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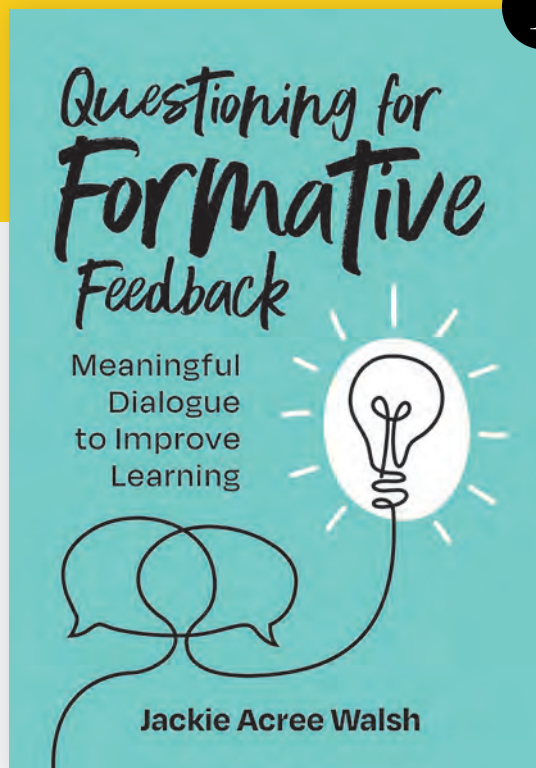
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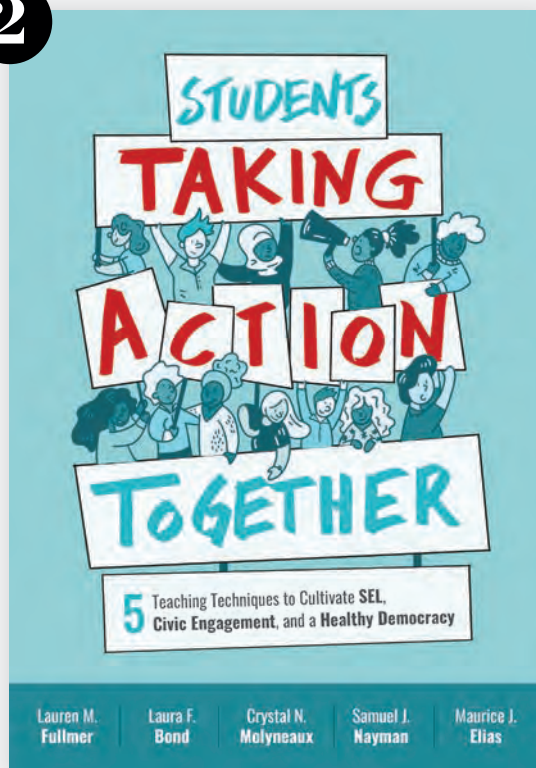
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Why This Issue Looks Smaller Than Usual

As an educator, you know first-hand that the pandemic has had far-reaching effects and required constant readjustment. This shortened print edition of *Educational Leadership* is one more example of that.

Due to ongoing supply-chain issues coupled with a major paper mill strike in Finland, our printer is facing a severe paper shortage. To help them through this crisis, we have agreed to reduce the page counts of the *print editions* of this issue and our upcoming May issue by roughly half.

However, we are committed to ensuring that you still have access to all the great content you have paid for and have come to expect.

To that end, the full 88-page version of each issue—including all the articles and columns coming after page 48 on this table of contents—will be available as a downloadable PDF on our website.

All these stories and resources will also be on our website in their normal online form, open to you as part of your membership or subscription. You can find the complete contents of this issue (both in PDF and web form) at www.ascd.org/el/feedback-for-impact.

We apologize for any inconvenience this printing change may cause. At the same time, we hope you will see this as an instance of the kind of collaboration and adaptability that we've all had to rely on to get through this challenging year. As educators, you are our greatest role models in that regard.

If you have any questions about this issue or your membership, please contact our customer service department at member@ascd.org. Or email the *EL* team directly at edleadership@ascd.org.

As always, we appreciate all you do for schools and students.

—The Educational Leadership Team

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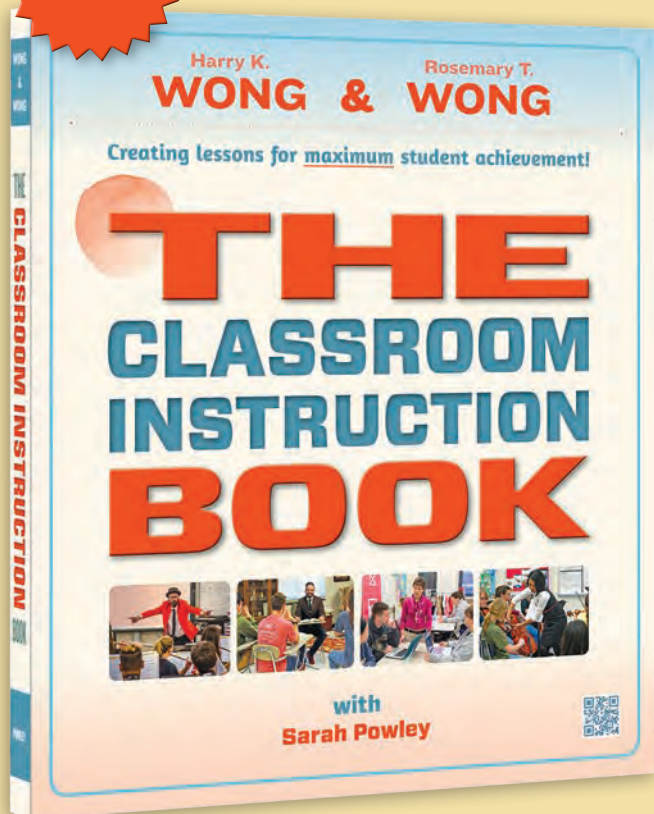
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Anthony Rebola

Feedback as a Form of Care in Schools

This is arguably the first issue of *Educational Leadership* this school year where the theme is not directly related to the pandemic and its effects on education. After all, the role of feedback within schools has been a standard topic among education leaders since long before COVID-19 hit. By the same token, it may not seem like an especially pressing matter right now, given all the deep crises facing schools.

Yet, in rereading the articles in this issue, I was struck by how sharply relevant they are, even if many of them don't specifically mention the pandemic. Consider the context. We've all heard a great deal this year about "learning loss," "instructional gaps," and "accelerated learning." We're also hearing more and more about the rising tide of job dissatisfaction and burnout among educators. Effective feedback, properly understood, can be an important entryway into addressing all these complex issues. It's not the only strategy needed by any stretch, but it should be a critical part of schools' pandemic-recovery plans. And it's worth considering whether it's been given enough attention to date.

As the authors in this issue emphasize, there's plenty of evidence to show that well-calibrated feedback—and well-calibrated feedback systems—can play a significant role in boosting student achievement and staff performance and morale. Good feedback also has a way of improving classroom and school cultures. It can give students and

teachers alike a sense of empowerment, growth, and connection.


If providing effective feedback is not typically seen as a high-leverage school-improvement approach, that may be because it's not always well understood. It's not a routine skill, or something that most teachers and leaders do as a matter of course. As the articles here make clear, feedback, if not an art, is at least a highly developed craft.

In this context, it's significant that several of the articles on providing feedback to students focus not on oral or even written commentary but on improving rubrics, those nuanced artifacts of instructional culture. As Jay McTighe and Tony Frontier write, well-crafted rubrics—those that are descriptive, make clear distinctions between achievement levels, and are tied to specific learning targets—"can serve as a shared road map for teaching and learning" and "become the basis for the specific, understandable language of feedback" (p. 17). That is, good rubrics make it clear to students what steps they need to take to get better.

To make a difference, however, rubric scores and other forms of feedback to students must be used in the right contexts. Most important, students must have opportunities to understand and act on the information provided. Feedback isn't supposed to be an end point or fixed judgment, as it so often is in schools. Instead, as teachers Andrew Housiaux and Bowman Dickson write, it should be "an invitation to intentionality"

and development on the part of students (p. 30).

This is true of feedback for educators as well. Several of the articles look at ways to improve classroom observations and other feedback channels for teachers. One common point of emphasis is the need to recognize teachers' commitment to making a difference for their students, meaning that feedback should be "collegial and supportive" (p. 42) and inquiry-based rather than directive or judgmental. Another is that feedback should be tailored to teachers' specific contexts and needs, not replanted from some arbitrary or external methodology. And like students, as Sanée Bell reminds us, teachers need "to be given time to practice and reflect" (p. 36).

At its best, feedback "empowers and honors educators, builds trust, prompts reflection, and develops the skills to analyze performance for continuous professional growth" (p. 50, online only). Another way of saying this, to paraphrase cognitive scientist Therese Huston (interviewed in this issue), is that effective feedback is a form of caring for others (p. 12). That's something we can all agree is pertinent in schools this year. 



RESEARCH ALERT

The Feedback Disconnect in the Classroom

Ever feel like your feedback just isn't getting through to students? New research by feedback experts Fabienne Van Der Kleij and Lenore Adie suggests you're not alone. Turns out there's often a disconnect between what teachers and their students perceive feedback to be.

Van Der Kleij and Adie videotaped 40-minute classroom lessons by both an English and math teacher, then asked the teachers to watch the video and pause it each time they identified a moment of feedback. The researchers then asked students to watch and do the same thing, noting where the teachers and students paused at the same times and where they differed.

They discovered that almost one-third of feedback identified by teachers went unrecognized by any of the students interviewed. At no point did all the students interviewed recognize the same interaction as teacher feedback. Of the feedback that was recognized, only 36 percent of these



GOODSTUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK

interactions in English and 30 percent in mathematics were perceived by one or more students as the teacher had intended them, suggesting that “feedback messages can be easily misunderstood.”

One solution the researchers suggest: Talking more about feedback. Discussing “intentions behind feedback can make the process more transparent, leaving less room for misunderstanding of intent.”

—Tara Laskowski

Source: Van Der Kleij, F., & Adie, L. (2020). Towards effective feedback: An investigation of teachers' and students' perceptions of oral feedback in classroom practice. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 27(3), 252–270.

Students Prefer “Where to Next” Feedback

One type of feedback is routinely recognized by students and may be particularly valuable to them. That's according to a study of more than 3,000 high school and university students by John Hattie and a team of colleagues that found students preferred “Where to next?” feedback on their online essays over other types. They also leveraged that feedback to improve their work.

Using Turnitin Feedback Studio, researchers looked at the work of students who submitted online essays, received teacher- and computer-generated feedback, and revised and resubmitted their work for a final grade. The study drew on Hattie's 2007 research (with Helen Timperley), which noted that for feedback to be effective, it must answer three questions: “Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How

am I going? (What progress is being made toward goals?), and Where to next? (What activities should I undertake to make better progress?)”

While good feedback combines elements of all three, “where to next?” feedback—focused on specific, actionable guidance for improvement—led to the greatest gains from first draft to final submission, the new study found. Interestingly, if “where to next?” feedback wasn't provided, Hattie told ASCD, students claimed “they received no feedback” at all.

—Sarah McKibben

Source: Hattie, J., Crivelli, J., Van Gompel, K., West-Smith, P., & Wike, K. (2021). Feedback that leads to improvement in student essays: Testing the hypothesis that “where to next” feedback is most powerful. *Frontiers in Education*, 6.

DID YOU KNOW?

Gender Bias in Feedback

Women tend to receive less actionable developmental feedback than men, which can affect their employment and leadership paths, according to a 2021 *Harvard Business Review* study. Researchers combed the open-ended feedback data given to 146 mid-career political leaders in a leadership-development program from more than 1,000 peers and found four differences in how advice was given to female and male leaders. One key difference: men were encouraged to focus on being visionary, be assertive in claiming their space, and leverage politics for opportunities. Women were encouraged to execute others' vision, be cooperative and deferential, and cope with politics by reducing tension or toughening up. Read the full study: hbr.org/2021/02/research-men-get-more-actionable-feedback-than-women.

—Kate Stoltzfus



OLHA KHORIMARKO / ISTOCK

RELEVANT READ

Pulling Back the Curtain on Student Thinking

Questioning for Formative Feedback: Meaningful Dialogue to Improve Learning by Jackie Acree Walsh (ASCD, 2022)

Reciprocity. It's not the first word you think of when considering teacher questioning. Teachers often view questioning as a strategy to help guide students through a lesson and determine if they are engaged and understanding—maybe even to help them stay alert! Any feedback involved is generally some form of evaluative teacher response. But what this age-old strategy lacks, according to Jackie Walsh, is reciprocity—exchanges through which everyone in the classroom provides feedback on others' learning and ideas and contributes to the whole class learning together.

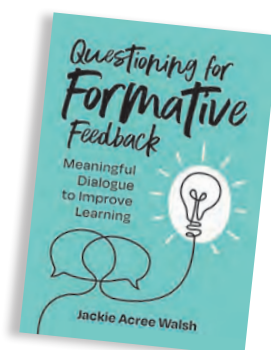
When a teacher plans for reciprocity, she uses questions to elicit responses that uncover students' *thinking* (which is feedback for her). The teacher then uses follow-up questions or observations to draw out the original respondent and other students' thinking. This leads students into brief dialogues that help create new ways of

seeing or understanding. Learners get feedback beyond what they could get from one teacher.

Classroom-based examples in the book (including artifacts like dialogue transcripts and videos of questioning-in-action accessible via QR codes) show how this cycle of questioning, revealing student thinking (and encouraging *more* thinking, using wait time), and dialoging pushes thinking forward—and why Walsh calls it “formative.”

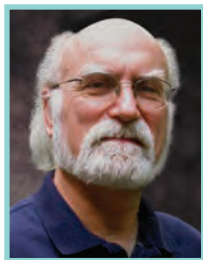
Pre-planning is crucial, especially in question-forming. Chapter 5 provides guidance on how to create questions that reveal student thinking and “response strategies”—sample instructions that lead students to give fuller answers. A Quick Reference Guide by Jackie Walsh, also from ASCD, gives nuts-and-bolts on how to form questions that generate rich student responses and strengthen students' questions of each other, so reciprocal sharing of thinking blooms.

—Naomi Thiers



STEP BY STEP

Resource Highlight: Seven Keys to Effective Feedback



Grant Wiggins

Instructional feedback may not strike most people as a perennially “trending” topic, but it is among educators. We at ASCD know this from our web data, particularly with respect to one article. Grant Wiggins’s “Seven Keys to Effective Feedback,” published in *Educational Leadership* in September 2012, is easily one of our most-viewed articles of all time. Even today, nearly a decade later, it gets thousands

practice on a critical but often slippery topic. “Multiple researchers . . . have confirmed that providing students with actionable feedback is one of the most impactful actions for enhancing student performance,” says Jay McTighe, who coauthored the *Understanding by Design* series with Wiggins. “In his article, Grant lays out the conditions for acting on this research to optimize the use of feedback in the classroom.”



Grant Wiggins’s classic 2012 article on feedback has had a long tail—and a lasting impact on the profession.

It also helps that Wiggins’s authorial voice conveys a certain authenticity or casual wisdom: You get the immediate feeling from his examples and explanations that this guy (1) knows what he’s talking about and (2) is no stranger to classrooms. As McTighe puts it, Wiggins—who died in 2015—“combined a scholar’s attention to research with a practitioner’s focus on practical application. Plus, he wrote with great clarity based on personal experience.”

of page views every month. It received nearly 5,000 this past January (an otherwise down month for us). That’s a mighty long tail, to use the web-analytics lingo.

Given these stats, we suspect many educators encounter Wiggins’s article in education school courses and professional development materials. Many have likely turned to it as a source of guidance and, finding it helpful, passed it on to colleagues.

So what accounts for this article’s appeal? One big factor is its practicality—or more precisely, its ability to link research and

Fittingly, Wiggins begins the piece by setting out a simple but uniquely apt definition: “Basically, feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal.” In this respect, feedback, he emphasizes, is not the same thing as giving advice or making a blanket value judgment, although it’s often mistaken for one or the other—or both—in education and other areas (hello, fellow parents). True feedback simply conveys information about “the effects of [one’s] actions as related to a goal.”

Stripped-down and elemental as it may seem, this definition is central to the

now-famed “seven keys” Wiggins proceeds to lay out. The most constructive feedback for teachers and students, he writes, is:

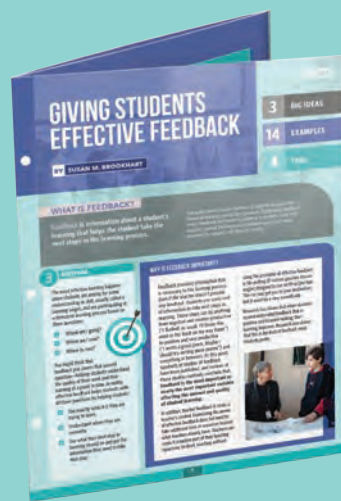
- **Goal-referenced:** It pertains to a specific—and clear—goal the person is working toward.
- **Tangible and transparent:** It’s clearly connected to results or actions related to the goal.
- **Actionable:** It provides concrete, specific, useful information the recipient can act upon. (“‘Good job!’ and ‘You did that wrong’ and *B+* are not feedback at all.”)
- **User-Friendly:** The person can understand the feedback and is not overwhelmed by too much of it.
- **Timely:** It comes at a point when the recipient can still use it (a particular challenge in education, where “vital feedback often comes days, weeks, or even months after the performance”).
- **Ongoing:** It gives the person multiple opportunities to use it “in real time.” (Think about how kids get better at video games, Wiggins advises.)
- **Consistent:** It is “stable, accurate, and trustworthy”—and doesn’t change from classroom to classroom.

Of course, Wiggins doesn’t just list these qualities. He discusses each in depth and offers helpful examples and pointed observations, including on using video to accurately appraise performance, avoiding “opaque” comments on student work, and “counting” in classroom observations. Along the way, he makes relatable references to baseball, tennis, his daughter’s track performance, and *Guitar Hero* and *Angry Birds*. (Remember, this was 2012.)

A key subtheme of the article, meanwhile, is the need for educators to create more time for feedback, and Wiggins offers several ideas for doing this. For Wiggins, this was not an abstract or trivial concern. As his article illustrates, he believed strongly in the wisdom of “less teaching, more feedback.”

Read “Seven Keys to Effective Feedback”: <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/seven-keys-to-effective-feedback>

—Anthony Rebora



SCHOOL TOOLS

Guides for Improving Classroom Feedback

We know feedback is a key ingredient to learning that allows teachers to guide students’ progress and encourage them at challenging moments. But knowing how to give it—and request it—isn’t always intuitive. To strengthen students’ sense of how they are performing and where they’re headed, educators can consult Susan M. Brookhart’s quick reference guide, *Giving Students Effective Feedback*. This six-page tool provides guiding questions and classroom examples that outline when giving feedback is helpful and how best to deliver it. Find it here: <https://www.ascd.org/books/giving-students-effective-feedback-quick-reference-guide>.

Teachers can also seek feedback by asking students directly about challenges or successes in their learning. Survey Monkey offers a free guide with templates for using the platform to get a better understanding of student perspectives on a range of topics, from the difficulty of a lesson to moments they’re most proud of from the year: Find it at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/student-survey-questions/>.

Therese Huston on Giving Better Feedback

Many leaders dread giving feedback, but frequent praise and advice can help you keep your best teachers.



Therese Huston is a cognitive scientist at Seattle University. In her talks and in her latest book, *Let's Talk: Make Effective Feedback Your Superpower* (Portfolio, 2021), she blends rigorous research with eye-opening stories to help leaders say what needs to be said and, even more important, say it in a way that can be heard. Huston has given more than 225 keynotes, talks, and workshops, including presentations for Microsoft, Amazon, the Cleveland Clinic, and Harvard Business School. She gave her first TEDx talk on what smart groups do differently, and her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Oprah's O Magazine*, *Forbes*, *Time Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Why is giving feedback so hard for many leaders?

I've been researching for many years why it's so hard to give feedback, and I've discovered a few reasons for this. One, it feels personal for most of us. If you are the principal of your school, chances are you hired that teacher, you know some of their challenges, and you don't want to hurt the relationship or demotivate them, so that

can be part of the challenge.

Kim Scott, author of *Radical Candor* (St. Martin's Press, 2019), talks about how we are taught from a very young age that if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. And voila, now as a leader, it's your job to say it! Giving feedback goes against the polite etiquette upbringing that most of us, especially in the U.S., have had.

Two, it can be an identity issue for the giver. You think of yourself as a caring principal who doesn't say things people don't want to hear. It can be a real challenge to go against your perception of yourself as a nice person. However, if you care about that teacher, the thing you need to do is give them feedback so they can improve. Think about if you were doing something that was holding you back in your career, and someone saw it and they didn't say anything. You'd wonder, "Why didn't you tell me?" So, it is caring to give feedback. If you see someone doing something that is getting in their own way, the thing to do is to speak up.

The third reason I think giving feedback is hard is that many of us haven't been trained formally in it. We feel unprepared for what might come up, worried about what to do if the person reacts badly. I went through a year-long program in organizational leadership at Oxford University recently, and never once did we talk about giving feedback, so I know it's overlooked even in the best of programs. In the *Harvard Business Review* article "Why Do So Many Managers Avoid Giving Praise?", researchers found that in the corporate world, 21 percent of managers say they just avoid the hard conversations altogether. If one in five superintendents aren't having those conversations, that's a large group of teachers that aren't getting the feedback they need to grow.

What's also interesting is that there is a common misconception that feedback is most stressful for the person who is receiving it. But

when scientists have surveyed people, they've found that givers of feedback tend to feel more stressed than those receiving it. It truly is something that most of us dread, and I really want to change that. We all deserve great feedback, but we don't all receive great feedback.

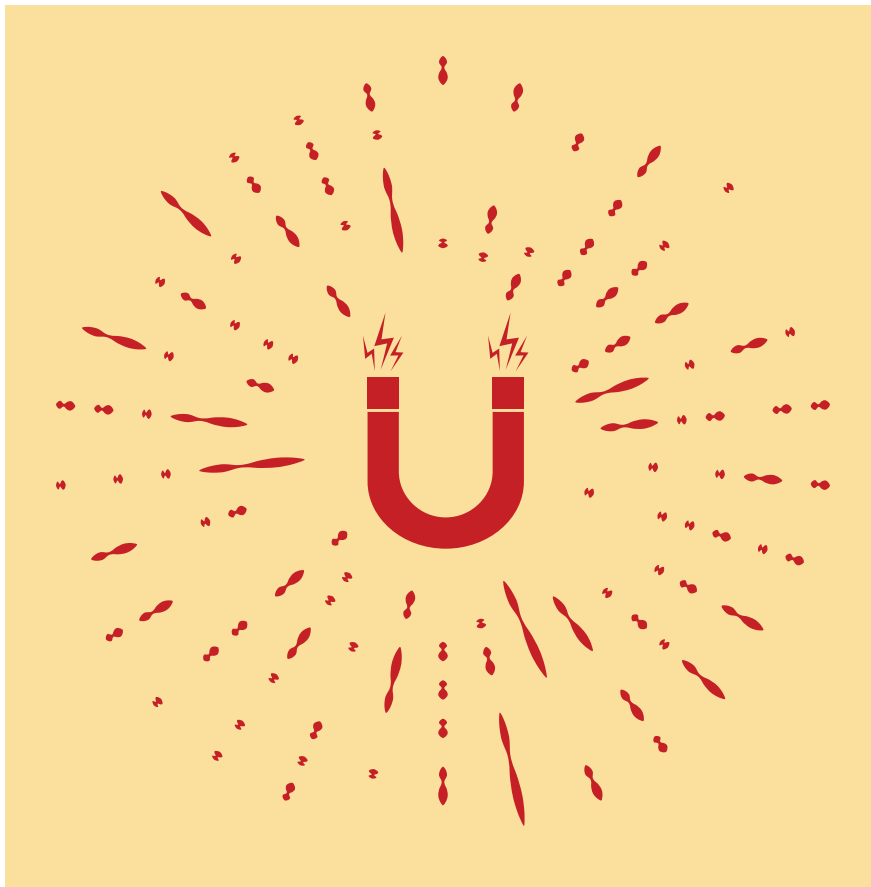
In your book, you break down three types of feedback: appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. What are the differences between them, and how can leaders know when to give what type?

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen discuss these three types in their book *Thanks for the Feedback* (Viking, 2014). Most of us have heard that there are positive and negative feedback types, so these three categories are a bit more refined.

