Connecting Student Learning to Leadership Performance

Delaware establishes standards and assessments for exemplary leadership

By Liz Willen

At first, the richly detailed narrative took middle school principal Claude McAllister by surprise. His first performance evaluation under a new assessment system adopted by the state of Delaware contained a wealth of data and a roadmap for improving student performance and closing the achievement gap — unlike anything he had experienced in his 41 years as an educator.

McAllister, 63, came out of retirement as a New Jersey superintendent to become principal of Everett Meredith Middle School, a junior high of 1,150 students in a rapidly growing area of New Castle County where farmland is being paved over for subdivisions and four new schools have opened since 2000.

In all the communities where McAllister had previously worked as an educator, he had never received or given an evaluation beyond a standard, obligatory visit with little discussion of student progress.

“There was no process, no conference, no goals, no feedback and no discussion of performance,” McAllister says, while strolling the orderly corridors of his top-scoring middle school for grades 6 through 8. “As long as the test scores looked like they were sort of going up, I was in the superintendent’s good graces.”

Now that he is in Delaware, McAllister has become accustomed to a far more rigorous evaluation process. The Delaware Performance Appraisal System that McAllister and educators in the Appoquinimink district have taken part in for the past two years clearly defines what is expected of them. Principals are evaluated for their goals, vision and ability to create and reinforce a culture of learning, and some, like McAllister, embrace and welcome the new evaluation system, which emphasizes student achievement as a measure of effective leadership and combines detailed student performance data with specific suggestions on how educators can improve. Others, however, have resisted having their own ratings linked to the standardized test scores of students in their schools.

Six school districts and three charter schools in Delaware are using the new system, which by next year will be implemented throughout the state and in 17 charter schools, says Robin Taylor, Delaware’s associate secretary of education for assessment and accountability. The
evaluations are designed for teachers, principals and administrators alike, and there are even evaluations for specialists such as guidance counselors and school psychologists. Superintendents are evaluated under the system, as well, by school board members who are receiving special training. In every case, the evaluations are aimed at developing clear goals, strategies and targets connecting leadership to actual learning.

Delaware’s new leadership assessment is being phased in at a time when educators throughout the United States are moving toward more stringent standards and accountability systems. The state has become a model for innovation by developing a comprehensive and multiple-part system, says Joseph Murphy, a professor and dean at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, and one of the top leadership experts in the United States. Murphy is part of a team of researchers from Vanderbilt and the University of Pennsylvania that is developing an innovative assessment tool, supported by The Wallace Foundation, designed to emphasize learning-centered leadership behaviors.

“If a state is looking for a statewide system, the first place they should look is Delaware,” says Murphy, who has consulted widely throughout the state to help revise its assessment system, which he compares to “a chain.” “The first link,” he says, “is to strengthen leadership, then curriculum, instruction, teaching and learning.”

There is far more at work in the evaluation system than test scores. The system itself was developed by Delaware over the past five years with support from The Wallace Foundation as part of the state’s commitment to a comprehensive leadership support system aimed at strengthening the connection between learning and leadership. The system does so by defining what school leaders should know and be able to do — and by giving them the tools and feedback they need to improve and ultimately excel.

The new evaluation system comes after the entire state adopted the national “ISLLC” standards for school leaders in 2001, named after the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. As a result, school leaders throughout the state are aware of clear expectations to improve teaching and learning. That means possessing skills, knowledge and values aligned to the state’s standards, such as improving mathematical problem solving. A principal, for example, might observe lessons and give feedback on the quality of instruction — or even a model a strategy.

Revised standards that are coming out in 2008 also will define specific behaviors that exemplify good leadership, such as demonstrating how well leaders know and use the curriculum, along with ways of assessing student progress, says Jackie Wilson, the associate director of Delaware’s Academy for School Leadership at the University of Delaware.

“It’s all part of a commitment to a comprehensive leadership support system aimed at strengthening the connection between learning and leadership by defining what leaders should know and be able to do — and by giving them the tools and feedback needed to improve and ultimately excel.”
To make sure goals are being met throughout the state, staff members and administrators rate themselves and one another with a score of one to four, with four being exemplary. A rating of three means “effective,” two means “needs improvement” and one is “unsatisfactory.” The process — known as formative assessment — begins in the summer with goal setting.

Midway through the year, the principal meets with an administrator, usually the assistant superintendent or the superintendent of the district. A follow-up conversation takes place with feedback given on how the goals that were set earlier are or are not being met. The principal brings evidence to the meeting of what he or she has done to achieve the goals, which might range from spending more time in classrooms to closing the achievement gap between whites and minorities. The evidence might include a file of e-mails and letters to parents, students and guidance counselors documenting conversations and instructional plans, for example.

After that midyear meeting, a written progress report is drawn up, providing a kind of roadmap of what needs to be done for the rest of the year to meet the goals. At the end of the year, after a third meeting, a summative report is drawn up. Supervisors ultimately rate the principals based on data from three sources: teachers, the principal’s self-assessment and the supervisor’s own assessment.

Middle school principal McAllister says the new system has changed the way he thinks about his job. “I’m being assessed on student learning, and that’s what our business is,” he says. “I was a science and math teacher, so I love all this data.”

For other principals, the detailed and blunt evaluations can seem harsh. When Lesley Sparks, the former principal of Silver Lake Elementary in Middletown, read the word “unsatisfactory” on one portion of her summative evaluation in August, she felt angry, even though it represented just one part of an overall satisfactory rating that praised many other aspects of her leadership.

“I was disgusted. I wanted to throw it in the garbage,” Sparks recalls. “I don’t like the fact that everything is based on test scores.”

