

Linking Professional Development and Educator Appraisal to Support Effective Teaching and Learning

Carolyn Good
Project Coordinator
Olathe Unified School District 233

Juliet Correll
Vice President, Education
My Learning Plan, Inc.

Principal Connie Heinen is sitting at her dining room table after dinner, laptop open, connecting the dots between professional development and educator appraisal to support the ongoing growth of her staff at Olathe North High School. She checks on her teachers who are in an active evaluation cycle by reviewing a graphical summary of their status and progress. Noting that Jenna Delay is due for a classroom observation, she opens a pop-up box to schedule the observation and the post-observation conference. An automatic email notification is on its way to Jenna with a reminder to have a lesson plan prepared, and the meetings are added to Connie's Outlook calendar.

Next, Connie opens Jenna's electronic Individual Professional Development Plan (Action Plan) to examine the teacher-generated SMART goals that are aligned to the selected growth areas for the current appraisal cycle and drive the action research process. She sees that one of Jenna's current goals is to provide support to students in transition to high school. Jenna's targets focus on developing personal relationships with students, fostering student connections with the school community, and setting high expectations for academic rigor for all students in her English classes.

In addition, Connie looks at Jenna's online portfolio to see all of the professional learning experiences that she has engaged in recently, noting the formal workshops and conferences, as well as outcomes from job-embedded activities, including PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings, curriculum projects, and mentor interactions. Finally, she scans the electronic teacher self-assessment form to glean Jenna's perspective on her progress since the last appraisal cycle.

The integrated online system helps Connie to readily see the connections between the personal SMART goals and targets in the Action Plan, the actual completed professional development experiences, and Jenna's own teacher reflections. With all of this data at her fingertips at any time, Connie is easily and fully prepared to facilitate meaningful, focused and collaborative professional growth conversations during the appraisal meetings to help all of her staff move their practice forward. The following day, Connie brings her laptop to Jenna's room, and while the lesson unfolds,

she keeps a close eye on the teacher and student interaction while entering notes and highlighting cells in a rubric in real-time on an online observation form. The interactive tools enable her to maintain her focus on the lesson, rather than the mechanics of data entry.

At the end of the day, back in her office, Connie refines her notes on the Observation form, dragging and dropping them to appropriate fields on the form. At the bottom of the form, she selects a couple of categories of professional development that might be helpful for Jenna given what was observed during the lesson, checking back to revisit the SMART goals on the Action Plan form as another reference point. A few minutes later, Connie is prepared for the post-observation conference, which will happen at the end of the week.

How can Human Resources leaders stay connected with a district's vision for enhancing educator effectiveness? Perhaps collaborating with the Professional Development team to create the conditions for an integrated approach, strengthened by the latest technologies as described above, would support these efforts. For as long as we can recall, educator evaluation and professional development have typically been separate processes that are often managed through different departments without much dialogue or information exchange between the two. Traditionally, Olathe District building principals reported evaluation results to the Human Resources Division, while reports from Building Leadership Teams about the impacts of professional development were channeled to the Assessment and Professional Development office within the Teaching & Learning Division. There was an ongoing struggle to coordinate the sharing, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data in the quest to pinpoint the most effective instructional strategies and to identify the kind of professional learning that has had a positive impact on teacher practice and student achievement.

We believe that educator effectiveness can be enhanced by bringing these separate, but interrelated processes together to form a complete, authentic cycle of ongoing and informed professional growth. In the 1999-2000 school year, leaders at the Olathe District determined that this was a promising strategy.

With support from a National Education Association (NEA) Foundation Improvement in Education grant, district administrators from the Human Resources office and other Divisions, Olathe NEA teacher leaders representing all levels and content areas, Kansas NEA Instructional Advocacy staff, and university partners worked collaboratively to formulate and implement a comprehensive Professional Growth and Appraisal System that would address this initiative. The system is standards-based and focuses heavily on the concepts of support, feedback, and reflection. Professional development, a core value of the district, is an integral and integrated part of the program. The school improvement process and the appraisal process are intertwined with professional learning to create an innovative program designed to attract, induct, develop, and retain high performing educators. Implementation and training around the Professional Growth and Appraisal System has been ongoing and monitored by a subcommittee of administrators and NEA leaders from the Professional Council, which is the district negotiations team.