"It is caring to give feedback. If you see someone doing something that is getting in their own way, the thing to do is to speak up."

Appreciation, the first kind, is positive feedback. It's telling the person what you like about their work, the positive impact they are having, what you want them to do more of. The second type, coaching, is advice. It's things they could be doing differently, ways to adapt, or discussing a strength and ways to make it even better. It doesn't have to be negative. Finally, evaluation is letting someone know where they stand. Are they on track to getting a promotion this year? Are they where you'd expect someone to be after their first year of teaching 4th graders?

You shouldn't be giving all these types equally. Leaders should mostly be giving appreciation, giving people lots of praise and noticing what they like about their work. Say, "Here's what



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“If you want to hold on to your teachers, you need to be praising them.”

makes your classroom shine, here’s what parents appreciate about you.” Find that strength and tell them.

If possible, you should give people appreciation at least once a week. It builds trust, so in the future if you have something critical to say to a person, they trust that you’ve seen what they do well. If you jump right into coaching, the other person thinks, “Have you even seen my good work?” It’s very easy to be reluctant to hear someone’s criticism if they haven’t also

noticed what you do well.

Coaching should be the next most frequent. Evaluation should be the least frequent, but it shouldn’t be just once a year during a performance review. Most teachers would be happier if they knew more often where they stand. If they are underperforming, they want to find that out sooner so they have a chance to improve. At least give this feedback twice a year, so your teachers get a chance to improve and impress you.

But if school leaders should mostly give positive feedback, shouldn’t that be easy to do?

Well, not exactly. Some people think that feedback means critical. In the corporate world, about 30 percent of managers never offer praise. They think their value is to offer coaching and observations around what’s not working. Or they think their employees are going to get complacent if they offer too much praise. Other people feel awkward giving praise because of the receiver’s reaction. Not everyone is comfortable receiving praise in the moment, and managers can feel that discomfort and don’t know what to do with it. The feedback giver thinks, “Maybe I shouldn’t be saying this.” However, remember that

if you want to hold on to your teachers, you need to be praising them—and don’t forget about your veteran teachers and superstars. A 2016 Gallup poll revealed that if someone says they haven’t received praise in the last seven days, it is twice as likely they’ll quit over the course of the next year, so praise is tied to retention.

Also, even if people don’t express deep gratitude in the moment, most of us take that comment and go home and tell our family,

“Guess what my principal said today?” Even if they don’t beam in the moment, they beam later, so know you’re doing good in the world.

What do school leaders need to consider when giving feedback to younger teachers?

Regardless of age, for the teachers who are new to your school, you should be leaning heavily on the praise. When someone’s new, you need to build trust and express your appreciation with details and authenticity whenever you can.

In terms of age groups, Karie Willyerd points out in *Harvard Business Review* that Millennials, those born between 1980 and 1995, tend to want feedback more often than the teachers they are replacing. Gen X and Baby Boomers are content with feedback once a quarter, but most Millennials, who make up 70 percent of the workforce, want it at least once a month, some once a week.

Gen Z—the youngest teachers—also want more frequent feedback. They prefer once a week. But here’s what’s interesting about them. Many of them think that Millennials have been coddled and pampered, so they pride themselves on the fact that they want straightforward feedback—they want you to tell it like it is and have direct conversations. In one study, 80 percent of Gen-Z workers felt failure was an opportunity to learn, which was much higher than other generations.

One tip I’d tell school leaders about giving great feedback to younger teachers: A lot of them want to know how their work impacts the world more broadly. They are looking to

have a real purpose and impact, so if you can tie your feedback to the larger implications of what these teachers are doing in the classroom—maybe that they are going to be creating kids who will be more successful when they get to high school, or developing students who know science and will help save our planet—they will feel more satisfied in their work. These teachers want to know it’s not just about teaching geography, so you can help them see the long-term impact of their jobs.

Are there any phrases educators should avoid when giving feedback?

“Even if they don’t beam in the moment, they beam later, so know you’re doing good in the world.”



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“A lot of young teachers want to know how their work impacts the world more broadly.”

I have three things you should avoid. The first is questions that begin with “why.” It makes people defensive if you ask, “Why did you do that?” They scramble to defend themselves rather than reflect on what they could do differently.

Instead, ask: So what were you hoping for? And once you find out their motivation, you can then say, “Oh, OK. Great. So I’m concerned the actual impact you had was *this*, so let’s brainstorm other ways we can get to this great goal.” Give them the benefit of the doubt.


Second, avoid, “Everyone thinks that. . . .” If you’re conflict-avoidant, it’s easy to use this one because it feels like you’ve got the support of many other people behind you. But this makes the other person feel like there are rumors about them; it makes them feel most of their colleagues are foes, not friends, and it can make them reluctant to work with others. So even if it’s true, don’t say that. Instead, be direct and say, “I’ve got a big concern, and we need to talk about this.”

Third, avoid the phrase, “I’m sure you. . . .” Leaders might say, “I’m sure you want people to like you” or “I’m sure you want to get better,” because it feels as though they’re tapping into someone’s motivation. But don’t assume motives for the other person because it gives them room to argue with you (even if they’re only arguing with you in their head). A much better way to go about this is to say something like, “I’m concerned about ___” and cite specific evidence that you have observed.

How can educators be better receivers of feedback?

This is a really crucial skill, so I’m glad you asked this question. One way to be better at receiving

feedback is to assume positive intent. It increases the chances you’ll find something of value in what the person says. You should ask yourself, what can I learn from this? It’s so easy to dismiss the other person’s feedback for various reasons—they are a young teacher, they haven’t been at the school very long, they weren’t in that meeting—but we need to consider feedback when we get it. Now, I don’t mean that every piece of feedback is equally good and valid—you need to filter it. But the problem most of us have is that we filter before we’ve even heard it, or we hear a little of it and shut down. Try to listen, be curious about the other person’s perspective, and then later go through and decide what to act on and what to put aside for now.

Finally, there is new research by Constantinos Coutifaris and Adam Grant at the University of Pennsylvania that shows that something leaders should be doing to be better receivers of feedback is to share the feedback they’ve received. In staff meetings, let people know you received a certain piece of feedback, that it was helpful, and give steps you are doing to change what the feedback pointed to. This signals to people that they should give you feedback because you want it and will act on it. Often, we make changes but don’t tell people, so they don’t notice. It also tells them what kind of feedback is actionable to you, so you are more likely to get that type in the future. Finally, it improves the psychological safety in your school. It lets people know that it’s OK to discuss areas where they have room for growth and improvement because you as a school leader are modeling it, and it will make them more open to feedback themselves in the future. 

—Tara Laskowski

Editor’s note: This interview has been edited for space.

How to Provide Better Feedback Through Rubrics



FIG. TRADE/ISTOCK

Well-crafted rubrics create a shared language that lets teachers and students work together.

**Jay McTighe
and Tony Frontier**

A rubric is an evaluation tool consisting of a set of criteria, a fixed scale (e.g., 4-point, 7-point), and descriptors that distinguish the differences in the levels of the scale (Arter & McTighe, 2001). The term has its origins in the Latin word *rubrica* meaning “red earth” or colored soil used to mark things of importance. The term also references the large, red opening word in biblical manuscripts, indicating the text that

follows deserves attention. Today, these meanings persist, since a well-crafted rubric signals to students the qualities that are most important in their work.

Rubrics are typically used by teachers to judge the degree of students’ understanding, proficiency levels of skills, the quality of their products or performances, and their growth from one level to the next. But beyond being evaluation tools, rubrics can be an excellent way to give feedback for improving teaching and learning.

FIGURE 1. Holistic Rubric for a Public Service Message on a Billboard, Poster, or Website

Levels	Descriptors
Expert 4	The billboard, poster, or website conveys a clear and compelling message that calls for public action to address a need. The overall graphic design is well coordinated, with words and visuals working together to enhance the message and the call to action.
Proficient 3	The billboard, poster, or website conveys a message for the public but does not call for specific action. The overall graphic design is generally coordinated. The words and visuals work together in support of the message but do not communicate needed actions by the public.
Emergent 2	The billboard, poster, or website suggests a message, but it is unclear exactly what the viewers should take from it. The visuals do not clearly support the words of the message or communicate needed public action.
Novice 1	No clear message is evident. The visuals seem random and do not convey any message. The overall graphic design is sloppy and unappealing.

Source: McTighe, J., Dobet, K., & Carbaugh, E. (2020). *Designing authentic performance tasks and projects: Tools for meaningful learning and assessment*. ASCD. Used with permission. Copyright © ASCD.

What Makes a High-Quality Rubric?

An effective rubric is grounded by clear and appropriate criteria that serve as the basis for judging student responses, products, or performances. In essence, the criteria specify what “success” looks like. In a standards-based system, the criteria should be derived primarily from the targeted standards or outcomes being assessed, rather than from any specific assignment or assessment task. For example, if a teacher is focusing on expository writing, the rubric’s criteria for any such writing task would target accuracy (information presented is correct and appropriate descriptive vocabulary is used); completeness (all relevant aspects of the topic are addressed); clarity (precise, well-chosen, academic vocabulary is used to suit audience and purpose); organization (information is logically framed and sequenced); and conventions (proper punctuation, capitalization, spelling; etc. is used).

When a high-quality rubric is used effectively, teachers and learners benefit. For teachers, good rubrics:

- Specify the salient qualities of successful performance, based on targeted standards.
- Support sound evaluation by describing important distinctions in the degree of understanding, proficiency, or quality from one level to the next.
- Serve as teaching targets, since they reflect the qualities embedded in standards.
- Provide feedback to teachers on how their instruction might need to be adjusted.

For students, high-quality rubrics:

- Serve as learning targets, since they identify the key qualities of successful learning and performance.
- Communicate how their work

Well-crafted rubrics provide a shared language that lets teachers and students work together to navigate the most important attributes of deep learning and effective performance.

Three types of rubrics are commonly used in schools:

- A holistic rubric provides an overall impression of a student’s performance, yielding a single rating or score. Figure 1 shows a holistic rubric for a project asking students to create a public service message (McTighe, Dobet, & Carbaugh, 2020). Holistic rubrics gauge the overall quality or impact of a student’s work; for example, to *what extent* did the story entertain its readers or to *what extent*

was the argument convincing?

- An analytic rubric also contains a performance scale but divides a targeted product or performance into distinct elements or traits and judges each independently. Figure 2 shows an analytic rubric for mathematical problem solving.

- A developmental rubric describes growth along a proficiency continuum, ranging from novice to expert. Think of the six different colored belts in karate that designate various proficiency levels. Developmental rubrics are well suited to subjects that emphasize skill development over time, such as physical education or world languages.

FIGURE 2. Analytic Rubric for Mathematical Problem Solving

Level	Traits and Descriptors			
	Reasoning	Computation	Representation	Communication
4	An efficient and effective strategy is used and progress toward a solution is evaluated. Adjustments in strategy, if needed, are made, or alternative strategies are considered. There is sound mathematical reasoning throughout.	All computations are performed accurately and completely. There is evidence that computations are checked. A correct answer is obtained.	Abstract or symbolic mathematical representations are constructed and refined to analyze relationships, clarify or interpret the problem elements, and guide solutions.	Communication is clear, complete, and appropriate to the audience and purpose. Precise mathematical terminology and symbolic notation are used to communicate ideas and mathematical reasoning.
3	An effective strategy is used, and mathematical reasoning is sound.	Computations are generally accurate. Minor errors do not detract from the overall approach. A correct answer is obtained once minor errors are corrected.	Appropriate and accurate mathematical representations are used to interpret and solve problems.	Communication is generally clear. A sense of audience and purpose is evident. Some mathematical terminology is used to communicate ideas and mathematical reasoning.
2	A partially correct strategy is used, or a correct strategy for solving only part of the task is applied. There is some attempt at mathematical reasoning, but flaws in reasoning are evident.	Some errors in computation prevent a correct answer from being obtained.	An attempt is made to construct mathematical representations, but some are incomplete or inappropriate.	Communication is uneven. There is only a vague sense of audience or purpose. Everyday language is used, or mathematical terminology is not always used correctly.
1	No strategy is used, or a flawed strategy is tried that will not lead to a correct solution. There is little or no evidence of sound mathematical reasoning.	Multiple errors in computation are evident. A correct solution is not obtained.	No attempt is made to construct mathematical representations, or the representations are seriously flawed.	Communication is unclear and incomplete. There is no awareness of audience or purpose. The language is imprecise and does not use mathematical terminology.

Source: McTighe, J. (2013). *Core learning: Assessing what matters most*. School Improvement Network, p. 91. Copyright © 2013 Jay McTighe. Used with permission.



To help students understand a rubric’s relevant language, teachers should explicitly teach key vocabulary contained in standards and associated rubric criteria.

get feedback to students about the strengths of their performance and areas needing attention. Analytic rubrics can also provide valuable feedback to teachers. For example, if a teacher notices a high percentage of students are showing weakness on a particular trait, that information suggests the need for greater instructional emphasis on that dimension of performance. Since there are several traits to consider, using an analytic scoring rubric may take a bit more time than assigning a single score. But we believe that the more specific feedback that results is well worth the effort.

Figure 3 summarizes key “do’s and don’ts” for constructing and using rubrics in a manner that meets Wiggins’ criteria for effective feedback.

Guiding Students to Use Feedback from Rubrics

Presenting students with a well-developed rubric and reviewing it with them is necessary, but not sufficient, to guarantee that students will get the most benefit possible from that feedback. Research on how feedback is used by those who receive it notes that “the ability to receive feedback well is not an inborn trait, but a skill that can be cultivated” (Stone & Heen, 2014,

will be judged, presenting important distinctions in the degree of understanding, proficiency, or quality from one level to the next.

- Enable them to self-assess their work and performance based on the success criteria.

- Provide feedback that affirms areas of strength and informs needed improvements.

Leveraging Rubrics to Provide Effective Feedback

Feedback is descriptive information that’s used to affirm areas of strength in learning and performance and point to areas needing improvement (Frontier, 2021). Grant Wiggins (2012) argued that to be most effective, feedback must provide information that is *specific*, *understandable*, *timely*, and *actionable*. A well-constructed rubric can provide the basis for *specific* feedback that is *understandable* to the learner, ensuring the learner knows exactly what they have done well and

what they need to do next to improve. *Timely* and *actionable* describe how the rubric should be used if we want students to receive feedback in the manner we intend—to guide their next efforts toward deeper learning and improved performance.

Holistic rubrics are appropriate when a rubric’s primary purpose is to assign a grade for an assignment or summative assessment task. However, a letter grade or a numerical score, on their own, don’t provide feedback. How can students improve their writing skills, for instance, if all they receive is a “3” (or a “B–”) on a holistic rubric for their essay? Without more detailed information, learners are left to guess what to do differently on their next essay.

Accordingly, we strongly recommend using analytic rubrics as feedback tools. Since they identify and evaluate distinct traits important to effective performance, analytic rubrics provide more detailed, tar-

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FIGURE 3. Designing and Using Rubrics as Tools for Effective Feedback

Feedback Qualities	Effective design and use of a rubric	Ineffective design and use of a rubric
Specific	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> objectively and precisely describes the most important qualities (the success criteria) of effective learning and performance. <p><i>Effective feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> specifically describes the most relevant aspects of student work as related to the most important aspects of a specific level of success criteria. affirms areas of strength and informs specific actions the learner should take to improve their learning and performance. 	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses general language like “good” or “excellent” to describe differences between levels. confuses quantity with quality by focusing on surface features (e.g., number of slides). <p><i>Ineffective feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is ambiguous or vaguely worded. is presented as general praise (“good job!”) or a vague suggestion (“Try harder.”).
Understandable	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is explained using tangible examples to illustrate the key traits, associated success criteria, and key differences in quality at each level. employs important academic language that’s been explicitly taught to students. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> enables the learner to articulate (in their own words) the strengths and weaknesses of their work. shows the student specific actions that they can take to improve their learning and performance. 	<p><i>An ineffective rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is based on hidden criteria “in the teacher’s head”. uses terms and jargon that have not been taught to the learner. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> gives a numerical score or grade, but does not explain the relationship among the grade, their work, and the most important attributes of quality. leaves the student wondering what they could do to improve. overwhelms the student.
Timely	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is presented in advance for learner to use formatively to guide strategy and effort to produce work of high quality or evidence of deep understanding. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is provided to the student while it can still be used to improve their learning or performance. 	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is only revealed to the student when it is used to provide a summative judgment or grade. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is given solely as a summative grade or score. is given well after the student has done the work.
Actionable	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is used by the student to describe the goal, the current level of quality or depth of understanding, and strategies he/she can use to improve. is used by the student to guide self-assessment and reflection. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is delivered with the expectation that it be used to make focused revisions, corrections, or other changes to improve the quality of learning or performance. includes opportunities for students to revise, practice, or refine their work in the future. 	<p><i>The rubric...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is solely used by the teacher, not shared with or used by the student. is really a “single use” set of specifications that can’t be transferred to any other task or learning goal. <p><i>The feedback...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is given with no expectation that the student does anything with it. is given with no opportunity for students to use the feedback to revise, practice, or refine their work. is given with only a vague statement of hope that the student might use it in the future.

Source: Adapted from Frontier, T. (2021). *Teaching with clarity*. ASCD. Used with permission.

FIGURE 4. Analytic Rubric for Public Speaking

	Volume	Rate of Speech/Pacing	Eye Contact	Posture
4	Speaker projects with a strong, clear voice that can easily be heard by all.	Speech is delivered at a comfortable and appropriate pace.	Speaker establishes and maintains excellent eye contact throughout.	Speaker maintains excellent posture, displaying both confidence and composure.
3	Speaker speaks at a volume that can generally be heard without strain.	Speech is delivered at an appropriate pace with only occasional pauses.	Speaker makes eye contact with the audience but has occasional lapses.	Speaker maintains good posture and composure.
2	Speaker uses a soft voice that makes it difficult to hear the message.	Speech is too slow or too fast with frequent pauses.	Speaker makes intermittent eye contact with the audience.	Speaker displays poor posture and displays a lack of confidence.
1	Speaker speaks extremely softly and/or mumbles so that the message cannot be heard or understood.	Speech is halting and uneven with long pauses OR speech is delivered so rapidly that the audience can't understand.	Speaker makes little or no eye contact with audience.	Speaker slouches and fidgets, displaying extreme discomfort and lack of confidence.

Feedback and Suggestions for Improvement:

Goals and Actions for Improvement:

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p. 8). In other words, students need to be taught the meaning of rubrics and how feedback works if we expect them to highly benefit.

For instance, to help students understand a rubric's relevant language, explicitly teach key vocabulary contained in standards and associated rubrics. If *explanation* or *justification* appear frequently in your priority standards and success criteria, for

example, these terms should be highlighted as learning goals and included in vocabulary lessons and assessments.

One method we highly recommend is using examples of student work—anonymous samples from previous classes or ones you've created—to make more concrete the often-abstract criteria in rubrics and bring feedback to life. Teachers might:

- Show students one or two

examples of high-quality work, highlighting how the success criteria are evident within them. Highlight specific traits that are most important to the targeted standard. Then show several more samples and ask students to identify where they see the success criteria appearing in each.

- To help students identify distinctions among the different performance levels described in rubrics, use a set of

anonymous student work samples that range in quality. Present the diverse examples and ask students to rank order them into three or four sets and to give a rationale for their placements by describing the differences they see between the sets, using the language of the success criteria.

■ To help learners see how to use rubric criteria and level descriptors as feedback, ask students to identify specific ways that lower-level examples could be improved. Model this process through a “think aloud” to get students started.

Another good practice is to teach students how to use success criteria from a rubric to self-assess and set future learning goals. This practice is based on the recognition that the most effective learners are *metacognitive*—they self-assess their performance, welcome and use feedback, learn from their mistakes, and set goals to improve their performance (Wiggins & McTighe, 2004). Two simple graphic additions to a rubric, illustrated in Figure 4, can support the cultivation of these learning habits (McTighe, 2013). The first is the inclusion of two tiny check boxes at the bottom of each cell of an analytic rubric. The student uses the check boxes on the left to self-assess their work before they turn it in. The teacher uses the other box for his or her evaluation. Ideally, the two judgments should match. Any discrepancy raises an opportunity to discuss the success criteria in relation to a student’s work.


The bottom of the rubric includes a section for feedback comments (from the teacher or peers) and a space for the student to identify learning goals and action steps to improve their performance, based on external feedback and self-assessment. These

minor additions turn an evaluation instrument into a tool for feedback, self-assessment, and goal setting.

Of course, teachers will need to explicitly teach students how to self-assess their work against criteria and model how to set improvement goals. But imagine the impact if every K–12 teacher, across subject areas, embraced this practice and encouraged their students to regularly self-assess and identify specific action goals!

A Shared Road Map

Well-crafted rubrics can serve as a shared road map for teaching and learning. They mark the most important routes for teachers and students to navigate as they walk the circuitous path to deeper learning and more effective performances. When educators use those rubrics to teach students how to discuss and describe that terrain, rubrics become the basis for the specific, understandable

language of feedback—which students can leverage to guide their next steps to improvement. 

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Reflect & Discuss

Do rubrics function effectively as a feedback tool in your classroom or school? Why or why not?

Based on the criteria McTighe and Frontier discuss, in what ways could you improve the design and clarity of your analytic rubrics?

What steps could you take to help students better understand and use rubrics for assignments?

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The Assessment System That Made Me Love Grading Again (Yes, Really!)

Alexis Wiggins

When I was a young English teacher just starting out, I would take home a stack of my high school students' papers and stay up late into the night, slogging my way through them. I felt that giving good quality feedback to my students was a vital part of my job, even if it often felt like drudgery.

The trouble was, the feedback never seemed all that effective. I would fill the margins of my students' papers with suggestions, questions, and edits only to see their next round of papers plagued with the very same issues: fragmented sentences, vague language, superficial thesis statements.

Then I attended a workshop on feedback and assessment given by my father, the late Grant Wiggins. During the workshop, he shared one of his favorite tongue-in-cheek lines:

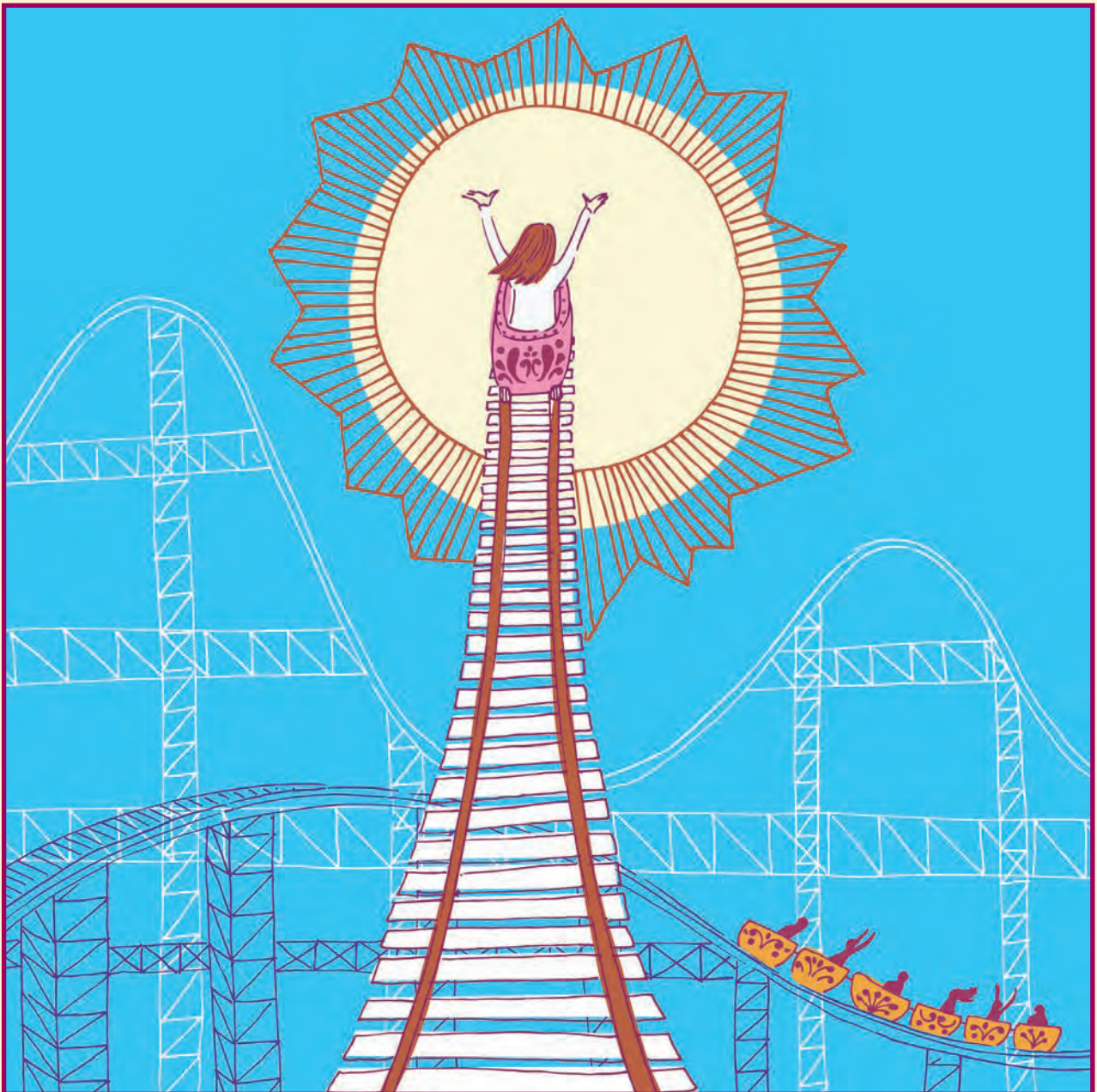
“Teach, test, and hope for the best.”

