

DPAS-II Feedback: 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 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

The Fall 2015 evaluation revealed that teachers and specialists in Delaware who reported that they received high-quality feedback from their evaluator were more likely to view DPAS-II as a tool for instructional improvement.⁵ Indeed, feedback has been shown to be a critical element of teacher evaluation systems.

For the 2015-16 report, we produced findings on the feedback process. Below, we highlight some of these findings.

Key Findings from Focus Groups and Interviews:

- **Implementation:** Educators reported receiving a combination of verbal and written feedback, with additional classroom visits outside of the formal DPAS-II evaluation process.

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.

³In 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 administrator communication about the purpose of DPAS-II and the DPAS-II Component V goal-setting process for educators.

⁵ Beaver, J.K. & Long, D. A. (2015). *The role of formative feedback in DPAS-II for teachers and specialists*. Philadelphia, Pa: Research for Action.

- **Promising Practices:** 1) creating opportunities for educators' self-reflection; (2) differentiating feedback to meet educators' distinct needs; and 3) providing specific, immediate, and consistent feedback over the course of the year.
- **Remaining Challenges:** 1) ensuring educators perceive that the rubric provides an accurate picture of their performance; 2) differentiating the feedback process for specialists; and (3) managing the increased workload required by DPAS-II.

In this memo we provide recommendations for DDOE, districts, and schools on ways 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 consider creating structures for educator self-reflection and peer learning.
- The DDOE should provide additional training for evaluators on calibration and the characteristics of high-quality feedback.
- School administrators should consider increasing the number of classroom visits to ensure educators receive immediate and consistent feedback on their practice.

Introduction: DPAS-II Feedback

The DPAS-II process provides multiple opportunities for educators to receive feedback from their evaluators over the course of the year. At minimum, it includes a fall conference, pre-observation conference, post-observation conference, spring conference, summative evaluation conference, and (where applicable) an improvement plan conference.⁶

This memo draws on data from interviews and focus groups from six best-practice schools to examine the quality of feedback educators received from their evaluator throughout this process; and how it translated into improvements in instructional practice.

We close by providing a set of recommendations related to feedback that are applicable for both policymakers and practitioners.

Implementation Findings: Feedback Process

In our 2015 report, we documented the value that teachers placed on receiving timely, high-quality feedback. To explore this dynamic in more detail this year, we asked participants in interviews and focus groups to describe the feedback they received from their evaluator. The following section summarizes our findings on the feedback process in the six best practice schools we visited in Delaware.

Administrators in best practice schools set clear expectations at the beginning of the school year. Many teachers and specialists reported having conversations with administrators in the fall in which they outlined the expectations for the year. Educators shared that these meetings provided them with an

⁶ See DPAS-II Teacher and Specialist Guides for more information. <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/domain/186>

opportunity to reflect on their practice and discuss annual goals. This initial communication also helped administrators lay the groundwork for the feedback process over the course of the year.

Educators reported receiving both written and verbal feedback in best practice schools. DPAS-II for teachers and specialists contains two main feedback mechanisms. The first is written feedback that follows both announced observations and unannounced classroom visits. The second is oral feedback that teachers and specialists receive in conferences with their evaluators, which is delivered at multiple points throughout the year. The intended purpose of these two types of feedback is to give educators the information they need to target improvements in instructional practices. One assistant principal noted the importance of both types of feedback:

I think oral feedback is so important when you hear something, but do you hear it? Do you retain it? Do you remember it? I don't know. I think that's why the written is so important too. And again everything that I try to say in a post observation meeting I try to document it so it's in the written piece so I think it's got to be both.

In the six best practice schools we visited, educators reported receiving a mixture of formal announced observations and more informal unannounced classroom visits. Following formal observations, written feedback was provided through an online system and educators had conferences with their administrators. After informal visits, administrators shared feedback in a more casual manner, either through emails or short conversations. The exact number of each type varied across schools, but typically educators reported receiving one formal observation and approximately five additional visits per year, though on some campuses, classroom visits were as frequent as once a week.

Additional classroom visits appeared to be a common practice across best practice schools. At all six best practice schools, teachers and specialists reported that principals met with them outside of the formal evaluation process. Administrators, such as the one below, used additional classroom visits to provide educators with more immediate and frequent feedback over the course of the year.

