
10 questions to ask

when selecting, developing, or implementing personnel evaluation systems

In McREL's experience helping states and districts nationwide adopt and develop personnel evaluation systems, we've seen firsthand the importance of thoughtful planning, attention to detail, and conversations with stakeholders. To avoid unexpected pitfalls, we encourage education leaders to consider the following 10 questions as they plan their transition to new evaluation systems.

1 What is the primary purpose(s) of your personnel evaluation system?

The first step in selecting or developing a new evaluation system is defining its purpose. If your goal is to measure teachers' and principals' levels of performance, your purpose is *summative*. Summative purposes might include:

- Rating and ranking teachers when implementing merit pay programs
- Identifying and rewarding high performers
- Improving the quality of the workforce by identifying and removing low performers

Alternatively, your purpose might be *formative*, that is, to improve performance by helping staff progress along a continuum of professional practices. Formative purposes of teacher and principal evaluation could include:

- Guiding improvements in teacher performance to support student achievement
- Providing teachers with real-time feedback on their professional practice
- Focusing everyone in the system on better execution of research-based practices
- Helping personnel identify next steps and plans for professional development

Personnel evaluation systems also can serve important *organizational* purposes, such as:

- Improving working conditions by ensuring fairness and consistency in performance reviews
- Focusing everyone in the organization on practices most likely to result in high levels of student learning and achievement
- Supporting a culture of continuous improvement across the entire system

Personnel evaluation systems can accomplish more than one purpose, but it's important to identify your primary purposes and translate them into a list of priorities. For example, you might identify these key priorities for your system:

- Supported by related professional growth and developmental resources
- Ongoing and systematic
- Incorporates analytic rubrics that are supported by organizational systems and related educational resources to help everyone improve their professional performance
- Clearly articulates performance expectations

2 Does your approach align with your stated purposes?

Once you've specified the primary purpose for your personnel evaluation system, you can review your approach (or a new approach under consideration) to make sure it's aligned with your specific purpose(s). For example, if a primary purpose of teacher and principal evaluation is to provide *formative* feedback, you might ask yourself these questions:

- Will this approach provide clear guidance for professional growth?
- Do teachers and principals know what they need to do to improve their performance?
- Do our models of professional practice clearly align with the performance expectations of our evaluation system?
- Do we offer professional development that aligns with the performance expectations of our evaluation system and helps staff improve their practice?

If your primary purpose is *summative*, you might ask yourself these questions:

- Does our chosen approach help differentiate and distinguish levels of performance?
- Are we confident that different ratings for teachers and principals truly and consistently differentiate levels of performance?

3 Does your approach include observable behaviors and/or practices with objective rubrics that help to differentiate high performance from low performance?

Once you've articulated your purposes, it's time to consider whether your performance descriptors are clear and objective. Specifically, you should ask these questions:

- Are your descriptors (behaviors) *observable*? Could someone walk into a classroom or school and see them occurring or see evidence of their existence through artifacts, professional collaboration, or dialogue?
- Are your descriptors *objective*? Are different evaluators likely to observe and assess them in the same way (for example, "aligns lessons with standards and identified learning objectives")? Or are they subjective and open to interpretation (for example, "believes all students can learn")?
- Do your descriptors clearly articulate the difference in educator performance from one rating to the next and (if your purpose is formative) help personnel understand what to do to raise their performance to the next level?
- If your purpose is formative, do your ratings reflect a growth-oriented view of professional practice? That is, does the wording of your rubrics reflect a positive assumption that all teachers, even low performers, are not "deficient" or "unsatisfactory," but rather are developing new skills and knowledge as they move toward higher levels of performance?

If evaluation criteria or rubrics are vague or too subjective, they can be interpreted in many different ways, leading to inconsistent and unfair evaluations. A simple check is to consider whether it's possible for a *high* performer to receive *low* marks and a *low* performer to receive *high* marks in your current approach or the one you're considering.

4 Are the behaviors on which teachers and principals will be judged strongly correlated with high levels of student learning and achievement?

Ultimately, your evaluations should align with your organizational performance goals. Thus, you should consider the extent to which your personnel evaluations encourage behaviors that research shows contribute to high student achievement, such as:

- Teachers' levels of content and pedagogical content knowledge
- Teachers' abilities to use effective instructional strategies in their classrooms
- Teachers' professionalism and contributions to positive school cultures and climate
- Leaders' ability to guide and monitor improvements in instruction
- Leaders' ability to translate district goals into focused plans for school improvement

If your personnel evaluations assess performance on measures with little connection to student success, it may inadvertently encourage behaviors that distract personnel from what matters most to improve achievement.

