

Expanding the limits of supervision

by Bambi Betts

In many educational systems, principals are charged with the role of "supervising" teachers." In the context of schools this idea of "supervision" has taken on a variety of meanings, and thereby practices, which have strongly shaped the day-to-day work of a principal. It is a valuable exercise for a school to clarify and clearly communicate the purposes of its supervision program and to ensure that the strategies employed match those purposes.

One well-accepted purpose for supervision is that the process should assist teachers to improve their teaching skills. This concept has spurred a variety of practices, many of which are centered on the principal gathering data and giving it to the teacher. What is done with that data depends largely on the philosophical orientation of the school. For many schools, it is simply that: data. The teacher does with it whatever seems appropriate. The principal is simply a vehicle to provide information to the teacher, which may otherwise be difficult to obtain. Other schools will require teachers to act on that data in some way.

Traditionally, and unfortunately, strategies for gathering data have been largely based in "observations" of the teaching act. The principal and teacher agree ahead of time what the principal will look for, then the principal observes, records, reports, and sometimes discusses the data with the teacher. This is a valuable strategy for SOME aspects of teaching, but it clearly falls short of being the whole picture.

If a second purpose of supervision were to improve student learning, a much broader range of data-collection tools would be essential. And we are beginning to see some of these now in our schools. When schools adopt improvement of student learning as a purpose of supervision, we see principals employing strategies which supervise planning, assessment, the learning environment, student work, and the act of learning. "Supervision" becomes one of the most central roles of the principal. Principals organize their daily work around it. What does this look like?

- * Regular sessions are held between teacher and principal to examine assessment tools before they are used, to check whether the assessment tool truly assesses for the desired curricular standards.
- * Student work is brought to each and every meeting between teacher and principal and scrutinized for whether it reflects curricular standards, whether most students are actually achieving the standard, and for clues to how to adjust teaching.
- * Classroom observations emphasize gathering data on the learners equally as frequently as on the teaching act. Principals become adept at recognizing the signs of understanding and the relationship between that understanding and the strategies the teacher has selected. For the teaching act itself, the focus becomes 'Are the selected teaching

strategies in a particular lesson the most effective ones for ensuring all students achieve the specific learning standards set for that lesson?

* A differentiated set of strategies is designed for each teacher, to maximize growth

Clearly a third purpose, then, of supervision, is to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. It makes no sense to collect rich data on both teaching and learning and leave it unanalyzed with no action plan. As principals gather the data, they help the teaching build a picture of how to use it to adjust planning, teaching and assessment practices.

This purpose begs the question: Can principals supervise without evaluating? As obvious as the answer may be, this question has plagued educators for quite some time. One perspective does support separating the act of assisting teachers to improve practice from the evaluation of their progress. However, as in any classroom, this separation is neither practical nor productive. When the principal is called upon to both work with teachers to improve practice as well as eventually evaluate them, it makes sense that the data collected for 'supervision' will be used in the evaluative process. It is fairly difficult to ignore what is learned from supervision activities when it comes time to write an evaluation. So, the extension of the identification of strengths and opportunities for improvement as a purpose for supervision is to include "evaluate progress."

And when we evaluate progress, just as with students, it is a good idea to work from a universal, school-wide set of professional standards for teachers. The final purpose of supervision is to evaluate teachers according to a set of pre-defined standards. Schools which have defined these standards find that they, in fact, tie the whole package together. And while there is always subjectivity in evaluation, the standards at least begin to make it clear to all what an effective teacher is in your school. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is doing significant work in this area in the US.

Finally, many supervision models assume that the principal is the key player in the supervision process. As we learn to use the many strategies available beyond observation, the possibility for new models and relationships in the supervisory process is inevitable.