

Linking Professional Development to Teacher Evaluations

By Emmanuel Felton

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Stephanie Jackman spends a lot of time evaluating her 44 teachers at Lafayette Elementary School in Colorado. Like her fellow principals across the country, she sits in on their classes, jots down notes, and provides feedback on what areas teachers could improve.

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Often that's where the conversation ends. But Jackman's school district, Boulder Valley, has gone a step further, merging its vast catalog of professional-development courses with its teacher evaluation system to create one resource.

Through a program the district launched last fall called MyPassport, teachers and their evaluators use an online platform to pick out which of the district's educator-effectiveness standards the teacher is going to tackle during the year. Then they see the specific professional learning opportunities across the sprawling 500-square-mile district that will help teachers reach their goals.

"Just visually, it's all linked," Jackman said.

While teacher evaluations and professional-development programs are ubiquitous in school districts around the country, rarely do the two meet. Evaluators may accurately pinpoint the areas where a teacher needs to improve, but that's often the end of the conversation—teachers are left to their own devices to figure out what kinds of professional development they need to better their craft. MyPassport is meant to eliminate the need for teachers to guess whether a given PD opportunity will really help them.

The idea is not to play "gotcha" with teachers who are not excelling on all 25 teacher effectiveness standards, but to instead support them in improving their craft, said Mary Jo Bode, the professional learning director in the district, which serves 31,000 students in 56 schools that run the gamut from one-room schoolhouses to large, comprehensive high schools.

"As for professional development, all we were doing was compliance. In our old system, we were just tracking how many hours you had toward getting recertification," said Bode. "Now a teacher sits down with an evaluator for a conversation around this question of what are the areas that would benefit you and your students the most?"

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In 2010, Colorado passed Senate Bill 191, a contentious educator-effectiveness law that requires that at least 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation score be based on a measure of student growth, and made sweeping changes to teacher tenure rights. The bill forced the district to overhaul its teacher evaluation system.

Around the same time in Boulder, a pair of local philanthropists—Suzanne Hoover, who had been a teacher and school board member in another community, and her husband David—donated \$1 million to Boulder Valley to build a professional-development academy. Bode said that as the district saw these dual initiatives coming down the pike, it decided to merge the two efforts.

"What we realized was, if we are asking someone to show improvement in an area and we don't offer anything to help them, that's a very hollow and disappointing message," said Bode.

By December, just a few months after launching the system, BVSD staff—the MyPassport program has expanded beyond teachers to include all employees—could already choose from 376 classes available on the MyPassport platform. The course list is constantly growing as Bode's three-person team works with employees across the district. There's a knife-skills class that was requested by food-service employees, an email-writing course that some staff members who speak English as a second language asked for, and even a course to teach high-flying educators how to design and launch their own MyPassport courses.

While Bode now heads the operation, a committee she co-chairs with Tina Mueh, the president of the Boulder Valley Education Association, the district teachers' union, built MyPassport. Both Bode and Mueh agree that this work would have been a lot harder without getting the buy-in of the teachers' union. Mueh, for her part, was happy to see the district link its evaluation and professional-development systems.

"I've been in this district for about 25 years, and I can say that we never had an evaluation system that was tied to anything, or really even meaningful," said Mueh. "And as for our professional-development system, you would take all of these little classes, but the district wasn't tracking that. You would turn scraps of paper in, but no one was tracking if this was helping you reach your goals, or improving outcomes for students, or helping the district reach its goals."

By collecting data on what professional development is working and tying it into information on teacher performance and student outcomes, the district is identifying what professional-development programming is and isn't working. The district has already reined in what kinds of courses teachers can take to reach their evaluation goals and climb the salary scale. For instance, after establishing tougher criteria for what courses would count for climbing the salary ladder, the number of courses eligible for salary credit dropped from 400 to 60, though that number is growing again as the system adds new, more-rigorous courses.

"There was pushback," Mueh admitted. "But as I think about our committee, the people with the highest standards for their colleagues are members of the [education] association. They are teachers themselves who are saying, 'our profession needs this if we are going to be taken

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seriously.' We can't tolerate professional development that doesn't live up to the standards that we hold ourselves to as professional educators."

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