

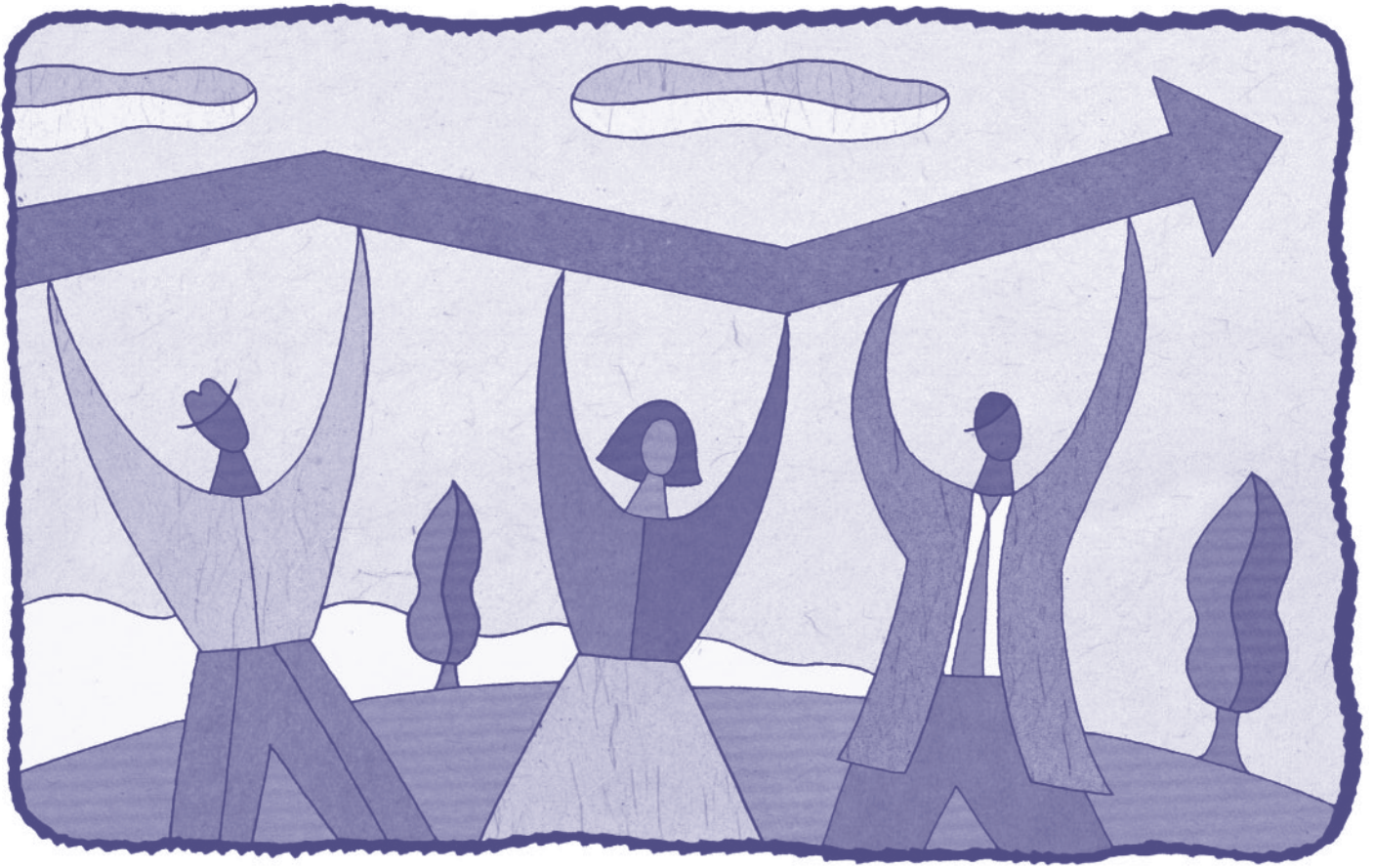
COMMENTARY

Hamilton County Department of Education (TN): Rethinking Teacher Evaluation through Project COACH

by Jim Scales and Connie Atkins

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Hamilton County Department of Education:

Rethinking Teacher Evaluation through Project COACH

| JIM SCALES AND CONNIE ATKINS

The Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) acknowledged some disappointing statistics about its teacher evaluation process a year ago; it became clear that we were missing an opportunity to support teacher development. Like many districts around the country, too few evaluations were given, too many indicated consistently high performance, and too few resulted in real action. Today, we are proud that we have made tremendous progress in less than a year through our Project COACH pilot. We have moved to a system of short but frequent “mini-observations” that will culminate in an annual summative review—a system that supports much greater and more frequent feedback and developmental dialogue. We have conducted well over 15,000 mini-observations in the 68 participating schools, and look forward to the first round of summative evaluations under our pilot system this spring. Perhaps most importantly, principals and teachers are collaborating in ways that we have not seen in the past.

