

Communicating the Purpose of DPAS-II: Perspectives from Best-Practice Schools

Memo

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Overview

Since 2007, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) has engaged external evaluators to conduct annual studies of the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II). Research for Action (RFA), along with one partner organization,¹ served as the external evaluator for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years. RFA has a 20-year track record of conducting rigorous research and evaluation studies that speak directly to the needs and interests of educators.

This year, RFA visited six DPAS-II best practice schools² across the state that exhibited strong implementation of DPAS-II to conduct interviews with school leaders and focus groups with educators.³ The following memo is one of three documents designed to inform state and school-level efforts to improve implementation of DPAS-II.⁴

This memo focuses on an aspect of DPAS-II that our fall 2015 comprehensive report highlighted as crucial: The communication educators receive concerning the evaluation system.⁵ Communication refers to the messaging that teachers and specialists receive from DDOE or district or school administrators about the DPAS-II process, evaluation tools, and components. These communications are important; our 2015 report found that the single greatest influence on educators' views of DPAS-II was whether they believed that its purpose was to improve instructional practices. Educators who believed that DPAS-II served the purpose of supporting instructional practices were more likely to view DPAS-II as fair compared to educators who did not believe the system's purpose was to improve practice.

¹ Operation Public Education (OPE).

² Schools were selected based primarily on data from the 2014-2015 DPAS-II survey, including indicators of fidelity of implementation and positive perceptions of the feedback and goal-setting processes. Student achievement measures and geographic diversity were also considered in the selection process.

³ In this memo, the term "educators" refers to Group 1 and Group 2 teachers and Group 3 specialists. See the Technical Appendix for definitions of these educator groups.

⁴ The two accompanying memos explore the DPAS-II Component V goal-setting process for educators and the formative feedback educators receive from their DPAS-II evaluator.

⁵ Long, D. A. & Beaver, J. K. (2015). *Delaware Performance Appraisal System Second Edition (DPAS-II) Evaluation Report*. Philadelphia, Pa: Research for Action.

Key Findings from Focus Groups and Interviews:

- **Implementation:** Administrator and educator perceptions of the purpose of DPAS-II were mixed. A few educators reported that DPAS-II's main purpose was to support professional growth, but most reported that its primary purpose was to comply with state law. In contrast, most administrators thought its purpose was both to comply with a state law and improve instructional practice.
- **Promising Practices:** 1) in-depth training on DPAS-II components; 2) the use of DPAS-II as a regular part of day-to-day practice; and 3) creating a school culture of trust, collaboration and commitment to student achievement.
- **Remaining Challenges:** 1) some educators report that DPAS-II has no influence on their practices; and 2) some educators and administrators experience DPAS-II as a burden due to the time it takes to complete DPAS-II paperwork.

In this memo, we provide recommendations for DDOE, districts, and schools on ways in they can help improve the design and/or implementation of DPAS-II. These recommendations were informed by suggestions from our study participants, promising practices and ongoing challenges that emerged from our visits to best practice schools, and review of related literature.

Key Recommendations:

- School administrators should continue to spotlight rubrics during trainings.
- To strengthen the lines of communication via more frequent walkthroughs and informal conversations that more directly support instructional practices, DDOE should consider alleviating any burdens associated with documenting DPAS-II evaluations.

Introduction: Communication about DPAS-II as a Formative Feedback Tool

DDOE's DPAS-II webpage states that the three main purposes of DPAS II are to assure and support:

- I. Educators' professional growth
- II. Continuous improvement of student outcomes
- III. Quality educators in every school building and classroom

Educators' general opinions about DPAS-II are influenced by their perception of whether the purpose of DPAS-II is to improve instructional practices. Therefore, this memo showcases administrator and educator views on how much communication about DPAS-II suggests that the evaluation serves the first purpose—assuring and supporting “educators' professional growth.” Our analysis draws on interviews and focus groups in six Delaware schools.

