

See something? Tell the teacher

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Many school districts are pushing principals to spend more time in classrooms observing and evaluating teachers but few are using the information they gather to improve education.

"A lot of time is invested in gathering data, but the information is rarely shared with the people who need to see it - the [teachers](#)," said Marsha Ing, assistant professor of [education](#) at the University of California, Riverside's Graduate School of Education.

Instead of storing mountains of data on a database or the top of someone's desk, principals and district administrators need to facilitate discussions with teachers and give them the resources they need to be more effective in the classroom.

An article in the November issue of "The School Administrator" written by Ing and a colleague, Kenneth Montgomery, an assistant principal at Capuchino High School in San Bruno, drew an analogy between education and baseball, where so much time is spent analyzing data such as home runs, RBI's and earned-run averages that no one is watching the game.

"The key part about classroom observations is to use the information to change instruction," said Ing, whose research involves measurement and assessment of student learning.

More stringent teacher evaluation methods, including classroom observations, are an integral part of President Obama's Race to the Top

initiative that encouraged states to compete for a portion of \$4 billion in federal stimulus funding to improve educational opportunities. In a Nov. 20 column in the New York Times, Thomas Friedman called education "The epicenter of national security."

A growing number of school districts use value-added test scores to evaluate teachers. Value-added scores, highlighted in a recent series by the Los Angeles Times, involves judging teachers' performance based on how much improvement individual students make on a set of standardized tests over the course of a year.

Test scores are an attractive tool for evaluation because they are easy, efficient and inexpensive to collect.

"You can administer a test to all students and create a test score you think is an indication of what the students know and are able to do," Ing said. "It's a great way to get a broad, general sense of what's going on for all students but this isn't the entire story."

The problem is a lot of tests aren't designed to measure what the teacher is doing to make a difference for the student in that particular year, Ing said.

Another way to get to that is through consistent observation by trained observers using specific learning factors that are deemed to be important.

Typically, a principal visits a teacher's classroom several times a year, making notes and completing some sort of learning walk or classroom observation protocol.

Classroom observations are most effective when there is agreement throughout the district in terms of what learning should look like. "If there is consensus that [student engagement](#) is an important factor, then

creating tools to measure student engagement signals what is important," Ing said.

Even student engagement needs to be clearly defined, so that observers are noticing and recording the same things in each classroom.

Then, the information collected in the classrooms needs to be systematically shared with individual teachers, who can use the feedback to make changes in their teaching. Principals may use the information to schedule professional development activities or to modify class schedules to give teachers more time to collaborate.

Information gathered from classroom observations should be combined with other outcomes such as student test scores, student work, and student interaction to determine areas for improvement.

"These outcomes are hopefully what you see being changed as a result of teachers changing what they do in their classes," Ing said.

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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