

Employee assessment in public education: Integrating roles, responsibilities and development

Perspectives in Practice is a series of briefing notes to promote discussion on select employment matters at issue in the K-12 public education sector. Each ends with a question to get the conversation started. Let us know what you think at contact.us@bcpsea.bc.ca.

The purpose of this paper is to lay the groundwork for a discussion. If we want to facilitate employee growth and development, what role does assessment play and what models are most applicable to the K-12 public education workplace?

In late April, BC education minister George Abbott spoke of the need to consider all options for improving the province's education system, including teacher assessment. He stated: "I know that there is a sensitivity for the teachers' federation around assessment and I know that they have views with respect to assessment. But the fact of the matter is that for our educational partners, assessment is an important issue."¹

Why is assessment considered a sensitive issue? Employees in the private, public and non-profit sectors are regularly assessed, and the act of teaching is one that requires ongoing assessment of students on both a formative and summative basis. In some quarters within the public education system, however, teacher assessment has historically been viewed with suspicion.

Teacher assessment is considered important by the educational partners mentioned by Abbott – including parents, school administrators and the general public – given our current understanding of the impact of highly effective teachers on student success. Within the public education system, the goal of teacher assessment is teacher improvement. The idea is that

¹ Quoted in an interview with *Vancouver Sun* reporter Janet Steffenhagen and posted on her blog on May 2, 2011: <http://communities.canada.com/vancouver/blogs/reportcard/archive/2011/05/02/teacher-assessment-final-word-of-the-day.aspx>

through regular and ongoing assessment, teachers can develop their professional practice, which will ultimately lead to increased student learning and engagement. Assessment is also a professional responsibility. Outside feedback, formal evaluation and personal assessment should be accepted as appropriate practice by any professional group.

What is employee assessment and why is it used?

There are many definitions of employee assessment and its related practices of employee evaluation, performance appraisal, employee appraisal, performance review or career development. In broad terms, employee assessment refers to:

- a method by which the job performance of an employee is evaluated (generally in terms of identified criteria), typically by a supervisor;
- an activity to guide and manage career development;
- the process of obtaining, analyzing and recording information about the relative worth of an employee to the organization;
- an assessment of an employee's recent successes and failures, personal strengths and weaknesses, and suitability for promotion or further development; and
- the judgement of an employee's performance in a position based on considerations other than productivity alone.

It can consist of a range of activities, including:

- a formal annual evaluation where a supervisor assesses the employee against a set of pre-defined criteria,
- a 360-degree review where the employee is assessed by an immediate supervisor as well as his or her peers and those who report to the employee,
- informal feedback provided by a supervisor or colleague on how to improve performance, and
- a process that involves the employee and his or her supervisor setting goals and objectives for the year ahead.

In summary, employee assessment is used to:

- evaluate an employee's performance,
- motivate and engage employees by providing feedback and goal-setting opportunities, and
- align the behaviour of an individual with the broader goals of the organization.²

Employee assessment addresses two broad goals, with the first focusing on accountability and the second on professional growth. This interplay of accountability and professional growth also

² Summarized from content on HR Council for the NonProfit Sector website: http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/policies-sample-policies-page4.cfm#_secA35.

reflects the dual nature of performance management as it looks both retrospectively and prospectively in time.

Looking backwards, employees are assessed on whether they have met the goals and objectives established earlier in the performance management cycle. Looking forwards, employees are encouraged to set goals and outline a plan to build on their strengths and identify areas for growth.

As the HR Council for the NonProfit Sector writes, “While historically the focus of performance management was on past performance, often used for the sole purpose of compensation decisions, today best practice performance management focuses on on-going employee performance improvement and professional development.”³

Performance development models in practice

BC Public Service

The BC Public Service’s Employee Performance Management system has a core objective of ensuring that “employees understand their roles, how their work contributes to achieving the goals of government, and are focused on results.”⁴

It is based on an annual and cyclical process, consisting of:

- *Planning*: This involves establishing goals to support achievement of the organization’s or ministry’s business or service plan, outlining the measurable key work goals and demonstrable behaviours, and discussing the employee’s career goals and professional development desires.
- *Mid-point discussion*: Halfway through the year, a supervisor reviews the employee’s progress in achieving the goals, provides feedback and makes adjustments.
- *Final performance evaluation*: Supervisors provide a written evaluation. If an employee’s performance is satisfactory or better, the supervisor is to assess the employee’s potential for career growth within the public service and identify training needs. If performance is less than satisfactory, the employee and supervisor are to come up with a plan for the employee to gain the required skills, knowledge or competencies.

