# Visit classrooms early and often, and give new tools to principals

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IN A recent comparison of student achievement in 65 countries, American adolescents ranked 17th in reading, 23rd in science, and 31st in math. Within the United States, achievement gaps among racial and economic groups are widening — including in Massachusetts.

Why? Lots of factors drag down achievement, but research shows that one thing can overcome them all: good teaching. What happens in classrooms is especially important for children who enter school with any kind of disadvantage; effective teaching closes achievement gaps; mediocre and ineffective teaching widens them.

So how do we increase the amount of good teaching? A good place to start is revamping our teacher-evaluation process. There’s general agreement — echoed by a task force that just reported to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education — that the current system does a terrible job distinguishing between highly effective, effective, mediocre, and ineffective teaching. Many outstanding teachers aren’t recognized and asked to share their magic; lots of teachers who need help aren’t getting it; and all too many who shouldn’t be teaching are still in front of kids.

Why is teacher evaluation in such sorry shape? First, principals are spread thin. As a school leader in Boston, I was responsible for 40 teachers who collectively taught 200 lessons a day. That’s 36,000 lessons a year! Even the most energetic principal sees only a tiny fraction of teachers’ work with students.

Second, teachers generally have advance notice of the principal’s annual or bi-annual evaluation visits. Knowing exactly when the boss is coming, and having so few chances to show their stuff, it’s understandable for teachers to prepare a “glamorized’’ lesson that is not representative of what students are getting every day.

Third, teacher evaluation rarely addresses the most important question: are students learning what’s being taught?

Given these design flaws, it’s easy to see why supervision and evaluation seldom improve teaching and learning — and why so much mediocre and ineffective teaching flies under the radar. The “special lesson’’ tradition is especially problematic: it’s a collusive deal in which the principal pretends the observed class is typical and writes it up — saving the time, emotional difficulty, and union hassles involved in spotting, confronting, and improving less-than-effective teaching. Struggling teachers sign the evaluations, avoiding the hard work of getting better. And all those “satisfactory’’ evaluations go into personnel files, maintaining the fiction that things are just fine. What a mess.

One solution being proposed is using students’ standardized-test scores to evaluate teachers. There’s a heated debate about this idea, but one problem is obvious: MCAS scores aren’t tabulated until summer, which means that an entire school year goes by before anyone is held accountable.

Struggling teachers need tough-love feedback and support during the year. Teacher teams and administrators need to look at well-constructed assessments of student learning every few weeks to see which teaching methods are working or which aren’t. And if a teacher is having serious problems and isn’t taking suggestions and improving, the dismissal process must begin early to minimize the damage to children’s learning.

The ultimate goal is effective teaching in every classroom, every day, every year. The best way to reach that goal is to give a new set of tools to the person with the best access to classrooms and the greatest opportunity to orchestrate improvements in teaching (and remove ineffective teachers): the principal. Administrators will be far more effective when their classroom evaluation visits are:

■Unannounced, so they see everyday reality;

■Short, frequent, and systematic, so every teacher is visited at least 10 times a year and all aspects of instruction are sampled;

■Followed each time by a short, face-to-face conversations in which the principal and teacher focus on curriculum, methods, and results (struggling teachers would get more intensive supervision and support and an improvement plan);

■ Summed up in end-of-year evaluations with two dimensions: a rubric that gives detailed ratings at four levels — highly effective, effective, improvement necessary, and does not meet standards — and a report on each teacher team’s September-to-May student learning gains measured by high-quality during-the-year assessments.

Schools experimenting with these ideas are making dramatic progress. Let’s follow their lead, bring out the best in principals and teachers, and give all our kids the education they deserve.

Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is author of “Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation.’’