It was an ironic phrase born from the umbrage he took with the notion that a teacher's job is to “cover” the content and that a student's job is to learn it. He felt it was wrong for educators to wash their hands of responsibility, that “I taught it, and they didn't learn it” was not an excuse for poor learning outcomes. That was an aha moment for me: I realized I was guilty of the same erroneous thinking. In my case, it was, “I gave feedback, and they didn't absorb it.” I knew I needed to try a different way.


I had heard about a university professor who never gave grades on his students' papers but instead assigned one of two categories: “Publishable” and “Not Yet Publishable.” At the end of the semester, the students' grades in the course were determined by how many “Publishables” they had achieved by the final submission date, with unlimited revisions allowed up until that point.

I wanted to try this method, but I

*A revision-based assessment system,
driven by clear rubrics, can mean less stress,
more effective feedback, and greater student learning.*



I would fill the margins of my students' papers with suggestions, questions, and edits only to see their next round of papers plagued with the very same issues.



knew high school students would need a little more scaffolding, so I built a comprehensive rubric with specific writing criteria (“Content,” “Organization,” and “Language/Mechanics”), changed the “Not Yet Publishable” to “Revisable,” and added a third designation called “Redo.” I told my students that “Publishable” was A-level work (from A+ to A-), “Revisable” meant something needed to be fixed (the equivalent range would be from B+ to D-), and “Redo” had just completely missed the mark because the assignment had not yet been fulfilled (“Incomplete” or “F”). I allowed my students to revise their papers as many times as they wanted to until they reached “Publishable” status. The results were fascinating. Most of my students worked tirelessly to move from the “Revisable” column to the “Publishable.”

The only downside? It was killing me. I couldn't handle the volume of revised papers. As a result, I abandoned the practice after one year.

Finding Rubrics That Work

I spent 10 years after that experiment immersing myself in assessment best practices and standards-based grading and reporting before once again attempting a revision-based assessment model. This new method I trialed in 2018 in a class I taught alone, my 12th-grade English course Film and Composition.

Over the summer, resurrecting the “Publishable,” “Revisable,” and “Redo” categories, I created rubrics for each assessment type the course required, rubrics specifically designed with the principles of standards-based grading in mind. Our high school English program focuses nearly as much time and energy on oral and

digital presentation skills as on writing skills. As a result, my film students only needed two different rubrics for this kind of seminar: one for written film reviews and one for oral presentations.¹ For the written film review assessment, I developed detailed criteria such as being able to make a persuasive argument, employ an engaging and compelling “voice,” and show an understanding of the film and its directorial choices without spoilers. The oral presentation assessment had similar criteria, but it also asked students to use digital media effectively, embedding images and film clips in slideshows, and to employ strong public speaking skills, such as facing the audience, making good eye contact, and speaking in a volume, register, and tone that engaged.

On the back of each rubric, I added the breakdown of how the course grade would be calculated based on the letter-grade system in our school, explaining clearly what combination of “Publishable,” “Revisable,” and “Redo” statuses of their assessments resulted in what letter grade. For example, four Publishable assessments and one Revisable assessment would result in an A, whereas three Revisable and two Redo assessments would equal a C grade, and so forth.

I was hopeful the detailed rubrics would alleviate some of the burden of grading revisions, especially since my department had decided on department-wide criteria that all rubrics would be built from. The rubric descriptors could be written only for the “standard” (highest level)—either the student hits the standard or doesn't. In this way, I wouldn't be wasting time looking over an analytic rubric to decide if the language they used was “good” or “very good,” I would

only be looking to see if the Revisable criteria had been improved upon. But I was also prepared to throw in the towel in the second half of the year if either I or the students were struggling.

So what were the results? The best assessment system I had ever experienced in my nearly two-decade career as a teacher, hands down.

More Revision, Less Stress

My aims for this system had been straightforward, and all were met.

1 *Develop a model that made feedback more effective for my students.*

The new rubrics offered clear, standards-based criteria and specific descriptors of the attributes of “Publishable” work. Critically, this allowed my comments on papers to be far less time-consuming because the rubric did half of the work for me already. I could simply highlight the rubric descriptor, leave a short comment, and suggest a meeting if the student needed more feedback. Additionally, I had a series of professional and exemplar student film reviews from years past that I could link to in my online feedback via Microsoft Teams or Turnitin or attach hard copies if grading on paper. These models offered students concrete examples of what I was suggesting in the feedback, saving both of us a lot of time. For example, if a student had written a technically strong film review that nonetheless lacked “voice”—one of the criteria—I could suggest in my



comments that she read a review written by a professional film critic or one of my former students that was replete with humor and sarcasm, giving her permission to flex her creative, sardonic abilities. After seeing models like this, students would often say, “Oh, I get it now. I didn’t know you were allowed to be funny.” Between clear feedback against criteria and models, students were able to better see what the standard was and work toward it.

2 *Put the focus on learning rather than the grade.*


I had grown so weary of students waiting until the end of the semester to ask, “What can I do to get my grade up?” Even worse, every time I would give a paper back, I saw several students’ faces drop with disappointment, sometimes

Alexis Wiggins works with a student during an AP literature and composition class at The John Cooper School in The Woodlands, Texas.

culminating in tears.

Now, as if someone had waved a magic wand, I suddenly had zero conversations about grades with students. Zero. The only questions students now had were about how to improve their work. It was like all my English teacher dreams had come true.

I’ll never forget one of my seniors, Lauren, saying to me, “Since 8th grade, I’ve been told by teachers that I have problems with MLA citation, but I finally learned how to do it right in your class because I had to in order to get Publishable.” That comment made me laugh, but it also made me wince. How often are our assessment systems set up to reward point accumulation



versus actual learning? Lauren had managed to get good grades throughout high school but had never learned a basic requirement in the discipline because there wasn't enough incentive to focus on the *learning*.

3 Make the grading/assessing as streamlined and manageable as possible for me and other educators who want to try this method.

Throughout that first year with my film students, I kept experiencing the feeling that I was grading more often, but that it somehow seemed like less effort than ever. I dare say it was even enjoyable. That was new. While I loved my job

knowing that the B+ could have long-lasting impacts on that student's college ambitions.

In this new system, grading didn't feel like the worst part of my job anymore because it was merely feedback against the goal of "Publishable." Without the assigned value—a number or a letter—that students often saw as representative of their own value as learners, there were no more charged emotions. No more tears or crushed looks. Uncoupling the work from lettered and numbered values allowed all of us to refocus on the work itself, not the student. Assessment suddenly felt like the tool it was meant to be, not a weapon. This allowed me

to have a new relationship with my grading, one that felt less like a chore and more like an effective exercise in feedback.

The most unexpected benefit of all, though, was that the students reported in the anonymous surveys that their stress and anxiety dimin-

ished greatly. That first year, 19 out of 20 students chose this option on the survey: "This is the best assessment system I have ever experienced. Every class should do this." The majority said they had never learned more, and never stressed less, in any high school course. I was sold.


Scaling It Up

There was just one question: Was it scalable? I wondered whether other educators would have the same experience I did. What if I was just a fast grader? What if it only worked with older students and not younger, less mature ones?

In the past two years, I asked two of my trusted colleagues to pilot the system in their senior English courses. Both had similar outcomes: Students paid attention to feedback more than ever before. One of those teachers shared with me that a struggling student of his chose to revise an essay 20 times that spring, even when he suggested she stop and move on to another project. He told me it was one of the highlights of his career to see her get that final Publishable, to see her radiate with pride when she did.

As a result of these successes at the senior level,

As if someone had waved a magic wand, I suddenly had zero conversations about grades with students. Zero.



as an English teacher, I had always dreaded grading. But with more precise rubrics, grading was faster. I wasn't rereading whole drafts each time; now, I would merely review the previous rubric's feedback and look for the criteria that had been marked as not yet Publishable. For instance, if Lauren had Publishable in all criteria except MLA citations, then I was just scanning her essay to see if she had fixed the citations, which could take as little as 30 seconds. And, since students were revising the same type of assessment multiple times, as the year progressed, they became pretty adept at writing in this particular genre. By January, first drafts were often "Publishable" or only needed a few tweaks to get there, so the grading time was further reduced.

But the best part was that I was able to achieve a couple things I wasn't even aiming to do. First, I realized that the dreading, loathing, and avoiding of grading I had experienced in my younger years wasn't related to the drudgery of correcting but to the actual decision of what grade to give. I had often agonized about whether a student's paper was closer to an A- or a B+,

the sophomore and junior English teachers at my school have chosen to try revision-based assessment with their students. So far, after trying this method with more than 200 students, we're seeing deeper learning and less stress reported at all age levels.

In surveys, our students have been very positive with their feedback. "I like how we can continue to work on a specific paper or assignment as many times as we like, with as much feedback as we want," said one senior. "I often get confused in other classes because grading seems like an ultimatum rather than a learning process." Another student in 10th grade wrote, "I can make mistakes and revise what was wrong, which is what a real writer does."

Want to Try It?

I have only tried revision-based assessment in high school English classes, so my experience is limited to that discipline. However, I have taught middle school ELA, high school humanities, and Spanish, and I suspect this type of assessment would easily transfer to those disciplines and ages as well. I can also see clear applications in elementary classrooms, where skills-based growth is paramount, and in the sciences with projects and labs.

While I am completely sold on this assessment method for my classes, there are some important considerations if you want to try it in your classes:

- You need to know the total number of assessments for the grading period up front, before the start of the year. This takes planning and organization.

- You need to leave yourself enough time to correct revisions before the

I was grading more often, but it somehow seemed like less effort than ever. I dare say it was even enjoyable.

end of the grading period. I learned this the hard way my first year when I set the final submission date for revisions a few days before the semester's end. Oops. That was a painful amount of grading in a short time! Now I set the final submission date for all revisions at least two weeks before final grades are due (for example, early December in the fall semester), allowing me time to correct revisions before exams and final grades are due.

- You need to remind students of their status regularly. My colleagues and I who use revision-based assessment in grades 10, 11, and 12 send official notes to students and their parents a few times each semester,

reminding them of their current status on all assessments and what the grade will be if they choose not to revise further. There are a lot of moving parts in this system, and clear communication helps everyone understand the process and where they are in it.

- You need to let go of the small stuff (quizzes that test only recall, note checks, homework checks, etc.). We still do those things, but they are formative work, counted as zero percent of a student's grade. We report on them to students and parents, but we don't "count" them. This is so we can focus on the bigger skills in the summative work and revision process.

For years, I thought I was giving good feedback because I spent a lot of time writing out detailed comments on student work. I never stopped to consider how the assessment structure itself was impacting the feedback process, rendering it largely ineffective. Now, with the power of standards-based rubrics, targeted feedback, and a system that incentivizes learning over grades, my students seem to be thriving. And I feel excitement, not dread, when those revisions come in. 🗨️

To view the full rubrics for this course, visit <https://bit.ly/3KhbxX9> (Film Review Persuasive Essay) and <https://bit.ly/3FB69KM> (Film Oral Presentations).

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Reflect & Discuss

What about this method of assessment appeals to you most?

How might you adapt Wiggins's system to your own classroom or school? What challenges might you encounter?

Less Work, More Learning:

The Promise of Effective Feedback

Four misconceptions keep teachers' feedback on student work from being as effective as it could be.

Andrew Housiaux and Bowman Dickson

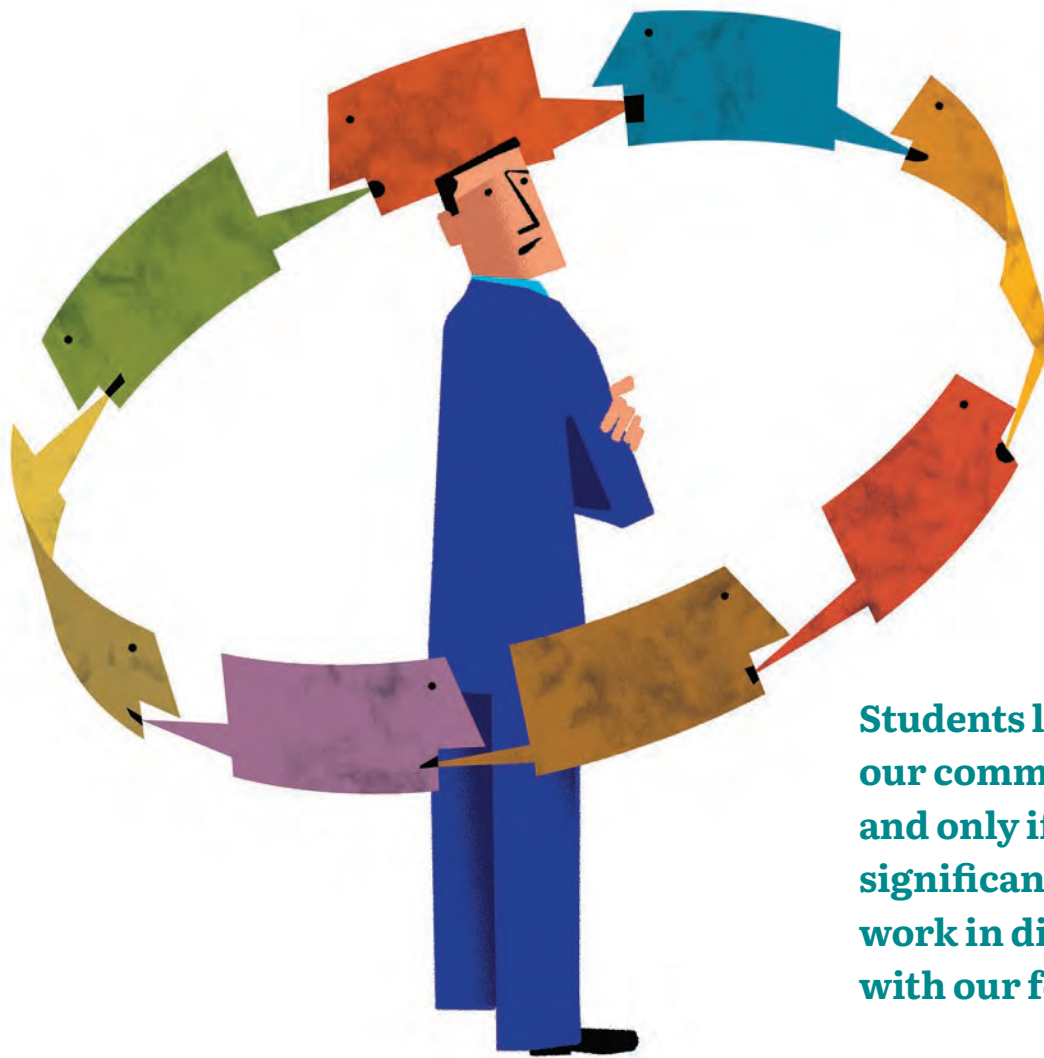
A recent Twitter exchange between two teachers forced us to confront some common challenges with feedback.

One educator asked, “Has there ever been anything more disproportionate than the amount of hours put into marking vs. the impact that marking has on individuals?”

The second (tweeted by @Ms_KMP) replied, “I carried out an experiment. Last year I gave individual feedback on an online homework [assignment]. I gave each student a secret code word (e.g., John Smith would be “Jumping Snake”) and the message to see me with the code word to get a prize.” The disheartening result? “I gave out one bag of Haribo in a class of 30.”

As teachers, we spend tremendous amounts of time giving students feedback and grades. Our efforts fill weekends, late nights, and planning periods. The time we spend correcting student misconceptions, engaging with their thoughts, and coaching them toward deeper intellectual work is often deeply intertwined with our identity as educators. We may even see a direct link between how much individual feedback we give students and how much we care for them.

The effort we put into giving feedback matters—as does caring for our students, of course. However, if mistaken and unexamined assumptions inform our practices, we won’t impact student learning in the ways we hope. So what misconceptions prevent us from giving feedback effectively—in a way that



Students learn from our comments if and only if they do significant intellectual work in dialogue with our feedback.

matters to students? How might we give feedback better, and what education research can we rely upon?

In our work as teachers and teacher leaders in secondary schools, we've found four durable misconceptions about feedback that, in turn, suggest alternate moves teachers can make that are grounded in the research literature (Dickson & Housiaux, 2021). In considering how to best give feedback, we should keep in mind this definition from Wiggins (2012): "Feedback is information about how we are doing that guides our efforts to reach a goal."

Misconception #1: The harder a teacher works, the more a student learns.

Educators are familiar with the adage, attributed to John Dewey, that students learn not from experience,

but from reflecting on experience. The same principle applies to feedback. Students don't learn from the time and effort we put into giving them feedback; they learn from *reflecting* on that feedback, engaging with it, and making meaning with it (Wiggins, 2012). Put differently, students learn from our comments if and only if they do significant intellectual work in dialogue with our feedback.

The implications are clear: When we give feedback to students, our work is only half done. We need to design regular opportunities for students to reflect on our feedback, coaching them in how to do so, to ensure such reflection becomes a durable habit (Brookhart, 2017). Without this instruction, students may not know what to do with the feedback we give them, or how to learn from it. Teachers should



return assignments with enough time remaining in class for students to read their feedback, respond to it, and make a plan for their learning and growth. These reflections can be the basis for subsequent teacher-student conferences.

William (2018) articulates the central principle that feedback should cause thinking. Feedback in the form of questions can cause thinking, especially when we provide an opportunity for students to respond to our inquiries and reflect on their learning. Students can also respond to our feedback by categorizing it: what they did well, what they need to do better, and what they can do next time.

When we help students engage with our feedback and ask them to refer back to it in the future, we make it more likely that they'll learn from it—and not make the same mistakes on subsequent assignments.

Misconception #2: Feedback is objective and experienced the same way by all students.

The second misunderstanding is subtler. It's the belief that feedback is objective, and that the same words will be experienced in the same way by all students. Teachers inhabit multiple personal and professional identities in the classroom in terms of race, gender, age, and other identity markers. So do our students. These identities impact the ways in which students receive our feedback. It follows that if we've created a positive environment and built rapport with students, then they will be

Students don't learn from the time and effort we put into giving them feedback; they learn from reflecting on that feedback and making meaning with it.

more likely to see our feedback as supporting their learning and growth—and not as a personal attack.

Teaching is a deeply relational endeavor that requires trusting relationships. With trust in place, teachers can become “warm demanders,” building upon this emotional foundation to hold students to high standards and support them in their productive struggles (Hammond, 2015; Kleinfeld, 1975).

The balance between trust and effective communication is especially important when teachers support students who may have good reasons *not* to trust their school environment. In one important study, Yaeger and colleagues (2014) describe an intervention in which white teachers learned to give one sentence of feedback that had a significant positive impact on Black students: “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can meet them.” We believe framing feedback in this way is effective because it implies to students that teachers see them as individuals, not solely as members of a group that’s subject to stereotype threat.

By articulating the reason for their comments—high standards for the course and students as opposed to personal criticism—and expressing belief that the student can meet those high standards, these teachers offered feedback in a powerful way. Interestingly, these effects were stronger for Black students than white ones in the study and were strongest for Black students who initially had low trust in

their environment. Compared to Black students in the control group that received no intervention, Black learners who heard this *one sentence* revised their work more and achieved higher grades on the task tied to the feedback. The implications of this study are significant: Giving students a sense of belonging and our belief that they can meet high expectations can be deeply transformative.

Misconception #3: Lots of teacher comments lead to lots of student learning.

When teachers give too much feedback on a student assignment, they run the risk of making two mistakes. First, the sheer volume of their feedback might overwhelm students, who won't be able to discern which feedback is most essential (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). A student's working memory can be quickly overtaxed by the many complex cognitive tasks required to read and interpret all the feedback (including deciphering a teacher's handwriting!). When teachers comment on a range of different errors instead of focusing their efforts more strategically, they may give students the mistaken impression that comma splices are of equal significance to identifying the causes of the Civil War. Teachers who design assignments with clear, focused learning goals and then provide targeted feedback in these areas help students understand how to prioritize their learning and thinking.

Teachers also err when their feedback focuses too much on just evaluating completed work, rather than providing guidance about how to improve future work. Wiliam

(2016) asserts, "The main purpose of feedback is to improve the student's ability to perform tasks he or she has not yet attempted" (p. 2). Merely focusing on the past will not, in and of itself, help students learn to apply lessons from past work more effectively in the future. Asking students to generate their own focus areas for improvement on subsequent assignments is one way to encourage self-reflection and draw students' attention to their ongoing learning and growth.

A legendary English teacher at Philips Academy used to comment on student essays in crayon. When bemused colleagues asked why, he

replied that the crayon required him to write in large letters while prioritizing only a few things. The limitations imposed by using a crayon prevented him from haphazardly writing too much feedback. Even if we don't go to such lengths ourselves, this example illustrates the importance of a teacher's self-restraint in cultivating students' learning.

Misconception #4: Grades are feedback.

Grades and feedback are different. Students can learn from the feedback we give them, but it's much harder to learn from a grade alone (Guskey, 2019). Guskey's research points to

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the importance of students receiving grades and feedback on assignments. However, many teachers have had the depressing experience of dedicating significant time to responding to students' work on an assignment only to have students scan quickly for their grade, ignore the written feedback, and immediately engage in a comparative conversation about their grade with a classmate. How might we reexamine the entrenched habit of giving students a grade and feedback at the same time?


Giving feedback is an invitation to intentionality.

Postponing the grade is a straightforward, powerful intervention. Teachers can wait to give students their grades until students have spent sufficient time reading and reflecting on their feedback (Kuepper-Tetzel & Gardner, 2021). Doing so removes the understandable temptation for students to search immediately for the grade and then read their feedback through the lens of their score. This approach asks teachers to dedicate some of their limited instructional time—in the classroom or as a homework assignment—to having students read and perhaps respond to the feedback they received. While such an instructional choice can seem difficult, Wiggins (2012) reminds us that “less teaching plus more feedback is the key to achieving greater learning.”

Bringing It All Together

Teachers aspire to communicate clearly and create environments where all students can trust us, learn, and thrive. However, our feedback practices don't always align with these aspirations. More than that, these four misconceptions all hint at a more fundamental one: the notion that students know what to do with the comments we give them. How do we know this? Have we ever asked students what they do with the feedback they receive, whether from us, their peers, or themselves?

Giving feedback is an invitation to intentionality. With greater pedagogical clarity, we can significantly increase student learning, and do so

in ways that help students be more active, thoughtful participants in their own learning. We can conceive of ourselves and our role in a new way—one where we measure our care for students not in terms of the volume of feedback we provide, but in terms of how much time and guidance we give students to reflect on it. 

Editor's Note: This article is adapted from the resource “Feedback in Practice: Research for Teachers,” created by Andrew Housiaux and Bowman Dickson at <https://tanginstitute.andover.edu/feedback-in-practice>.

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Creating a Culture of Feedback

Three ingredients for feedback that resonates.

Sanée Bell



According to a 2019 Gallup study, only 26 percent of employees strongly agree that the feedback they receive helps them to produce better work (Wigert & Dvorak). In the book, *Thanks for the Feedback*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen state, “When we give feedback, we notice that the receiver isn’t good at receiving it. When we receive feedback, we notice that the giver isn’t good at giving it” (p. 3).

