

**Support 9**

★ Rigor/Relevance

★ Relationships

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

### Purpose

Supervision of learning is about follow-up and support. An instructional leader needs to not only set the vision and develop staff around teaching priorities, but he or she also needs to follow up. This supervision of learning takes many forms—formal teacher observations, classroom walk-throughs, conversations with students, and individual conversations with teachers. In any of these supervisory situations, good questions are essential.

### Procedure

As you engage in conversations, both formal and informal, prepare yourself with a great set of questions to learn about what is happening in teaching and learning in each classroom and also to encourage teacher reflection. Asking the Right Questions to Improve Learning, which follows, is a great place to begin.

### Asking the Right Questions to Improve Learning

Change in teaching practice will not come from policy or mandate, but from thoughtful questions and reflection.

Principals who perceive themselves as instructional leaders seem to know all the right things to do. They venture out of their offices to interact with staff, students, and parents; they actively observe teaching; they listen to staff and parent feedback; and they “get in touch” with the needs of students. All of these “doing” activities make principals more knowledgeable about the teaching and learning that is taking place in their schools. But does all this knowledge actually promote change? The answer depends on the communication skills of the leader.

The changes needed to improve learning must ultimately come from teachers. If principals are to use their extensive knowledge to influence the quality of learning, they must learn to communicate in ways that influence teaching and learning. Often this means asking the right questions.

Questions are the hidden key to good communication. Questions engage people in active conversations, they stimulate thought, and they control the direction of communication. Good questioning techniques are vital to a principal’s efforts to effectively communicate what they know about teaching and learning in their school. This is particularly so in the case of classroom observations, one of the most common responsibilities of instructional leaders.

Principals frequently communicate what they have learned from classroom observations through traditional tools such as the policy memo, faculty “sermon,” or an individual coaching session. Like most educators, principals typically apply their own teaching experiences to their evaluation of classroom practices, and in so doing, they often attempt to influence others’ ideas about the right way to teach. Sometimes this works. Often it fails. It fails because of limited, misinterpreted observations or unconvincing arguments made to an unwilling listener. But it is precisely this ability to convince others that leads to changes in instruction, thus improving learning.

Effective instructional leaders can encourage teachers or others to change practice through self-reflection. Good communication skills are instrumental in guiding and stimulating such reflection. A well-timed, thoughtful question can be the most effective way to stimulate a person’s thinking about his or her own practices. The principal who is able to ask the right questions at the right times is well on the way to being not only an active observer, but

also one who is able to thoughtfully influence change without resorting to mandates or forced practice. Change that is imposed is often opposed, but change that is nurtured is frequently embraced.

### Types of Questions

In order to use the appropriate questions at the right times, it is important to understand the different types of questions and the kinds of information that they elicit. Questions can be grouped into two major types:

1. **Close-ended** questions are requests for specific information, with a narrow range of response. These include such questions as “Is this the right road to Dover?” and “What is the square of 8?” Close-ended questions act as a precise probe for particular information and a prompt response.
2. **Open-ended** questions serve as stimulants for broad response, encompassing a wide range of information. Often there are multiple appropriate responses to such a question, or there may be no obvious “answer” at all. Examples of open-ended questions are “What was the intended purpose of that lesson?” and “Why are visual aids important to learning?” This type of question requires deeper thought and reflection in its response.

In the context of evaluating teaching and learning practices, it is open-ended questions that possess the most potential for rich reflection. By using such questions, the educational leader can stimulate thoughtful conversations about current and innovative practices and possibly influence change.

### Effective Use of Open-Ended Questions

There are several types of open-ended questions that principals can use to stimulate teacher reflection. It is important when attempting to facilitate thoughtful reflection to be sure that the questions cannot be answered with a one-word answer or simple response. Ambiguity is fine, but the questions

should be precise enough to be understandable and should relate clearly to teaching and learning.

Following are five general types of open-ended questions which can be used as guidelines when thinking of good questions to enhance reflection.

### *Explanation Questions: How do you...?*

Explanation questions encourage teachers to think about their teaching, while compelling them to analyze the learning process and the ways in which their students learn. By describing the learning process in their own terms, teachers must confront their own beliefs about the practice of teaching and the essence of learning.

Examples of Explanation Questions:

- How do you develop the assessments you use in your classroom?
- How do you get all students to participate?
- How do you explain the purpose of this lesson?
- How do you get students to ask more questions?
- How do you help students to develop writing and speaking skills?

### *Discovery Questions: What is...?*

Discovery questions require teachers to devise solutions and examine learning from different perspectives. These questions should present interesting problems that do not have simple or obvious explanations. At the same time, they should challenge teachers to make connections with previous or new information.

Examples of Discovery Questions:

- What is the connection between this lesson and the State standards?
- What is an aspect of your students' work that you are most proud of?
- What is your most difficult problem in teaching?

- What is something that other staff or I might help you with?
- What is the most difficult part of your curriculum to assess?

### *Causation Questions: Why...?*

Causation questions invite teachers to think about the possible causes of certain occurrences and encourage them to think about the practices that contribute to high achievement. This type of question is ideal for making direct connections between teacher behavior and student learning, as well as for reinforcing good practices and identifying problems.

### Examples of Causation Questions:

- Why do your students maintain a high interest level in your classroom?
- Why do your students work well by themselves?
- Why do your students work well in groups?
- Why do students show pride in their work?
- Why do you think some students are not paying attention?

