



YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH TRICIA COULTER, PH.D., DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE CENTER FOR TEACHER QUALITY

*Interview by Marie Husby-Slater, Great Lakes West
Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates*



Tricia Coulter, Ph.D.

On April 1, Great Lakes West staff member Marie Husby-Slater sat down with Tricia Coulter, PH.D., to discuss teacher effectiveness and developing and sustaining evaluation systems for teacher effectiveness. Dr. Coulter is the deputy director of the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (TQ Center). The TQ Center has created many resources and has provided a great deal of assistance to regional comprehensive centers on the issue of teacher evaluation and effectiveness. However, this opportunity provides a unique resource for accessing the TQ Center's expertise in this area.

Great Lakes West: Who is responsible for defining teacher effectiveness?

Dr. Coulter: Defining teacher effectiveness should be a collaborative effort because how you define what you mean by teacher effectiveness has a huge impact on the types of methods and measures of evaluation that you will put in place. For example, if you define teacher effectiveness solely based on student achievement, you will want to put all of your resources and efforts into making sure that you have a good way of measuring student achievement as well as having a good data system where you can track achievement. If you also include teacher practice, then you want to specify what kinds of teacher practice are important. Is lesson planning important? Is how teachers behave inside a classroom important? Each of these definitions would lead you to different methods of evaluating teachers.

It is necessary to have people in the room who have awareness of and investment in how you are going to define effectiveness. So, it is going to be the teachers, the central office staff, and the state education agency staff. Depending on how much the state is going to mandate the evaluation system be put in place versus how much control the districts are going to have, you may want to include district superintendents and the state superintendent.

One of the often-overlooked stakeholder groups is state legislators because if there are any policy ramifications for how you are going to evaluate teacher effectiveness, then legislators need to know on the front end so they can be invested in getting the best policies in place. You want the voice of the teacher, which can be accomplished by having teachers or the teachers union representative in the room.

It is important from the outset to have engagement from all of these stakeholder groups because that makes the development and implementation, as well as the continued improvement, of an evaluation system so much easier. Because your efforts start with how to define effectiveness, it really is important to have all of these groups together from the outset.

Great Lakes West: *How would this collaborative group go about defining teacher effectiveness?*

Dr. Coulter: The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality has good resources on that. We have the Communication Framework for Measuring Teacher Quality and Effectiveness. It is a way of talking about what matters to you. You will want to look at the teacher standards that you have in place and decide if they are outcome-based standards. Most of them are now—states really are starting to move toward outcome-based standards. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) incorporates certain aspects of performance skills inside their standards, and many states use the INTASC Standards. It is a matter of deciding what is important; you need to ask, “What do we care about most in our teaching force?” Each one of the stakeholders is going to have a different aspect.

Classroom teachers and union representatives will probably be concerned about having too much emphasis placed on student academic achievement alone. Considering all the other multitudes of factors that can go into whether or not a teacher is effective and whether or not the teacher’s practice has anything to do with effectiveness. There are other factors not under the teacher’s control that impact whether or not a student is achieving academically. Teachers in the classroom are going to be concerned with having 100 percent of the evaluation based on student achievement.

The legislators are going to be worried about how you are going to decide what we mean by effectiveness for purposes of licensure or certification. They will be concerned with knowing who to hire, who to retain, and who to advance. Legislators will be more concerned with how effectiveness and an evaluation system will interact with the policy ramifications on certification and licensure.

Principals might be interested in whether there is an induction system. They might ask, “How do I know that a teacher is good enough to become a master teacher or a mentor teacher?” So, each stakeholder group is going to focus on an area that is most important to them. It is important to hear all of these aspects so that an understanding can come out of that discussion. That discussion can help uncover which is most important, how you want to prioritize, how will you define effectiveness and create a system that will accommodate the things you find most important. Also important is establishing a system that you can sustain because sustainability is also a huge problem. You could have a great comprehensive evaluation system based on a very detailed comprehensive definition of effectiveness, but you could lack the resources to implement the system.

Great Lakes West: *It sounds like there are a lot of pieces that go into building this big picture. How do you include different stakeholders?*

Dr. Coulter: Stakeholders should be involved from the outset. However, if you get a group that is too large or unwieldy, then you are not going to be able to move anything forward. There has to be someone who is in charge of moving the work forward. Usually what happens is you have a cross-section to represent the sample from the state. You can get the president of the parent teacher association or the president of the local- or state-level union representative. You look for the higher level people who represent the rest of the group. Your ideal group is a small group with a large backing behind it.

You want the people there who represent all the interests in the state. For example, I was just at a meeting in a state that has a large Native American population. It was important to have a representative from the American Indian Education Bureau there. If you have a state with a large rural group, you need to make sure they are represented; the same is true with a large urban population. These groups have very specific concerns and issues that need to be taken into consideration when dealing with these specific situations within a state. Depending on how much of an issue these things are in the state, you will want to make sure

they have a representative at the table. You want that representative to be able to carry the most voices without having that many voices in the room.