If leaders expect the feedback they give to translate to improved results, they need to practice delivering it in such a way that others are willing to receive it and act on it. As I’ve learned throughout my career as a school and district administrator, for feedback to build capacity—and, ultimately, to improve student achievement—leaders must (1) build a culture that supports effective feedback, (2) frame critical feedback with care, and (3) put steps in place to ensure the feedback sticks.

1 Build a Culture That Values Effective Feedback

Teachers won’t be receptive to your feedback if they don’t believe you have their best interests in mind. To create an environment that thrives on using feedback for growth, allow your staff to VET (visibility, engagement, talking) who you are as a leader.

Visibility is key.

People in any organization need to see their leader often. If your role is to

provide feedback that is focused on supporting the growth of your direct reports, make yourself present where they work. It is very difficult to provide constructive feedback, especially feedback based on patterns of behavior or practices, if you take a drive-by approach.

Schedule time on your calendar to be present in various parts of the building so your staff gets equal attention. For example, if your 6th grade teachers or the entire math department is on the second level of the school, spend at least 10–15 minutes observing each of those teachers in action and provide them with immediate feedback. You can leave a sticky note on their desk, send an email, fill out an electronic feedback form—unrelated to the formal evaluation system you use—or leave a voicemail. This informal feedback is similar to how a coach provides feedback to an athlete—short, focused, and timely.

During these informal interactions, reinforce the positive practices you see. Spending time in classrooms—just being present—gives you the opportunity to notice the subtle things that make a big difference in student learning: Like the way a teacher opens and closes a lesson, gives students feedback, or transitions the class between activities. Ensure that teachers see your presence in classrooms as nonthreatening.

Engage in collegial conversations.

As you spend time observing teachers in different parts of your building, analyze the trends you see and adjust accordingly. Listen to learn about their passions and the areas in which they are seeking to grow. Take mental notes and later provide resources to help them further their knowledge and skills. Follow up throughout the year and express interest in informally seeing their work in action. You might be surprised by how often you will be invited into classrooms to observe learning and share your insights.

Talk about your own areas of growth.

Modeling your growth process is an effective

strategy for building a culture of learning. When I was a principal, for example, I shared my goal of visiting classrooms more often, why I wanted to grow in this area, and the specific actions I was going to take to achieve this goal. Through informal surveys and focus groups, I asked teachers to provide feedback on the frequency of my informal classroom visits and the impact

This informal feedback is similar to how a coach provides feedback to an athlete—short, focused, and timely.

my presence was having in their classrooms. In return, I was transparent with them about the challenges I was having visiting classrooms on a consistent basis.

Practicing vulnerability demonstrates to your staff that you, too, are willing to put yourself out there for the sake of improvement.

2 Frame Critical Feedback with Care

Giving critical feedback to an underperforming teacher is considered by some to be the instructional leader's "most difficult job" (Hall, 2019). But it's a part of the job that you can't opt out of. The only way to get better at providing critical feedback is to practice giving it in a way that it can be received. It is not what you say, but how you say it that matters. Your tone and body language play a critical role in how your feedback is received.

Reflect on the following: Will the teacher perceive the feedback you are conveying to be helpful or harmful? Will they believe that you are committed to supporting them throughout the growth process, or are you too focused on documenting the problem? Keep these questions in mind as you plan your discussion and ensure that you focus on providing support and partnership.

Going into a feedback session with an empathetic lens can help you filter your words to be kind but direct.

Manage your emotions.

Typically, critical feedback is given in response to behavior that is unproductive or detrimental to the organization. This means that emotions on both sides tend to run high. When planning your feedback session, acknowledge any feelings that may arise—and be specific about how you’ll keep them in check. Some strategies to stay calm:

- *Practice breathing techniques.* Before a tense feedback session, focus on your breathing to ground yourself in the present moment. Try breathing in for a count of four and out for a count of eight for a few minutes (Seppälä, Bradley, & Goldstein; 2020). It can also be helpful to bring attention to your breath and posture during a meeting.

- *Practice silence.* It’s OK not to respond to every statement that is being made. Making room for silence can help you be a more intentional listener.

- *Repeat a mantra.* When engaged in a difficult conversation (with anyone, really), try repeating a phrase in your head as a reminder to stay centered and focused. Create a mantra such as “This will pass” or “This isn’t about me” (Gallo, 2017).

- *Take a break.* In sports, coaches get several opportunities to call a timeout when the game is getting away from the team. If you feel that the feedback session is becoming too tense or unproductive, call a timeout. State the reason why the break is needed and reconvene in 5–10 minutes—or even the next day depending on the need.

Plan and practice.

Prior planning for formal feedback meetings shows that you care about the outcome, the person receiving the feedback, and the progress you are seeking. It also forces you to

identify your objective and goals.

Consider the following practice tips:

- *Ensure that the conversation is not one-sided.*

You should not be the only person speaking if your goal is for the teacher to act on the feedback given. Prepare questions ahead of time that are aligned to your objective and that elicit reflection.

- *Practice your words aloud.* This can help you identify unproductive words or phrases that might come up. Some to avoid include: “No offense, but . . .”, “I’m sure you can agree.”, and “In my opinion. . . .”

- *Plan for unexpected turns.* Try to anticipate the many directions in which the conversation could go. You may not be perfect in predicting the course of the discussion, but at least you will have spent time brainstorming ways to respond to different scenarios.

- *Don’t be rigid or overly focused on your script.* Being scripted makes the conversation about you and your emotions; it prevents you from demonstrating leadership agility. Use your script as a flexible guide and be nimble in your approach.

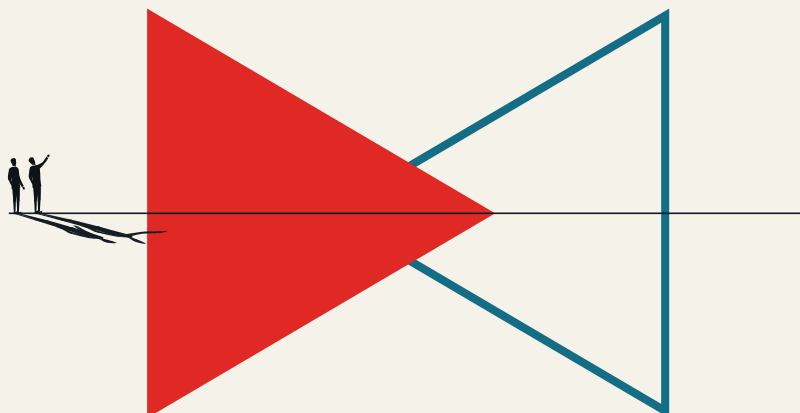
- *Close your feedback session with clearly defined next steps* (unless processing time is needed). Consider asking questions like: How can I help? What can we commit to?

Shift your perspective.

Finally, try to take the perspective of the person in front of you. Going into a feedback session with an empathetic lens can help you filter your words to be kind but direct. Once the session starts, pay close attention to the person who is speaking and try to identify the fear and anxieties that may be surfacing. Remember, you are only seeing a fraction of what they may be experiencing internally as they listen to your feedback. If possible, seek to address any surface fears in a productive way.

Make sure you stay focused on changing behavior rather than fixing the person. Practice active listening skills by maintaining eye contact, using wait time before responding,

Practicing vulnerability demonstrates to your staff that you, too, are willing to put yourself out there for the sake of improvement.



and reframing the situation so that it is moving in a productive direction. After identifying a behavior or practice that needs to change, work with the teacher to develop a plan focused on improvement.

Feedback should move a conversation from discovery to action—yet delivering it is more art than science. Always leave those you lead with dignity and hope after a critical feedback session.

3 Ensure the Feedback Sticks

For feedback to make a difference, we must be mindful of relational contexts and ensure that teachers have time and space to understand it and integrate it into their practice.

Be aware of identity factors.

I was once in a feedback session with a teacher that seemed to be going well. We both identified the same areas of focus for growth and came up with a plan of action. I thought the session was productive and positive; however, as we were wrapping up, the teacher asked me, “Are you not happy with me as a teacher?”

I was baffled because in my mind, I had done everything “by the book.” That is, everything except consider how this teacher’s identity was

going to be impacted by my feedback. Teaching is a personal endeavor. So much about what we do as educators is tied to who we are and what we believe about ourselves. This was a veteran teacher who was new to our campus. He did not know me as a leader or my approach to partnering with teachers.

When I later reflected, I realized that though this teacher agreed with me verbally, he was probably acting out of compliance rather than true understanding. I was able to identify where I made some critical mistakes in my haste to “fix” this teacher. I had not spent enough time establishing a collegial relationship with him. Because he was experienced, I assumed that rapport could be developed at a quicker pace. It would have been useful in hindsight to have conducted more informal visits in the teacher’s classroom before the formal observation.

Allow time for teacher self-assessment.

Prior to the scheduled feedback session, develop some questions around what you observed in the classroom, including the outcome of the lesson, the work students were engaged in, and the behavior demonstrated by the students. Too often leaders dive right in to explaining the rating of an observation without taking the time to process the lesson with the teacher.

Remember, “bite-sized” change can be more easily managed and can build efficacy.

Ask questions that promote deeper analysis:

- What worked well in the lesson you delivered?
- How did the students demonstrate their learning of the content?
- What aspects of the lesson would you change? Why?

Asking questions leads to dialogue and self-discovery about what is working and what can be refined. Prior to sharing observation data with the teacher, give them the opportunity to self-assess where they feel their lesson scored based on the rubric. Then discuss how your observation results align with or differ from the teacher’s self-assessment.

Allow time to practice.

To master a new skill, one must practice intensively for several hours (or 10,000 hours for complex skills, if you ask Malcom Gladwell). After providing teachers with feedback, allocate time for them to practice their new learning.

During this practice period, work with them to identify resources or support they might need. Allow them to give you the green light indicating when they are ready for you to return to observe and provide additional feedback. Remember, “bite-sized” change can be more easily managed and can build efficacy. Help teachers to set a goal and schedule progress checks along the way.

Allow time to reflect.

It’s not always necessary to immediately discuss next steps. Space for deeper reflection can give us an opportunity to consider the next course of action. Rushing through is an invitation for the teacher to dismiss your feedback. If the feedback session was emotionally heavy, give the teacher time to process it. Schedule a follow-up meeting to collaboratively create next steps.

From Good to Great

As a former athlete, coach, and now sports enthusiast, I’ve spent a great deal of time watching how athletes are coached. I love to analyze coaching moves and the adjustments that the athlete or team makes in response. Some coaches are masterful in this craft, while others are still trying to figure it out. Each coach is different, as are the players they are coaching. To get the best performance out of their athletes, coaches must use a variety of feedback techniques.

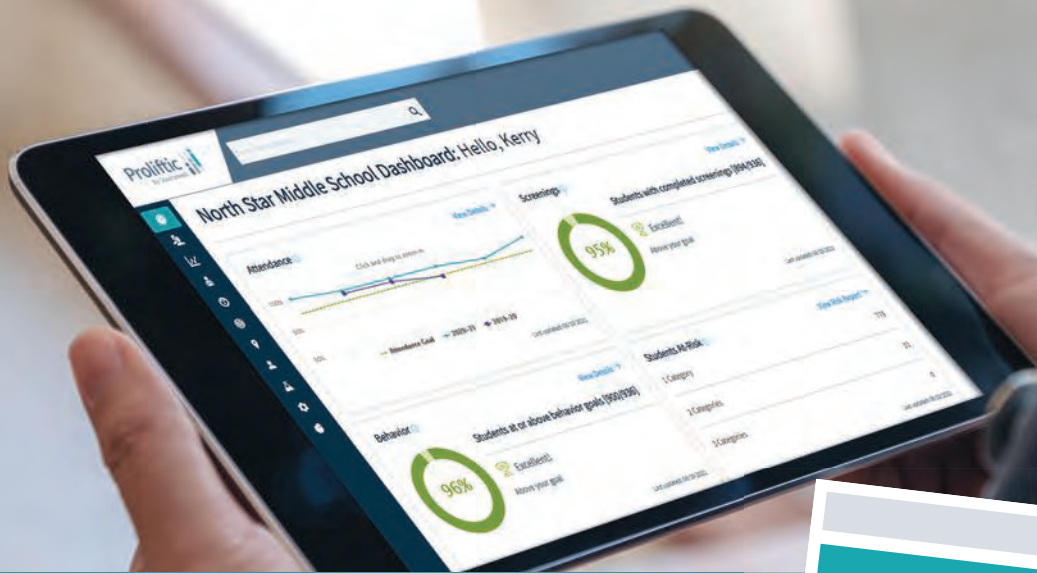
The same is true for educational leaders. Get to know your staff, their strengths and opportunities for growth, how they respond to feedback, and the type of feedback they need. Leading is coaching; it is being able to skillfully deliver feedback in a way that impacts performance.

We must tread cautiously, however. Teachers need to feel respected, to have a voice in feedback sessions, and to be given time to practice and reflect. These are the ingredients of a true partnership centered on learning. 🗣️

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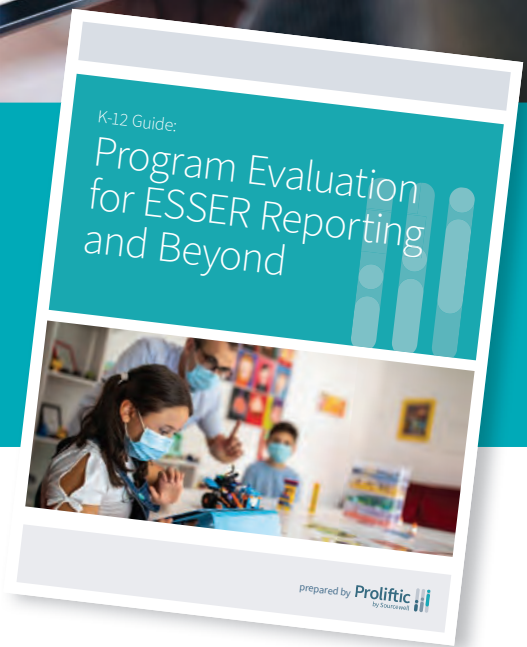


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What Teachers Really Want When It Comes to **FEEDBACK**



New research points to five characteristics for effective feedback on instruction.

Thomas R. Guskey and Laura J. Link

Teachers today are bombarded with many different forms of feedback. School leaders offer suggestions based on classroom observations. Professional learning community colleagues provide guidance on how to improve instructional techniques and boost student engagement. Instructional coaches recommend ways to refine teaching practices and enhance relationships with students. And professional learning sessions present strategies to improve nearly every aspect of the teaching and learning process.



But among all these forms of feedback, what do teachers find most valuable to their efforts to improve their interactions with students and their impact on student learning? What information addresses their greatest concerns?

We asked these questions in a recent study to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' personal perspectives on feedback (Guskey & Link, 2021). Our study involved analyses of self-reported survey data from 92 K-12 teachers who were involved in a pilot mastery learning program in a medium-sized Midwest school district. What these teachers told us challenges the premises of many teacher feedback models, but also offers insights on how to ensure the feedback teachers receive improves their effectiveness in diverse classroom contexts.

The teachers we surveyed identified five characteristics of helpful feedback that offer clear direction in school improvement efforts.

1

Teachers want feedback on student learning.

Much of the feedback teachers receive, especially from formal observations by school leaders, focuses on teachers' actions and behaviors while teaching. In compliance with the district's evaluation procedures, leaders note such teacher actions as: Are the lesson objectives clearly communicated to students? Is there a reliance on students' background knowledge to introduce a new concept or skill? Is the teacher asking higher-order questions and soliciting student feedback during the lesson? Is the teacher using techniques designed to ensure all students participate in class discussions?

Although teachers generally acknowledge the importance of these actions and appreciate knowing when they do them well, most teachers see these behaviors as means to a far more important end: their impact on students. In particular, teachers want to know: Do my explanations make sense to students? Are even reluctant students engaged and catching on? Are

Teachers want to make a difference. The feedback they find most useful recognizes that commitment and, in collegial and supportive ways, helps them do just that.

all students feeling that they are part of the class and involved in something meaningful? School leaders occasionally talk with students during or after an observation and ask these questions, but rarely are they part of formal observation procedures.

Ironically, school leaders are typically well positioned to offer this kind of firsthand feedback on student learning because they know their teachers and understand their classroom situations. School leaders often know the students, their learning histories, and family backgrounds. In most cases, they also have some knowledge of the curriculum and learning expectations. But most formal classroom observations occur only a few times each year and are generally disconnected from students' work (Link, 2020). Teachers also point out that many school leaders' knowledge of teaching methods, lesson plans, instructional technologies, assessment strategies, and classroom discipline are not up to date because of their years removed from being a classroom teacher themselves. As a result, leaders' feedback often isn't focused on what teachers identify as most useful to their professional growth or improvement (Bayler & Ozcan, 2020).

Above all else, teachers want to know if they are making a difference for their students (Lam, 2016). How they view their effectiveness and

what they regard as the greatest rewards of teaching come from feedback about their impact on the students they teach (Walk & Handy, 2018). Most important, teachers don't judge their effectiveness based on their teaching actions or behaviors, but rather from seeing how their students think, how they solve problems, and how they feel about themselves as learners (Kraft, 2019). None of the teachers we surveyed defined "having a good day" in terms of what they did or how they taught. Instead, they described seeing their students "get it," observing "lights go on," noticing "smiles of understanding," and realizing that what they did as teachers made that happen.

Most teachers have an honest skepticism of ideas for improving their effectiveness that come from outside their specific context.

2

Teachers want feedback from their students in their classes.

Teaching is not a unidirectional, linear process in which teachers provide information and students respond. Rather, it is a reciprocal, contextually based, and ongoing exchange where teachers and students share information with one another. This information serves to monitor both the teachers' instructional success and the students' learning progress in a particular context (Wiliam, 2020). The feedback on student learning that teachers find most useful, according to our survey (and many other studies), is personalized for them and designed to help them succeed in their context. Teachers want ideas that will enhance interactions with the students they see daily in order to gain personal "mastery experiences" that show they make a difference (Bandura, 2001).

Unfortunately, nearly all teachers have gone

through the process of being told something will work, only to try it and discover they were misled or deceived. Despite careful planning and implementation, the strategies they were told to use never yielded the promised improvements. As a result, most teachers have an honest skepticism of ideas for improving their effectiveness that come from outside their specific context. Hearing that an idea worked for another teacher, with different students, in a different school, or in a different state rarely convinces them. Eliminating that skepticism requires personal mastery experiences that provide teachers with tangible evidence that the ideas work with their students in their classrooms (Guskey, 2020).

3

Teachers want feedback they trust.

Sources of evidence on student learning vary widely. Measures of student achievement can range from nationally normed standardized tests to results from student projects, classroom quizzes, and formative assessments. Measures of student outcomes include surveys of students' attitudes, their confidence in learning situations, their self-efficacy, and social-emotional learning skills. Although debates rage about what evidence is most important, the one thing we know is that school leaders and teachers differ in their perspectives about what evidence is most valid (Guskey, 2007).

School leaders—as well as most school board members, policy makers, and legislators—trust large-scale assessments of student achievement. They like the seeming objectivity and reliability of standardized tests and state assessments developed by well-established assessment companies. Despite evidence showing that many of these assessments are "instructionally insensitive" (Popham, 2007) and poorly aligned with state curriculum standards (Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011), school leaders generally believe they provide trustworthy information about learning progress.

Teachers, however, tend to be more skeptical

of large-scale assessment results. In our study, many stated that large-scale assessments “reduce kids to numbers” and “offer data that was misused to evaluate my teaching ability.” Teachers also appear more aware of the frequent misalignment between these assessments’ content and format and the knowledge and skills emphasized in the curriculum.

The teachers in our study further noted that because the results from large-scale assessments may not come back until weeks or months after administration, their feedback is seldom useful in revising instruction or planning remediation activities. Far more than school leaders, teachers trust the results from students’ daily work, personal interactions and observations of students, student presentations and demonstrations, and classroom assessments in their classrooms (Guskey, 2007).

In our study, for example, teachers gathered three types of evidence on students’ learning progress. The first was formative assessment error analyses, in which teachers tallied the number of incorrect answers on classroom formative assessments to find trouble spots, similar to Figure 1. On this particular assessment, these data show that most students did fairly well on items 1 through 6, but items 7 and 8, as well as item 12, were answered incorrectly by large numbers of students. It may be these poorly answered items are ambiguously worded or mis-keyed. But if examination reveals no obvious problems, then the instructional activities were clearly ineffective for most students and need to be revised or replaced.



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The second type of evidence teachers used was mastery charts of class progress on formative assessments (fig. 2). This chart shows the percentage of students who achieved the mastery standard on each formative assessment across units that had retake opportunities. Ideally, the majority of students should achieve mastery on the second formative assessment in each unit, and more students should attain mastery on the first formative assessment as units progress. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the teachers’ corrective activities. It also shows whether students are increasingly prepared to do well in new learning units.

Not having the majority of students attain the mastery standard on second formative assessments would be a sign of problems, indicating that teachers need to plan alternative strategies. Perhaps students didn’t fully engage in

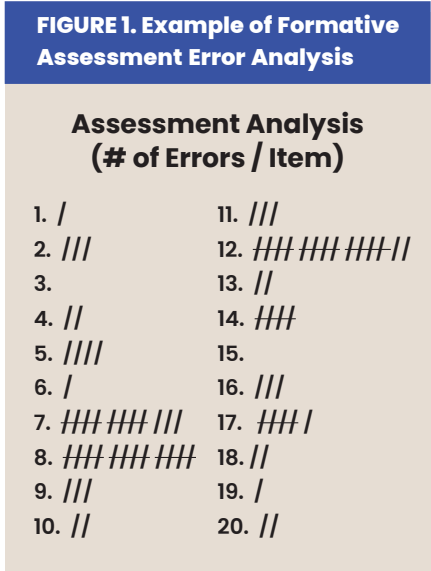
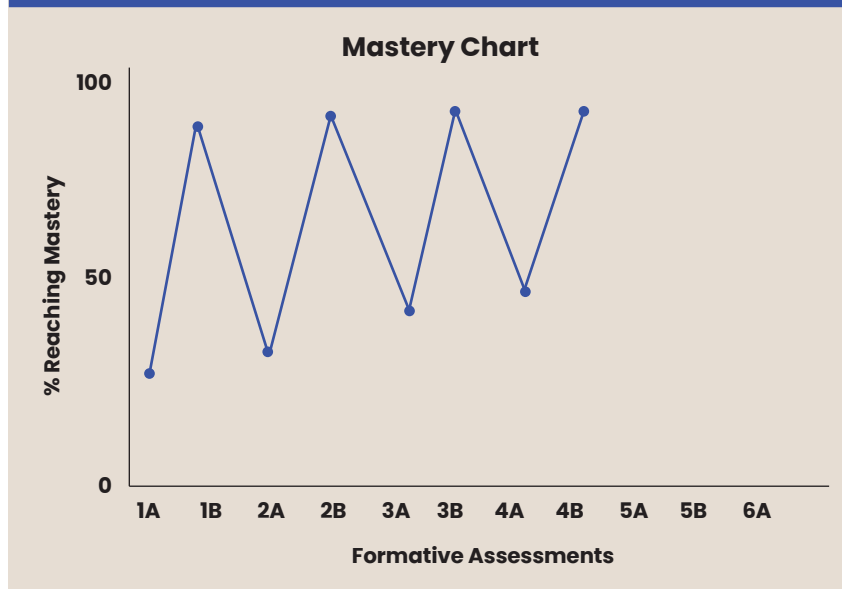


FIGURE 2. Example of a Mastery Chart Plotting Formative Assessment Results



the corrective process and need more structured guidance.

The third type of evidence teachers gathered involved comparing summative assessment results. After a series of instructional units, teachers administered cumulative, summative assessments to students, primarily to determine students' course grades. Teachers then compared the grade distributions of current students with those from previous years.

When asked to weigh the usefulness of these types of feedback, teachers at all grade levels consistently rated the tallies of students' errors on formative assessments (fig. 1) as the most meaningful because of its highly specific evidence on students' performance. Teachers used these data to determine which concepts and skills they had taught well and which required a different approach. Although the mastery charts and summative assessment comparisons were informative, teachers considered that evidence more useful in making summative judgments of effectiveness (Guskey & Link, 2021).

4

Teachers want feedback quickly.

In some systemic change efforts, improvements for students may not be immediately apparent. Sustained support for extended periods may be required to achieve potential benefits (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). But when it comes to classroom-level strategies or procedures, teachers want evidence of improvement quickly, typically within the first few weeks. If they don't readily see evidence of a positive difference for their students, most teachers will abandon a new innovation and revert to tried and trusted practices. This occurs not because teachers are afraid of change or hesitant to try new ideas, but because continuing with an untested strategy holds the possibility that their students will learn less well.