We also identify practices that administrators use to effectively communicate that DPAS-II supports instructional practices. Ongoing challenges in messaging DPAS-II as a formative feedback tool are also discussed. Finally, RFA provides suggestions for administrators, districts and DDOE for communicating DPAS-II as a tool for supporting educators' instructional practices based on suggestions from study participants, promising practices and ongoing challenges participants reported in our site visits.

Implementation Findings: Perceptions of DPAS-II's Purpose

In RFA's 2015 report, we found that educators' perceived purpose of DPAS-II was the most influential driver of overall views of DPAS-II. To address this key driver during the 2015-2016 school year, we asked

educators and administrators what they believed the purpose of DPAS-II to be, and what messages they received from the state, district and administrators about the purpose. Our research showed that across our six best practice sites, a few educators at each school perceived DPAS-II's main purpose to be providing formative feedback. But most educators at each school said that DPAS-II's primary purpose is to comply with state legislation that requires administrators to evaluate educators on an annual basis. In contrast, most administrators perceived DPAS-II to serve both purposes.

Educator Views

Educator Perceptions of DPAS-II

Most educators at best practice schools believed that the primary purpose of DPAS-II is to comply with a statewide mandate. They experienced the process as time-consuming, not helpful for becoming better educators and as a “check off.” This view was most pronounced among Group 3 educators, who either do not teach in a classroom setting or teach a subject such as music or art. They reported that DPAS-II did not apply to their practices because the tool seemed geared to regular classroom educators. A Group 3 educator shared how she experienced DPAS-II as a tool for accountability:

I don't think it's to help you do anything; I think it's to help someone else be able to see on a piece of paper something that they can tangibly look at, and see if you did something or didn't do something.

A few educators at each school said DPAS-II's main purpose was to develop them as professionals. They identified three ways it served this purpose: 1) providing a structured feedback process; 2) supporting professional growth; and 3) providing opportunities for self-reflection. Across all schools, Group 1 educators were most likely to report that DPAS-II served as a tool to improve their practice, compared to Group 2 and Group 3 educators. One Group 1 educator explained how DPAS-II serves the purpose of improving practice:

I feel like it breaks it down into four different areas: the planning and prep, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. It allows us as teachers to have discussions across the grade level and it also allows us with our administrator to see what our strengths are and also where we could improve in different areas.

Educator Perceptions of Communication about DPAS-II

Most educators perceived state- and district-level communication about DPAS-II as focused primarily on state mandates and accountability. Group 1 and Group 2 teachers and Group 3 specialists said that communication from the state and district levels focused on requirements, artifacts, number of observations, and deadlines. One Group 1 educator explained:

Some people like that constructive, 'I want to know how I can be better.' But then sometimes you have the state saying, 'Oh, you need to make sure you need to do this, this, and this.' A lot of it comes from even above the building level or even the district level. So, then teachers don't even necessarily know that's going on. I just feel like there's a huge disconnect in the way that it works.

In contrast, communication from school administrators focused on DPAS-II as a formative assessment tool. Educators reported that messages from school administrators focused on DPAS-II as a tool for providing formative feedback. These perceptions were based on explicit messaging from administrators, as well as ongoing support from their administrators and colleagues. Using Professional

Learning Community meetings, one-to-one interactions, trainings and email, administrators communicated with teachers about DPAS-II as a tool to improve instruction by focusing conversations on the rubric, emphasizing student achievement, offering praise during post-observation conferences, and helping educators understand DPAS-II. One educator described how her principal's ongoing support and messages that connect DPAS-II to the students influences her view that the evaluation supports her practice.

I just think [our principal] is really good about—and he does this even with his communication, his emails, his conversations, with everything—he always highlights the children. And everything that he does, it's for the kids...through our DPAS, it's, 'okay, we're going to have to get this done regardless.' But he's always highlighted that, ever since I've been here, and so I think that's why we're kind of like, 'Okay, [our principal is] telling me I have to do this, and the state's telling me I have to do this.' I'd rather listen to [our principal] than the state, because we respect [our principal] and we respect him as an authoritative figure, because he's always been supportive. So I think we probably come up as one of those [best practices] schools because [our principal] is our leader, and we respect him.