Service Canada

Guidelines on the Service Canada website emphasize that employee assessment in the federal public sector should be “uncomplicated but detailed enough to give employees a clear indication of what is required of them in their jobs. The focus is on dialogue.”⁵

³ HR Council for the NonProfit Sector website: http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/policies-sample-policies-page4.cfm#_secA35.

⁴ Taken from the BC Public Service Agency website: www.bcpublicserviceagency.gov.bc.ca/policy/HR_policy/03_Employee_Performance_Management.htm.

The performance management discussion cycle includes:

- *Setting individual performance expectations:* The focus is on results (not activities) and competencies (skills and behaviours).
- *Providing ongoing feedback:* Supervisors are to provide specific feedback related to competencies and outcomes, meant to foster insight and learning.
- *Formally reviewing performance:* This is a one-on-one meeting to review overall performance.

HR Council for the NonProfit Sector

The HR Council for the NonProfit Sector – an organization that provides support to the non-profit sector on labour issues – outlines what it considers to be best practices in performance management:

- *Alignment of employee performance objectives to organizational goals:* Performance objectives include both qualitative and quantitative standards or criteria for each key activity.
- *Supervisor – employee collaboration:* Employee performance management “provides an opportunity to build trust and foster constructive and productive working relationships” and a collaborative process is seen as the most effective way to set performance objectives and evaluation results.
- *Cycle of performance management:* This should be done at least annually. The cycle consists of:
 - *Performance planning:* A collaborative process of describing expected results and identifying any training or professional development plans required to help the employee meet those objectives.
 - *Performance feedback:* The supervisor provides ongoing informal feedback.
 - *Performance management:* If employees are not achieving results, supervisors take action by providing coaching, training or other resources. Over the long term, employees who continue to struggle even after receiving support may be placed on probation, moved to a new position, disciplined or terminated.
 - *Performance appraisal:* A formal one-on-one meeting at the end of the cycle.⁶

⁵ Taken from the Service Canada website:
www.hrmanagement.gc.ca/gol/hrmanagement/site.nsf/eng/hr11577.html

⁶ Summarized from content on the HR Council for the NonProfit Sector website: http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/policies-sample-policies-page4.cfm#_secA35.

Teacher assessment in Singapore

Singapore is often upheld as an example of a country with strong performance on international tests of student achievement – results that are seen to stem from the country’s established systems of support for educators.

The report *Teacher and Leader Effectiveness in High-Performing Education Systems* describes Singapore’s system for assessing teachers and managing performance – the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS):

The EPMS is a competency-based performance management system that spells out the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes expected at each stage of the career and within each of three career tracks: the teaching track (which extends through levels of senior, lead, and master teachers); the specialist track (which includes roles like curriculum specialist, educational psychologist, and guidance counselor); and the leadership track (which progresses through roles like department head to vice principal, principal, superintendent, and divisional heads and directors). These opportunities bring recognition, extra compensation, and new challenges that keep teaching exciting.

Teachers are assessed based on their contributions to the holistic development of students, i.e., quality of students’ learning, pastoral care and well-being of students, co-curricular activities, and collaboration with parents. The evaluation takes into consideration both processes and outcomes in academic as well as non-academic domains. All teachers are assessed yearly using the EPMS. They are expected to have a minimum of two one-on-one work review sessions with their head of department, who is their immediate supervisor. The final assessment is reviewed and endorsed by the school principal. Outcomes include classroom success of students, but external exams occur only in sixth and tenth grades, so outside test scores are not generally part of the evaluation process.

Annual evaluations are used to establish a performance bonus set by the principal for each teacher, as well as to flag struggling teachers for additional assistance or potential dismissal (a very tiny number), and to flag successful teachers for potential promotions. In considering teachers for promotion or progression along each of the three career tracks, their performance evaluations in the last three years are taken into consideration. There is flexibility of lateral movements across the three career tracks.⁷

⁷ Tan Lay Choo and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Creating Effective Teachers and Leaders in Singapore,” in *Teacher and Leader Effectiveness in High-Performing Education Systems*, published by the Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (2011), p. 37-38.

