

An Overview of a Research and Professional Development Initiative

Syracuse University and
The Study Council at Syracuse University

The Evaluator Conferencing Skills Initiative

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The purpose of the **Evaluator Conferencing Skills Initiative** is to develop, disseminate and test the effectiveness of a clinical simulation model of professional development widely used in medical education but new to public education. The model is designed to develop the capacity of building principals to actively engage teachers in evaluations of their performance.

There is general agreement that the quality of teaching is the single most important school factor affecting student learning, the quality of a school principal's leadership the second most important factor, and the teacher evaluation process one of the main ways in which the latter impacts the former (Marzano, 2003). Yet for all the attention recently paid to teacher evaluations, there has been little attention to the linchpin in this process: *the process by which evaluators engage teachers in discussions of their performance*. There has been limited work on the interpersonal skills required to conduct these discussions and even less work on how to develop such skills (Gall and Acheson, 2011).

The evaluation systems being implemented in New York and other states require evaluators to consider different kinds of evidence, tap the teacher's first-hand knowledge, and produce agreement on goals for improvement, using detailed rubrics that focus on how a teacher's pedagogical decisions affect student learning. Evaluators cannot reconcile these different demands without engaging the teacher in an active dialogue that balances different objectives: to provide a summative assessment of the teacher's performance but also formative

assistance for improvement; to communicate the evaluator's own concerns while getting the teacher to take ownership of his or her own evaluation; and to keep the discussion focused and on track, while convincing the teacher that his or her own opinions have been heard and respected. The tensions and seeming contradictions between these different objectives, and the fact that they require evaluators to adjust their own approach to teachers' responses, are what makes the evaluator's job so challenging and impossible to script (LeFevre and Robinson, 2015).

Most studies that comment on the communication skills of principals at all cite the lack of attention to them in preservice preparation and professional development (Morreale and Person, 2008; Gill, 2012). Syracuse University's Benjamin Dotger, one of our initiative's co-principal investigators, is one of the only scholars to have given explicit attention to how the interpersonal communication skills of school leaders can be developed. His School Leader Communication Model (Dotger, 2013) serves as the basis for the **Evaluator Conferencing Skills Initiative**. Building on a model employed for decades in medical education, Dotger and his School of Education colleagues have developed a set of detailed clinical simulations, in which preservice candidates and practicing administrators interact in one-on-one conferences with actors trained to represent teachers, parents, or students in a variety of challenging situations. The University has used simulations for five years in its leadership preparation program and in workshops for practicing administrators, and for seven years in its teacher preparation programs, funded by various federal, state, and private foundation sources. Outside evaluators have documented that the simulations have enhanced participants' skills and confidence in challenging interpersonal situations.

Like case studies and role plays, simulations have learners grapple with authentic problems that have no single "right answers," and then discuss with colleagues how they would

deal with them. Unlike case studies and role plays, they demand constant engagement with actors who never step out of their roles, require learners to think on their feet and act in the face of imperfect information, and are employed repeatedly in a sequence that allows learners to develop, practice, and continuously refine how they address challenging exchanges. The simulations are video recorded, allowing participants to review their performance and then debrief with peers who have engaged in the same situation. Simulations allow participants to *experience* situations they would otherwise just talk about, and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what they have learned.

The simulations in this initiative are framed as evaluation conferences with simulated teachers whose classroom performance is problematic. Retired administrators and teachers serve as actors, ensuring familiarity with the situations being depicted. A total of six simulations have been developed, some framed as exchanges with teachers whose performance is seriously deficient, while others raise more particular concerns, like a teacher's low expectations of minority students or reluctance to use student performance data in planning instruction. Some are framed as stand-alone situations, others as pairs of initial and follow-up conferences.

We have already conducted these simulations twice with preservice administrators in Syracuse University's own school leadership preparation program. We now propose to provide and test their effectiveness as professional development for practicing administrators in districts across Central New York. With grants from New York State and (we hope) other sources, and the cooperation of BOCES across the region, we propose to offer the opportunity to participate in simulations to over 100 practicing administrators over the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years, roughly half each year as treatment subjects in a full six-simulation sequence with debriefing sessions, and half as control subjects participating without debriefings in only two simulations at

the beginning and end of the year. Those administrators or districts that choose to serve only as control subjects in one year will be given the option of participating in the full sequence of simulations and debriefings the next year.

Although the **Evaluator Conferencing Skills Initiative** is ground-breaking, it builds on experience and resources that make its success likely. We believe that the evaluation feedback simulations we have inaugurated have the potential for substantially improving the preparation and continuing professional development of school leaders to conduct effective evaluations of teachers' performance. Enhancing those skills is essential, if the public's investment in improving teacher evaluation, and thereby teaching and learning, is to be realized.

Districts and BOCES that are interested in having some or all of their administrators participate in the Evaluator Conferencing Skills Initiative, and helping us test the approach's effectiveness, are invited to contact Dr. Joseph Shedd, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Executive Director of the Study Council at Syracuse University, at 315-443-2685 or jbshedd@syr.edu. The first several hundred administrators to participate may do so without any charge, provided their districts or BOCES are members of the Study Council at Syracuse University; other districts may participate for a projected fee of \$50 per participant per simulation, provided there are sufficient numbers of participants in their region to make recruiting and training actors feasible.