Administrator Views

Administrator Perceptions of DPAS-II

Most school administrators believe DPAS-II serves a dual purpose: 1) complying with state legislation that requires that administrators evaluate educators on an annual basis, and 2) providing formative feedback. These administrators accepted the fact that the evaluations are required by the state and that teachers should be held accountable. When they were critical about DPAS-II, many cited the time-consuming process of completing the evaluation. Several administrators said that the amount of time it took to complete the necessary paperwork was burdensome and took time away from giving ongoing feedback that would help improve educators' practices. Also, one principal said that perceptions of DPAS-II as an accountability tool stemmed from its use in assessing educator effectiveness rather than offering professional support:

If it's the tool that you use to get rid of teachers that aren't strong instructionally, it's always going to be looked at as the tool to get rid of teachers who aren't strong instructionally. You put me on an improvement plan, it doesn't work out, you get rid of me. That's the tool for that. So until that part of it changes, it's always going to be the tool that you can use to get rid of a teacher that you don't think is strong instructionally.

Administrators also provided examples of how DPAS-II can function as a formative tool. They cited particular aspects of DPAS-II, such as the rubric, observations and feedback, as especially useful for providing support to teachers. One principal summed up his perception of the purpose as “to give feedback to teachers.” He elaborated:

They [teachers] want to know, 'how am I doing? How am I doing?' And it's a formal way of letting teachers know how they are doing and providing the feedback.... When I have a post observation meeting [I say] here is something you're really doing well and then here are the things that I think we could make better.

Administrator Perceptions of Communication about DPAS-II

School administrators reported that trainings covered both compliance and professional development, but emphasized the value of pre and post conferences for giving teachers useful feedback on their practices. One principal described how a training he attended last year communicated two purposes of DPAS-II.

Last year my district had a group of old, retired principals. They all come together and deliver training. They were giving lots of good information and that was helpful to go through and really identify where the struggles were in our building. We were really taking a look and analyzing each other's and revising and giving suggestions. That kind of stuff is best practice and that kind of stuff you need, but depending on who you talk to you can see some people are 'it's lengthy document' and 'you use it for compliance only' and 'all your real stuff comes from feedback.' I kind of look at it as both. You can't just say it's one or the other. It has to be both and you have to marry the two. So when I go to DOE based workshops they are selling it as both.

Several administrators reported that their trainings focused on rubrics, which lend themselves to improving instructional practices. One assistant principal said:

The message I definitely got at the boot camp was that it was a tool to improve instruction. It never should be an "I got you," or looking to get anybody. That through our pre-conferences and post-conferences, we should really be having good conversations that do improve, and to really focus on the rubric, and that the rubric is from the Charlotte Danielson framework, and it is what good teaching looks like.



Promising Practices for Communicating DPAS-II as a Formative Feedback Tool

In our 2015 report on DPAS-II, we found that perceptions of whether DPAS-II helped to improve instructional practices were closely associated with beliefs about the tools' utility. Here, we highlight some approaches that educators in our 6 best practice schools favored for communicating DPAS-II as an improvement tool. These promising practices offer guidance to schools for messaging DPAS-II as a tool to support educators' professional growth.

Spotlighting components and rubrics helped administrators message that DPAS-II served the purpose of supporting instructional practices. Administrators and educators reported that trainings from school leaders often focused on DPAS-II components and the component rubric. Both groups said that rubrics were useful for clarifying not only DPAS-II expectations, but also important dimensions of teaching practice. Educators found it particularly helpful to practice using the rubrics to evaluate teachers in videos or peers in their classrooms. An administrator described how DPAS-II components lent themselves to discussions about instructional practices, even without explicitly presenting them as a part of DPAS-II.

They (educators) know the components of [DPAS-II]. But our training [focused] on instructional practices, which is a part of DPAS-II. We talk about the components of DPAS. We talk about the planning piece. We talk about the instructional pedagogy of unpacking the standards, and taking a look at how those standards connect to each other, and how they move forward those standards. We talk about the climate in the classroom and the behavior in the classroom, and what the needs are to engage all children.