And most teachers are reluctant to risk the learning success of their students for the sake of innovation (Guskey, 2002).

This means the process of implementing a new practice or strategy must establish procedures for teachers to gain feedback on their efforts' results within weeks, not months or years. Our study showed that results from regular formative assessments provide an excellent source of such evidence. But feedback on improvement in students' daily work, better written assignments, enhanced engagement in class lessons, greater confidence in learning, or improved attendance might prove equally effective. To maintain the extra work involved in implementing a change, teachers need to know quickly that positive results are not only likely, but also within their reach.

5

Teachers want feedback offered in meaningful, non-threatening ways.

Leaders can offer teachers feedback through a variety of formats, including written comments, recorded notes and observations, group

discussions, or individual conversations. Yet regardless of the format, how leaders communicate that feedback matters to teachers. Strong evidence shows that if teachers don't receive feedback in meaningful, helpful, and non-threatening ways, their practices will not change (Cherasaro et al., 2016)

Our surveys revealed the means of communicating feedback teachers found most useful closely parallel what we know about offering effective comments to students (see Guskey, 2019). Specifically, effective comments follow a four-step process:

1. Begin with something positive.
2. Describe what needs improvement.
3. Offer guidance on how to make the improvements.
4. Express confidence in success.

Similarly, teachers appreciate recognition of their successes with students, big and small. They want targeted but non-judgmental feedback on the areas for improvement or where a different approach may prove beneficial. Paired with that feedback, they want specific guidance and practical suggestions on how they might improve. But they want that advice in the form of ideas and strategies that communicate support, rather than as mandated practices they are told to use. Instead of relaying “Your instruction needs more student engagement or critical thinking,” effective feedback would include: “I like the way you incorporated open-ended questions about the text in your lesson, yet some of your students seem more prepared than others to address them. Next time, you may want to employ a short formative assessment before the discussion to check students’ individual comprehension levels.”

Finally, teachers want to know that their leaders, colleagues, coaches, and advisors believe in them, understand their commitment to students, and have confidence in their success. Concluding the example feedback session with “You’ve got this!” or more specifically, something like “I know you’ll have all students thinking

When it comes to new strategies or procedures, teachers want evidence of improvement quickly, typically within the first few weeks.



about what they read in no time,” provides the supportive affirmation teachers seek.

Teachers want to make a difference. The feedback they find most useful recognizes that commitment and, in collegial and supportive ways, helps them do just that.

Making a Difference

When it comes to providing helpful feedback to teachers, no impediments stand in our way. There are also no discrepancies between what teachers want and what they need in order to have the greatest impact on students’ learning. Teachers want timely and trustworthy feedback that focuses on their students’ learning and offers practical suggestions for classroom applications. When we offer teachers this type of feedback, they gain meaningful information for

improvement and direct evidence that their work makes an important difference. 

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Reflect & Discuss

Think about how you prefer to receive feedback from others, and how you prefer to give feedback to others. What similarities and differences do you notice?

Is your or your school's current approach to giving feedback to teachers effective? Why or why not?

Which of the five characteristics of helpful feedback can you see yourself working on immediately, and what's one way you plan to do so?

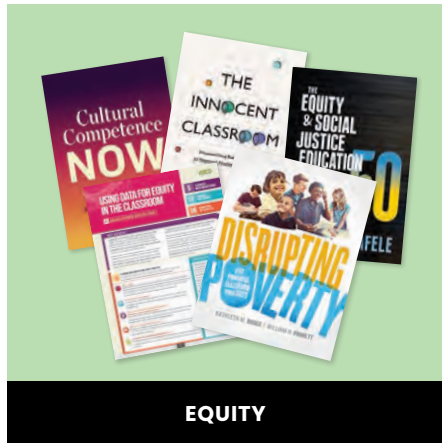
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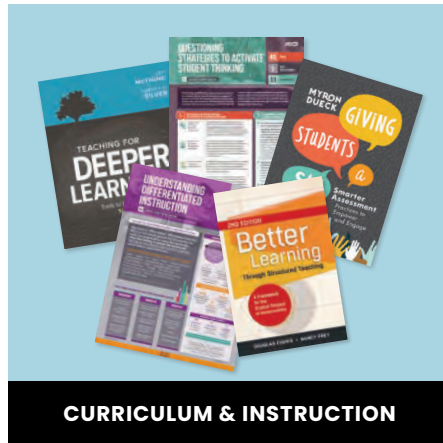


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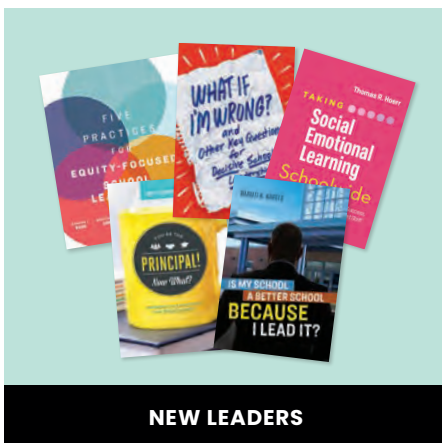
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Approaching Observations as a Curious Colleague

When classroom observations are grounded in curiosity, they're more likely to give teachers the feedback they need—and want.

**Sean Conner and
Jennifer Froehle**

Feedback. . . . We've all experienced the ear-piercing screech when an amateur audio technician creates a loop between microphones. School leaders should note the word's double meaning: although feedback can amplify teachers' best practices, it can also make an audience cringe and stop listening. Specific, actionable feedback to teachers is one of the most valuable commodities in any school environment. It can significantly impact students' learning experiences, if delivered with precision and connection (Cantrell & Kane, 2013).

In 2012, the state of Indiana moved to a teacher evaluation process

requiring multiple observations of each teacher annually. As school leaders (Sean, a middle school principal, and Jenny, the district's chief academic officer), we completed hundreds of classroom observations in the years following. The process matched that in many schools: scripting what we observe; providing written, actionable feedback; and holding post-observation discussions with each teacher. Our leadership team, made up of school and district administrators, discussed early on how the feedback and dialogue generated by these observations could have an impact on teaching and learning commensurate with the extraordinary commitment of time and training to do them. These conversations changed our culture significantly, prompting our leaders to hone their observation and feedback

skills in order to elicit an outcome worthy of the effort.

The learning curve, however, was steep. Many administrators felt comfortable giving suggestions to new or struggling teachers, but less confident about engaging master practitioners in critical analysis of their work. Few administrators have experience as instructional coaches, and it takes time and skill to create a "community of professional inquiry" including self-assessment, reflection, and professional conversation (Danielson, 2016).

We trained constantly to become better observers and studied how to generate feedback that mattered to teachers, eventually transitioning to a system that included teachers themselves observing and offering feedback to each other. Here is what



we learned about creating a culture of feedback that moves the needle on performance—feedback for impact.

Less “Cringeworthy” Feedback

All teachers know the educator’s classic nightmare—the one where they are teaching a lesson, without materials and completely unprepared, in a class of unruly students. Amid the chaos, the panicked teacher sees the principal silently observing from the back of the classroom and feels the dread only a performance evaluation can bring. Given this limbic (albeit semi-conscious) response, how can feedback have any constructive impact? Some of our leadership team’s liveliest conversations over the last decade have centered on how to make observational feedback not only actionable but desirable.

For teachers, receiving feedback on their work can feel threatening, even though they give it to students regularly. The simple addition of an observer in a classroom scripting or capturing video can feel unsettling. One teacher shared an article with her principal that described the dread she felt during an observation: “Having someone watch you teach is almost like a stranger standing in your dressing room watching you dress—it feels like an invasion of privacy” (Richardson, 2000).

Many teachers feel anxious when given suggestions for improvement, as if it connotes failure. Some find feedback insulting: How can anyone who hasn’t taught their discipline or grade level offer advice about improving performance? Veteran teachers may even resist the idea that

they need feedback at all; they have mastered their craft through decades of experience.

Overcoming the “cringe and cover your ears” reaction to feedback requires shifting teachers’ mindsets so that being observed brings a sense of pride, not panic. In our district, we chose to do this by framing the observation and analysis of classroom work as the highest honor we can pay professionals. As we moved to new observation practices, we constantly reminded our staff that teachers are highly skilled practitioners in a demanding field with an intricate practice to discuss. Observations are not check-ups to catch mistakes; they are the way we dignify the work and the professional doing it. Feedback is the ultimate compliment of the high-wire act

teachers perform courageously every day.

Observers must also shift mindsets, we concluded, from thinking like supervisors to thinking like colleagues—people who have also taught, struggled with a challenging student, altered an activity mid-flight, or lived through a lesson that didn't work as planned. To do this, evaluators

must take off their leadership hat and put on one of a critical friend and experienced teammate—one with the courage to ask hard questions about instructional practice.

Too often, school leaders enter a classroom taking the position of *expert who will identify how to fix things*, rather than *curious witness to your work*. But curiosity is key, we

FIGURE 1. Focusing Feedback: Common Classroom Practices and Possible Questions

Focus	What We Want to See	What We Often See	Feedback Questions
Class Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher prompts discussion, but students carry the conversation, responding to one another's thoughts, talking to each other rather than the teacher. Language is complex; students should express complete thoughts, questions, and connections. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher asks a series of questions that have a specific, desired, typically brief response. Once a student answers the question, the teacher asks a different question of another student. Four or five students (often volunteers) respond to the teacher, while the remainder of the class observes. Student language is simple, fragmented, and ideas unelaborated or unsupported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did you learn from listening to the student discussion you led? How could you change the complexity of your questions to elicit more student interaction/debate? What strategies could you use to empower more students to speak and all students to speak more? What can you do to make sure students speak in complete sentences using sophisticated vocabulary and fully support or explain their ideas? How do you prepare students for discussion participation and discussion leadership?
Formative Assessment (during group or independent work)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher uses a strategy requiring every student to participate or practice in ways that let the teacher assess their understanding of concepts/skills (ideally before they practice/apply them outside class). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher asks questions of a few volunteer students or asks a rhetorical question like, "Does everyone understand?" leaving the teacher without knowledge of most students' understanding. The teacher checks for understanding by grading homework before students have had supported practice. The teacher circulates during group/individual work time asking vague questions ("Everything OK?") without probing students. The teacher uses group/practice time to do their own work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How could you use available technology or other strategies to efficiently check what all students know? How could you group students during your check to allow more students to participate and to allow you to collect more evidence of what they know? How would you attend to those multiple groups to check for understanding? What strategies could you use to get a more random sample of students during your check? What specific question/task could students answer/do to demonstrate understanding to you as you circulate during work time? During group work, what can you ask that requires students to reflect on their process, push their thinking, or self-assess?

Figure 1 continues on p. 53.

learned. Honoring teachers’ professional expertise requires that we ask questions, listen and prompt as they analyze the performance we captured for them, and provide ideas and resources as they identify what they need to keep growing.

With these new mindsets, our schools become true professional learning communities, teaching ecosystems

where the work is important and fascinating enough to examine and keep improving, *together*.

Letting Questions Do the Talking

Observers often frame feedback as a list of “corrections” sandwiched between two positive comments. But coaching

FIGURE 1. Focusing Feedback: Common Classroom Practices and Possible Questions (continued)

Focus	What We Want to See	What We Often See	Feedback Questions
Stations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher purposely chooses activities and groups so that students receive appropriately targeted instruction when they rotate through the teacher’s station. • Station work is meaningful, can be done without teacher support, and is best done in groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As students rotate through stations, they are each doing the same independent task (e.g., each has the same map to label/color), making the convening of stations unnecessary. • The work required in the independent stations necessitates teacher support, too often pulling the teacher from students at the teacher’s station. • Stations/groups are not constructed to provide scaffolding/stretching for students with different needs/abilities. • Time at stations is too brief for meaningful interaction between teacher/students. • Stretch or sponge activities are not available leaving students who finish early with nothing to do but wait to rotate. • Outside the teacher station, students are doing “time-filler” tasks that are not rigorous, not aligned to objectives, or not designed to build their skills/knowledge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you choose station work for these activities? • How could you have grouped students differently to give them a richer experience? • How could alternate groupings change the guided work in your teacher’s station? • How could you leverage technology to make some station work a more individualized experience? • How do you determine the time required for each rotation? • What was the important learning for students at each station? How was learning enhanced/layered by doing it in this group and in these timed rotations? • Which students probably found the station work easy or hard? How do you design the stations so that those students are supported/stretched? • How will you build on today’s station work tomorrow?

Figure 1 continues on p. 54.

FIGURE 1. Focusing Feedback: Common Classroom Practices and Possible Questions (continued)

Focus	What We Want to See	What We Often See	Feedback Questions
Student Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are asked to produce work for authentic audiences causing them to analyze, synthesize, theorize, and create their own meaning rather than seeking answers from a text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are assigned questions with answers that may be directly found in text/other source. • Students are given a problem set. The problems are designed to be easily solved, all similar, and have no real-world context. • Students are not asked to think about the process and quality of their own work. • Students do work that only the teacher sees. • Students present work to peers who have been given no purpose as an audience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How could you make your students' work more authentic? • How could students design some of the problems they are practicing/solving? • What would change if the problem set already contained answers and students analyzed for errors or to deduce the process for arriving at the answers? • What level (Bloom's) are most of the questions students are answering? • How could you offer students a choice in how they show evidence of mastery? • Who is the audience for your students' work? How does the audience engage with them, require them to explain and defend their work, or learn from their work? • How can you structure presentations of work products so that each student gets maximum time presenting/defending and as little time as possible passively listening? • What feedback will students get on this work to help them adjust the way they do it next time?
Personalized Learning and Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students explore a question or research topic that personally interests them, using a variety of sources/experiences, and communicate their learning to others. They determine content, process, and products and have authentic struggles with information gathering, project management, and collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are assigned a project topic/question with a teacher-defined process and product. • Project work has no authentic audience or real-world purpose. • Project work is done in teacher-assigned groups with little preparation of roles and matching of skillsets to tasks. • Teacher controls the timeline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the reason for the project? • How could you offer students choice in their topic, process, or product for this project? • What's a real-world connection or authentic audience for this project? • How can you design project work to give students experience with the challenges of altering timelines, revising scope, collaborating with others, and connecting with experts? • Was there learning that all students needed related to this project? How did you ensure that each student, regardless of their project, got that necessary learning?
Use of Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology tools are leveraged to: take advantage of teachable moments, individualize instruction, access primary sources, provide forums for exchanging ideas and feedback, improve the writing process, use multiple media, allow student choice in mode of expression, assist in organization of materials, and find authentic audiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology is underutilized. • Technology is the digital version of an analog activity. • Technology is used for automation (ease), not for the advancement of the learning experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How could technology improve the students' writing process? • How could the use of technology change the formats and audiences for student work? • How could technology expand students' resources beyond the school? • How could technology allow each student to learn at their own pace? • How could technology have helped streamline the organization of learning activities? • How could technology have allowed more students to build on each other's ideas?

experts can affirm this “comment sandwich” does little to transform practice. The research is clear on the importance of agency for learners—especially adult learners (Knight, 2018). Being told what to do does not transform performance, and many schools may not have the luxury of an instructional coach to support teachers. Thus, school leaders must learn to deliver feedback that eliminates telling and directing; instead, they must offer evidence (a script or video of performance) and thoughtful questions—prompting teachers to construct their own understanding of strengths, needs, and next steps.

Our conversations with teachers have shown that feedback is best received and acted on when it is focused on a small number of high-leverage classroom practices and framed in the form of questions that prompt discussion about how to improve them. Questioning common classroom structures that educators often take for granted elicits deeper thinking about why we employ them and whether they work. We’ve found that questions often lead to ideas for change and requests for support, or advice from the experienced observer—who has the advantage of seeing many teachers in action—usually initiated by the teacher getting the feedback.

An examination of performance with a curious colleague asking questions can eliminate the typical “fight or flight” response to observations and develop a teacher’s ability to self-assess and strategize ways to improve instruction. When the two of us shifted to a questions-first approach with the 75 teachers we had been working with and observing, our teachers were better able to

Observations are not check-ups to catch mistakes; they are the way we dignify the work and the professional doing it.

identify specific actions that might improve their next performance.

Figure 1 offers a wealth of examples of desired outcomes we sought, common practices we observed, and the types of questions we used to prompt teachers to examine the difference.

An Empowering Process

Feedback can sound like criticism or collegial curiosity. It can cause a




Reflect & Discuss

How are observations framed in your school or district?
Could you recast the analysis of classroom practice as “the highest honor we can pay professionals”?

—————
In your experience, what makes classroom observations most helpful?

—————
Do you think a shift from delivering post-observational feedback to asking thoughtful questions could put teachers at ease—and make them more receptive to instructional change?

listener to recoil or lean forward into a lively conversation about improving teaching and learning. Offered in the form of gathered evidence and purposeful questions, feedback empowers and honors educators, builds trust, prompts reflection, and develops the skills to analyze performance for continuous professional growth.

Over the last eight years, our observations of teachers who have engaged in this process of analyzing and questioning practice have revealed substantive changes in the teachers’ instructional choices and improvement in their implementation of instructional strategies. As a result, we are seeing much more engaged and productive learners. 

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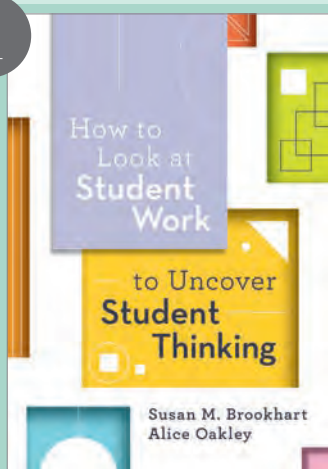
What's your **FEEDBACK APPROACH?**



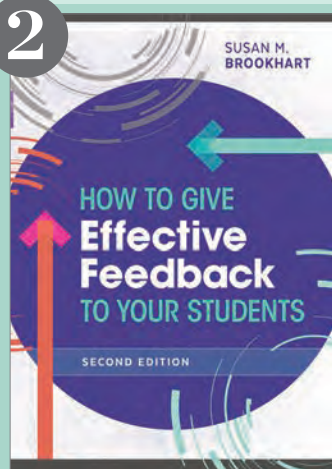
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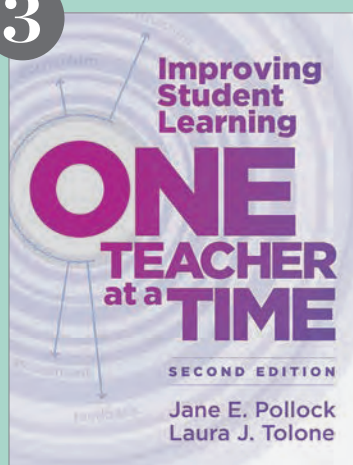
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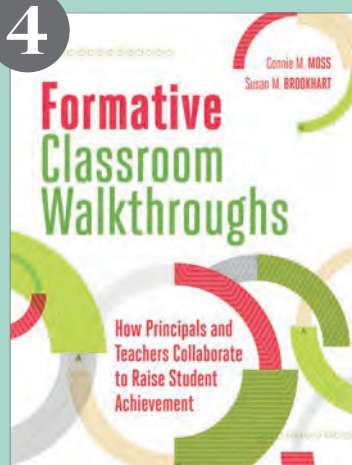
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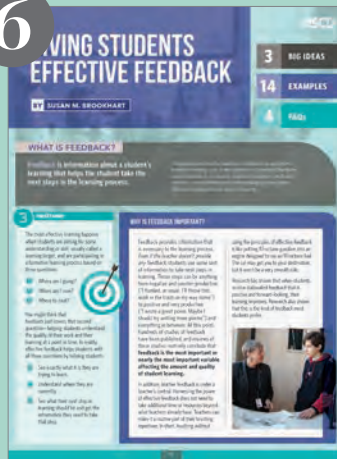
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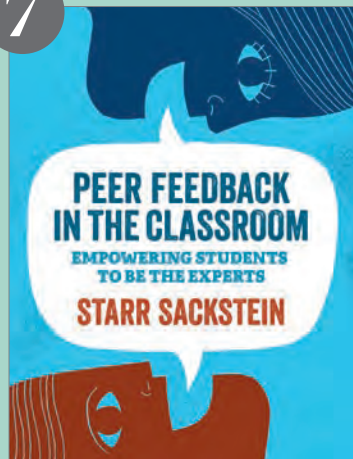
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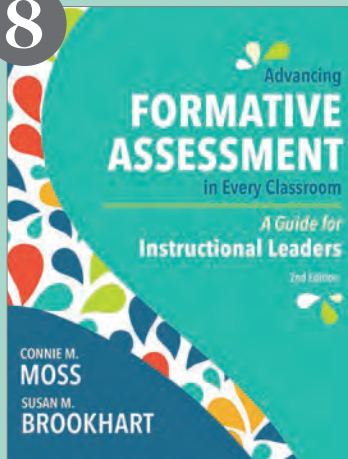
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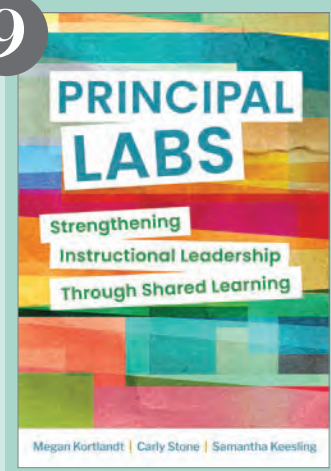
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SCHOOL LEADERS: If You Want Feedback,



Jenn David-Lang

When we think of what makes for ideal feedback, the well-known article “Seven Keys to Effective Feedback,” by the late feedback guru Grant Wiggins (2012) comes to mind. However, the article’s cogent criteria assume that you’re receiving feedback in the first place. The problem for school leaders is that they are often the ones who get the least feedback in the building. And the feedback they do get isn’t always the growth-producing kind. Feedback from district leaders may focus more on compliance issues, while teachers may be too afraid of their job security to tell the boss what they really think. When leaders first step into the role of principal, they think people will just show up at their office door and offer feedback. This almost never happens.

For this reason, I would argue that the most important part of feedback for any principal is to solicit it. However, drumming up feedback isn’t as simple as saying, “Hey, would you

ASK FOR IT

To create genuine feedback channels for their work, school leaders have to develop attitudes and structures to encourage conversation.

give me some feedback on that?” Below are a few suggestions for school leaders to develop the structures and attitudes needed to ensure that the feedback they ask for will be regular, genuine, and truly useful.

Creating Structures for Feedback

Hold One-on-One Meetings

We can all agree that waiting in your office and hoping people will meander in to share some comments about your communication style or the PD you led Wednesday afternoon is wishful thinking. That’s why thoughtful leaders who want to grow and improve put structures in place to ensure that they actually receive feedback. One such structure is the recurring one-on-one meeting. Whether you meet biweekly or monthly with individual staff members for feedback, coaching, and support (and if you don’t, you should), including a regular part of the meeting in which you ask for a “glow” (*What is one way I am supporting your teaching?*) and a “grow” (*What is one way I could do it better?*) helps to normalize the process of teachers giving feedback to their supervisor. Teachers will come to expect this part of the meeting and see critical feedback as something the principal wants, and in fact, expects.

Debrief School Events

Asking for “glows” and “grows” is also a useful structure to include as a regular part of school events. After parent-teacher conferences or the first

day of school, gather staff to debrief and conduct a brainstorm on what went well and what could be done better next time, and have a notetaker record reactions. When staff members see this protocol pop up after every major event, they will come to see that you are genuinely asking for feedback (assuming you do act on it). Further, because this feedback is done via a brainstorm, no single piece of critical feedback will necessarily be tied to a specific person, so it frees up staff to share more honestly.

Vary Feedback Structures

It can be particularly helpful to mix up the structures you use to ask for feedback because not everyone feels comfortable raising their hand and sharing critical feedback face-to-face. In addition to using the one-on-one meeting and brainstorm structures, you might try a range of formats: holding office hours, using online surveys, asking questions via email, and convening focus groups to ask stakeholders for feedback. Leaders may want to ask for feedback on their leadership style (*In what ways might my communication be more effective?*), their coaching (*When I debrief with you, what is the most and least helpful thing I do to help you improve your teaching?*), or their implementation of a new initiative (*What did I do well, and what do you wish I had done differently, when we implemented the new phonics program?*)

Online options—such as Google Forms and Survey



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that I run, each leader takes an opportunity to share a dilemma they have, such as handling a staff member who has a toxic influence on others, finding a better way to involve families in their children’s academic progress, or looking for ways to get teacher buy-in for professional learning when they are feeling particularly burnt out. For these conversations, we use a modified version of the National School Reform Faculty’s Consultancy Protocol (2017). In this structured approach, one leader starts by sharing a dilemma and then remains silent while the rest of the group provides feedback and brainstorms possible solutions to help. This is one of the best structures I know for leadership feedback because the presenter doesn’t feel attacked and the participants don’t feel uncomfortable giving critical feedback.