By way of background, Tennessee’s First to the Top Act, passed in February 2010, legislated that districts needed to conduct teacher evaluations yearly, while simultaneously giving districts the option to create new evaluation systems. As readers are sure to know, teacher evaluations are a critical component of the federal Race to the Top program. The First to the Top Act was meant to

position Tennessee as a leading candidate for the Race to the Top money—and it did just that. Tennessee was one of two states to receive first-round Race to the Top funding; as a result, HCDE will receive about \$10.9 million over four years. After First to the Top was formalized, HCDE was given permission by the state to develop a new evaluation system for the 2010-2011 school year. HCDE Principal Jill Levine serves on the state’s Teacher Evaluation Advisory Committee, and has been a key participant on the HCDE team as our efforts progressed.

By 2011-2012, 50% of the state evaluation system will be based on quantitative student achievement outcomes, and will include data/growth information from TVAAS (the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System). HCDE is hoping to shape what the other, observation-based 50% will look like, and Project COACH is the result. If the model is successful—and signs are looking very positive—HCDE hopes the initiative will be approved by both the HCDE board and the state for the long term.

Building a Teacher Evaluation System at HCDE

Collaboratively building a new evaluation system has provided us with an opportunity to harness a great amount of energy among principals and teachers. In the past, frustrations centered on the system being compliance-oriented, where a “dog and pony show” of scheduled observations resulted in infrequent and sometimes non-substantive feedback. Evaluations were isolated from professional development and other human resource operations, and the evaluation system only sometimes produced positive outcomes.

We are driving the new system toward some significantly different objectives. The new evaluation system must increase the effectiveness of our teachers to improve student achievement. A primary objective is to develop a common understanding about “what is effective teaching.” With all of our work on our rubrics aimed at this goal, we continue to believe that building this common language is one of the most important outcomes. Also, each teacher evaluation needs to be developmentally-oriented, incorporating frequent feedback. ▸

Hamilton County Department of Education (TN) Fast Facts

- Formed by a 1997 merger between Chattanooga Public Schools and Hamilton County Public Schools
- 41,950 enrollment (2010-2011)
- 6,500 employees (~3,000 teachers)
- 78 schools
- Fifth-largest school system in the state, and the largest employer in the county
- 34 Title 1 schools
- FY2011 General Budget: \$311,777,651.00

Feedback should be both informal as well as formal, and promote greater discussion and collaboration. The new system needs to communicate a clear understanding of performance levels, and should target professional development at specific identified needs. Lastly, but perhaps most significantly, the evaluation system should be used to honor high performers and support all teachers.

At the outset, we communicated some clear guiding principles. The evaluation system would:

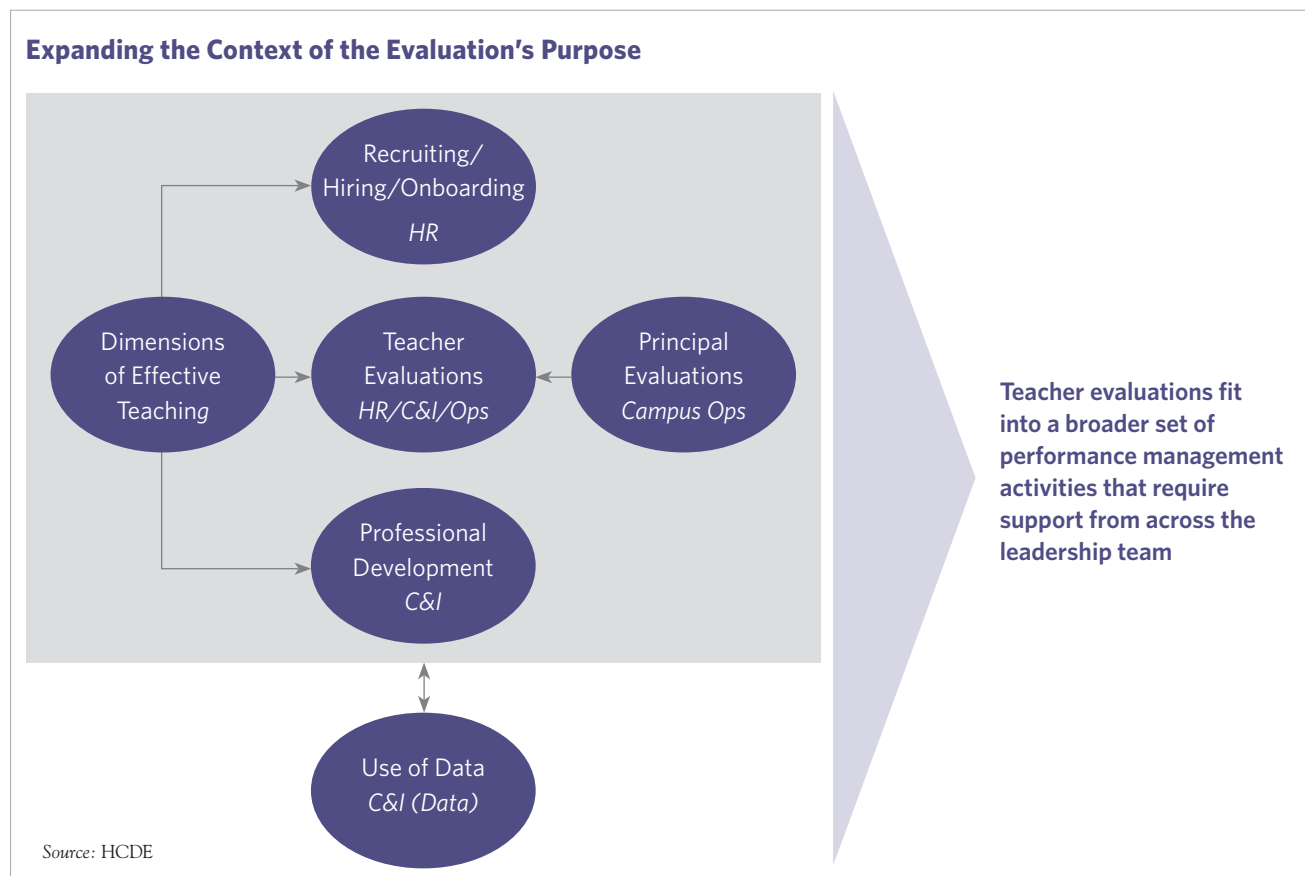
- 1) be oriented toward teacher development,
- 2) focus on frequent feedback and collaboration,
- 3) provide both formal and informal feedback,
- 4) provide individualized support, and 5) be practical and fair.

Specific goals were to provide teachers with frequent, targeted feedback in order to develop their pedagogy and to raise student achievement through improved teaching. As shown in Figure 1, we expanded the context of our teacher evaluations to address a variety of performance management

areas, and we continue to align processes to get maximum value from the information gathered.

This type of rhetoric sounds good, but the key questions remain: How do you actually *do* this? How long will it take? And where do you start? As we surmise might be the case in other districts, stakeholders in HCDE discussed the need for improved teacher evaluation and effectiveness systems for years before actually getting to work. A formative event occurred in February 2010, when HCDE and the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Education Foundation invited Kim Marshall, consultant and author of *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation*, to be a guest speaker at an HCDE retreat. This initial training generated lots of excitement. Perhaps the biggest transformation was in understanding just how much great dialogue and feedback could take place between teacher and principal in a few short minutes. Tennessee's Race to the Top win at the

FIGURE 1





Hamilton County Department of Education Superintendent Jim Scales helped launch his district's new teacher evaluation system.

end of March 2010 provided the catalyst to actually get to work. With the assistance of The District Management Council (DMC) and a great team from HCDE, we developed a structure for our new evaluation system in the span of a few short months, and a pilot was ready to go before the school year started in August.