In some schools, administrators made communication about DPAS-II a regular part of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and professional development so that educators became familiar and comfortable with DPAS-II evaluations. Some educators said that PLCs provide the opportunity to discuss DPAS-II with grade-level colleagues and at least one administrator. Educators and administrators favored the use of PLCs to discuss the DPAS-II process, goal-setting, rubrics, assessments and components. One administrator described how he has integrated information about DPAS-II into regular meetings.

That's why we've made it a part of our PLC and our professional development plan--because we feel like it is effective. It is labor intensive and time consuming and there's a lot of pieces to it, but it can move, it can drive student improvement. But if you're only using it once a year or when you're observing I feel like you're missing the boat. I look at it as this is what we're using. If this is what my principal is evaluating me on this is what I need to know... sometimes we'll do a PLC activity where I have teachers bring a lesson plan that is current or they're currently using and we'll look, we'll pick two or three areas in the rubric and we'll see how your lesson plan aligns with these areas. I think we've done that pretty well here so our teachers, I don't think our teachers are threatened by DPAS-II. I do think they all agree it's a lot, but I don't think they fear it. I think they see it as a tool.

In one best practice school, administrators appointed educator leaders to serve as liaisons between educators and their evaluators. In describing the leaders' roles, one administrator reported that educators ask leaders logistical and process questions about deadlines and which documents to submit.

I think it's worth noting that we always use our lead teachers. We have two lead teachers in this building and our student advisor, who's sort of a quasi-administrator. Those three are liaisons between...liaisons in the process between the teachers that use DPAS on their side and the administrators that use DPAS on our side. To try to remove any anxiety that may go along with the deep goal-setting process, pre-observation process. "So, how do we even do this?" "Where are we going to find this document?" "When are we going to complete this document?" "How do we submit it?" "Is this what they want?" All those things. Rather than the teachers coming to their evaluator, we've sort of created a middle person who helps them through that process in a non-evaluative way.

In best practice schools, DPAS-II evaluations took place within school cultures that featured relational trust between school leaders and educators, collaboration among educators, and an emphasis on student achievement. This context facilitated positive impressions of DPAS-II. Participants said that school leaders sent regular emails and attended PLCs to provide ongoing communication about DPAS-II expectations. Administrators also provided extensive support and feedback outside of the official DPAS-II evaluation system process. Trust and collaboration was further strengthened by PLCs, common planning time and professional development sessions that devote time for same-subject educators to discuss their practices and offer resources, feedback and general support to one another. Across some schools, peers observed each other, allowing them to learn models for instructional best practices firsthand. Furthermore, across multiple schools, leaders stressed that providing quality education for their students is their priority. They viewed the evaluation system as a means to achieving the ultimate goal of helping all students achieve at higher levels. A Group 1 educator commented on the importance of school culture for perceptions of DPAS-II.

She used the word 'culture,' and I think that's part of how you would interpret the DPAS-II and the whole process. Here's a culture of trust, of building you up and making you a better educator. Collaboration, exactly. So, in that sense, how do you teach culture to another administrator? You have to build that rapport, that trust with the people in your building. It goes from there. I don't look at this as something to fear. I look at it as something to make me better.



Remaining Challenges for Communicating DPAS-II as a Formative Feedback Tool

Educators and administrators at best practice schools shared positive beliefs about DPAS-II and its purpose of supporting their practices; however, some educators' negative experiences with DPAS-II undermined this perception. What challenges remain for the DDOE, school districts and schools to communicate DPAS-II as a tool for improving instructional practice?

Similar to findings from last year's evaluation, some administrators and educators continue to perceive DPAS-II mainly as a compliance tool and therefore not useful in supporting their practices.