Middletown High School principal Donna Mitchell says she was somewhat relieved when her first “unsatisfactory” rating during the first year of the new evaluation system came with specific tools and ideas on what she could do to improve a gap that had white students outperforming minorities.

The differing reactions of principals in the three distinctly different schools within the Appoquinimink district tells much about what the new evaluation system asks of them, says Wilson, adding that the assessment was never intended to be punitive.

“It creates an opportunity for principals and supervisors to have an ongoing conversation about school improvement,” says Wilson, who co-chaired with Murphy a committee that helped write the guidelines.

In some districts, salaries and raises are determined by the evaluation, and a school principal can be fired or placed on probation for poor ratings. However, there are many opportunities to improve first, as all unsatisfactory ratings have to be followed up with an improvement plan, and administrators with unsatisfactory ratings have to be provided with assistance from their district, says Taylor.

And while a district can remove someone based on an evaluation, the goal is to give leaders the resources they need to do a better job from start to finish, with feedback throughout to help them improve.
The entire evaluation system was created with support and input from the Delaware Association for School Administrators, the professional membership organization that represents school administrators in the state, says Wilson, who directed Delaware’s accountability system from 2001 to 2003 and now visits districts to monitor almost every aspect of leadership, from mentoring to professional development.

Wilson is a huge fan of the goal setting the system encourages, and principal McAllister has learned through trial and error to fine-tune the process with his staff at Everett Meredith Middle School. Changing the way the staff think about what they do has become a high priority, McAllister says, noting that there was some staff resistance when he first set and announced goals for the school year.

In the past, goal setting for teachers meant reaching more personal milestones, like getting a master’s degree or improving an aspect of instruction. “Now, it’s all about ‘this is the degree to which I want to improve student learning, and here is how it will be measured,’” McAllister says. “The big jump is on the focus on learning, rather than on the delivery of instruction.”

During 2005, the first year the new evaluation system was piloted, McAllister received his first formative evaluation, which included a survey that all the staff members he supervises had to fill out, along with a self-assessment. He then sat down with the district’s assistant superintendent Marion Proffitt and examined the scores of all students at Everett who scored below a level 2, meaning “unsatisfactory.” McAllister met with each student and offered advice on books and reading.

“I said, ‘Hey, you didn’t read this summer,’” he recalls. “They want to succeed, but they may not know how. I gave them a plan to improve.”

McAllister met with their parents as well, and he later asked the guidance staff and district office to follow up with the parents. Faculty meetings included discussions of how to reach the tough kids. McAllister now keeps a folder of all e-mails related to student performance and another folder for everything related to his goals.

One year after the new pilot evaluation system was implemented at Everett and the staff began discussing shared goals, test scores were up 10 percent or more in math, reading and social studies.

“There has been a trickling down, a realization that the school is rated based on student learning,” he says. “The pilot [of the assessment] brought everything together toward a focus on instruction. I think it’s wonderful.”

At Silver Lake, Sparks found the emphasis on goals somewhat onerous. “It bothers me, because I know how hard we all work here,” says Sparks, who is retiring this year after 38 years as an educator. “I feel it’s not just a reflection on me, but on my staff.”

“We are educational leaders and we should be in the classroom, working with students and teachers to improve student learning. Once you get back into the classroom, you rekindle the passion for why you got into this in the first place.”
Sparks questions linking any rating in an evaluation to the test scores of students who come to school with many personal challenges. Silver Lake has the highest rate of poverty and the largest minority population in the growing district, she says. “There are lots of things we do that make this school a better place, and I don’t agree that an evaluation should be based on one year of test scores,” she says. “I get kids here who come in at a very low level. There is no choice in the matter now that what we do will be about teaching to the test. And there is nothing I can do but suck it up and focus on those test scores.”

Sparks’ evaluation noted that the writing scores at Silver Lake showed sharp declines in 4th grade. Third grade math scores were down 14.7 percent, and assistant superintendent Proffitt wanted a specific plan in place to address the dip. Sparks was willing to think about the next step, but she disliked the way she was asked to come up with goals. “I was told I had to have seven [goals], plus one on discipline and parent participation,” she says. “It’s hard to work on seven things at one time. One or two would be sufficient.”

Proffitt, who meets with each principal to go over his or her evaluation, is aware that some principals dislike a rating system that emphasizes student achievement and accountability. “It’s not always a comfort zone for principals when you say, ‘Hey, you need to improve,’” she says. “And I say, ‘I’m not helping you grow if I don’t point out where the growth is needed.’”

That is why Proffitt likes the new system so much — she says that by meeting with principals and working closely with them, she can provide the kind of support that Mitchell welcomed at Middletown High.

Mitchell says the new evaluation system forced her staff of 140 to immediately address students at risk and think about how they are taught. Her first evaluation from assistant superintendent Proffitt suggested that she and the entire leadership team should be spending “the majority of time in classrooms,” and Mitchell knew something had to change.

“The administrators were spending 80 percent of their time managing, not educating — and that will not impact student achievement,” says Mitchell, whose office window looks out on one of the many new developments filling the district with more children and pressuring the district to build more schools.

These days, Mitchell is spending far less time in her office, and she believes that as a result, she is far more in touch with instruction. She also has become accustomed to the constant presence of Proffitt, who models what she expects of Mitchell by popping in and out of classes at the sprawling high school of 1,700 students in grades 10–12. Proffitt is at the school so often that students greet her personally, shouting out, “Hey, Dr. P!” when they see her in a hallway or in class.

“The whole focus of our role has moved to where it should be,” says Mitchell, whose rating improved to satisfactory a year after she made the changes Proffitt suggested. “We are educational leaders, and we should be in the classroom, working with students and teachers to improve student learning. Once you get back into the classroom, you rekindle the passion for why you got into this in the first place. The kids are why I’m here, and that is the bottom line.”