It gives us a bigger picture of a small amount of instruction. Walkthroughs are kind of how we gauge what's going on in our classroom more regularly...If you're struggling, you'll have us in there four or five times a month; if you're someone that it's been working with and we've not had any problems with, maybe once or twice a month.

In some schools, educators and administrators described these additional classroom visits as a component of DPAS-II, while at other schools, educators and administrators viewed them as outside of the formal evaluation system itself. Regardless, all stakeholders believed that additional classroom visits were a critical aspect of the feedback and improvement processes on their campus.

Deliberate Practice Framework

To understand how feedback translates into improvements in instruction in Delaware schools, we draw upon the framework of deliberate practice.⁷ The framework provides a useful organizational tool to help administrators think about the quality of the feedback they provide to educators. Deliberate practice highlights how expertise can be developed through focused and consistent feedback, and outlines four critical elements for translating this feedback into performance improvements:

⁷ Ericsson, K.A. (2006). *The influence of experience and deliberate practice on the development of superior expert performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- **Element 1: Buy-In.** Individuals must be motivated to attend to feedback and empowered as part of the improvement process.
- **Element 2: Differentiation.** Feedback should take into account pre-existing knowledge and individuals' distinct learning styles.
- **Element 3: Specificity & Immediacy.** Feedback should be specific and immediate, so that it can lead to actionable changes in practice.
- **Element 4: Consistency.** Feedback should be consistently provided over the course of the year to facilitate a cycle of continuous improvement.

We use these four elements of high-quality feedback to identify promising practices and challenges around the feedback process employed in DPAS-II in Delaware schools.



Promising Feedback Practices

The following section aligns the promising practices we learned from our best practice school site visits to the four elements of deliberate practice, and explores how administrators' feedback translated into teachers' professional learning and instructional improvement.

Element 1: Buy-In

Most administrators believed it was critical to provide educators with opportunities to reflect on their practice. Many administrators used the rubric to guide teachers through a self-directed learning process by asking them to discuss their own strengths and areas for improvement. They believed that this type of self-assessment empowered teachers to take more ownership over the feedback process. One principal described how self-reflection resulted in more sustainable changes in instruction at her school:

One of the most important things to give feedback is to get people to start thinking reflectively because you can go in and give as much feedback as you want, but until they start to internalize and start to think for themselves then that's where the carryover is.

Indeed, educators reported that the reflective process gave them a chance to self-identify specific areas of focus, which appeared to increase their likelihood of making changes in the classroom. As the Group 3 educator below noted, the reflective process helped identify concrete areas for improvement:

I think he asks a lot of good questions, too. It's more than just a statement. He asks questions that make you reflect on what you did, what went well, what could have gone better, why, what would you do next? Same thing you said, but I think it's those reflective questions, because through that, it helps you elevate yourself through the reflection that you're having.

Educators had high levels of trust in their administrators' leadership across all best-practice schools, which increased their level of buy-in to the system. The relational trust between administrators and educators appeared to be a critical driver of teachers' perception of the quality of feedback they received through the DPAS-II process. Most educators reported that administrators encouraged an environment of continuous improvement at their schools and created a safe space for

educators to try new practices in their classroom. As one Group 1 teacher noted, this increased teachers' buy-in to the improvement process:

Yeah, I think like the school atmosphere with the teachers all trying new things, I think it really comes from the top where they're willing to let us try new things. And if it doesn't work they're not going to come down on you. They're excited about us trying new things.

Most administrators also reported using the feedback process to celebrate teachers' strengths. They started with positive feedback to build educators' trust in the evaluation process and validate their hard work in the classroom.