Project COACH Evaluation System Overview

Mini-observations

- o Each teacher receives 10 mini-observations per year from the principal or assistant principal.
- o One to two sentences of feedback is recorded.
- o Observations are meant to be grounded in the rubric.
- o Feedback is given to the teacher within 48 hours of the classroom visit.

Summative evaluation

- o Once per year at the conclusion of the mini-observations.
- o Based on rubric with six domains of effective teaching (Figure 2).
 - Each of 10 indicators within the six domains receives a score from one to four.
- o Suggests Professional Development plan for teacher.

Source: HCDE

The team involved was impressive and broad: the central office and outside partners worked in conjunction with two committees to drive the work. Our teacher evaluation steering committee consisted of 12 members, including principals and representatives from central office human resources and curriculum and instruction. The teacher evaluation subcommittee had 35 members, consisting of principals and teachers. Over 100 teachers and administrators, including union representatives, participated in the initial training to review the six rubrics. Primary outside partners included the Hamilton County Education Association, the Public Education Foundation, Chattanooga's Ochs Center, and United Way. Kim Marshall provided deep content expertise, and DMC delivered program management support. Our team was able to structure the approach in late spring, conduct training through the summer, and begin delivery with the start of the school year last August. We are proud of this!

Collaboratively building a new evaluation system has provided us with an opportunity to harness a great amount of energy among principals and teachers.

Key Design Considerations

The starting point for any conversation like this needs to be a common definition of what effective teaching actually looks like. The model we are using is based significantly on the methodology, rubrics, and models presented by Kim Marshall. He suggests a four-part model: 1) mini-observations, 2) team curriculum planning, 3) a team interim assessment, and 4) an end-of-year rubric. The rubric is meant to be used for the end-of-year summative evaluation as well as for informal reviews. For the end-of-year evaluation, teachers receive a score on each of 60 indicators, ▷

shown below in Figure 2. While we started with Marshall's model, we spent a lot of time modifying and adjusting the indicators to make them our own. Our team spent hours in meetings, debating the words and phrasing of each indicator description to make it fit with HCDE's objectives and culture.

So, what exactly is a mini-observation? Many district leaders from around the country have looked at HCDE's model with great interest, and the idea of a mini-observation appears to be a popular topic. In HCDE, each teacher will be observed in their classroom a minimum of 10 times per academic year. A minimum of four observations must be completed each semester to ensure that administrators are able to complete 10 meaningful observations per teacher. In our model, there are three critical components to each mini-observation: 1) classroom observation,

2) communication, and 3) documentation.

The classroom observations consist of 10 unannounced mini-observations that are a minimum of five minutes each (additional time is possible, at the administrator's discretion). Additional observations should occur during teacher meetings, parent conferences, or other settings. In the communication phase, the administrator discusses the observation with the teacher, and gives specific and actionable feedback on both strengths and areas for growth. These conferences may be scheduled or unscheduled, but must be face-to-face. These meetings are intended to last only three to five minutes. Ideally, they occur in the classroom or a neutral location. The administrator should deliver feedback within 48 hours (two school days) of the observation. Lastly, the administrator enters the record into an electronic

FIGURE 2

Rubric Categories for End-of-Year Evaluation

Effective Teaching defined through 6 Domains and 60 Indicators

1 Planning and Preparing for Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Knowledge B. Alignment C. Mapping D. Assessments E. Anticipation F. Lessons G. Engagement H. Resources I. Differentiation J. Environment 	2 Classroom Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Expectations B. Relationships C. Respect D. Social-Emotional E. Routines F. Responsibility G. Repertoire H. Efficiency I. Prevention J. Incentives 	3 Delivery of Instruction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Expectations B. Mindset C. Goals/Objectives D. Connections E. Clarity F. Repertoire G. Engagement H. Differentiation I. Flexibility J. Application
4 Monitoring, Assessment, and Follow-Up <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Criteria B. Diagnosis C. On-The-Spot D. Self-Assessment E. Recognition F. Interims G. Tenacity H. Support I. Analysis J. Reflection 	5 Family & Community Outreach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Respect B. Belief C. Expectations D. Communication E. Involving F. Homework G. Responsiveness H. Reporting I. Outreach J. Technology 	6 Professional Responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Attendance B. Reliability C. Professionalism D. Judgment E. Teamwork F. Contributions G. Communication H. Openness I. Collaboration J. Self-Improvement