Common elements in assessment practices

These examples of employee assessment in the public and non-profit sectors share a common framework. Performance management is a cycle that includes:

1. Defining performance outcomes (including outcomes that are individual to the employee and those that are linked to the goals of the organization).
2. Developing goals and strategies, and taking action to achieve outcomes.
3. Providing support (training, resources, tools, information, feedback, etc.).
4. Evaluating performance.
5. Providing logical consequences for performance outcomes (both positive and negative).
6. Making improvements.
7. Starting again.⁸

The examples outlined above also share the assumption that an employer has – and should have – an interest in supporting employee growth, and that the employee has a responsibility to contribute to the broader goals of the organization.

As we shall see in the next section, this is very different from how teachers are currently assessed in BC school districts and the assumptions that guide these assessment practices.

How teachers are currently assessed in BC

There is an important distinction to be made between teacher evaluation and teacher assessment.

Teacher evaluation is a formal cyclical review conducted by a principal or vice principal. The collective agreement includes well-defined procedures for conducting an evaluation. In the performance management cycle defined above, teacher evaluation corresponds to step four (evaluating performance) and it offers a snapshot of an employee's performance at a particular point in time. This model is retrospective in nature.

Teacher assessment is a more collaborative process that can include self-assessment, goal-setting and planning as well as external feedback. In the performance management cycle defined above, teacher assessment would include elements from all the steps, with greater or lesser weight assigned to each step depending on the context. Teacher assessment corresponds with the classroom practice of “assessment for learning”, where teachers see themselves as coaches rather than judges as they support students in their learning and growth. The phrase “supervision for learning” has been used to describe this model for the teacher-

⁸ Taken from Jeffrey Russell and Linda Russell, “Talk me through it: The next level of performance management,” *T + D*, April 2010, 48.

administrator relationship, with the intent being “to promote reflection and learning for the teacher so that greater learning will occur for students.”⁹

Teacher evaluation as defined in the collective agreement

Teacher evaluation is a formal evaluation process defined in the collective agreement. With the legislative changes of 1988, this framework was abolished and the statute provided that a school board could dismiss a teacher if the board considered the learning situation to be less than satisfactory.

Although it was no longer necessary (as it had been under the statutory scheme) for the teacher to have received three less than satisfactory reports for grounds for dismissal, these matters became the subject of teacher-public school employer collective bargaining at the local level. What emerged was a pattern of contract language conformity. All agreements still share the “unsatisfactory test” from the pre-bargaining statute, although there are process variations in the agreements.

Elements of the guidelines for evaluation include:

1. Evaluations shall take place:
 - At the request of the teacher (T)
 - When initiated by the Administrator (A)
 - At a mutually agreeable time (M)
2. The teacher shall have the opportunity to select X of the observation times.
3. At least X days prior to evaluation, the teacher and the evaluator will meet and discuss evaluation criteria, timelines, etc.
4. A minimum of X observations and a maximum of Y observations will take place.
5. Reports shall focus mainly on the teacher’s primary area of expertise.
6. The teacher will receive a draft copy of the report and have the opportunity to propose changes prior to filing the final report.
7. The teacher will have an opportunity to submit written commentary of the final report, which will be filed along with all copies of the final report.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Number of contracts with language pertaining to classification:	T=32 A=32 M=5	35	49	56	27	53	56
Percentage of contracts with language pertaining to classification:	T=53% A=53% M=8%	58%	82%	93%	45%	88%	93%

The collective agreement contract for Nanaimo-Ladysmith provides an example of the language used to describe the goals of teacher evaluation and the criteria to be used. It states that the

⁹ Mike McAvoy and Jacquie Taylor, “Increasing Student Learning: Building the Skills of “Those Who Matter Most” (A discussion paper developed for the BC Ministry of Education), March 2011, p. 2.

“purpose of evaluation is to promote and reinforce an optimal learning environment for students. The teaching process is a complex one and the evaluation of this process is a difficult and technical function.”¹⁰ Teachers can be evaluated on criteria that include:

- Knowledge of subject matter and child development
- Preparation and planning
- Instructional skills
- Classroom management and professional relationships
- Student achievement and management of records.