Element 2: Differentiation

Most administrators said that the feedback they provided was differentiated to meet educators' distinct needs and learning styles. Administrators recognized that not all teachers would react similarly to the feedback provided through DPAS-II. For example, they noted that novice teachers often required more specific and detailed feedback to be able to make instructional improvements, while some veteran staff needed to engage in a more individualized self-reflective process. Several educators noted that their administrators deeply understood their needs, which increased the quality of feedback:

It's individualized and it's obvious that our administrator knows us individually. He knows our teaching styles. He knows what works for us, what doesn't, versus that document is a form. It doesn't reflect who we are. But he knows who we are. He takes the time to figure that out. When we have conversation, if he knows that I'm working on classroom management, he can say, OK, I've seen a difference from last time to this time... That kind of stuff makes good feedback. (Group 2 educator)

Most administrators and educators reported that because conversations allowed for in-depth discussion, they were more effective than written feedback at meeting educators' distinct needs. Conversations happened during the pre-conference when teachers identified focus areas for the observation, as well as in the post-conference when they shared additional context on the lesson. Educators valued these conversations because they were more interactive and provided them with an opportunity to ask questions and deepen their understanding of how to improve their practice.

Element 3: Specificity & Immediacy

All administrators in best-practice schools provided specific and targeted feedback so educators would have a clear understanding of how to improve their practice. Educators valued this targeted feedback and particularly appreciated when administrators suggested explicit strategies to implement in the classroom. As the Group 3 educator below shared, this type of specific and targeted feedback was more actionable:

Or even in the classroom, it could be specific as to certain strategies. They may say, 'Have you used the turn-and-talk strategy?' Have you tried specific activities or things that you can do in the classroom, not just, 'You need to get your kids talking to each other more.' It's actually ... specific activities, specific strategies that you could try with your kids. And they really try to target it, especially for my kids, because I have such a wide range of grade levels and abilities that it's not just cookie-cutter and they're pulling it out of a book. They sit down and they go, okay, your kids would probably do well with this, based on what I saw, based on your kids' abilities.

Most administrators and educators reported that more immediate feedback, often provided through informal classroom visits, was also more actionable. Educators typically received feedback from these informal observations the same day as the actual lesson, allowing them to make real-time adjustments in practice.

Element 4: Consistency

Most best practice administrators ensured that teachers received consistent feedback during the year, often through peer learning. Frequent feedback influenced educators' ability to improve – and sustain changes in – their practice. As noted above, administrators were able to provide more frequent feedback to teachers through additional classroom visits over the course of the year. Most educators reported that their administrators offered helpful feedback and were always available to provide needed support.

Some administrators also encouraged peer observation, as well as discussion of feedback during professional learning communities. One principal had developed a more explicit peer-matching program:

Something that I think is becoming more important is watching other teachers—teachers watching other teachers. So we have paired teachers up. We also let them mix and match pairs, but every month you're supposed to go into a classroom. You meet with a teacher, you go into a classroom, and you observe them doing what they either think is really a strong point of theirs, and you can have a discussion about that, or something that they want support on from a colleague that they can use in the classroom.

Educators reported that these collaborative opportunities provided them with practical models for improving instruction in their own classrooms.



Remaining Challenges for Providing High-Quality Feedback

The following section discusses challenges we learned from practitioners in best practice schools we visited. These challenges may be present in other schools as well.

Element 1: Buy-In

Educators at several best practice schools reported that evaluation ratings did not paint an accurate picture of their performance. While most educators reported that their administrators had clearly defined the performance expectations, some educators did not perceive that the evaluation measures, or in some cases, the evaluation process itself, yielded fair outcomes. The reasons for these concerns varied across schools:

- **Overly rigorous expectations for student-driven classrooms.** Both administrators and educators spoke about how difficult it was to get an “exemplary” rating because it required teachers to consistently implement student-led activities. While this expectation may be something to strive for, some educators noted that it was unfair to include as part of an accountability system. In particular, several early elementary educators, such as the one below, did not believe these expectations were appropriate given the developmental level of younger students.

It's really difficult on some of the rubrics to get Highly Effective just because we're in the elementary schools and some of the things that I think might be appropriate for a high school or a middle school just wouldn't be appropriate for us to be handing it over to the students....some of the things just are developmentally not ready as a 3rd and 4th grader to take that on and be responsible.

- **Inconsistency among multiple evaluators on their campus.** Several educators noted that their evaluators did not provide consistent feedback. This seemed to be of particular concern on one campus where the assistant principal was new and had different (and seemingly higher) standards of performance. Educators on this campus reported getting different ratings from different administrators on the same lesson, which led to increased frustration with the DPAS-II system.