Source: HCDE



A massive paper trail used to define the evaluation system.

system that was created for Project COACH, called T-Eval. The administrator notes the date of the observation, his/her name, and the teacher's name. Then, a brief (one-to-two sentence) note about the observation and feedback conversation is entered, and the specific teacher effectiveness

domain addressed can be tagged. The T-Eval platform also provides teachers with an opportunity to respond in writing. The tool reduces the massive paper trail that defined our previous evaluation system. Many principals are using iPads to enter and access data immediately while still in the classroom or when in transit between locations within the building. The tool has reporting functionality to enable tracking and management. In fact, the district's executive leadership team looks at the results every Monday morning, and Campus Operations looks at the data in their weekly meetings as well.

A major point of discussion around the concept of the mini-evaluation is one of time. Frequently asked questions include: How can so many observations be possible? With the complexity of issues and time demands on the principal, doesn't this system place an undue burden on the principal or assistant principal? What can possibly be accomplished in five short minutes? In fact, one of the illuminating moments in our design process was learning just how much can be accomplished in five minutes. Kim Marshall used a series of videos to assist in our training that stressed how five minutes is actually *a lot of time!* And as Figure 3 demonstrates, fitting 10 five-minute mini-observations into a school ▸

FIGURE 3

Where Will Everyone Find the Time?

HCDE principals have found that conducting five observations a day over a period of 120 days allows them to easily evaluate 60 teachers (10 observations each) with little drama.

Average number of observations per day	Days available for observing	Total observations	Teachers observed (at 10 observations per teacher)
○ 2 observations/day	○ 120 days	○ 240 observations	○ 24 teachers
○ 5 observations/day	○ 120 days	○ 600 observations	○ 60 teachers
○ 2 observations/day	○ 180 days	○ 360 observations	○ 36 teachers
○ 5 observations/day	○ 180 days	○ 900 observations	○ 90 teachers

Source: HCDE

We have succeeded in an area that some have referred to as the “holy grail” in public school districts—frequent, developmental feedback conversations between principal and teacher.

year is actually much more doable than many might think. Assuming that 120 days are available to perform the observations—a conservative estimate—and assuming a school of 60 teachers, the principal would need to do an average of five mini-observations per day (25 minutes per day) to stay on track for the year. Our pilot has shown that most principals are succeeding with this type of observation pace with little drama, and often with great enthusiasm. Moreover, what could be more important than delivering timely feedback to improve classroom practice?

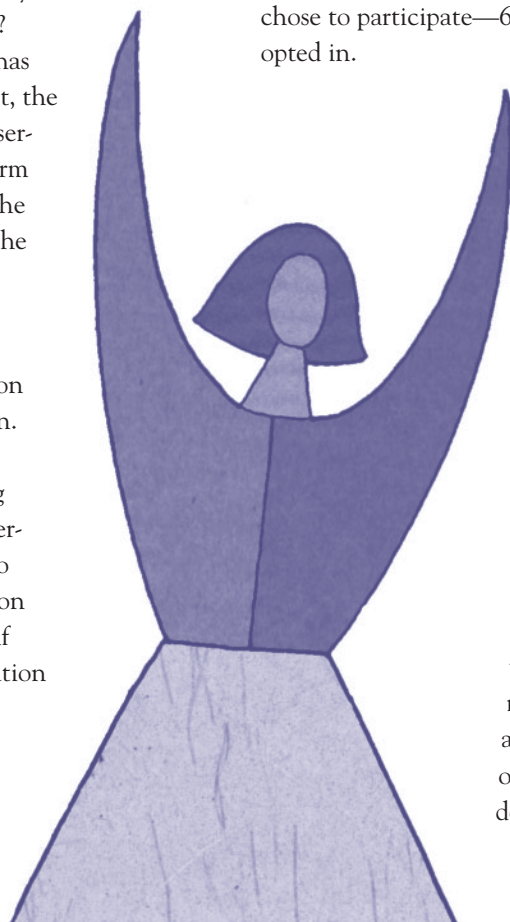
The summative evaluation has three similar components. First, the 10 or more classroom mini-observations, as described above, form the basis for the assessment. The observations are grounded in the rubric, and provide data for completing the summative evaluation. It is important to note that each mini-observation is **not** considered an evaluation. Additional non-classroom observations conducted during teacher meetings, parent conferences, or other settings are also included, as is other information such as portfolios or artifacts, if applicable. For the documentation component, the administrator scores each teacher across all indicators within the six domains, giving a rating of 1-4

(1=Does not meet standards; 4=Highly effective). The administrator provides comments and examples, and enters the record into the system. For the communication component, the evaluator communicates the evaluation to the teacher and then submits the final evaluation to the central office. Finally, an individualized professional growth plan is developed in collaboration with the teacher.

