

Plan of Assistance and Data-Based Observations

By Dr. John L. Tenny, developer of the Data-Based Observation Method and the eCOVE Classroom Observation Software, January, 2010

While at the National Association of Elementary School Principals' convention, I spent some time talking to Steve C., a retired principal who now contracts with districts to work with teachers on a plan of assistance. The teachers he works with are typically having some serious difficulties and are at the intervention stage of help. He has worked with teachers for many years, and talked about how using eCOVE Software and data-based observations has changed the entire playing field.

In many/most instances across the country, the plan of assistance is a combined process of making what is expected of the teacher very clear and specific, while gathering anecdotal notes to support a decision to fire/non-renew the teacher. The teacher is in a last ditch effort to demonstrate a satisfactory level of teaching or classroom management with the only thing different being the administrator in the classroom taking notes. This must rank among the highest stressful conditions under which anyone could ever work.

When I think about these teachers, I put them into three categories: a teacher who is in a truly overwhelming situation with out of control students, lack of materials, lack of support, etc. This is the kind of environment where all but the very, very best would struggle and fail. Putting the teacher on a plan of assistance that is focused on the teacher changing is unfair, but commonly done. Data-based observations in this case can be useful if data is gathered not only on teacher behavior but also on student behavior, outside interruptions, and other systemic

influences with an honest effort to determine what is going awry and what are the causes of the problems. It may be that the teacher does need additional skills -- along with a change in the classroom conditions that are not within the power of the teacher to enact. The data will help determine the difference.

The second category is the teacher who is having difficulty with a reasonably normal class of students, but cannot get a handle on what to do about it. These are often new teachers or teachers inexperienced with the particular group of students. They generally are making consistent, but ineffectual efforts to do a good job and are frequently a contributing factor in the non-productive classroom. This potentially good teacher has been buried under the problems, and is at the burnout, give-up, and quit stage. However, these are teachers that are worth the effort to support and data-based observations can really help.

By providing non-judgmental, objective data on the teacher's actions and the student's responses to those actions, the teacher, with guidance and support, can determine the cause and effects related to the issues, and design changes. The effectiveness of those changes can be tracked and the data will determine the value of the outcomes. Providing the data in a supportive atmosphere can empower the teacher to see ways to make changes and determine the efficacy of those changes. At the same time that the specific issues are being attended to, the teacher is building a life-long skill of reflection and growth.

The third group are those teachers that, sad to say, do not have the skills, knowledge, or capacity to change their behaviors. It can be a lack of interest, a lack of effort, or a basic lack of the personality and skills of a teacher. In any case, these

people, nice though they maybe, should not be functioning as teachers, and need to be counseled and/or forced out of the classroom.

The very best outcome of this plan of assistance is for the teacher to take a careful, reflective look at their own skills and values, and concluded that they are better suited for another career path. However, anyone approached by an evaluator who has the power to fire him or her, and who is in the room taking notes and making judgments, will bring up the stress level and engage every defense mechanism available. That can be shifting the blame, bringing in an attorney, building support among the staff and community regarding this 'unfair' treatment, etc -- in the end, this is a lose-lose situation for everyone, including the kids.

By approaching the issue through data-based observations, some significant things change. An objective picture of the actions in the classroom is presented to the teacher, which should be coupled with a clear description of the requirements for satisfactory performance. Subsequent efforts on the part of the teacher, if truly inept, will not show significant changes, and this non-judgmental picture is often the key to a person's levelheaded decision to change professions - that best of all worlds' decision.

Nevertheless, there will be conditions where the individual will continue to deflect responsibility that is appropriately theirs, and in spite of no data to show satisfactory performance, will continue to resist leaving the classroom. I feel for these folks, as it is often a move that will cause embarrassment and economic hardships -- but for the sake of the children, it is necessary to remove this person from the classroom. If the process has included clear statements of expectations,

and an ongoing record of objective data collection of relevant behaviors showing that they do not meet the expectations, the decision to remove that person is much, much more defensible. Judgments about a person's ability can easily be subject to bias; you will strengthen the entire structure when you add objective data collection.

Steve's experience, of the people he has been involved with on plans of assistance, is that approximately 60% decide to change occupations or are removed by the district. However, a full forty percent turn from struggling teachers to competent professionals. And as it is with teachers - when you can step in a help a struggling individual overcome the obstacles, you get to experience the joy that's the special gift to educators - the joy of helping another human rise to their potential.