Element 2: Differentiation

While most teachers reported that administrators provided differentiated support, many specialists shared that the evaluation did not address their specific needs. Since the rubric was standardized, it did not lend itself to the specialized context of non-instructional staff roles. To exacerbate matters, in most cases, administrators lacked the specific understanding of the specialist's role, which meant they tended to provide more generic feedback. As one Group 3 educator noted:

I don't think that the administration has, I don't think they feel that they are qualified to give anything negative because they haven't done my job. I think if I was evaluated by someone in my area of expertise we'll call it, they would be able to give me something negative or more constructive...

Element 3: Specificity & Immediacy

Several administrators and educators found the DPAS-II formal observation process to be burdensome and time-consuming. Administrators reported that the process sometimes prevented them from providing immediate and frequent feedback over the course of the year. As the administrator below noted, the tool itself was quite labor-intensive:

I spend a considerable amount of time in classrooms. And DPAS-II is an effective tool to use. Very effective, very efficient. But because of the labor-intensiveness of the tool...I know it takes a considerable amount of management if you're going to be in classrooms more frequently, and be able to give multiple feedback pieces to people. When I started at this school four years ago, it was in a very different place; I wanted to make sure that I could give feedback to people multiple times a week. DPAS didn't lend itself to that.

Teachers at several schools also expressed concerns about the magnitude and redundancy of paperwork required by DPAS-II. As the Group 2 teacher noted below, this process created unnecessary steps, which detracted from the value of the evaluation process.

Reduce the amount that's expected.... we constantly have to go in there and you have your pre conference, and your post conference, and your pre observation form and your post observation form. To me there are just so many extra steps that can be eliminated. It's very redundant, even in the questions that they're asking us to reflect on.

Element 4: Consistency

Some educators reported that formal announced observations were not frequent enough to lead to meaningful changes in practice. Educators often had to wait several days (or in select cases, several weeks) to receive feedback from formal observations. This delay meant that the lesson was less fresh in their mind, and as a result, some educators reported being less likely to implement changes in their classroom. In contrast, as discussed above, most educators reported preferring informal classroom visits because they permitted more frequent and timely feedback.



Recommendations for Improving DPAS-II Feedback

The following recommendations were informed by educator perspectives at best practice schools we visited, the promising practices and challenges that emerged as well as the literature on deliberate practice.

Element 1: Buy-In

- **For DDOE and districts: *Offer professional development and conduct joint walkthroughs to ensure administrators are calibrated on the evaluation rubrics and process.*** DDOE and district leadership should consider offering training for administrators on (1) rating on the rubric, (2) providing actionable feedback, and (3) guiding teachers' through a self-reflective process. This training would provide administrators with opportunities to share best practices within – and across – schools.
- **For administrators: *Provide examples of highly effective practice.*** Administrators should determine the best way to highlight highly effective practices in their schools to provide teachers with concrete examples of how to reach this level of performance.

Element 2: Differentiation

- **For DDOE and districts: *Assign evaluators based on specific areas of expertise.*** This might involve a policy change at the state level to allow content-specific evaluators for key specialist areas (e.g., counseling, nursing). If policy change is not feasible, district staff should ensure that evaluators receive explicit training for how to evaluate specialists.
- **For administrators: *Differentiate the implementation of the evaluation system to meet varying educators' needs.*** Administrators should build their understanding of teachers' distinct needs and tailor their approach to providing feedback to educators in their school accordingly.

Element 3: Specificity & Immediacy

- **For DDOE and districts: *Streamline systems and processes to ensure principals have the necessary time to provide specific and immediate feedback.*** State and district leadership should review the evaluation tools and process to ensure that they are as efficient as possible, so administrators can focus on providing immediate and frequent feedback to their staff.
- **For administrators: *Utilize frequent classroom visits and provide feedback outside of the formal evaluation process.*** Administrators should consider how to increase the frequency of

observations to provide teachers with frequent and real-time suggestions on improving their performance.

Element 4: Consistency

- **For DDOE and districts: *Consider adjusting the evaluation system requirements to include additional classroom visits.*** Given the value of **classroom visits** noted by both administrators and educators, DDOE should consider increasing the number required as part of the DPAS-II process.
- **For administrators: *Create structures to facilitate ongoing feedback-sharing between administrators and educators, as well as among educators.*** Administrators should consider how best to facilitate the sharing of best practice sharing on their campuses.