An essential aspect of the system is that needs assessment data and self-reflection information informs aligned district, building, and personal goals, to form the basis for professional development, growth, and evaluation based on multiple connected pillars. Over the last decade, expectations for educator effectiveness and performance, and hence targeted appraisal structures and professional development opportunities, have been defined by Olathe Educator Standards, indicators, and rubrics specific to each job category.

The Olathe District's adoption of MyLearningPlan, a web-based Professional Development Management and Evaluation solution, and more recently OASYS, an online Educator Appraisal and Evaluation Management solution, has provided a state-of-the-art, yet user friendly platform to easily and transparently manage all facets of the district's Professional Growth and Appraisal System from a single dashboard. The online tools are enabling Human Resources leaders and other administrators to save time by further streamlining processes, while realizing the full potential of the integrated plan. For example, this technology makes it simple to

incorporate rubrics into observation forms and other forms that are used for mid-year and end-of-year data collection, which keeps administrators and educators focused on expectations, and makes it much clearer and efficient to be consistent with those targets. The ability to not only more effectively manage all of the processes, such as scheduling, registering, approval routing, and collecting impact data, but to access and coherently examine district, building, and personal goal alignment, professional development histories, self-reflections, peer feedback, student growth data, and so on, has encouraged increased accountability from an administrative perspective and enhanced buy-in and active ownership from the educator viewpoint. Dr. Alison Banikowski, Deputy Superintendent, comments,



“With our philosophical foundation related to the importance of professional development and enhanced educator skills and the technology tools to support it, we have an opportunity to impact every educator and ultimately every student. We have not ‘arrived’ yet, but we have a system that makes our goal of a ‘quality teacher in every classroom a reality.”

In partnership with key stakeholders, looking ahead the focus will be on upping the ante on accountability for analyzing and interpreting results with a tighter focus on linking teacher practice to improving student achievement. The online management solutions allow data sets to be integrated and graphically displayed to observe cause and effect trends, as well as the fine-grained details. In addition, the state of Kansas has led the way in requiring that districts gather evidence of the effects of professional learning in terms of instructional changes and the effects on student achievement, which the Olathe District has been monitoring for ten years. Tying

District has been monitoring for ten years. Tying educator evaluation into that process is a logical extension and will help to further demonstrate return on investment in professional development. Using the powerful and convenient technology in the online integrated data tracking system will help systemize this process, enabling the opportunity to analyze data more efficiently to provide evidence of what's working, which will bolster the commitment from staff to improve their professional practice with strategies that have been proven effective. Additionally, through the integrated approach to professional development and educator appraisal, the district aims to examine those strategies that the evidence deems effective in preparation for bringing them to scale district-wide. Among the successful strategies that have emerged thus far is a new framework for implementing MTSS (Multi-Tier System of Supports: the state name for a broader version of RTI), including a collaborative process for pinpointing effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies

to accelerate response to elementary students' academic and behavioral needs. Another is a rubric for measuring implementation of metacognition for higher level thinking skills in problem solving, developed by the Olathe East High School mathematics department Professional Learning Community. A third example is targeted support and instructional strategies for ELL (English Language Learner) students, conceived jointly by 7th and 8th grade core team teachers and ELL teachers for science and social studies classes at Oregon Trail Middle School.

Without this symbiotic approach, defined by collaborative data exchange and data-informed discourse between Divisions, and among administrators and educators through the online Team Rooms and in face-to-face settings, it would have been nearly impossible to pull together the evidence required to identify these promising practices and have the opportunity to share and disseminate them throughout the district.

So, how does Principal Connie Heinen at Olathe North High School ensure that her staff has the skills and knowledge needed to effectively meet the demands of today's students, and the structures and support necessary to be ongoing learners themselves? As reflected in many communities across the nation, Olathe North has experienced growing diversity in the student population in the last decade, with increased numbers of students who are English Language Learners, living in poverty, and representing a number of ethnic minorities. To maintain and nurture achievement for all students at the high standards expected, the entire staff has found the need to re-norm, reaffirm instructional beliefs, and update instructional practices. We are finding that applying a multipronged, yet integrated approach, including strategic educator SMART goals, action research, and collaborative discussions among colleagues, all supported by the robust online systems, is facilitating impactful professional development, improved classroom practice, and more focused and meaningful educator appraisal. The result is high expectations for all leading to student success.

Principal Connie Heinen shares, "The more diverse your learners are, the more masterful your teachers have to be. The Olathe North teachers now have those tools in their pocket to help all students master required skills."

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