The most important step you can take to encourage people to keep giving feedback is to actually use that feedback.

Monkey—are a particularly easy way to ask for feedback quickly and effectively. One leader I know who wasn’t having success with the professional learning he was providing used a survey to ask teachers for feedback on how to improve it, and he got plenty of constructive advice. During the pandemic, lots of principals relied almost exclusively on online surveys to determine how effective their supports were during this difficult time.

Use the Consultancy Protocol

One very structured method that produces particularly helpful feedback is the use of a consultancy protocol. A consultancy is a structured process to help someone think through a dilemma, and it can double as a way to give that person feedback. For example, in the mastermind groups of school and district leaders

Include Student Voice

One feedback structure for principals that brings student voice into the process is a small-group student consultation or panel model. In their 2021 *Educational Leadership* article, “Students: The Missing Link in Teacher PD,” James Nagle and Penny Bishop describe how using a structure like this is useful in giving teachers feedback on their teaching, but these consultations can be useful for school leaders as well. In the student consultation model, the principal meets with a small group of selected students. In the panel model, a group of students sit on a panel, and the leadership team asks questions for feedback. In both cases, the adults might ask for feedback on topics students care about, such as grading, school uniforms, or how best to support LGBTQ students. This feedback structure provides valuable insights on the work that school leaders

have done and plan to do and is not something students would otherwise willingly offer up without such a structure. Other ways leaders can regularly solicit student feedback include carving out time during student government meetings or creating a student advisory committee that would regularly meet with and provide feedback to the principal.

Attitude Is Everything

Of course, it's not enough for school leaders to simply put a series of structures in place to solicit feedback. For students, teachers, and supervisors to offer genuine feedback, school leaders need to receive that feedback with the right attitude. The first thing leaders should do when someone offers feedback is to warmly thank the person. This simple step goes a long way in improving the likelihood that the giver will continue to share feedback in the future.

In addition, remember to stay curious (not furious). You don't have to agree with the feedback, but you'll get more out of it if you have an attitude of "What's right or useful about this?" Though feedback may at first seem wildly off base ("I would never drone on about administrivia during a staff meeting . . ."), in reality, it might not be. If you do a little reading about blind spots, you'll find that fewer than 10 to 15 percent of people are truly self-aware (Eurich, 2018). You will be more prepared to hear surprising things about yourself and to receive feedback gracefully once you see that few people are truly aware of their own flaws.

Finally, the most important step you can take to encourage people to keep giving feedback is to actually use

You will be more prepared to hear surprising things about yourself and more able to receive feedback gracefully once you see that few people are truly aware of their own flaws.

that feedback. Show people that not only is it worth their time, but you are also willing to change behaviors, routines, and policies because of that feedback. That will open the door to those who previously had been unsure about sharing their honest thoughts. And when you do make those changes, be noisy about it: "I wanted staff to know that I changed the policy about only wearing jeans on Fridays because of what John said . . ." "Students, I decided to push back the early start of the high school day because of the Friday student focus group's feedback to me. Thank you for that feedback."




Reflect & Discuss

What methods do you currently use to ask colleagues for feedback?

Which of these feedback tactics can you see incorporating easily into your day-to-day work?

Once you solicit feedback, how will you communicate with staff and students about the ways in which you will incorporate it?

Employing even just a few of these suggestions to solicit feedback—one-on-one meetings, feedback surveys, debriefing school events, or small-group student panels—and demonstrating a true desire to hear and learn from feedback—is a sure-fire way to not only raise your awareness of how you lead, but also to help students and staff feel heard and to move your school in the direction your most valuable stakeholders want it to go. 

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Jenn David-Lang is an educational consultant who provides monthly education book summaries via The Main Idea (www.themainidea.net) and facilitates Masterminds for professional learning with groups of school and district leaders. Follow her on Twitter @The_MainIdea.



Make Your Rubric More than

A WALL

OF

WORDS

By streamlining organization and using positive descriptors, we can turn rubrics into tools that students really use.

Matthew Leisen

Teachers all use rubrics. Of course we do.

And those rubrics are probably OK—serviceable and likely supportive of learning. However, many are also likely flawed.

The practice of using rubrics is well-established. In a 2000 article, Heidi Andrade notes that “[a]t their very best, rubrics are . . . teaching tools that support student learning.” As educators, we’ve seen myriad examples of rubrics. We’ve written them, borrowed them, modified them, and added to them. In theory, rubrics are useful because they inform students of their level of achievement, providing detailed descriptions of a range of evaluation criteria. We know it’s best practice to continually update and tweak our rubrics in response to student performance and feedback. But the question remains: do students actually use these detailed rubrics? My suspicion is that they don’t, due to some basic flaws in how traditional rubrics are designed and used.

The Problem with Rubrics

Traditional rubrics are too often a patchwork quilt of teacher-talk—a wall of words. By “traditional,” I’m referring to analytic rubrics where performance or product criteria are listed in one column, and levels of achievement (often numbered 0–4) are laid out in a row across the top. This creates the familiar grid filled with cells describing various levels of student achievement. In my experience, students read these grids about as often and in as much detail as you or I read the user agreement for our latest phone app—not very well, if at all. Andrade (2000) describes good rubrics as “concise and digestible,” but I’ve witnessed lab-report rubrics with 40 different cells. Yes, a small subsection of students may conscientiously look at the rubric when given a new assignment, but the majority of students give traditional rubrics only a cursory glance. And there is no joy in creating a protracted, repetitive document that your students are not going to use.

By “use,” I’m referring to the act of students interacting with a rubric *before* and *during* the learning process. A student briefly looking at their grade and perhaps noting some of the descriptors that have been circled doesn’t qualify

as using a rubric. If we want to place the student experience at the center of the learning process, we need rubrics that are written for students, rather than for teachers.

In addition to being overly long and detailed, many rubrics—maybe most—rely heavily on negative descriptors, or things we *don’t* want students to do. A Google search for the term “Oral Presentation Rubric” returns innumerable examples heavily laden with words such as *partial*, *incomplete*, *missing*, *unable*, *incorrect*, *flawed*, and *not present*. One rubric labeled “kid friendly” included the phrase “audience seemed disinterested.” In a sample rubric shown in a recent article (Alonso, 2017) more than half the descriptors are negative, identifying what students should not do; negative descriptions even appear in the “Satisfactory” column.

Rubric language is also often oddly imprecise. Although most guidance on how to craft a traditional rubric recommends making teachers’ expectations very clear, example rubrics include phrases such as “essay marches along, but doesn’t dance,” “there is . . . no hint of a real person in it,” and “I’m trying too hard to impress” (Andrade, 2000). These types of negative or unclear descriptors are demotivating and confusing for our students.

Why So Many Negative Descriptors?

One potential reason for using negative descriptors is to eliminate the need to write negative feedback. It’s quicker to circle the phrase *Missing Evidence*, than to write out the specific feedback. Another reason is that when creating rubrics, the starting point is often Competent (or 3, B, or whatever is deemed to basically meet the

In my experience, students read rubrics about as often and in as much detail as you or I read the user agreement for a smartphone app.

standard). After composing the descriptors to achieve competency, we work backwards to fill in the descriptors for levels 2, 1, and sometimes even 0. This results in a rubric that has two or three columns describing varying levels of low-quality work. Such descriptors reinforce deficit thinking and provide nothing for students to aspire to.

The effect of these two features—too many words and negative or unclear descriptors—is that traditional rubrics become autopsy reports that are only engaged with after the assignment has been submitted. When I taught middle and high school English, it was rare to see any of my students reading and engaging with my rubrics *before or during* the learning process—precisely when the rubric might have had a positive effect on their achievement. I now cringe when I consider the time I spent “going over” the rubrics for a project or paper, only to find that students weren’t using them in the course of their work and that many missed the mark in the end. The fault, I realized, was mine and I needed to change if I wanted my rubrics to be used differently.

Creating a Rubric with Positive Language

The first step to creating a rubric students will use as a tool in the learning process is:

FIGURE 1. Vertical Rubric Template

2 – Basic
3 – Competent
4 – Excellent

The first step to creating a rubric students will use as a tool in the learning process is: *simplify.*

simplify. Start with three boxes labeled, Basic, Competent, and Excellent, as shown in Figure 1. That’s it—just three boxes, not 12 or 16 or 40. I also strongly recommend turning your rubric vertical and stacking the three boxes, but a horizontal arrangement would also work (see Leisen 2019a, 2019b). Other words can be used for the main descriptors; however, for this example I’ll use Basic, Competent, and Excellent.

If you employ a 4-point grading scale, each box will also have a corresponding number—for example, 2 (Basic), 3 (Competent), and 4 (Excellent). The question “What about the 1 box?” often arises. I recommend having only three boxes because on a 4-point scale, a 1 does not meet basic requirements. A 2 is the first passing grade. If a student does not meet one of the descriptors in the 2-Basic box, then they will score a “1-Limited or Incomplete”—but filling a fourth box with negative descriptors isn’t necessary or helpful. As long as the Basic box is very clear about what students need to do or show, if something is missing, a teacher can assign a grade of 1, “Not Yet,” or “Work in Progress.”

First, focus on the 2-Basic box and create a list of tasks or assessment descriptors that will demonstrate a basic level of achievement for which you could comfortably assign a passing score. It’s imperative that students aren’t assessed on whether or not they understand an overly complicated rubric, so teachers must write clear, positive indicators of success, as shown in Figure 2. Tell students exactly what they need to do, create, or show, not what we *don’t* want them to do. If you want your students’ lab reports to include an introduction that clearly states the topic they are investigating, then don’t waste

If you want students' lab reports to include an introduction that states the topic they are investigating, don't waste space with descriptors like "Missing introduction."



time and space with descriptors that say, "Missing introduction" or "Introduction does not clearly identify the topic." Instead, state that to meet the "Basic" requirements, their report needs to "Include an introduction that clearly states the topic of the lab." The clear message to students is, *Do this*.

Interestingly, I adapted the "basic" descriptors in the rubric shown in Figure 2 from a traditional rubric, where they had been listed in columns 3 and 4. This is another effect of filling our rubrics with negative words like *partial*, *incomplete*, and *unclear*. Because we start with such a low standard and need to differentiate between the columns, we end up listing basic, sometimes minimal expectations to score a 3 or a 4. Previously, I might have awarded a 3 for correctly including a conclusion on a report, but that's really a basic requirement. Now, that requirement is where it belongs, in 2-Basic. In

other words, eliminating negative descriptors enables us to increase rigor and expectations.

Once you've listed requirements in the Basic box, start populating the 3-Competent box. These descriptors

usually mirror what's in the Basic box but have a higher level of complexity. For example, students might be required to write an introduction to earn a 2, but for a 3, that introduction needs to establish a broad topic

FIGURE 2. Rubric with Positive Task Descriptors—Basic Level

2 - Basic: In order to score a 2, you must meet each of the following requirements:

- Includes an **introduction** that clearly states the **topic** of the lab
- Data is presented and includes **graphs and images**
- Includes a **results statement** of what was observed
- Includes **analysis** (explanation) of **evidence**
- Includes a **conclusion**
- Lab report is **edited** for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation

FIGURE 3. Lab Report Rubric with Positive Task Descriptors for Competent and Excellent

3 - Competent: You must meet all of the "Basic" requirements, plus all of the following:

- Introduction begins with a **broad topic**, but then **narrows to the specific topic** of your lab
- Graphs and images **include descriptions**
- Results statement is **accurate** and **matches data** presented
- Analysis explains **knowledge gained**
- Conclusion makes a **connection** to previous science labs

4 - Excellent: You must meet all of the "Competent" requirements, plus all of the following:

- Introduction includes a "**hook**" and **previews the important details** of lab
- Data is presented in a **specific, logical order**
- Results statement is **connected to the conclusion**
- Analysis is **thorough** and **accurate** and **supported by data**
- Conclusion is a **detailed summary** of results, observations, conclusions, flaws, and connections to other labs

before narrowing and identifying a specific topic.

Following completion of the 3-Competent box, list descriptors for the 4-Excellent box. These should be the most complex and rigorous tasks, again stated in positive terms. Figure 3 shows what these boxes for this rubric for a lab report might look like.

An equal number of descriptors

in each box isn't necessary; the "4-Excellent" box should usually have fewer descriptors than the 2-Basic or 3-Competent boxes, to avoid cluttering our rubric with inauthentic, unnecessary, or redundant expectations. If a "basic" requirement is to have "a properly formatted APA heading," then no "competent" or "excellent" equivalent of that element

is needed. Also, keep in mind that even if a teacher writes seemingly crystal-clear descriptors, students will always benefit from examples to aid the learning process. Seeing exactly what is meant by "data is presented in a specific, logical order" will help students see what meeting these indicators and demonstrating excellence looks like in practice. Ideally, an educator would take these exemplars from past student work, but as a teacher, I sometimes created these myself to provide clarity of expectations to my students.

Using Rubrics Before and During the Learning Process

A rubric filled with clear, positive descriptors is ready to be put into action *before and during* the learning process. As part of this, it's crucial to accept that your rubric will evolve. As students are working with your rubric, you may identify descriptors that should be reworded, redistributed into a different box, or deleted altogether. Give yourself permission to start with an imperfect rubric, knowing that adjusting, modifying, and improving is one of the things great teachers do. (We often ask our students to take something "good" and make it "great"—and we must do the same at times.)

One question I often hear about this approach is, "What if a student accomplishes everything in the 4-Excellent box and everything in the 3-Competent box, but they're missing something in the Basic box? That learner has demonstrated excellence, but what grade should they receive if they haven't met one of the basic requirements?" In most cases, with a well-constructed rubric, this shouldn't

actually happen. The Basic requirements will closely align with the Competent and Excellent descriptors, with the higher-level requirements building on the foundation laid by the Basic level. A situation where a learner has met requirements at higher levels but not fulfilled something at a lower level is unlikely to arise, but it is possible.

That said, if a student has demonstrated excellence but missed a basic descriptor that is easily corrected, teachers could justifiably award the 4. Sometimes, however, one of the “2-Basic” requirements is absolutely required (e.g., I will include transitional phrases to introduce new topics), although a student might have done all the other work needed to attain Competent or Excellent except for that one task or action. When this happens, I will assign the student a “W” (Work in Progress), meaning “You aren’t done yet, and you need to fix this”—with the expectation that the student will make the required revisions within a reasonable grace period. This could also be indicated by “NY” (Not Yet), “NG” (No Grade), or a similar abbreviation.

If the required revision is never completed, then a teacher *may* decide to change the “W” to a score of 1 (basic requirements have not been met), but this is a situation I work to avoid. I’ve found it’s extremely rare for a student who has met some or all of the “excellent” descriptors to not fix a deficiency to demonstrate their learning. Often only a brief tweak or addition is needed, and most students are happy to have the opportunity to make the correction and turn in a better assignment. Keep in mind that these rubrics are designed to raise students’ performance, not penalize them for technicalities. And it is imperative to clearly communicate how our rubrics will be used—*during* the learning process to identify and make needed revisions or improvements.

Indeed, when we *don’t* initially assign a grade to an insufficient product, and instead ask the student to make revisions or improvements, the rubric becomes a tool for feedback, rather than an autopsy report. If you are exploring ways to

provide reassessments or multiple opportunities for students without going through a complete redo, this procedure offers a way. An entirely new assessment, new project, or a “retake” isn’t necessary; instead, you can highlight omissions and areas to be improved while providing a chance to make it right. If rubrics are to be tools of assessment *during* the learning process, then we need to incorporate such feedback and opportunities for continual improvement.

Finally, because we use positive descriptors, it’s very clear to the students what they need to do. The rubric becomes a tool for self-assessment to be applied during the learning process.

Students can also use the rubric to assess examples provided by the teacher, which can lead to rich conversations about achievement, expectations, and what exactly phrases like *high-level thinking* mean. Teachers might even leave space on a rubric for students to come up with descriptors: What do *they* think would show basic, competent, or excellent achievement?

The end result is a living rubric that provides feedback during the learning process—a process now centered around students. 🗣️

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Too often, rubrics are a patchwork quilt of teacher-talk.

Quizzes and tests don't count as feedback if educators and students can't act upon the information they provide.

Ben Arcuri and Myron Dueck

A few years ago, while attending a well-known grading conference, a group of us took a break to go holiday shopping. One of the educators in our party had a mission—to find his daughter a holiday-themed snow globe.

To our colleague's delight, we came upon a store focused entirely on Christmas. With an air of confidence, he swung open the door, all but reaching for his credit card to obtain his daughter's wish. As we scoured the festive boutique, and failed to immediately find the crystal ball, he approached a sales associate.

"Where might I find your snow globes?" he asked.

"You are the fifth person today who's asked for a snow globe, and I'll say for the fifth time—we don't sell them," she said.

It was hard not to see this as an instructive

but they were read only as the fires raged and ships sunk.

Perhaps things are not so different in our schools. We have a lot of data, and we claim to value feedback, but to what extent is that feedback data disseminated and acted upon? Would we educators have seen the signs that the planes were on their way? Are we getting signals that we should stock snow globes only to inadvertently ignore customers' requests? Perhaps the airwaves are buzzing with valuable feedback data that's not even on our radar.

Defining Effective Feedback

Recently one of us, Myron, designed a professional development session focused entirely on feedback. At the start of the session, he asked the teachers to confirm that they regularly provide students with feedback. Then he suggested that if they were going to be examining feedback,

Fine-Tuning Assessments

example of someone being oblivious to feedback.

Another example: In his fascinating book *The Secret War* (Harper, 2016), Max Hastings explores the complex and perilous world of WWII espionage and intelligence. One of his conclusions is that intel was only as valuable as any country's ability to (a) disseminate it and (b) act on it. One of many examples cited was the 14 pages of intercepted radio signals suggesting that Pearl Harbor would be attacked. These intercepts had been in the possession of a U.S. intelligence officer,

they should define it. The response in the room was a blank stare.

According to Sadler, feedback in educational contexts is information provided to a learner to reduce the gap between current performance and a desired goal (1989). First, we need to articulate that desired goal. Effective feedback needs clear, straightforward objectives—hopefully derived from established standards. Second, any student's *current performance* needs to be understood by the student. This requires time



for Better Feedback

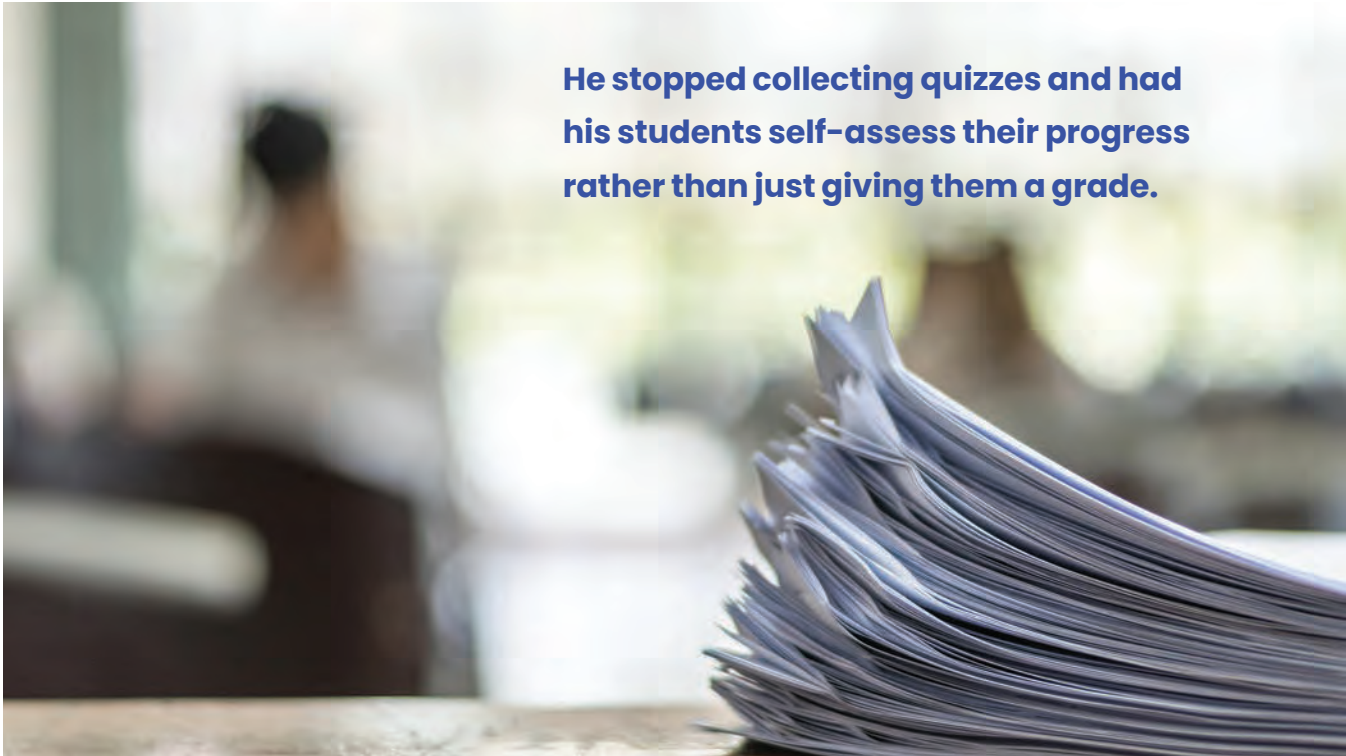
for review, revision, and learning from mistakes. Finally, if the student is going to reduce the gap between the goals and current performance, then they will need to know how. Feedback has not been given unless the student has a clear, personalized direction as to what to do next (Hattie, 2012; Sadler, 1989).

Before we get to a few effective feedback tools and examples, tested and tried in real high school classrooms, let's establish a few elements of effective feedback that we will specifically

look for in those examples.

Effective feedback:

- Must involve student voice, choice, and agency. The teacher and student should form a co-pilot relationship on this flight.
- Does not need to “count” in the gradebook—in fact, it's often much better if it doesn't.
- Thrives on fewer categories to describe the learning. If you're using percentage grades that have 100 categories, consider moving to a proficiency scale.



He stopped collecting quizzes and had his students self-assess their progress rather than just giving them a grade.

■ Should be an integral part of a larger classroom-assessment system that contributes positively to student disposition and learning.

■ Can be used by the teacher and student in a timely fashion to make informed “next-step” decisions.

Now that we’ve established a definition for feedback, and elements to consider in its implementation, let’s explore a few examples from our own classrooms.

Method #1: Effective Quiz Feedback—Immediate, Informal, and Informative

When we started looking into the research on effective feedback, we began to realize that we might not be providing clear objectives, nor monitoring the airwaves for informative feedback. Perhaps our students were asking for snow globes, and we were selling toasters.

Ben decided to look more closely at his in-class quiz structure. He’s always been a fan of quizzes—they are easy to create, efficient to administer, and perfect for checking student understanding on specific learning targets. After letting students complete one of these short assessments, Ben could typically grade them before heading home, which made it possible to go over them as a class the next day. These moments of revision were great for conversations and checking in on understanding . . . or so he thought.

Right around the time of the snow globe incident, Ben realized that he needed to rethink how he could better utilize quiz feedback. He wanted to find a more effective way to give students the opportunity to close the gap between their current performance and the established goal and improve the quality of the feedback they were getting.

He implemented a few changes—big and small—that dramatically improved his use of feedback within the constraints of available class time. Key changes included making his quizzes entirely formative—they were not “counted” toward the final student grade. He also stopped collecting and grading the quizzes and shifted the assessment process to his students by having them self-assess their progress rather than just giving them a grade. Here’s how his new quiz feedback structure works:

Ben’s grade 11 chemistry course has 25 main learning targets organized into 5 units of study. After a day or two of instruction, lessons, labs, and activities, the students can expect a short quiz to assess their understanding. These quizzes are not counted toward the student grade. Each quiz takes approximately 10–15 minutes, then the class goes

over it together. Some students may finish earlier than others, so while waiting they might compare their answers with their neighbor, look up previous notes, or try alternative solutions. The main purpose of the quiz is not to accumulate points, but rather for the students to check their level of understanding on a specific learning target. If a student is stuck on a question, or bumps into confusion, they can take steps to change that.