The evaluation process defined in the collective agreement is formal and retrospective – not surprising given that the process originated in legislation defining grounds for dismissal. The end result is generally a report written by the administrator that includes a rating of either “satisfactory” or “not satisfactory” performance.

Most contracts specify that all teachers should be formally evaluated by a principal or vice principal once every three years. The frequency varies from district to district.

A complementary model: professional growth plans

A minority of school districts in BC use a professional growth plan model as part of their assessment process. In situations where the principal recognizes that the teacher demonstrates satisfactory performance, the principal might ask the teacher if he or she wishes to complete a professional growth plan rather than participate in the formal evaluation process.

If the teacher agrees, the teacher and administrator work collaboratively on the growth plan to identify areas of strength and areas for professional refinement. The growth plan is meant to be aligned with professional development activities as well as with specific school- or district-based goals.

However, this process and use of a growth plan model is not supported by the BCTF. Because growth plans are developed in consultation with a principal and because they may link to school or district goals, they are seen to impinge on a teacher’s professional autonomy.

Policies and procedures outlined in the *Members’ Guide to the BCTF* emphasize the importance of supporting efforts to remove cyclical teacher evaluations from the contract language and encourage teachers to avoid “administrator-driven” (rather than “self-directed”) professional growth plans:

1. That the BCTF encourage locals and teachers to utilize voluntary, self-directed professional development planning.
2. That locals which are seeking a means to eliminate cyclical teacher evaluation:

¹⁰ Taken from the local agreement for school district 68, accessed on the BCTF website at: <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/BargainingContracts/Agreements/Local/68-Nanaimo.pdf>

- a. negotiate mid-contract modifications which remove reference to cyclical evaluations from their collective agreements;
 - b. not pursue professional growth plans as an alternative.
3. That members be advised of the potential pitfalls inherent in involving themselves in administrator-driven professional growth plans.¹¹

Similarly, in policy item 46.05 – Teacher Competence, locals are instructed to “work to ensure that matters of teacher performance and competency are addressed through the teacher evaluation procedures in the collective agreement, and that locals resist practices that do not recognize members as self-directed professionals.”

BCTF views on employee assessment

The BCTF resists the professional growth plan model of assessment, preferring that matters of performance and competency be addressed through the procedures outlined in the collective agreement.

Even here, however, evaluation is not seen as an opportunity for reflection and growth, but as a potential impingement on a teacher’s professional competence. Policy item 45.B.03 in the *Members’ Guide*, for example, states that “the evaluation of members should be based on the assumption of professional competence and, hence, formal evaluation should not occur unless the assumption is questioned or a formal evaluation is requested by the member.”

The union’s suspicion that often greets teacher evaluation stems, in part, from a concern that teachers will be assessed solely on one criterion alone: student achievement. As Andrea English writes in *Teacher Magazine*, “The central problem is that these methods of teacher evaluation entirely leave out what goes on in classrooms on a day-to-day basis—they leave out how the teacher is actually teaching.”¹²

There’s another problem, too. This narrow vision of teacher assessment leaves out the other critical element of performance management: professional development.

However, recent comments by BCTF president Susan Lambert suggest that the organization does not see professional development as a component of assessment. As recounted by *Vancouver Sun* reporter Janet Steffenhagen, Lambert “said the union has been talking with the minister about professional development and in-service ‘*but that’s an entirely different thing.*’ The issue of teacher assessment was purposely set aside, she said, because it’s covered in contracts.”¹³ [italics in original]

¹¹ “Procedure 30.A.22-Professional Growth Plans,” *Members’ Guide to the BC Teachers’ Federation*, p.131.

¹² Andrea English, “Should teachers think? Autonomy, accountability, and philosophy of education,” *Teacher Newsmagazine*, 23.5 (March 2011).

¹³ http://communities.canada.com/vancouver_sun/blogs/reportcard/archive/2011/05/02/bctf-prez-susan-lambert-on-teacher-assessment.aspx

The union's suspicion of teacher evaluation is articulated in an article in *Teacher Magazine* asking educators to reflect on whether they are being supervised or evaluated. While administrators are recognized as "having the authority to supervise," this is distinctly different from the more formal and less frequent process of evaluation. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to be concerned if they receive letters or memos asking for details on "how they are meeting the school goals through instruction and to make links to the accountability-contract language."¹⁴

As explored in the overview of performance management in other employment sectors, a supervisor asking employees to link their daily work to the goals of the organization would be upheld as modelling best practices; here, it is cause for concern that requires contacting the BCTF local office.

