TO WHAT END?
TWO POTENTIAL NEW EVALUATION SYSTEM APPROACHES AND OUTCOMES
By Dr. Mark Johnson, Nooksack Valley Superintendent

As districts across the state (and country) are in the midst of implementing a new and more comprehensive evaluation system through varied approaches, it seems likely equally diverse outcomes may result for teachers and the students they serve. What follows is a simplified view of what could be considered the two ends of the implementation continuum spectrum. Keeping front and center the question "To what end?" will be critical as districts develop implementation plans and in assessing the degree to which the desired outcomes are achieved through those plans.

Potential Approach and Outcome #1

Compliance Orientation: In these districts the new teacher evaluation is "business as usual," with a compliance-driven response to the external demand of a new law. These districts have a new set of instructional standards and corresponding levels of performance, but neither the standards nor the rubric are necessarily taught, supported, or expected. A principal and teacher may simply go through the checklist exercise of "evaluating" to meet a new state law. Feedback comes in the form of a "summative" score. Observable evidence will not be used to engage in formative conversations on strengths and areas for improvement. This process does little to promote growth, let alone the creation of a culture of adult learning. The pull of the existing culture will prevail— stunting growth and improvement, and fostering the status quo and protecting or buffering instructional practices that are not yet proficient, let alone distinguished.

Principals will likely not have experienced a parallel system of instructional leadership standards and corresponding professional development (including formative and summative feedback) and will resort to what they know and have the most comfort. A lack of confidence, cultural pressures within a school community, and side-by-side comparisons of teacher ratings (within a school system and with neighbors)— will yield skewed ratings leaning toward the higher side of the rubric (i.e. "grade inflation").

Further, the emerging information from some folks who have piloted a new process have indicated that one "formal" observation has entailed a 60 minute preconference, a 60 minute observations, several hours of observational coding to the evaluation rubric in preparation for the post conference— concluding with a 60 minute post conference. To what end? To what extent did this 5+ hour process result in improved teaching and learning, for that one teacher and his/her students?

Districts who concentrate efforts on implementing the new evaluation process (inter-rater reliability, metrics, etc.) as the desired outcome will likely be asking themselves "so what, now what?". They will have successfully "rated" all teachers on a rubric and all will be assigned a summative 1-4 "score" but, again, to what end? Some teachers will improve their practice simply by better understanding the instructional model and their assigned summative score. Many might not know how to improve. Many will desire to become "proficient" or "distinguished" on a rubric, but might not know what "proficient" looks like in practice. Some cultures may even serve to stilt individual attempts to improve. What will such systems do to provide the necessary supports and structures for success?

The result of this compliance orientation will be minimal improvement of teaching and learning within a classroom, school, or school system. Compliance will serve as the motivator (or lack thereof) rather than a system-wide commitment to improving teaching and learning. When asked "why are you implementing this new evaluations system?" a likely response would be

"because of new state laws." This approach could also serve to further fuel the sources within our society who promote a stronger business model; "just get rid of the bad teachers and provide more open choice." In other words, if the results produce evidence of "we're all proficient" and/or no appreciable growth in teacher practice or student learning, the proponents of a more simpleton "hard line" pathway to improving our schools will actually be provided evidence to suggest they are right, and thus have a stronger lobby platform to change and "strengthen" the current legislation.

The reasons some districts may choose this approach vary. It could be that leadership does not hold the belief that instruction and leadership practice are THE key variables in student learning. It could be they simply do now know how to strategically act on this belief. It could be that they believe "all of this will go away" at some point, instead of leading as if instruction/leadership are key, even if the evaluation requirements do "go away." Some districts may be unwilling or unable to place a stake in the ground around the instructional practice and leadership. They then might take the safe route of leaving the improvement of learning up to individual schools, and individual principals and teachers. The resulting islands of excellence and sea of mediocrity is then not a system issue, but becomes a school and/or individual talent issue. Safer that way, but to what end?

In this approach the "T" in TPEP may in reality stand for "train wreck" since it does little to foster and create real growth in teaching or learning, or a culture of adult learning.