Project COACH Implementation

An important decision, and one that we carefully considered, was whether to do a pilot or to roll out the program district-wide immediately. We decided to allow schools to opt in, under the belief that the voluntary nature would increase the likelihood of success. We recognized that the size of the pilot may increase or decrease the chance of success and that it was important to have a representative/diverse set of schools (by poverty level, achievement level, magnet school inclusion, school level, etc.). Principals did not make opt-in decisions until after initial training was administered in the summer of 2010. Excitingly, a significant majority chose to participate—68 of our 78 schools (85%) opted in.

Which school-based employees would be included in the system? During the pilot, tenured (professionally-licensed) and first- and second-year non-tenured (apprentice) teachers received 10 mini-observations while third-year non-tenured teachers were still evaluated under the old instrument. Because of the timing of the decision and implementation, union approval was required to use the new mini-observation system and a formal memorandum of understanding was developed and approved in



collaboration with the Hamilton County Education Association. All teachers would receive 10 mini-observations, but teachers identified as potentially ineffective must also go on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). To be placed on a PIP, a teacher must not be meeting the minimum standards of effective teaching by the third mini-observation. Disciplinary issues, such as gross misconduct, policy violations, insubordination, attendance issues, or lack of professionalism are documented separately in writing in a parallel process. Core and non-core subject teachers would all receive 10 mini-observations, whereas non-certified staff would not. Several other special groups such as psychologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, would also be observed with a modified rubric (not all the indicators would be used). An additional rubric is being devised for counselors and librarians so that a similar process can be used with those groups as well.

HCDE's central office role is evolving in order to support systemic growth in teacher effectiveness. HCDE is gathering and analyzing new information and generating insights to improve district practices. First, simply tracking the number of observations conducted signals a change in the way business is done. Accountability systems are becoming aligned to support systemic change. Evaluations are being linked to a broader performance management approach, including professional development, compensation, career tracks, and more. Recruiting will also be oriented around the HCDE rubric.

Before launching the pilot last summer, the HCDE central office drove program design, communications, and multiple trainings, as well as ongoing Q&A support. During the school year, support provided includes training, frequent visits by Campus Operations staff, informal success coaching from both Curriculum & Instruction and Campus Operations, and Q&A support. John Stewart, a recently retired principal who served as project manager from the human resources department, ran all of the trainings, helped run all of the steering committee meetings, and served as a sounding board for principals to inquire about the model and T-Eval.

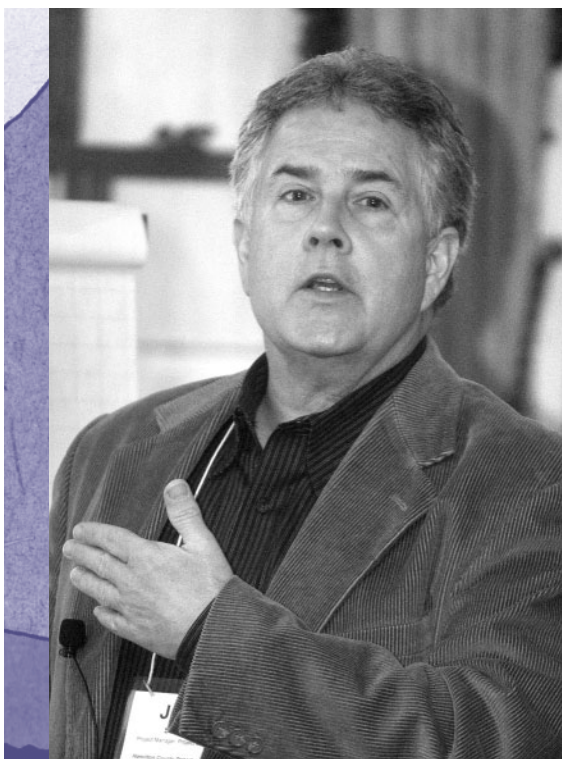
Principals must be able to spend as much time as possible in their buildings and the central office role needs to support that.

