potential modifications, two researchers independently rated 57 prescriptions on each rubric criterion, and a third researcher calculated the percent of prescriptions for which the two raters agreed on the ratings. The agreement rates ranged from 96 percent for alignment of problem statement to the standard, to 65 percent for alignment of the evidence to the problem statement. Two researchers agreed on the ratings on at least five criteria for 77 percent of the prescriptions. (To put these numbers in perspective, classroom observers in the “Measures of Effective Teaching” study were required to demonstrate 50 to 70 percent agreement, depending on the observation instrument.)

Questions to Guide Implementation

The development and research on the Evaluative Feedback Rubric described in this article raised the following questions for BPS that may guide the
### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Does Not Meet Criteria</th>
<th>Partially Meets Criteria</th>
<th>Meets Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Statement</strong></td>
<td>Problem Statement is missing or not aligned to the standard.</td>
<td>Problem Statement partially aligns to the standard.</td>
<td>Problem Statement completely aligns to the standard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alignment to the Standard</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity of Issue</strong></td>
<td>Problem Statement does not describe a problem or issue that needs to be addressed.</td>
<td>Problem Statement describes a problem or issue that needs to be addressed, but is not clear.</td>
<td>Problem Statement clearly describes a problem or issue that needs to be addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence</strong></td>
<td>Evidence is missing or the evidence is not aligned to the Problem Statement.</td>
<td>Evidence partially aligns to the issue(s) in the Problem Statement.</td>
<td>Evidence completely aligns to all issue(s) in the Problem Statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alignment to the Problem Statement</strong></td>
<td>Evidence does not include specific information.</td>
<td>Evidence includes some specific information (such as dates of observations or detailed examples), but some evidence remains vague.</td>
<td>Evidence includes specific information (such as dates of observations or detailed examples).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specificity of Information</strong></td>
<td>Prescription Statement does not have action items that address the issue(s) identified in the Problem Statement.</td>
<td>Prescription Statement has action item(s) that address some of the issue(s) identified in the Problem Statement.</td>
<td>Prescription Statement has action item(s) that address all issue(s) identified in the Problem Statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prescription Statement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alignment to the Problem Statement</strong></td>
<td>Prescription Statement does not include specific action items.</td>
<td>Prescription Statement includes specific action item(s), but they may not include sufficient information about the strategies to employ, the professional development that is needed, or the method for obtaining support.</td>
<td>Prescription Statement includes specific action items that include detailed information about the strategies to employ the professional development that is needed, and/or the method for obtaining support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specificity of Action Items</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 For the purposes of analyzing the prescriptions, the Problem Statement did not need to be aligned to the indicator; it needed only to align to the standard.

Implementation and further modification of the rubric:
- Should all criteria have the same weight, or should specificity and clarity have greater weight, since they are more closely tied to the possible actions teachers may take to address the problem?
- To ensure that the issues identified in the problem statement are manageable for the teacher to address and for the evaluator to track over time, should there be a limit on the number of issues included in the problem statement?

Written feedback to teachers should clearly articulate an issue, provide specific evidence to support the issue, and describe clear and specific actions to address the issue. Developing this rubric helped build consensus about the nature of feedback that supports effective teaching and learning. Sharing the rubric and the issues that were identified in the early use of the rubric may provide other school leaders with insight into the criteria to consider and the questions to raise about the characteristics of feedback that will best support educators.

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