Instead, some educators, particularly Group 3 educators who said DPAS-II was not relevant to their practice, viewed DPAS-II as a tool for accountability. Furthermore, educators and administrators experienced the evaluation as a burden or hindrance to their practice. Several study participants said that they focus on student achievement, becoming better educators and reflecting on their practices without the DPAS-II evaluation. One Group 3 educator illustrated this by saying:

I don't think it's been that helpful, to be honest with you. I'm just going to say that only because I already know what kind of instructor I am. So, I would look at data anyhow, right? I don't need someone to mandate that for me. I would still investigate certain things that would be better at reading a textbook, for example, because those are the things that I know are important to my practice, which will then in turn be important to how my students fare, whether it's on an exam or in a specific skill.

According to some administrators and educators, the amount of DPAS-II paperwork was burdensome, contributing to the perception that DPAS-II is more of a compliance exercise than a tool for formative feedback. One Group 2 educator said:

I've been teaching nine years and to be honest with DPAS it's been around pretty much my whole teaching career that sometimes it does feel like compliance. I'm very comfortable in how I teach and what I'm teaching, so some of the paperwork and forms it's like "ok, I have to do this. It's expected of me. The state needs this." Some of the staff like I always feel it's a waste of time some of the paperwork that you do after you've been teaching for so long. As a veteran teacher that, you know, it doesn't seem, it seems silly or frivolous some of the paperwork you have to fill out.



Recommendations for Improving Perceptions of DPAS-II as a Formative Feedback Tool

The following recommendations were informed by educator perspectives at best practice schools and the promising practices and challenges that emerged from our focus groups and interviews.

For DDOE and District-Level Administrators

- **Continue providing in-depth training on the DPAS-II rubric.** Administrators suggested that workshops in which they closely read, practiced using and received extensive training on parts of the rubric sent the message that DPAS-II supports instruction.

- **Increase the number of short observations and related conversations during a school year.** Rather than observe a teacher a few times each year for a formal evaluations, educators suggested that frequent informal walkthroughs become part of the DPAS-II evaluation. This way, administrators can offer ongoing support to educators, and DPAS-II can have more of a direct and positive influence on their practices. Support and influence resulting from frequent observations are likely to contribute to educators' perceptions that DPAS-II serves the purpose of providing formative feedback.
- **Tailor the DPAS-II evaluation to fit the educator.** Some educators, especially Group 3 educators, experienced DPAS-II more as an accountability tool that was not applicable to their practice. To address this issue, DDOE should consider customizing the DPAS-II process to each educator group.
- **Reduce DPAS-II paperwork.** Participants described DPAS-II paperwork as cumbersome. To make time for frequent walkthroughs and informal conversations that more directly support instructional practices, DDOE should consider lessening the burdens administrators face when documenting DPAS-II evaluations.

For School-Level Administrators

- **Continue communicating that DPAS-II's purpose is to support educators' professional growth.** Our research suggests that it is particularly important for administrators to explicitly communicate that DPAS-II is not a "gotcha" but rather is a tool for formative feedback in meetings, one-to-one conferences and via email. Administrators can reinforce this message by supporting educators' practices with ongoing feedback, up-to-date trainings and information about changes to DPAS-II, and flexibility in choosing DPAS-II Component V assessments.
- **Use DPAS-II as a framework that is part of what educators do each day.** This message can be buttressed by discussing DPAS-II in professional development sessions, in Professional Learning Communities and in informal conversations with educators.
- **Designate educator leaders who mentor and support educators throughout the DPAS-II process.** Schools could potentially expand the role of educator leaders beyond answering logistical and process questions and involve them in answering more substantive questions and training teachers on how DPAS-II can be useful for their practices. Because educators can ask these liaison questions, they might help ease anxiety about DPAS-II and help position it more as a formative feedback tool.
- **Continue providing opportunities for educators to understand rubrics.** Some administrators and educators appreciated that rubrics aligned well with effective teaching practice. Like DDOE and district-level officials, school administrators should continue spotlighting DPAS-II rubrics in order to illustrate that the system's purpose is to improve their practices. They can do this by providing more hands on approaches and peer learning by way of peer to peer walkthroughs in which educators observe each other's classrooms using rubrics. Devoted time to talk about these tools in PLCs help educators learn from each other.