Great Lakes West: *Is that person who is making the decisions and making sure things more forward more likely to be at the district level or the state level? Or is it someone else altogether?*

Dr. Coulter: That has been an issue for a while—the need to navigate the relationship between local control and state accountability. The upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the blueprint for ESEA appear to be asking the state to take a more involved role with issues like evaluating teachers and determining their effectiveness. That is going to bring about a completely new era of negotiations between state accountability and local control. The person that will ultimately be responsible will likely be at the state level because the state will be held accountable. It is important to have district representatives but the person with the most responsibility in the end will likely be the state.

Great Lakes West: *Going back to what you have said about evaluation, what should be the purpose of evaluating teacher effectiveness?*

Dr. Coulter: The purpose should be putting in place methods and processes whereby teachers' strengths and weaknesses can be clearly identified and supported. If you have a teacher who is really good at classroom management, you want to know that so you can use that teacher as a mentor, peer counselor, and teacher leader so other teachers can learn from that person. If, on the other hand, you have a teacher who has difficulties in any particular area, you will know what that area is, so you can immediately put in place targeted professional development and targeted support in order to ensure that they improve.

It is important to realize that a teacher evaluation system is supposed to be for the ongoing improvement and to support teacher effectiveness and student learning. Coming into evaluation with that attitude means you will automatically be looking for more formative evaluations and more formative evaluation data so that you can clearly identify any areas of strength or weakness. These areas can either be utilized or corrected for the betterment of the entire teaching force and for student learning.

Great Lakes West: *What does it take to sustain an evaluation system like the one you just described?*

Dr. Coulter: As with so many other things, it takes energy and resources, and often these are fiscal. When an evaluation system is being created, there needs to be a clear understanding of what the resources are in order to implement the system well. A lot of states and districts use some sort of classroom evaluation or look at classroom observation tools. The challenge in that is to have a classroom observation tool that is as objective as possible, and to do that you will need to have more than one rater. You are going to have to determine how to go about training multiple raters, ensuring that multiple raters are given the time that they need. That means they will need relief time if they are peers in the school, or you will be bringing them in from the outside. That is all money, time, and resources that have to be supported.

You have to make sure that there is a system put in place so that you can evaluate the evaluation system and make sure that it is both providing the data and meeting the purposes of what you wanted the evaluation system to do. The evaluation system also requires expertise, resources, and human time for people to come in and determine if the system is doing the job it is supposed to do. All of these actions are necessary for sustaining a good evaluation system, and they need to be thought about at the outset.

Hopefully, what will happen is you will have a mass of excellent teachers who feel supported and feel like their professional development is being honored and understood. The retention rate would go up, and the attrition rate would go down. There would be a ripple effect of more resources being spent on the evaluation system and the teaching staff in general. This needs to be considered at the outset because what you don't want to happen is to put in this evaluation system, involve all of the stakeholders, get everyone excited about it, and roll it out for one year and then realize you do not have the resources to sustain it.

Great Lakes West: *Once you have developed a definition of teacher effectiveness and an evaluation system, how do you know that they are working?*

Dr. Coulter: Hopefully, evaluation would go up and student achievement would go up if you were looking at student growth that would go up. It would be a good idea to have direct input from teachers themselves about whether they found the evaluation process useful and felt more supported. Have they benefited from professional development that has been directed by the results of the evaluation processes? There is a belief that if you are in a school with a high attrition rate, there is a chance that having a high-quality evaluation system would increase retention of effective teachers. Do you have a greater number of effective teachers because not only are we hoping they would stay but also we're hoping teachers that may have been initially rated as less than effective would get targeted professional development and support that would help them become more effective. The result would be an increase in the percentage of the teaching force that would be effective or highly effective.

Great Lakes West: *What does having a definition of and system for evaluating teacher effectiveness mean for student learning?*

Dr. Coulter: It should mean an increase in student learning. It should mean an increase in student engagement in the scholastic process. Many things happen for children in schools that are not necessarily based on the core academic subjects. You may experience an increase in engagement of community that is a school or an increased civic responsibility. These are things that we do not accept as academic achievement but are aspects of learning. Students are learning to be citizens in a country, they are learning to be part of a group, they are learning to engage with adults and peers around them, and most of it is influenced by the teacher in the classroom. If you have a teacher in a classroom who knows that they are supported in improved practice, then that cannot help but filter down to everything the school provides for the students.

Increased engagement happens when a teacher walks into the classroom that is well managed. That means the students are engaged, they are talking to the teacher, and they are engaged in discussion and creative thinking and analysis. Teacher effectiveness is very important for all aspects of student learning. Without having an evaluation system that is able to determine, identify, and discern strengths and weaknesses of a particular teacher, it is very hard to know how to improve. As soon as you can find out something is working really well or is a challenge that you need to get some support for, it will increase the teacher's effectiveness overall, and that will filter down to having the student population more engaged and learning at a better level.