Reviewing the answers to the quiz is an opportunity for discussion, debate, and the airing of opinions. At the end of the discussion, the students self-assess their original responses and identify where they had gaps in their understanding of the concept. Based on this discussion, students use the table in Figure 1 to determine most accurately, on a scale of 1–6, the statement that best applies to their level of understanding on the established learning outcome.

After the students are done with the self-assessment, Ben walks around the room and records their self-evaluation—but only to track their progress, not to form any part of their summative grade. The power of this process is that it provides him, the teacher, with valuable feedback. He might ask students, “How are you feeling after that quiz?”, “Did anything stand out to you?”, or “Do you know where to find some practice questions?” This way, he can quickly identify a common problem or question and determine concepts that he should re-teach. He can also identify instructional elements and activities that may have fallen short of what his students needed and may reteach a certain concept in a new way. Throughout this process, Ben’s work is in line with Hattie’s suggestion

FIGURE 1. Student Self-Assessment Scale

Level	What Does This Mean?
6	Near perfect demonstration of understanding/skill
5	Strong demonstration of understanding/skill, slight error involved
4	Good demonstration of understanding/skill, a few errors
3	Satisfactory demonstration of understanding/skill; key concept missing; errors may be common
2	Minimum demonstration of understanding/skill; numerous errors
1	Inadequate demonstration of understanding/skill; basic skills are minimal; errors throughout

that feedback is for the teacher (2012) and with research that there is a positive relationship between student performance and assessment when the teacher is willing to modify or improve instruction (Brown, Peterson, & Irving, 2009).

Ben’s quiz structure reflects other research surrounding memory. According to Cepeda et al. (2008), “To achieve enduring retention, people must usually study information on multiple occasions” (p. 1). To encourage “enduring retention,” Ben offers a re-quiz a few days later on the same learning target, with different questions or a different format. Once again, the re-quiz is not counted toward their overall grade. The point is to give students more feedback so they can take risks, analyze their routines, and demonstrate a better understanding of the learning target. As Susan Brookhart (2012) argues, “Feedback can’t be left hanging; it can’t work if students don’t have an immediate opportunity to use it” (p. 27).

Method #2: Rearranging the Test Structure

While Ben restructured his quizzes for better feedback, Myron tackled his tests. According to Bjork and Bjork, “The effectiveness of tests as learning events remains largely underappreciated, in part because testing is typically viewed as a vehicle of assessment and not a vehicle of learning” (2011, p. 62).

One of the barriers Myron bumped into when trying to use test data for effective feedback was that his tests weren’t designed for it. All of his test sections had been separated and organized by format: true/false, short answer, fill-in-the-blank, and so on. Each of these sections were a blend of various learning priorities, and therefore the score or grade for either a section, or the entire test for that matter, was a broad and nebulous concoction. This approach flew in the face of William’s suggestion that “we need to ensure that feedback causes a cognitive rather than an emotional reaction” (2018, p. 153). Students would

Everyone—students and teachers—learns through clearly identifying objectives and then using feedback to improve understanding of those objectives.

be eager to see their overall score, indicating an emotional response, only to cast it aside immediately after. Myron yearned for a cognitive response—a change in their thinking—and he hoped that feedback on specific outcomes would achieve it.

Myron decided to restructure his regular unit test, separating the sections according to the key learning outcomes rather than according to format. As a result, students and teacher alike immediately gleaned more useful information. The students received feedback on how well they grasped specific learning priorities, and Myron could see which outcomes had been effectively conveyed to the students, individually and as a whole. This *feedback for the teacher* allowed Myron to improve upon or revisit specific learning objectives. Lastly, he could reorganize his gradebook, creating three or four columns organized by outcomes, rather than one column of a blended score. In one easy step, he achieved a standards-based gradebook rather than an event-based one (Dueck, 2021).

Once the unit tests were divided by outcomes, it was far easier to use portions of the assessment for formative or summative purposes, depending entirely on how the students (or Myron as the teacher) responded to the feedback data (Dueck, 2021). In other words, the student could decide which sections of the unit test would count in the gradebook, and which sections

would be re-tested. Therefore, for example, the first test could be entirely formative, or partially formative if the student decided to revisit certain sections. If a student was satisfied with the original test, then it was rendered entirely summative.¹

Acting on Feedback

The two of us are not alone in the quest to re-engineer many of our assessment tools and processes to better align with the main tenets of effective feedback. Myron has seen evidence of this in his work internationally as well. Everyone—students and teachers—learns through clearly identifying objectives and then using feedback to improve understanding of those objectives. Considering Sadler's definition of feedback, perhaps the most important question is: To what extent are we helping our students close the gap between the identified goal and their current performance in relation to it?

When wading through the reams of grading data we collect every year, our challenge is not dissimilar to the code-breakers of WWII and the owners of Christmas-themed gift shops. To harness the power of feedback, we need to disseminate it *and* act on it. 🗣️

¹For an example of a test cover that indicates how sections are tied to specific outcomes, as well as the corresponding student tracking sheet, visit <https://myrondueck.wordpress.com/involving-students-in-ongoing-assessment/>

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Ask an ASCD Expert

ASCD faculty and authors respond to educators' dilemmas.

Are Students Always This Mean?

Q As a new teacher I have noticed a lot of drama in the classroom. Kids say unkind things to their peers and leave others out. And this is only kindergarten, so I can only imagine the situation at other grade levels. I realize this has always gone on but somehow it seems more prevalent now. It breaks my heart to see this meanness/unkindness and how the targeted children are affected. Do you have any ideas for addressing this behavior and fostering a community of peace and caring?

—Concerned Kindergarten Teacher

A I appreciate your desire to create a positive classroom culture centered on peace and caring. While your students may not have been of school age at the start of the pandemic, like all of us, they experienced periods of isolation and had limited exposure to activities that create a sense of belonging. Now more than ever it is important to teach students how to feel and show empathy.

Simply put, students need to be taught how to accept and value each other. Every child wants to feel they are seen and heard. To do this, it is important to teach both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Students need to develop a sense of self. Teach them the power of affirming statements that build confidence and self-awareness. I would suggest greeting students outside of the classroom each morning. Hold up a full-length mirror for students as they enter the classroom and ask them to verbally commit to a kindness affirmation while looking at their reflection. Affirmations might include, "I am kind," "I am ready to learn," "I am a good friend," or "I am ready to listen." Of course, these will need to

be modeled and practiced. This will set the tone for the day.

Next, consider devoting 10 minutes to the start of each day to build community. For several weeks use simple questions such as, "What is your favorite fruit?" This will get students familiar with the process of taking turns and listening to each other. As your class becomes more familiar with the process, you can ask empathy skill-building questions such as, "What do you do when someone gets hurt?" Ask questions that naturally invite teachable moments.

Throughout the day when you notice your class demonstrating kindness or showing empathy, point it out. Consider jotting the example on a slip of paper and place it in a Community Kindness jar. End each day with optimism by drawing a slip from the jar to highlight and remember one of the bright spots. I would caution against focusing this particular activity on any one student, as you do not want kindness to become a competition. Instead offer verbal praise, in the moment, to highlight students who are demonstrating peace and caring.

Finally, be kind to yourself. This is tough work, and I applaud your question, as it shows your deep concern for our young people. As you plant seeds of hope, notice the little sprouts that begin to pop up around you. On tough days, take a deep breath and remember this work takes time. I see you, I hear you, and I am cheering you on! 🙌

Meredith McNerney, an ASCD faculty member, is a professional development consultant and former principal of a large Title I school in Maryland. She owns the education consulting company The Trauma Trainer LLC and provides professional development workshops and coaching to schools on topics related to SEL, culture and climate, and bilingual education.



Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey



Getting GREAT at Feedback

The key to feedback is how it is received by the student.

Feedback is an important influence on learning. Broadly, the overall effect size for feedback is 0.48. However, not all feedback is equally effective. Several factors can strengthen feedback, especially in knowing where and when to use it. A recent meta-analysis of studies on feedback¹ reported that several factors can make feedback contribute even more to

However, a common misunderstanding is that it's all about the amount of feedback given—and the more the better. But the key is actually how the feedback is received by the learner. The relationship between the person giving the feedback and the one receiving it is paramount in terms of how much “gets in.”

Here's where both having a solid relationship with a student and delivering feedback in a caring way that sustains the relationship comes in. Consider times in your own life when you received feedback you dismissed. Perhaps you didn't have a trusting relationship with that person and were suspicious of their motives. Or perhaps the feedback was so vague you weren't sure the deliverer was a knowledgeable source of information, an expert who had accurately observed and judged. Even if the feedback was accurate, you likely failed to act on it.

A Focus on Five Dimensions

Looking at models both inside and outside of education that reflect best practices informed by feedback research, we came across a framework that forges trust, helps the hearer sense a positive motive, and is clear and informative. (There are many approaches or systems for feedback that cover these things well, but we can't highlight them all here.) It's the GREAT model developed by LarkApps, a team productivity and engagement company that supports businesses whose employees work remotely but collaborate regularly. This feedback framework identifies five dimensions of good feedback:

- **Growth-oriented:** The delivery signals one's intention as constructive, focused on improvement not criticism.
- **Real:** Feedback is honest, targeted, and actionable (showing the speaker's grounding in the area in

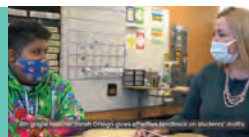


TURK_STOCK/PHOTOGRAPHER/ISTOCK

student achievement. For instance, feedback that includes information on the task or processing the task (“Think about what you know about order of operations as you try that problem again”) and on self-regulation (“You used that attention strategy we've been talking about, and it's working”) is better than feedback that's simply corrective. And feedback is equally useful in oral or written form.



**Watch
the Video**



Watch a 4th grade teacher give growth-oriented feedback on students' writing at <https://www.ascd.org/ej/articles/getting-great-at-feedback>.

question), not vague or false praise.

- **Empathetic:** It combines critique with care and a quest for mutual understanding.

- **Asked-for:** The speaker encourages the receiver to ask questions and seek more feedback, after offering brief comments.

- **Timely:** It's delivered soon after the task or learning is demonstrated. Feedback gets stale fast.

Let's imagine what sharing one's thoughts on student work, with each dimension in mind, might look like.

Growth-Oriented. Start by stating your purpose for giving feedback in such a way that makes clear your intent is constructive. For instance, a middle school English teacher (we'll call her Kelly) might begin with, "Saylor, I noticed you've been working on your essay revision, and I wanted us to have a chance to discuss some feedback so you can make the most of your additions." By adding the statement that the feedback is for the purpose of strengthening the writing, the teacher signals that it's being given in the spirit of growth, not just correction of an error.

Real. "Real" feedback is information-rich, giving the learner details about what to start doing, continue, or change. It's not simply corrective ("This one's right, that's wrong"). Rather, it gives the learner information about the task, the process, and perhaps their self-regulation. Kelly might start with what Saylor should continue doing:

You're effectively showing your thinking on paper with your thesis statement. One thing to start doing is to restate one important idea at the beginning of each of the next paragraphs. I suggest you stop adding the thesis statement again at the end of each paragraph—it's not necessary. I have to add, your persistence in making this a polished piece really shows.

"Real" feedback is information-rich, giving the learner details about what to start doing, continue, or change. It's not simply corrective.

Notice Kelly's focus on the thesis statement. It's important not to overwhelm the learner with more feedback than they can process at a given time.

Empathetic. It's easy for feedback to be reduced to "you" directives. Be sure that what you say to a learner also contains "I" messages that foster empathetic listening. In a conversation that could involve feedback that might feel critical to the listener, people often listen more effectively when the person sharing feedback uses this pronoun. Talking about "I" as much as "you" can reduce that defensive clench that might otherwise shut down the conversation.² For instance: "I'm still unclear on your thesis statement. I've struggled with formulating a clear thesis in my writing, so I know how hard that is." Or, to affirm something, "As I read your essay, your effective thesis statement helps me to join you in your argument."


Asked For. Effective feedback is a dialogue. Simply blasting a student with lots of feedback isn't likely to foster relationship-building. After providing micro-feedback, ask the learner if they'd like more comments or guidance ("What questions do you have? Is there anything you're confused about?"). Suppose Saylor responds to Kelly: "I thought we were supposed to restate the idea—the thesis—in each paragraph. I know it's on the rubric for this essay. Where do I restate my thesis?" Kelly now recognizes that for Saylor, the

instruction wasn't clear. The two of them further discuss restating the thesis in the concluding paragraph of the essay.

Timely. Novice teachers often make the rookie error of saving their best feedback for the end of an assignment, only to witness students checking for the grade and discarding the rest. Imagine if the conversation between Saylor and Kelly hadn't happened until the final draft was submitted. Give comments and guidance at a time when a student can still act on it.

GREAT Feedback in Action

In the video that accompanies this column, you'll see 4th grade teacher Sarah Ortega at Harborside Elementary in Chula Vista, California, offering feedback. Notice that she provides GREAT feedback to two students who have written a first draft of an opinion piece on a topic they chose.

Feedback isn't better just because it's longer; most of these feedback conversations take only a few minutes to complete. But regular doses of GREAT feedback provide the teacher and the student with learning opportunities while fueling a positive relationship. 

¹Wisniewski, B., Zierer, K., & Hattie, J. (2020). The power of feedback revisited: A meta-analysis of educational feedback research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 3087.

²Bletscher, C. G., & Lee, S. (2021). The impact of active empathetic listening on an introductory communication course. *College Teaching, 69*(3), 161–168.

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Jill Harrison Berg



Breaking Through Blind Spots

To shine a light on our biases, we must seek honest feedback.

We all have cultural ways of being that we've picked up inadvertently—regardless of the skin we're in—that create or perpetuate harm to others. From a young age, society teaches us the subtle message that some people matter more than others, that there's a social hierarchy to follow that ranks people by identity markers such as race, class, and gender—and that we shouldn't talk about it. This

Actions such as these can cause students to question themselves: Am I good or bad? Who is normal and who is not? Do I matter?

Sowing seeds of self-doubt in students is dangerous. Yet it's nearly impossible to avoid doing this if we don't know that we're doing it. And it's hard to know if we're doing it because most people won't tell us.

The Shortfall of Self-Reflection

Biases are “blind spots” caused by the shortcuts our brains take in their attempt to help us be more efficient and effective. To protect us from becoming overwhelmed, our brains selectively economize on what we remember. When we're short on time or information, our brains make inferences that enable quicker decisions (Benson & Manoogian, 2021). But are these self-protective mechanisms serving us and those around us well, or are our brains economizing to our detriment? To truly know the answer, we need feedback.

Self-reflection only goes so far because, well, we're biased. Our brains are trained to skip right over what we *haven't* taught them to look for, what *doesn't* confirm what we already know, and what we *don't* want to admit is there. Sure, self-reflection can be aided by feedback in the form of evidence, such as observations of another's emotional response to our actions, comments from bystanders, or even hard data like a score on Harvard's Implicit Association Test (Project Implicit, 2011). However, it's remarkably easy to find alternative explanations for outcomes we don't like and to interpret any discrepancies between fact and rationalization in our favor. Self-reflection is necessary but insufficient for identifying and mediating the harm our implicit biases might cause.

For this reason, we need to be able to look to others

“order” of things influences our actions in ways we don't intend, but that have a harmful impact.

Left unchecked, our biases can make their way into our classrooms in subtle and not so subtle ways: teaching ideas and perspectives that primarily originate from just one of our seven continents, praising students who come to school with new school supplies, paying more attention to boys than students of other genders, or encouraging participation of lighter-skinned students while chastising or ignoring darker-skinned students.



LA-PANDRI / ISTOCK

as allies—to solicit feedback from family members, friends, colleagues, and even students. Unfortunately, it's rare that these individuals will be instinctively inclined to share their honest observations with us about ways our bias may be causing harm. In the internal calculus of the pros and cons of providing feedback to others about their biases, most of us would cautiously lean toward keeping our mouths shut.

Plus, nobody wants to give us feedback if they feel we aren't prepared to receive it well. We might get upset and take it out on them, we might take it personally and hold it against them, or we might push back and make them feel like they were wrong. The potential disadvantages and risks of raw honesty outweigh the advantages of it every time. If we're going to get the feedback we most need—the feedback that can help us to take responsibility for our impact on students—we need to learn how to receive it skillfully.

Receiving Feedback Skillfully

In their 2015 book, *Thanks for the Feedback*, Stone and Heen point out that accepting feedback well is a learned skill. Receiving feedback often triggers an emotional response that can make us want to fight or flee. But we can—and must—choose to channel this energy in service of our ultimate goal: to recognize and mitigate the harm our biases may cause. We must embrace feedback as the coaching we need to reach that goal. If we can do this proactively and visibly, we'll build others' confidence in our commitment to improvement and we'll get the feedback we most need.

Whether you turn to your colleagues and ask for feedback directly or find yourself on the receiving end of unsolicited input, these tips adapted

from Stone and Heen will help others to trust that you value their feedback.

■ **Ask for specific kinds of feedback:** Would you rather hear low-inference descriptive observations, or do you want to hear colleagues' interpretation of those observations? Are you concerned about how you come across in a particular context? It's OK to ask for what will be most helpful to you: "I'm working on equity of voice in our classroom discussions. Can you help me by being another pair of eyes?"

Self-reflection only goes so far because, well, we're biased.

■ **Seek feedback from unlikely sources:** You might be tempted to approach the "usual suspects"—maybe long-standing coworkers or colleagues who match your demographics. Instead, try inviting one-on-one conversations with students, new colleagues, or others outside your social sphere. You might ask, "Would you be willing to join me at lunchtime? I'd like your perspective on my facilitation of team meetings."

■ **Be transparent when you're feeling defensive:** You may hear something you weren't expecting. After all, the purpose of feedback is to get a new point of view! If you're feeling emotional, acknowledge it. Clarify aloud that it's not the messenger but the message that has you heated: "I don't want you to be put off by my emotional reaction. It's just my passion for this issue, and my desire to do better."

■ **Get curious, not furious:** Channel powerful feelings into clarifying questions that can help you picture and depersonalize what the other person has said. "Can you tell me more about what you noticed?"

■ **Be imaginative:** Can't accept feedback from this person? Imagine someone else said it. Can't believe this feedback is true? If it were true, what would you do? Imagine conditions under which feedback that sounds off-base might be on-target. Try telling yourself, "That's the last thing I want to happen! How can I keep anything like that from happening?"

■ **Show appreciation:** Others have taken a risk to share their perspective with you. Respond with gratitude that's specific. How has the risk they've taken been enlightening and useful to you? You might say, "Thank you for the feedback. When I know better, I can do better!"

When we lean in to inviting and receiving feedback on sensitive issues, we not only grow personally and professionally, but we also improve relational trust with our faculty and colleagues.

Those of us who are serious about assuming responsibility for our impact cannot afford to have others withholding the very feedback we need. To break the silence, we must give them confidence that we value their feedback. We can do this by receiving it skillfully. 🗣️

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Jim Knight



One Habit that Improves Conversation Skills

This simple act can deepen conversations and connections in schools.

When Vivek Murthy was chosen to be the nation's 19th surgeon general in 2014, he anticipated, as he explains in his book *Together* (2020), that he would direct his attention to concerns like obesity, tobacco-related diseases, mental illness, or other frequently discussed health issues.

said they “often or always feel lonely.” An AARP study (Frank, 2018) using UCLA's loneliness scale reported that one out of three American adults over the age of 45 are lonely.

Studies from several other countries show that pervasive loneliness isn't confined to the United States. All these studies were done before the pandemic, but I think we can safely assume that loneliness hasn't gone down since COVID-19 arrived. What these statistics imply is that the next time you sit in a meeting with a small group of fellow educators, at least three and maybe more of the people gathered feel chronically alone.

One antidote to loneliness is connection through conversation. It's as true for K-12 educators as anyone that a single conversation can help you feel heard and seen, breathe life into your existence, and show you that you aren't alone. That's why I've spent much of my professional life studying and writing about communication, particularly in my book *Better Conversations* (Corwin, 2015).

Conversation is especially important in schools—even more so during the pandemic, which has brought with it so much uncertainty and forced isolation. The quality of the conversations that occur in schools can profoundly affect children and adults. Indeed, the best way to improve what happens in schools, might be to improve the way we talk with both children and adults.

Conversation, Interrupted

But there's a problem: Many of us want to be better communicators, but again and again we fall back into old habits that thwart real communication. We know what we should do, we just don't do it. I often fall into this trap myself.

To better understand how people might persist



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To ensure he was addressing the top health concerns, Murthy conducted a listening tour across the country. When he asked people to talk about their health, he repeatedly heard about one topic he hadn't expected. “Loneliness,” Murthy writes, “ran like a dark thread through many of the more obvious issues that people brought to my attention, like addiction, violence, anxiety, and depression” (p. xv).

The Loneliness Crisis

In *Together*, Murthy reveals the scale of the loneliness problem by sharing some statistics. In a 2018 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 22 percent of U.S. adults

in changes toward having deeper exchanges, I established the Life-Giving Conversations Project at the Instructional Coaching Group. We study what happens when people try to adopt simple, life-giving communication habits. The project is just starting, but I'm confident we have identified one habit that can radically improve anyone's conversations. What is that habit? *Put away your phone.*

To realize why this is central, consider what Sherry Turkle, an expert on how technology affects personal relationships and interactions, says in *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015). Turkle acknowledges that technology has many advantages, but also describes the negative impact addictive use of a smartphone can have:

We are somehow more lonely than before . . . our children are less empathetic than they should be for their age, and . . . it seems nearly impossible to have an uninterrupted conversation at a family dinner. We catch ourselves not looking into the eyes of our children or taking the time to talk with them just to have a few more hits of our email. (p. 12)

What Happens When We're Phone-Free . . . and Why It's Hard

I've been studying conversations with a small group of dedicated adults who've been putting their phones away on a regular basis just to see what difference it makes. Every day, my research partners and I identify when we will put our phones away. At the end of the day, we write a few notes in a journal to record what went well and what we'll do differently the next day.

Everyone involved is finding that putting away our phones seems to be

making a big difference. We're having deeper, better, more joyful and more important conversations. At home or at work, in casual friendships or committed relationships, stepping away from your phone can transform surface interactions into conversations that build authentic connection.

In a 2018 study, 22 percent of U.S. adults said they "often or always feel lonely."

But while putting the phone away is an easy physical task, for many people, it's still not easy to do. Many of us struggle to go five minutes without glancing at our phone. If the phone bings or buzzes, trying to ignore it can feel like sitting beside warm, chocolate chip cookies when we're dieting; it's hard to resist just one look. One look becomes a short check for texts, and then email, and, well, just a few minutes on Instagram—and suddenly our conversation is over.

Fortunately, there are a few simple things you can do to make it easier to adopt this new conversation-enhancing habit:

- Identify specific times when you want to put away your phone (for me that's anytime I have an opportunity for a meaningful conversation).
- Put your phone out of reach or in a different room when you're about to have a conversation.
- Take time in the evening to reflect on the rewards you experienced from putting the phone down that day—or any costs of not doing so.
- Ask those closest to you whether

they feel a difference in your conversations when you're phone-free. Positive comments from your partner, child, or friend may be all you need to persist.

No Trivial Step

We'll never completely get rid of our smartphones—and we shouldn't. Having a video communication system; the world's largest library of books, music, and videos; and access to millions of apps and games on a pocket-sized device is a wonder. We'd be silly not to use such devices. However, if administrators, coaches, and teachers just put their phones away during important conversations, they could experience the kind of connection that can help others—and themselves—feel less alone. Given the scale of the loneliness crisis, this habit might seem trivial, but I believe it can transform your relationships. I'm hoping it will transform mine. 📧

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Matthew R. Kay



Student Teacher Standouts

Four traits we should encourage in novice teachers.

As I approach the second half of my teaching career, a few new passions have sustained my energy. The most important of these is mentoring student teachers—specifically, helping them to lead tough classroom conversations. While I try to assure them that their personal pedagogy doesn't have to match mine, I do want them to leave after a semester in our classroom feeling comfortable enough to not shrink from necessary conversations when the moment calls.



students before they become student teachers can nudge them in the right direction.

They initiate informal student interactions.

