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Helping Struggling Teachers

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What happens to teachers who aren't reaching performance goals? Assistance plans can help them get back on track.



In the current context of heightened accountability for schools and their leaders, educators are searching for ways to restructure, reform, or renew the whole of what we call schooling. One element of this improvement process is capacity building—the development of all people who serve the school, both within its walls and in the community (Fullan, 2000; Schmoker, 1999). Capacity building means training, mentoring, developing, and supporting professionals at all levels of service. As expected teacher and administrator shortages become more acute, we will need to retain, assist, and support current personnel. Marginally performing teachers will test our commitment to improvement. Administrators face the demanding challenge of maintaining high standards while offering increasing levels of assistance to individual teachers so that they can meet those expectations.

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Assistance Plans

Expert opinion and empirical research indicate that 5 to 15 percent of the 2.7 million teachers in public school classrooms perform at incompetent levels (Bridges, 1992; McGrath, 1995; Tucker, 1997). We usually define incompetence as a lack of relevant content knowledge or necessary skills in such key areas as instruction and classroom management. Despite conservative estimates that 5 percent of teachers are incompetent, the termination rate—which includes resignations, dismissals of tenured teachers, and nonrenewals of probationary teachers—is less than 1 percent (Bridges, 1992; Educational Research Service, 1988).

Many principals usually use remediation to assist poorly performing teachers and view remediation procedures as an important tool for fulfilling supervisory responsibilities. Principals in one study reported that approximately half of the teachers identified as incompetent improved after participating in a remediation process. Further, those principals perceived remedial procedures to be the most important factors in an effective evaluation system (Tucker, 1997).

One specific remediation strategy is to create a plan of assistance. Although most evaluation systems offer assistance plans, few principals take advantage of them because they require time and effort to implement (McGrath, 2000). In addition, many principals do not consider using remediation except as a last resort. In those cases, remediation often fails because the principal has moved beyond wanting to help the teacher improve to wanting to simply dismiss him or her. As schools are pressured to produce greater student learning results and teacher shortages begin to make nonrenewal and dismissal less likely, assistance plans may become useful strategies for improving instruction. They offer a bridge between the demands for high quality instruction and the

reality of poorly performing teachers.

Consider the case of Mrs. Bates, who has taught language arts at Holloway Middle School for more than 15 years. During her tenure, the school population has grown from 350 to 780 students. Some of her students' parents love her, but others are less enthusiastic. As student enrollment has increased, Mrs. Bates's late arrivals to class, loss of student work, and poor follow-up with parents have become more problematic. Although her past good evaluations reflected solid content knowledge and instructional skills, increasing numbers of parents are complaining about her disorganization and poor communication—with justification, in the principal's mind. What is the best approach in this situation? What if serious conversations about the problems have not yielded any changes? The principal in this situation decided that an assistance plan offered a means of identifying problems and provided needed support for a historically capable teacher.

Every administrator committed to taking his or her school to the next level of excellence should provide assistance to struggling teachers. They have an ethical obligation to do so because successful remediation affects many people. Students and their parents benefit because it ensures a quality educational experience. For teachers, remediation reflects the school system's concern for its teachers' professional development. Dedicated administrators know that whole-school improvement won't happen unless everyone performs well, and helping each teacher do so is an integral part of an instructional leader's role. In addition, assistance plans take on legal importance in some states because they are required before principals can recommend teacher dismissal.

Continuum of Assistance

When educators hear about assistance plans, they may react negatively. Teachers often perceive assistance plans as the first step in a possible dismissal case instead of the final step in a continuum of assistance that is embedded in the supervisory process. If the supervisory process is characterized by high expectations for all staff and ongoing, direct, and specific feedback and support, teachers will view the offer of assistance with greater trust.

The first step in a fair evaluation process is the clear and explicit explanation of job expectations. Principals often underestimate the value of articulating their beliefs about what good teaching involves. Most individuals want to meet expectations if they have a clear understanding of them. Teachers new to the system and their principals may need to discuss the job expectations: What does "positive student rapport" mean in a given setting? What is the expected level of collaboration? How much technology should teachers use? Describing and supporting school norms prevent future misunderstandings and help staff accept judgments about performance as part of the school's evaluation process. Once expectations are clear, the normal supervisory process with observation and feedback can take place.

If concerns arise during formal or informal observations, principals can provide verbal feedback and suggestions to teachers. Most teachers respond positively to this level of guidance. If verbal feedback does not lead to improvements, written feedback is the next step. A written note or observation summary often offers greater clarity and weight than verbal feedback and can spur changes. If the teacher still fails to improve in the identified areas, written reprimands can define problems in terms of job-related expectations and the need for improvement in meeting those expectations. At this point, an assistance plan will help clarify performance concerns and expected changes and will help determine possible interventions and a timeline.

Assistance Plan Components

Plans of assistance typically have at least six components: a definition of the problem, a statement of objectives, intervention strategies, a timeline, procedures to collect data, and a final judgment. The plan should match the needs of the individual and the school. What works for one teacher will not necessarily work for others, even in the same school or with similar problems.

Definition of the problem. Describing the teacher's precise problem or problems is the most difficult aspect of the remedial process but is fundamental to determining the other components of the assistance plan. Relate the identified problems to the district's evaluation criteria. Focus on key concerns that apply to a variety of situations.