We would rather pursue a slightly imperfect process that we can learn from and adjust over time, rather than wait on the sidelines until a better approach comes along. Past experience shows that we may wait a very long time!

How is it going?

This effort represents a significant change for the district, and we are pleased with the progress and status of the program. Of course, we have not yet completed a full cycle of the summative evaluations, or tested correlations with Tennessee's TVAAS value-added data. But, we have succeeded in an area that some have referred to as the "holy grail" in public school districts—frequent, developmental feedback conversations between principal and teacher. While the quality and implementation of these observations and feedback are not perfect in every case, the system has spurred over 15,000 feedback conversations so far this year! That is truly amazing. Imagine all of the improvements in teaching that have resulted from those observations and feedback. There is a sense that accountability has increased as a result of increased frequency of visits, and that instruction has improved as a result of the development orientation.

Results from internal surveys are strong. Both principals and teachers were positive about the impact of the Project COACH model in a survey ▸



Retired HCDE Principal John Stewart ran all of the initial trainings for Project COACH.

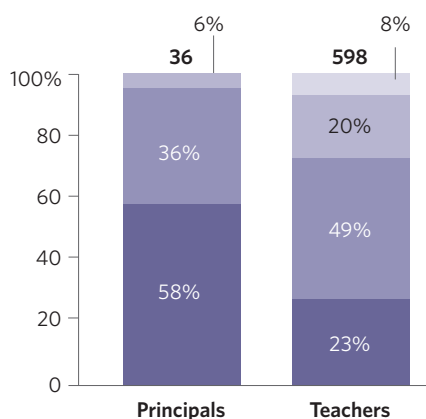
conducted in January 2011 (Figure 4). Although clearly more popular with principals, the vast majority of principals and teachers feel that the new evaluation system is a positive initiative for HCDE. Further, 100% of principals and 84% of teachers agree or strongly agree that the verbal feedback provided or received through the mini-observation process has been helpful in improving classroom instruction. This is an exciting endorsement.

Where does the work take us next? First, while the mini-observation process has been a success, we need to translate that energy into a successful summative evaluation process at the end of this academic year. We also need to show that our evaluation system—a qualitative design—is aligned with results from the state’s value-added data system for student achievement results. We look forward to exploring these areas as our district continues to accelerate its learning around teacher effectiveness.

FIGURE 4

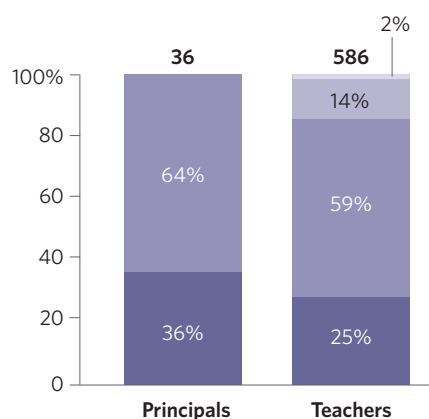
Principal & Teacher Attitudes about Project COACH

I feel the new evaluation system is a positive initiative for our district.



Percent agreed 94% 72%

The verbal feedback I provided/received has been helpful in improving the teacher's/my classroom instruction.



100% 84%

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Source: HCDE

In summary, we have learned that significant change is possible, and that it's possible to achieve change quickly. We would rather pursue a slightly imperfect process that we can learn from and adjust over time, rather than wait on the sidelines until a better approach comes along. Past experience shows that we may wait a very long time! Let's just get started. Most districts in Tennessee waited this year to see what the state would impose upon them, but we have taken our future into our own hands through this pilot process. While we learned that principals are critical to enlist as partners in the process, we also learned that outside partners can be an important factor in successful implementation of change, with Kim Marshall and DMC providing complementary expertise and assistance in driving HCDE's progress. Finally, we learned about the importance of following the energy—everyone got excited about this process. Even though it wasn't in the strategic plan or even our 12-month planning, we were opportunistic about making this happen when the window of opportunity emerged.



In the past, frustrations centered on the system being compliance-oriented, where a “dog and pony show” of scheduled observations resulted in infrequent and sometimes non-substantive feedback.



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