The need for a coherent approach

For the education sector, performance management is important because the stakes are so high: "our greatest leverage in increasing student achievement for all students lies in the consistent development of the skills of our teachers and principals."¹⁵

The "consistent development of skills" reflects the professional development component of the performance management cycle. The best professional development happens when it is motivated by a desire to improve a particular area of practice with the ultimate goal of enhancing student learning.

The process of identifying areas of improvement comes from assessment – which can include self-assessment, peer assessment or assessment from a supervisor or school administrator. This reflects the accountability component of the performance management cycle.

Effective employee assessment practices therefore bring together professional development and accountability into one coherent system.

The environment in which this all occurs matters. A review of 800 meta-analyses on student achievement concluded that the best outcomes happen when school leaders "promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support other teachers to reach these goals together."¹⁶

What stands out here is the emphasis on safe environments, setting goals and the importance of collaboration and peer support. Educators would generally agree that these are the best conditions within a classroom environment to support students in their learning. It is not surprising that they are the elements of a system that supports teachers to succeed too.

¹⁴ Peter McCue, "Is this supervision or is it evaluation?", *Teacher NewsMagazine*, 17.3 (November/December 2004). Accessed online at: <http://bctf.ca/publications/NewsMagArticle.aspx?id=7866>.

¹⁵ McAvoy and Taylor, p. 2.

¹⁶ McAvoy and Taylor, p. 1.

Michael Fullan argues that teacher assessment as a strategy for improving student performance will only succeed if assessment is embedded in a “culture that is supportive of learning.” The elements that define such an environment must:

- Foster the intrinsic motivation of teachers and students,
- Engage educators and students in continuous improvement of instruction and learning,
- Inspire collective or team work, and
- Affect 100 percent of all teachers and students.¹⁷

Fullan writes:

If you want the instructional practices-student engagement/achievement nexus to be the centre of attention do two things: name it as the focus, and use the group to get more of it. The holy grail of teacher quality is only a proxy for effective instruction. Once you dwell on instruction the whole system can be mobilised to that end. It won't be heavy handed accountability, teacher appraisal, rewards and incentives, and the like that will move big systems. Movement on this scale can only be realised through actual improvements in instructional practice. The latter, as I have said, is tightly connected to the intrinsic motivation of teachers and their peers to do the job well. Policies that focus on both human and social capital and do this with transparency of practice and results will create all the pressure and support that is needed for effective accountability.¹⁸

What emerges after reviewing best practices in employee assessment in the public and non-profit sectors and comparing them with practices in British Columbia's public education system is a strong sense of the chaotic and haphazard qualities of our approach to teacher assessment. The current system struggles under the weight of its legislative origin that narrowly defined only one aspect of assessment (evaluation leading to dismissal) and provisions in the collective agreements that do not support a model of professional reflection and growth grounded in accountability.

The situation is further complicated by the collision of two very distinct views of the role of assessment. On the one hand, the BCTF generally takes the position that teachers are autonomous professionals who have the knowledge and expertise to operate independently of school or district goals. Teachers are professionals who can self-assess their strengths and weaknesses, and formal evaluations are seen simply as a requirement of employment. Education partner groups, on the other hand, believe that it is quite justifiable for the employer (including school administrators and the district) to have an interest in assessing teachers, to identify areas for individual growth that are aligned with broader school or district goals, and to check in at some agreed-upon date to review overall performance.

If we are interested in system reform and growth, we need a coherent model of employee assessment. Pockets of best practices here and there do nothing to address Fullan's fourth

¹⁷ Michael Fullan, “Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform,” published by the Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series Paper no. 204, (May 2011), p. 3.

¹⁸ Fullan, p. 15.

point – that sustainable and meaningful system reform can only occur if the proposed change affects 100 percent of teachers and students.

For Reflection and Discussion

What might an integrated, systematic and modern approach to teacher assessment look like?
What practices could be incorporated province-wide that are collaborative, respect the needs of the individual teacher as a professional (as well as the larger context of school or district goals) and that are aligned with a cycle of continuous improvement of instruction?