

THRUN'S EVALUATION TRACKER: OBSERVATIONS ARE MORE THAN JUST WATCHING

With the increased focus on evaluations, observations are vital in making high stakes employment decisions and require planning and preparation. This edition of Thrun's Evaluation Tracker focuses on how observations are much more than simply watching a teacher teach.

School officials should develop a document outlining observation procedures. The first step is to determine the days the evaluator will come into the teacher's classroom for scheduled observation(s). Because many evaluation determinations are drawn from classroom observations, it is important to communicate to the teacher that the observation should highlight the teacher's best performance. For example, conducting an observation when the teacher is not providing direct instruction may not yield relevant information for the purpose of completing the performance evaluation.

The administration also should inform the teacher which administrator will serve as the "evaluator" so the teacher will know who to approach with questions. In many cases, when the administration is aware of a teacher's previously-identified performance deficiencies, a second administrator will be designated to observe that teacher to get a "second opinion." The administration should communicate to the teacher that the identified evaluator will use his or her observations, the second administrator's input, and other relevant information to complete the evaluation.

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The Revised School Code requires only one observation for a teacher rated effective or highly effective on his or her two most recent annual year-end evaluations. A teacher rated minimally effective or ineffective on his or her two most recent annual year-end evaluations must have at least two classroom observations. The Teachers' Tenure Act, however, still requires multiple observations for probationary teachers. Therefore, *tenured* teachers rated minimally effective or ineffective in their two most recent annual year-end evaluations and *all probationary* teachers must receive multiple observations during the time period covered by the evaluation. For the 2016-17 school year, at least one of those observations must be unscheduled.

The Revised School Code requires that evaluators take the following steps when conducting a classroom observation. First, the evaluator must review the teacher's lesson plan. The evaluator must also review the state curriculum standard that is used in the lesson. Michigan's curriculum standards are found on MDE's website. It would be prudent for the evaluator to document that he or she took these actions for each observation, both scheduled and unscheduled.

The Revised School Code requires the evaluator to review pupil engagement during the observation. In most cases, the evaluation tool will provide specific criteria to evaluate pupil engagement, but it also is important to provide narrative information to support the evaluator's conclusions. If the evaluation is challenged, the narrative will explain how the teacher was scored.

A classroom observation is not required to last an entire class period. However, unless the entire period is observed, it is unlikely that an evaluator could determine whether the teacher: (1) completed the objectives on his or her lesson plan; (2) satisfied the requirements of the State curriculum standards; and (3) maintained pupil engagement.

A "walk-through" observation that cannot satisfy these components likely will not meet the Revised School Code's observation requirements. Evaluators may still conduct "walk-throughs" for monitoring purposes, especially when a teacher is subject to an Individualized Development Plan requiring periodic feedback, but walk-throughs should not take the place of the evaluator's observations. Whether conducting an observation or a walk-through, the evaluator should document when he or she entered and exited the classroom.

Finally, after the observation is completed, the evaluator must provide the teacher with feedback, preferably in writing. Specifically, the evaluator must notify the teacher of any performance deficiencies and give the teacher “ample opportunity” to improve. Improvement in the area of deficiency, or lack thereof, should be noted during any subsequent walk-throughs or observations and on an IDP or a mid-year progress report, if applicable.

Observations take planning and forethought by the evaluator. Failure to follow the statutory requirements could undermine the observation and call the teacher's year-end performance evaluation into question.

As we reported previously, non-compliant evaluations can result in reversal of layoff decisions. See *Summer v Southfield* (June 15, 2015 E-blast). Non-compliant evaluations also can impact performance based compensation, probationary nonrenewal, and tenured teacher discharge decisions. School officials should ensure that the above requirements are met.