Providing Feedback Recommendations

Effective feedback builds trust when it is accurate, sincerely discussed, and likely to increase professional success. When teachers are allowed to elaborate on feedback (e.g., through mediational questions), they are more likely to apply.

**Be timely** (i.e., make sure the feedback is still relevant/applicable).

Try to provide the feedback at the earliest time of mutual convenience. The more time that elapses between the observation and the feedback, the greater the likelihood of distortions from poor recall or low probability that the collaborative data analysis will be applicable.

**Assess readiness to engage.**

Be attentive to the teacher’s readiness and other immediate needs. Analyzing observation data requires the capacity to look objectively at it (as best as we’re able). Observation data that demonstrates confused instruction, poor learning/behavior management, and/or low student engagement and success can pose significant challenges to our self-concept or simply affirm our self-doubt. It’s important that beginning teachers review observation data in a climate of trust—in the knowledge that professional growth happens best in a culture of “revision and redemption,” through which improved practice will be supported and mistakes are seen as a natural part of practice.

**Attend to the teacher’s professional area of focus/needs.**

Research finds that feedback in much more meaningful and more likely to be acted upon when it is related to a teacher’s professional area(s) of focus, needs, and/or identified goals. Feedback can be disempowering if it fails to meet the teacher’s needs and only serves/is biased by the needs of the mentor. Feedback unrelated to the identified professional area of focus/need is also more likely to fall on deaf ears or weaken the trust between teacher and mentor. Respond first to the teacher’s identified area of focus and only then point out additional areas of success/concern that the data suggests are important to address.

**Examples:**

- We’ve been working on reducing the number of call-outs by students. The data confirm that when you remind students to raise their hands, they are less likely to call out. Working on making that a classroom habit can eventually pay off.
Your focus on establishing consistent routines at the start of the period seems to be paying off—the data here show that all the students began working on the warm-up activity within the first 2 minutes of the period.

**Use objective data.**

Observational data are most valuable when the are objective, measurable, specific/precise, consistent across observers, nonjudgmental, and indisputable. When we combine objective data into evidence that affirms or negates a hypothesis or helps to clearly answer a question, then we engage in expert, professional practice. We also develop our appreciation and capacity for data-based decision-making and avoid the pitfalls of bias, prejudice, and other obstacles to equity and effective service to students, parents, oneself, and our colleagues.

**Describe rather than evaluate.**

By avoiding evaluative language, the feedback is more likely to be applied. It is less likely that the teacher will react defensively. It also helps to encourage the teacher to use the feedback as s/he sees fit. Descriptive feedback helps focus the teacher on the behavior or issue rather than a judgment.

**Examples:**

- **Evaluate:** What a great lesson!
- **Descriptive:** Your initial questions invited students to connect the book’s characters to their personal lives. Their written responses show the range of connections they made and their personal engagement with the topic.

**Be specific rather than general.**

Avoid using labels, professional jargon, or general terms that may be interpreted differently. The more specific the feedback, the more useful it will be to the teacher.

**Examples:**

- **General:** Students knew exactly what to do when they came in.
- **Specific:** Within 2 minutes of returning from recess, 12 of the 14 students looks at the board for the transition activity and began working on their math problems.
Note impact of behavior upon others (e.g., students).

Help the teacher see connections between her/his actions and the student’s behavior and learning—in particular, the positive connections. This also helps teachers build an internal locus of control and their sense of effectiveness [or efficacy]. It also helps them avoid externalizing the problem or issue—”those students...”, “they always...,” “I can never get them to....”

Examples:

• When you respond to students who call out, you give them the message that it’s okay to call out.

• When you model the procedures and roles for group work, you’ll increase your students’ success with the process.

Help identify changeable behaviors.

Don’t increase the teacher’s frustration by focusing on things that may not be able to be changed (e.g., the fact that standardized tests are coming up; the stress of parent conferences; their overloaded schedule) OR by focusing on some trait or behavior that might seem overwhelming.

Examples:

• Overwhelming: Developing your teacher presence would help.

• Changeable: Standing at the front of the classroom when you deliver the instructions for the activity helps the students focus on you as the teacher. OR Use proximity to keep students on task; it will reduce the number of times you need to call across the room to a student who is off task.

Seek teachable moments and self-reflection.

Capitalize upon those spontaneous and fortuitous opportunities to share information or promote reflection that can improve a teacher’s understanding and practice. This is especially important at times when a few fundamental concepts or basic strategies could help the teacher make good choices.

Examples:

• What research suggests about how some students learn to read is...

• What from your experience prepares you to...? What do you feel most/least confident about?

• One thing to keep in mind is the importance of modeling how to use manipulatives before students receive them and begin to work on actual problems. How might that modeling support students?
Promote professional responsibility.

Don’t just focus on what needs to be changed so the practice can improve. It is also important to point out or direct attention to areas of strength/success as well as areas for development and growth. Help the teacher identify practices that are working—giving language to the professional steps s/he is taking and/or strategies sh/e is using successfully will help them be more accessible in the future. At the same time, it is important that the identified areas of strength are sincere and not just manipulative attempts to “make the teacher feel good” or provide a cushion for negative feedback.

Examples:

• Your students who have expressed confidence are definitely motivated to participate. Let’s see if we can figure out a way to have the students who have expressed lack of confidence shares their ideas, too. What can we research or experiment with to help them?

• Eighty-six percent of the students recalled the facts about electricity as evidence by the test results. What are some ways you’d like them to link or apply their knowledge to the real world? Who might we partner with so that the students can discover even more through real-work applications?