### *Hypothetical Questions: What if...?*

Hypothetical questions confront teachers with new situations and require them to look at instruction in different ways. In order to answer such a question, the teacher is obligated to think beyond the components of a specific lesson or the events of a particular class and to draw upon and make connections to other experiences.

### Examples of Hypothetical Questions:

- What if a student arrives late to class?
- What if the demonstration did not work as you planned?
- What if you reversed the numbers in this math equation?
- What if you gave each student a different project?
- What if you had a longer instructional period?

### *Creative Questions: How would you...?*

Creative questions challenge teachers to devise new instructional strategies. Drawing from their past experiences, teachers apply what they know about a given problem to design a more effective or appropriate instructional technique.

Examples of Creative Questions:

- How would you assess students in a more authentic manner?
- How would you challenge students who are ready for more complex material?
- How would you give individual attention to students who need more help?
- How would you build connections to language arts skills into your lessons?
- How would you add more relevancy and real world application to your instruction?

### **Tips and Techniques**

Effective questioning depends not only upon the questions themselves, but also on the ways in which the questioner is able to set the tone in order to encourage thoughtful response. There are a few simple guidelines that will help questioners foster real reflection.

#### *Using Wait Time*

Wait time refers to the length of time between a question and the time it takes someone to respond. Deliberately waiting for five to ten seconds after a question is asked allows for deeper thought on the question. Often the questioner will wait only a brief moment before prompting a response or, worse, moving on to follow-up questions. This simultaneously puts pressure on a person to respond quickly, while relieving him or her of the responsibility of giving a thoughtful answer. Practice being more deliberate and consciously waiting once you have delivered a provoking, open-ended question intended to stimulate reflection.

### *Listening*

Questioning is only one part of the communication process. For this to be an effective process, it is crucial that communication flows in both directions. Show respect and interest by maintaining eye contact, refraining from interrupting, and paraphrasing the response to ensure that you have understood what was being said. If you become frustrated by a response which seems long or unfocused, do not interrupt the person, but before asking the next question, encourage him to be more concise in his or her response, and to think through his or her response more thoroughly before answering.

### *Framing the Question*

A good question should generally be brief and to the point. This makes it clear what kind of information the questioner is soliciting. However, it is often beneficial to frame a question with one or two brief statements on the topic, contributing to a more natural conversation. A questioning session which feels like an inquisition will make a person nervous and defensive, rather than thoughtful and open. By making a couple of positive statements before posing the question, the questioner is able to create real dialogue without the sense of an inquest. For example, you might preface a question on the objectives of a particular lesson by stating a few of the things you observed students doing in the classroom. While it is a good idea to prepare for a reflective session by listing questions in advance, do not stick rigidly to a script. Remember to maintain a natural conversation in which you pose questions that stimulate thought and reflection.

### *Monitoring the Difficulty of Questions*

It is important to think about the level of difficulty in the questions being asked. Questions which are either too simple or too complex can destroy the opportunity for reflection. Try to know as much as possible about the person you are interviewing, and be conscientious in monitoring body language to be sure you are finding the appropriate level of difficulty.

### Suggested Questions

The following questions can be useful in making the most of classroom observations. Principals may also want to encourage teachers, in brief interviews, to use these questions to reflect upon the learning process and their own practice.

- How do you get students more engaged, more thoughtful, and more expressive?
- What is it that you want students to know and be able to do?
- What is the work that students are expected to do?
- What is the evidence you rely on to indicate the degree of student engagement and understanding?
- Why are students meeting (or not meeting) your expectations for achievement?
- How would you use more time or resources to improve learning?

### Effective Observation

Observation should not be limited to the classroom—effective observation involves every member of the school community in every school setting. There are a number of ways in which a principal can expand the range of observations taking place.

- *Follow a Student.* Principals can learn a lot by following one student for an entire day, followed by an interview about what happened during that day. In addition to observing the student, the principal will have the opportunity to observe six or seven teachers.
- *Walk Around.* The concept of being involved in the life of the school is good at any time. Visit a few classrooms during the day, and do not forget art, technology, physical education, library, and family and consumer science classes.
- *Observe Other Events.* There are many other ways and times to make observation reports. Principals may want to write about the special

efforts being made during a play rehearsal, band concert, math convention, career day, or parent night. Use any meaningful situation to observe, record, reinforce, and give feedback.

In post-observation conversations with teachers, it is vital that the atmosphere remain positive. The lines of communication should always be kept open. Principals should encourage teachers to invite them into the classroom for interesting lessons or special events. When they receive such invitations, principals need to make it a point to be there.

Observation can be one of the more pleasant aspects of the principal's role. It allows him or her to spend more time with students—a priority in any principals' work—and to have positive, constructive contact with teachers. Regular observation can also stimulate improved classroom activity and instruction.

### **Where to Begin**

Effective use of thought-provoking, open-ended questions does not need to be a dramatic redesign of an instructional leader's observation and conversation techniques. Begin simply. The next time you sit down for a conversation with a teacher, do the following. On your notepad, write the words "Student Work" to remind you that the conversation should be less about what the adults in your school are or are not doing, but how teachers, staff, and administration can work together to create the ideal conditions necessary for students to learn and achieve. Next, write the five open-ended question stems in the left margin of your notepad: "How do you...?" "What is...?" "Why...?" "What if...?" "How would you...?" Use these stems to help you form provocative questions about teaching and learning, and then let the conversation evolve naturally.