Potential Approach and Outcome #2

A System of Teaching and Learning Growth and Continuous Improvement: In these districts, strategies are being put in to place to ensure a common vision of powerful instruction is developed, common practice is occurring in every classroom every day, and attention is provided to differentiation based on teacher and learner needs. These systems are evidence-based, growth-oriented, and provide a parallel system for the development of principals as instructional leaders. The emphasis is on continuous growth and improvement— commitment over compliance is developed and nurtured. The adults who work in the system appreciate and understand the value of having clear standards for their professional performance, and know that teaching and leading is never perfect and can always be strengthened. These professional standards become the content for collective and individual learning and growth.

A common language and vision is developed as the standards for instruction and leadership are approached as learning targets and success criteria for teachers and leaders.   Principals see themselves as "teachers" of teachers, with the content being the instructional standards through the common language provided by the evaluation rubric. Standards for powerful instruction are thereby "taught" through multiple strategies, including video analysis, self reflection, learning walks, book studies, etc.

Common practice is developed through *cycles of inquiry* that identify "problems of practice" (or opportunities in practice) and produce evidence of both student learning and adult practice development. In addition, professional learning communities, effective professional learning/development, formative and summative feedback from the principal, formative feedback and dialogue with peers, etc.—all further develop common high quality practice. Evidence of teaching and learning growth and improvement is collected at the system, school, PLC, and individual classroom level for improvement, celebrations, and accountability. Capacity is built in, as all of this is time, human capital and resource dependent.

Differentiation is imbedded within *cycles of inquiry*, formative and summative feedback, and professional development opportunities. Teacher leaders actively and effectively provide varied

supports based on need. Teachers who consistently meet or exceed standards have significant freedom and choice in the identification of their current "problem of practice" and may serve as mentors and/or studio classrooms— where others can observe effective practice in action.

New and comprehensive evaluation is a piece of an overall systemic approach to ongoing teacher and principal growth and development. These systems understand the critical importance of matching high expectations and evidenced-based accountability with high levels of support. These systems will see the greatest improvements in teaching practices and, thereby, student learning. These districts will have the clearest answers (with supportive evidence) to the question of "To what end?".

The critical importance that teacher engagement, participation, voice, and authorship play in the success of this and any major system-wide initiative is understood and embraced. Involvement of teachers in the development and implementation not only honors them as professional colleagues and contributes to ownership and commitment, it also brings to the table an expertise and perspective that contributes to success;

> "Some leaders believe that they must always project a concrete vision of the future and define the vision in detail. But influence is often most effective when people are drawn into a vision not yet fully formed, so they get to be part of the discovery. People do not want to be herded like cattle. They want to be fellow explorers." Author unknown.

Finally, in these districts the importance that passion, commitment, and dedication play in the success of a classroom, school, and district is understood and encouraged. Teachers and leaders know the importance of "the heart" in this work. While not included on a rubric or a standard, it is critical to the success of both the children and the adults who serve them. These systems continually work to ensure that teachers are successful and effective, as measured by the new evaluation system and *cycles of inquiry* evidence (and other measures) AND maintain the heart in this most important work. Children don't learn, and teachers don't teach, on an empty spirit! Adults and the children they serve need certain things to thrive, including a sense of belonging, significance, voice, appreciation, authorship, accountability, and caring. While not part of an instructional framework rubric, consider;

> "I've been visiting schools to sing songs for almost 30 years. I've been in a lot of classrooms, presented a lot of workshops, talked with a lot of teachers, and sat on a lot of floors with kids. If I bring reminders of what's important in education, they come from finding those moments when the heart shows up, moments that peek around the corner and need to be invited farther into the room so we can see them. Such moments might seem ordinary but they are way too important . . . . . They fill teachers (and sometimes children) to overflowing." Tom Hunter

To what end? The outcomes of this approach will be strong evidence of the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, a strong culture of collaborative adult learning, internal accountability based on clear standards/learning targets, and commitment. Achievement gaps and adult performance gaps will be steadily narrowed toward closure. In these districts, the effectiveness, passion and dedication of the adults who work in our schools will be fostered, enhanced, and celebrated.