In the case of Mrs. Bates, for example, at least three problem statements would be appropriate to address late arrivals to class, disorganization, and poor communication with parents. Such statements might read as follows:

- Mrs. Bates arrives late to one or more classes several times each week, leaving students unsupervised in her room.
- Mrs. Bates does not return papers to students promptly—within three to five days. As a result, students are not receiving timely, corrective feedback.
- According to a dozen parent complaints during the past two years, Mrs. Bates does not consistently return phone calls or answer requests for information.

Statement of objectives. If a current behavior is defined as the problem, then the statement of objectives or goals should reflect what future or improved behavior should look like. State what is required for the teacher to be retained. The objectives should be fair and reasonable, and they should describe a permanent pattern of teacher behavior.

Possible objectives for Mrs. Bates would be

- Mrs. Bates arrives for all classes before the beginning of each scheduled class period.
- Mrs. Bates regularly returns papers to students in three to five days.
- Mrs. Bates responds in a timely fashion—usually within one or two days—when parents contact her.

Intervention strategies. Intervention possibilities range from assigning the teacher formal coursework to asking a mentor to work with the teacher. Typical strategies include changes in the teaching assignment, observations and feedback from content specialists, demonstrations and assistance by master teachers, visits to other classrooms, reference materials, coursework, and district-based topical workshops. Teachers should play a central role in determining the most useful intervention strategies for their circumstances.

Possible interventions for Mrs. Bates would depend on the reasons for the problems that the administrator defined earlier. For example, Mrs. Bates's problems suggest that she needs help with organizational skills. Receiving assistance from a better organized, respected colleague or attending a time management course might be useful interventions.

Timeline. Develop a reasonable and firm timeline for the teacher to meet each objective. More complex problems may require more time. But in cases where the problem has serious implications for students, shorter timelines are appropriate. Assistance plans typically last for up to one year.

An appropriate timeline to assess improvement in Mrs. Bates's case might be 9 to 12 weeks. Her principal might extend the timeline for an additional 9 to 12 week period to ensure that Mrs. Bates has established a new work pattern.

Procedures to collect data. The principal should collect and organize data from multiple sources, including the teacher. For example, ask assistant principals or principals from other schools to observe the teacher. Use measures of student learning and feedback from parents and colleagues to create a complete picture of the teacher's performance. The challenge in the data collection process is to be objective, factual, and nonjudgmental.

Possible data collection strategies in Mrs. Bates's case would be

- Promptness to class, as observed by the principal or assistant principal and/or described in a

personal, written log of when she arrived.

- Management of paper, as evidenced by principal or assistant principal observations and/or a survey of students.
- Parent contact, as demonstrated in a record kept by Mrs. Bates of when parents contacted her and when and how she responded, or by parent feedback.

Final judgment. Once the principal collects the data, he or she must make a final judgment of whether the teacher has attained the plan's objectives. The principal must decide whether the teacher has exhibited a new pattern of behavior that meets the objectives, whether the plan must be continued with some modifications, or whether there is justifiable cause for dismissal. Fortunately, far more teachers meet their plans' goals than need to be dismissed (Tucker, 1997). Principals must provide supporting evidence to substantiate their final recommendations.

Advice for Administrators

Like teachers, administrators can find remediation to be difficult and stressful. The following suggestions can help administrators as they work with struggling teachers.

- Establish a support team. Principals need both technical and emotional support in the challenging process of working with underperforming teachers. Diagnosing and labeling problem areas—a key component of the assistance plan—may require additional input or confirmation from content specialists. Ask the central office or more experienced colleagues for assistance. In addition, principals need support in remaining optimistic and constructive even when the teacher may not be open or responsive to assistance (Painter, 2000).
- Invite teacher participation. Ultimately, the teacher needs to change some aspect of his or her teaching approach, so the assistance plan must include preferred intervention strategies and timelines that meet the teacher's needs. The principal is responsible for the completeness and integrity of the assistance plan, but honest collaboration with the teacher in identifying problems, instructional goals, and intervention strategies will help the teacher succeed.
- Focus the assistance plan. A laundry list of problems can overwhelm everyone involved in the assistance process, especially the teacher. Make every attempt to identify two to four fundamental problems and focus remedial efforts on those areas. Any problem that would make an administrator question retention, however, should be included. For example, in Mrs. Bates's class, if she arrives late to class *and* is unprepared to teach, the principal must address the lack of preparation. The principal cannot assume that if Mrs. Bates arrives to class on time, she will be better prepared to teach than had she been late. Lack of preparation is just as serious, if not more so, than the late arrivals to class.
- Give the teacher a letter of notice. Teachers have a right to be notified about performance concerns and the potential consequences if those concerns are not corrected. Provide such notice through oral and written communication. Putting such information in writing alerts the teacher that the situation is serious. It also provides necessary documentation for the record.
- Write all documentation with a third party reader in mind. Clearly describe observed behavior and actions and how they affect students, parents, and other staff. The more specific and measurable the documentation, the more it informs the improvement process. Concrete feedback on performance is often missing in routine evaluation, but it is crucial in the remediation process. People cannot change unless they understand the precise nature of the problems. If remediation is not successful, rich, descriptive language is also crucial for documenting all events leading up to a recommendation of dismissal or nonrenewal.

Plans of assistance can help administrators formalize the communication process with teachers

around the issue of instructional improvement. Such plans offer structure, clarity of purpose, and assistance that go beyond traditional supervision. The remediation process requires a substantial investment of effort by both the teacher and the administrator, but has the potential to yield substantial benefits for all concerned parties, especially students.

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