This year, it's been great to see my student teacher greet students at the door, ask them how their day is going, compliment them on their outfits, offer a silly "Happy Monday!" on a 1st-period Monday or "We're almost there . . ." on a last-period Friday. This should not be extraordinary, but it actually is, even among otherwise warm and outgoing pre-service teachers. Sometimes student teachers are afraid of the kids (which might be a red flag), but just as often they're so busy thinking about what they need to do that every second away from teaching is spent huddling over a laptop preparing to teach. Yet these check-ins can be just as important as last-minute edits to one's Google slideshow. Informal micro-interactions help students feel comfortable being vulnerable with the teaching team, which is a necessary prerequisite for them to contribute thoughtfully in tough classroom conversations.

They are excited about students' work.

Every year, I give my student teachers a slice of class to own: our Silent Sustained Reading program. Basically, they show our students how to find cool books, and once a quarter, they help the students design a project that lets them show off what they've gotten from the reading. These creative projects are brief, unless a student takes special interest in something (this year, one of our freshmen made an awesome stop-motion video with LEGO materials). I am always encouraged when, as the student teacher first hears students' project ideas, their eyes light up. "Whoa! That's a cool idea! Tell me more!" And when some drafts appear, they talk about how much they can't wait to see how the story ends. Then, after the final projects come in, they pull the students aside to pepper them with compliments.

Some years, this one included, I'm lucky to have a student teacher who doesn't need to start this mission on step one; their first few student interactions reveal that we can skip to the more complicated aspects of leading classroom conversations. While we often think that these proclivities are natural, I like to think that there's something about these pre-service teachers' training or prior experience that gives them this capacity. That it might be as much nurture as nature. Let's look at a few of these prescient behaviors, so that those of us who teach

I am especially happy when a pre-service teacher accesses kids' writing on Canvas that I have not asked them to grade, just because they want to see what students created. On a few occasions, I've come into the classroom wanting to tell the student teacher how "___ really did a good job on her memoir vignette," only to be interrupted by an excited, "I saw that!" A pre-service teacher who is excited about a student's burgeoning creativity is more likely to be excited by the fragmentary and often marginally coherent ideas that students share in class discussions. When students sense real excitement from their teacher about their creativity, they are more likely to keep recommitting to the creative process when it's needed in more challenging arenas.

They offer prompts before offering answers.

My students are often very comfortable asking student teachers questions that they hesitate to ask me. This might be because student teachers are typically closer to students' age or because they occupy the quasi-causal space of being both a still-stressed student and an authority figure. Students especially love asking pre-service teachers questions that are rooted in a momentary lapse of attention. ("Hey Miss, what page are we on?")

Sometimes, however, the nervously whispered questions are about ideas that the class is discussing. ("But Miss, why would Macbeth do that?") Here, I am always impressed when a student teacher doesn't answer with her own analysis, but instead chooses to answer with another question ("What do you think?"), or even better, with a specific prompt ("Haven't you ever just wanted something really bad? Yeah? What

When students sense real excitement from their teacher over their creativity, they are more likely to keep recommitting to the creative process when it's needed in more challenging arenas.

does that do to your mind?").

Answering questions with higher-order prompts keeps the inquiry going, which in turn keeps important conversations from dying prematurely. This decreases the awkward silences that student teachers often dread. Clever re-prompting is a skill that good dialogic teachers spend their entire careers perfecting, but it begins with this simple habit.

They take initiative.

A few years ago, I had a student teacher who, without my asking, constantly went to the board to take notes during our class discussions. This seemingly small habit was incredibly useful and inspired what has become one of my few non-negotiable rules: *Take initiative at all times.*

I make this expectation clear in my first conversation with student teachers, and it becomes a mantra throughout our time together. If you see a student struggling, go help them. If the numbers don't quite work out for a peer review, step in for the absent kid and give feedback. If nobody raises their hand to act out a role, step in and try to win an Oscar. If a conversation stalls, and you have an idea of how to rev it back up, do so. Or at least try. If you are unsuccessful, you haven't really lost anything, and you've gained useful experience. And most important, you have shown students (and your cooperating teacher) a willingness to mix it up.

Many mentor teachers are likely to reward this willingness to mix it up

by trying to match your energy. Want to teach a cool unit that engages a personal passion? Go for it. Got a field trip idea? Let's give it a shot!

It's easy for us to trust student teachers who take initiative—as long as when we gently and respectfully redirect them, or offer them notes after class, they take the feedback in stride.

The Right Direction

When a tough classroom conversation comes up, these underrated habits can make all the difference. A student teacher who is eager to read a student's imperfect but thoughtful creative work is more likely to recognize and engage that same kid's intent through some poorly phrased takes in conversation. A student teacher who offers prompts before answering questions is going to find that skill very useful when digging through the lines of a tough text to find discussion-worthy gems. And a student teacher who takes initiative in all things is more likely to find the best supplementary sources, the ones that allow students to make connections and see themselves in the conversation just a bit clearer. 🎯

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Monica Burns



Giving Effective Feedback in Online Spaces

With practice, educators can become digital feedback experts.

Providing students with relevant, actionable feedback is essential in every grade level and subject area. With learning happening in-person, virtually, and in hybrid spaces today, the need for effective online feedback on student discussion threads, posted essays or research papers, video or slideshow

sure your tone is clear. When was the last time you received a confusing text message? Maybe a family member or friend sent you a quick text message, and you had trouble figuring out the sender's tone. You might have wondered whether the person was frustrated, upset, or joking. Text-only messages can be difficult to decipher, even with the people closest to us, so they can definitely be misunderstood by students if you aren't careful. If your message is concise, the crispness of it might feel dismissive or not very supportive. If you're not sure that your tone is obvious, try using an audio or video recording instead.

- Include an action item or a question to help students understand what next step to take. In online spaces, providing a clear action item is especially important so the feedback isn't lost in a stream of notifications. This next step should be specific. For example, you might suggest that students visit a particular website to continue their research or suggest they click on a link to a video tutorial that can help them tackle a problem.

- Decide if a comment is truly aligned to your unit goals or goals set for an individual student. Although it may be tempting to add comments that are helpful to a students' growth in general, review a project rubric, checklist, or other items related to the unit to make sure all feedback is task-related. In online environments, you want to make sure that comments on a document, or annotations on a student's digital work, are easy to locate and used purposefully.

- Include an emoji along with your comment, such as an icon that connects to the type of next step students should take. Choose just a few "go-to" emojis to use in your online feedback rotation so students get used to these icons and know what you are suggesting or asking of them. For example, insert a video emoji if you want to



ALEXSI/ISTOCK

projects, and other assignments is even more urgent than ever before. As you transfer the best practices of giving thoughtful feedback to an online space, there are a few strategies worthy of consideration.

Before You Hit Send . . .

When you are giving feedback in online spaces, it is important to consider clarity, tone, method, and emotion. Here are some things to consider before hitting "send."

- Re-read your comment before submitting to make

suggest that a student should watch a tutorial. One caution: It's easy for emojis to feel unprofessional or distracting, so you may want to use emojis only as visual cues for student feedback and stay away from ones that show emotions.

All About Audio Feedback

Audio feedback has many benefits when working in online spaces. You may find that it's easier to explain a complex topic by talking through it. Audio feedback might seem “friendlier” as well if a student was not very confident when they submitted their work or happens to be having a tough morning when they open up a document with your feedback. Hearing your voice peppered with encouragement and understanding could be more meaningful to the student. As I share in my book, *EdTech Essentials: The Top 10 Technology Strategies for All Learning Environments*, this type of feedback can help communicate a suggestion, a piece of advice, or an action item as well as the enthusiasm of the person giving feedback.

In addition, audio (and video) feedback offers a higher level of ease and efficiency for both teachers and students. When this type of feedback becomes part of your routine, you may find that it saves time for everyone involved. For students giving feedback to their peers, this can be a particularly effective and quicker way for them to articulate their thoughts. For teachers, audio feedback can save time that can be reallocated to designing supports and interventions based on formative assessment data you might collect in the process of observing

student peer feedback loops.

What makes for good, effective audio feedback? When recording your voice, make sure to speak clearly and at a speed that gives students time to process what you are saying. If you are using a tool with transcriptions, it is important to speak at a steady pace so captions can be generated. Although every situation is different, the length of your audio feedback should be as short as possible. A comment on a document might be 15 to 30 seconds long, while a video reply explaining a concept might be one or two minutes.

Exploring Video Feedback

There are some situations where audio or written feedback is just not enough. Video feedback is especially helpful for explaining a concept with visuals where students may need to see something in action. In the same way that recording your voice helps in building connections and understanding, a

video of you demonstrating a concept can be powerful.

When incorporating video feedback into your routine, screencasting—recording your screen as you talk—is a very helpful strategy for providing feedback to students. Tools like Loom and Screencastify make it easy to illustrate and point out different visuals to clarify your feedback. For example, an English teacher might create a video where he annotates a piece of student writing or an exemplar text. Or a math teacher might record a video that models the steps for solving a math problem so students can hear her think aloud and watch her move through the steps. Screencasting can also help you highlight a particular resource, like showing off an online portal students might want to use if they are conducting research on a topic.

When working with students in online spaces, digital strategies for providing feedback can transform the way you review and interact with student work. Audio and video tools can help you give clear and concise feedback and actionable advice in any subject area. As you make the most of digital tools for intentional and thoughtful feedback, students can build their experience navigating online spaces in effective and meaningful ways. 🗣️

Tools for Audio and Video Feedback

- **Flipgrid**—A mobile app and website that lets teachers reply to student video submissions with video responses. Teachers can also create Shorts to explain a concept.
- **Mote**—A tool that lets teachers add voice recordings to comments in Google Docs, Forms, and Slides.
- **Seesaw**—A platform popular in elementary classrooms where students can post their work for teachers and classmates to view. Teachers can comment on student work in both text and audio format.

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Crafting Feedback for Student Learning

How an ASCD Partnership in Illinois builds principal confidence and empowers teachers.

For educators at any level of leadership, giving feedback is a crucial part of the job. Knowing exactly how to provide it, and toward what outcome, however, isn't always intuitive. In a partnership with ASCD's Professional Learning Services, the Maywood-Melrose Park, District 89 in Illinois, has been working to clarify the feedback process and reorient school leaders toward one central goal: improving student learning.

The district began working with ASCD three years ago, and as the partnership has evolved, Maywood-Melrose Park has placed more emphasis on principals. Although their school leaders had training on feedback in the past, it hadn't translated to better student outcomes, noted Maribel Taboada, the district's assistant superintendent of curriculum.

"We knew that there was a need for our administrators to be able to give that critical feedback to our teachers," she said.

School turn-around specialist and veteran educator Alisa Simeral has been the ASCD faculty member facilitating this professional learning. After an initial virtual workshop in August 2021, she has visited the district four times this school year to help conduct instructional rounds, in which administrators discuss strategies for giving feedback to teachers before visiting

classrooms and counseling their colleagues directly. Simeral explained that the group follows the definition of feedback presented by Grant Wiggins, who argues that feedback should be information aimed at accomplishing a goal. Here, that goal is developing

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It is critical to help teachers identify obstacles to student learning on their own.

teaching strategies that correlate with stronger student learning

"Usually, you have [specific criteria] that you're looking for in advance as you walk into classrooms," she says. "What's unique in this case is our only 'look for' is student learning."

This kind of formative feedback is not usually what administrators are trained to provide. Delivering it requires confidence—and an ability to look past superficial aspects of teaching practice. For school leaders who, say, need to counsel a chemistry teacher when they themselves don't have experience in that subject, it can be challenging to focus on substantive feedback that is connected directly to the purpose of learning.

"It's so easy to walk into a classroom and go, 'Oh, kids are out of their seats,'

or 'Oh, it's really noisy in here,'" says Simeral. But in this professional learning, it is critical to help teachers identify obstacles to student learning on their own. "The minute I tell you what to do, I take away your ownership of it," she says.

That approach has been returning positive dividends. Taboada noted that implementing these professional learning services has correlated with academic growth in the district. "I think we're becoming more in alignment with what we are expecting to see," she says.

The partnership with ASCD also allows leaders from different schools to collaborate directly, something that is new for Maywood-Melrose Park, said Taboada. The district organized four separate PLC teams based on grade levels that meet with Simeral during visits. Having supportive colleagues in Maywood-Melrose Park has been key to the district's success so far.

"Feedback is a lot like that. There are so many factors, and you can't approach it in a linear manner. You have to tackle it piece by piece and keep connecting it all together," says Simeral.

—Noble Ingram

For more information on ASCD's Professional Learning Services, visit: <https://www.ascd.org/services>

Readers React

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People-Driven Equity

Great issue. The knowledge base is extensive. Anyone who works with children internal to school districts or external can benefit from putting these data and people-driven frameworks into practice. [🐦](#)

Ashford Hughes Sr. (@ashfordhughes)

Know Thy Audits

How many missed conversations have there been because we've not been talking about the same kind of curriculum audit? Everyone needs to look at this! ["Which Curriculum Audit Is Best for Your School?" by Lauren Porosoff] [🐦](#)

Daniel Goduti (@danielgoduti)

Revisiting Classroom Equity Strategies

It's cool when you're reading EL magazine and an article reflects on practices you read and used from EL in past years ["Why Classroom Equity Strategies Aren't Always Equal" by Martha Curren-Preis, Nicole Garcia, and Meghan Shaughnessy]. Sticks, stems, and mixed-ability groups are all great tools and we need to reflect on purpose and adapt, if or when the tool becomes misaligned. To add to the sticks vignette: Ask the questions before pulling the stick? In my classroom, part of the point was that we all gotta be thinking about the question, ready to jump in to add, agree, disagree, etc. [🐦](#)

Dustin Voss (@TeacherVoss)

Finding the Courage for Antiracist Work

Terrific interview with Liz Kleinrock. ["Liz Kleinrock on Antiracist, Antibias Teaching"] We cannot center adult comfort as we move forward in our antibias and antiracist work for students and schools. The work is too important. [🐦](#)

Jennifer Abrams (@jenniferabrams)

Advice for Healing and Affirming

Ever have one of those days when you just need to fill your cup? Well Brittany Hogan's letter to equity-focused educators won't disappoint. ["An Open Letter to Equity-Driven Educators"] Brilliant, affirming, empathetic, inspiring, and motivational. [🐦](#)

Shonda Ambers-Phillips (@Doc_SOAP)

In-depth thinking at our Curriculum Council today. We moved a step closer to selecting our common K-12 template and began to think about the components of an audit tool to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion. Using the recent article from [Lauren Porosoff] as inspiration! [🐦](#)

Chrissy Miga (@ChrissyMiga_WI)



The Wonders of Wordle

My Grade 3 class joined the Wordle craze. ["What Wordle Reminds Us About Effective Phonics and Spelling Instruction" by Nell Duke, from The ASCD Blog] was persuasive about pedagogy that can be embedded for phoneme and word patterns. One of my students actually solved "oxide" after discussing the position of letters after we had solved "__ide." [🐦](#)

Erin Newburn (@ErinNewburnEDU)



Love (or dislike) something in a recent issue of EL? We want to hear about it! Write to us at edleadership@ascd.org or on Twitter @ELmagazine. Printed reactions may be edited for clarity and length.

To explore past issues of *Educational Leadership*, go to: <https://www.ascd.org/el>.



Tell Us About

A time that giving or receiving feedback really shifted your thinking.

Getting Rid of the Grade

When I started teaching English, I followed the traditional route of marking essays with corrections, suggestions, and scores. It would take hours. When I handed the papers to my students, they would look at the grade, and then smile, sigh, or grimace. The paper would be quickly stuffed into their backpack. I rarely saw students read what I had written. So I made a major shift to my instruction. I decided to give feedback only, with no grade. I also developed a cover sheet for student writing so students could let me know what they thought they did well and where they struggled. I met with each student and we set a revision writing goal. I would love to say that everything went smoothly and my class ran like clockwork, but the truth is that there were many bumps in the road. However, the outcome was that my students participated in their own learning, and I no longer spent hours on end grading papers on my own time.

—Roberta Blasjo, resource teacher,
Leesburg High School, Leesburg, Florida

Getting Beyond the Emotional Response

Sometimes we solicit feedback and sometimes it's thrust upon us. Recently I asked our faculty to provide me, their principal, with feedback. I asked what should I stop, start, and continue doing, plus a couple of other questions. The response was largely affirming for me, as well as giving me a few tips on how to refine my approach. I felt good about this process, as I was ready to receive the feedback, and agreed with the constructive comments. Then, in the last week or so I received some feedback I

did not ask for about how my behavior in online meetings was affecting some team members. Feedback is always a gift, but sometimes it's not easy to receive. Knowing myself, I could see the validity of the feedback, yet it rocked me. I had not been ready for it. In these cases it's hard to distance oneself emotionally from the feedback and look at it cognitively, moving away from the personal realm. There is one other real positive I can take from all of this: those involved felt safe enough to share that feedback with me, the principal. That thought gives me a boost as I process the feedback itself.

—Liz Durkin, middle school principal,
Stamford American International School, Singapore

Feedback Salad, Anyone?

We need to rethink the “feedback sandwich,” a method in which we offer praise, then criticism, then praise. It's predictable, and can therefore feel formulaic and disingenuous at times. Tailoring feedback by using our knowledge of the recipient can be a more sincere approach. Asking the recipient for their initial thoughts and engaging in reflective conversation helps build trusting relationships so that feedback can be welcomed on a regular basis.

—Julie Webb, literacy coach,
LitCentric, Napa, California

**Share your responses to
upcoming questions at
www.ascd.org/tell-us-about.**

REMEMBER TO VOTE for the 2022 ASCD General Membership Board Election

Vote to fill two positions on ASCD's 2022–2023 Board of Directors. The three candidates are:



Dr. Hannah Gbenro
Chief Academic Officer (CAO), Olympia School District, Olympia, Washington



Dr. Sarena Shivers
Deputy Executive Director, Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators, Ypsilanti, Michigan



Dr. Kim Wallace
Associate Director, 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) State Center, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, California

Cast your vote by logging in with your member ID and password at www.ascd.org/vote. The election closes on April 30, 2022.

Please contact ASCD Governance at governance@ascd.org with any questions.

Resources for Effective Feedback

Questioning for Formative Feedback: Meaningful Dialogue to Improve Learning by Jackie Acree Walsh. (ASCD, 2022). Stock no. 119006.

Learning knows no boundaries. So how can we infuse school learning with the authenticity and excitement associated with real-life experiences? Jackie Acree Walsh explores the relationship between questioning and feedback in K–12 classrooms and how dialogue serves as the bridge connecting the two.

Generating Formative Feedback by Jackie Acree Walsh. (ASCD Quick Reference Guide, 2021). Stock no. QRG122060.



Uncovering student thinking and pinpointing gaps in understanding are

essential formative assessment tasks for any teacher. In this quick reference guide, Walsh walks teachers through a process for crafting the quality questions that shine a light on student learning and identify learning gaps.

How to Look at Student Work to Uncover Student Thinking by Susan M. Brookhart & Alice Oakley. (ASCD, 2021). Stock no. 122011.

Assessment expert Brookhart and instructional coach Oakley walk teachers through a better and more illuminating way to approach student work across grade levels and content areas.

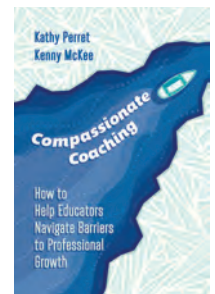
The Definitive Guide to Instructional Coaching: Seven Factors for Success by Jim Knight. (ASCD, 2021). Stock no. 121006.

Coaching expert Jim Knight offers a blueprint for establishing,

administering, and assessing an instructional coaching program laser-focused on every educator's ultimate goal: the academic success of students.

Compassionate Coaching: How to Help Educators Navigate Barriers to Professional Growth by Kathy Perret & Kenneth McKee. (ASCD, 2021). Stock no. 121017.

Barriers to effective teaching are temporary challenges successful coaches help teachers overcome by connecting them with the right methods and keeping them focused on the destination. Perret and McKee identify the six most vexing challenges teachers face and the six corresponding ways that coaches can help teachers surmount them.



Giving feedback is an invitation to intentionality. With greater pedagogical clarity, we can significantly increase student learning and help students become more active participants in their own learning.

—Andrew Housiaux
and Bowman Dickson, p. 30

Feedback should move a conversation from discovery to action—yet delivering it is more art than science.

—Sanée Bell, p. 36

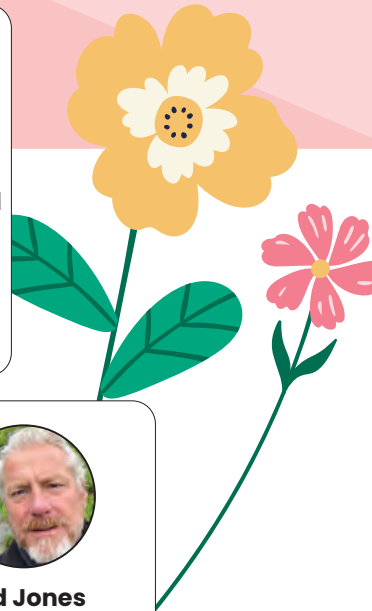
It's very easy to be reluctant to hear someone's criticism if they haven't also noticed what you do well.

—Therese Huston, p. 12

Your ASCD Professional Learning Partners

ASCD's Partnership Managers collaborate with leaders to build capacity across schools and systems. Together, we'll develop tailored professional learning journeys delivered by educators who connect with your team.

Meet Your Team



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Learn more about ASCD's
Professional Learning Services

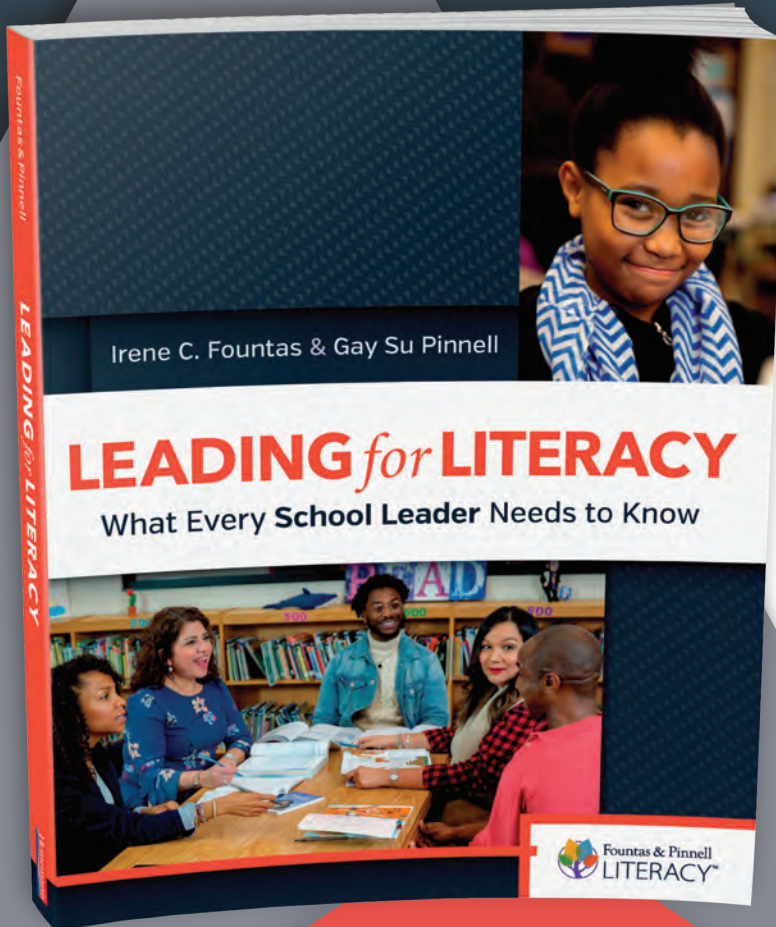
GET STARTED

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NEW!

THE LATEST ESSENTIAL RESOURCE FROM IRENE FOUNTAS AND GAY SU PINNELL

Lead students to literacy achievement



Leading for Literacy

guides school leaders as they create equitable communities of learning for all students.

- ▶ Build effective teams that deliver high outcomes for all students
- ▶ Create a common vision and shared values to create a healthy, collaborative school culture
- ▶ Sustain and scale up systemic improvements in your school or district
- ▶ Implement evidence-based instructional practices
- ▶ Design effective systems for intervention
- ▶ Teach English learners strategically
- ▶ Harness responsibilities and opportunities as a school leader
- ▶ **Includes over 30 observation and protocol tools**



Explore the workshop

Pair this invaluable resource with the virtual mini-workshop:

Leading for Literacy—Improving Student Outcomes in Your School (PreK-8)