5 How rigorous is the research base for your evaluation instrument and process?

Many developers of evaluation instruments claim their products are based on rigorous research. However, it's important to look closely at those claims and consider the rigor of the research supporting the claim. For example, if a developer is making causal claims (that use of their tool raises student achievement), you should inquire about the number of objective, peer-reviewed, published studies that support these claims and whether the studies are about the instrument itself or simply the practices the developer claims its tool measures. To date, few, if any, teacher evaluation systems have been subjected to true scientific study (with random design, experimental and control groups, and careful analysis of quantitative data), so the next best solution is to examine the strength of the research base that underlies the system, the reputation of the program developers, and most importantly, the extent to which the system aligns with your specified purposes.

6 Does your evaluation system reflect your organization's professional values?

An evaluation system should reflect your organization's shared values, beliefs, and identity. For example, you might wish to see criteria that articulate the need for respecting students as individuals, serving the public good, or upholding community values. Including these criteria can reinforce their importance and the culture you are seeking to create in your district. Conversely, omitting them can send a message that they are unimportant. A word of caution: with something as prone to ambiguity or interpretation as organizational values, it is especially important that your evaluation rubrics define, in clear, observable, and objective ways, how you expect staff to demonstrate their commitment to your organization's values.

7 Do your criteria articulate a continuum of professional growth?

Regardless of whether you view the primary purpose of your system as formative or summative, it is important that those being evaluated are able to understand what higher performance looks like and use feedback from their evaluations to chart a course to better individual performance. Ideally, the evaluation itself should foster coaching conversations between educators and their supervisors, one that helps everyone—whether teachers are novices or experts—to identify opportunities for growth and improvement.

8 Is your approach to teacher and principal evaluation practical? Does it place reasonable expectations on teachers and evaluators?

Given the often multiple (and sometimes competing) purposes of teacher and principal evaluation systems, it can be tempting to develop or adopt an “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach to evaluation that requires too much of evaluators and those being evaluated. This can lead to poor or uneven implementation, with evaluators and those evaluated only lightly touching on important items or steps in the process. That's why it's important to first agree on purposes, so you can balance comprehensiveness with a focus on what matters most to accomplish your district's goals.

9 Do your processes, policies, and practices align with the purposes of your evaluation system?

Even the best instrument can be poorly used if attention is not paid to processes, policies, and practices required for successful implementation. Early in the process of development or adoption of your new evaluation system, it is important to address such practical considerations as:

- How often do you expect principals to review teachers?
- Which teachers should they review?
- When should they conduct their reviews?
- Should teachers conduct self-evaluations?
- How will reviews be collected?
- Who will review the reviews to ensure they've been conducted fairly and with quality?

If there's a formative purpose to your evaluation, you should also consider how evaluation data will be used to guide planning and professional development for individuals and groups, and how expectations for teachers and principals will be communicated and enforced to ensure fairness and consistency in the evaluation process. In many ways, these concerns are as important as the evaluation criteria selected or developed.

10 Do the features of your evaluation system create value for the people using it and the system in which it is being used?

Most schools and districts have been implementing some type of evaluation process for years. These systems may, or may not, reflect a coherent, consistent, research-based theory of action for both principal and teacher evaluation. As states, schools, and districts develop, adopt, or adapt a new approach, an opportunity is presented to ground teacher and principal evaluation systems in the same theory of action, using a common, or shared, vocabulary of personnel evaluation. They can be based on the same workflows and schedules. Their reporting formats and templates can have the same "look and feel." If teacher and principal instruments are web-based and use the same platform, student achievement data and other measures of productivity can be easily integrated.

Aligned principal and teacher systems allow principals and teachers to communicate better and spend less time on training and completing the evaluation process—and more time on using the results to improve practices and guide professional growth and development.

McREL has developed a series of validated, research-based personnel frameworks for evaluating teachers, principals, and central office leaders. Please contact McREL for more information about any of these frameworks:

- Standards-Based Teacher Evaluation
- CUES-Based Teacher Evaluation
- Balanced Leadership-Based Principal Evaluation
- Balanced Leadership-Based Central Office Instructional Administrator Evaluation
- Balanced Leadership-Based Superintendent Evaluation

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