Mini-Observations – 22 Frequently Asked Questions

Kim Marshall – March 4, 2024

The idea of short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits and face-to-face debriefs is unconventional and raises a number of questions. Here are those I hear most often, each followed by my response:

1. *Isn't ten minutes insufficient to see what's going on during a lesson?* Watching a video of part of a lesson quickly convinces people that a *lot* happens in 10-15 minutes. But to get an accurate picture of a teacher's overall work, short visits need to be frequent, randomly spread through the year, and always followed by a face-to-face conversation in which the teacher can put the snapshot in context and fill in important background information.

2. *Unannounced visits feel like a "gotcha" aimed at catching the teacher doing something wrong, showing a lack of trust.* Mini-observations take some getting used to, but they allow the teacher's day-to-day work to shine through without the nervous-making once-a-year "dog and pony show." Supervisors build trust in the face-to-face conversations, showing that mini-observations aren't about finding fault but rather about appreciating good practices and working together to fine-tune teaching and learning.

3. *Observers will miss the best part of the lesson, which seems to happen just before or after a mini-observation.* That can happen, but face-to-face debrief conversations give the teacher a chance to describe what the supervisor missed, filling in gaps and showing the work students produced.

4. *The observer might see a bad moment and take that out of context.* Everyone has those moments, but if there are enough visits (once a month is a good frequency), not-so-good moments are seen in the overall context of effective teaching and learning.

5. *Unannounced visits will distract students and throw the teacher off stride.* If short visits are frequent, they become routine and students and teachers get used to them and barely notice the administrator's presence.

6. *Not having a pre-observation conference means the supervisor won't know the whole lesson plan.* Again, the face-to-face conversation gives the teacher an opportunity to explain the context, show the lesson and unit plan, and talk about students' long-term learning. Supervisors might also be able to look over the lesson plan during the mini-observation.

7. *What is the observer looking for in a short visit? Do they bring in a checklist or rubric?* Checklists and rubrics are not appropriate for a short visit. The supervisor should be looking for the big picture: how is this lesson going in terms of learning objectives, pedagogy, and student learning?

8. *What if the supervisor isn't experienced in my subject area?* Nobody can be an expert in every grade and subject, and humility is important. Face-to-face

conversations are an opportunity for the teacher to bring observers up to speed on content and pedagogy with which they're not familiar. With help from the teacher on grade- and subject-specific details, a perceptive administrator can make appreciative and helpful observations on pedagogy, classroom climate, and student engagement.

9. *Will busy supervisors be able to get into classrooms frequently enough?* There's no question that mini-observations are a time management challenge. But with the average caseload of 20-25 teachers per supervisor, making a monthly visit to each classroom involves an average of only two mini-observations a day. If the visits are short, the debrief conversations are short, and the write-up is limited to 1,000 characters (about 160 words), it's possible to do an average of two a day, which adds up to ten per teacher each year.

10. *Some teachers will get fewer mini-observations than others and that isn't fair.* Equity – everyone getting the same number of visits per year – is an important principle to which principals should publicly commit. Even the best teachers appreciate feedback and can be encouraged to share their ideas with colleagues.

11. *Shouldn't supervisors see a full lesson at some point?* Brand-new teachers benefit from a full-lesson observation, but ideally this should be low-stakes and conducted by an instructional coach or another teacher who is very familiar with their grade or subject area – and promptly followed up with a face-to-face debrief. Teachers on an improvement plan should also have full-lesson observations, perhaps by a third party to get another opinion. And if a teacher invites a supervisor to observe a lesson, they should stay the full time. But except for these three situations, mini-observations provide much more information and authenticity to the process of supervision, coaching, and evaluation.

12. *Are mini-observations suitable for instructional coaches and peer observers?* In most schools, the answer is no. Instructional coaches have smaller caseloads and benefit from seeing whole lessons and engaging in more in-depth dialogues with teachers than are possible for principals and other supervisors. Most of their observations are part of coaching cycles and involve more time in fewer classrooms. Peer observers are usually not able to do multiple visits (they usually have full teaching schedules), so mini-observations aren't a good fit. They should do a few full-lesson observations and have face-to-face debriefs as soon after as possible.

13. *It's unfair to base an end-of-year summative evaluation on mini-observations.* Actually, frequent mini-observations give a much more accurate picture of a year's instruction than one or two formal, full-lesson visits – provided that the short visits are frequent, randomly spaced through the day and year, and are always followed up by a face-to-face debrief. Using a detailed evaluation rubric at the end of the school year, with teacher input and discussion, supervisors can put together a remarkably detailed and accurate picture of overall performance.

14. *So could mini-observations <u>replace</u> traditional teacher evaluations?* Absolutely, if the key elements are in place: frequent, short, systematic, and unannounced; face-to-face conversations each time, with short summaries sent to the

teacher; a mid-year rubric check-in meeting to identify and address possible issues; then teacher input and a full discussion of rubric ratings at the end of the school year; and supervision of supervisors to ensure skill and fairness. There's a strong argument that this system is more accurate, fair, and supportive of teachers than traditional evaluations, and will result in higher-quality, more-equitable instruction for all students.

15. *What does the research say about mini-observations?* There have been very few studies of this model because researchers tend to accept the traditional model as unchangeable. However, there are strands of research on K-12 schools that support the mini-observation model, including: the importance of building relational trust, positive professional working conditions, principals acting as instructional leaders, frequent and specific feedback, early intervention with classroom problems, and face-to-face coaching.

New Leaders, a U.S. principal training and professional development program, identified fifteen research-based skills for school leaders; the mini-observation process includes nine of them: (a) being highly visible around the school; (b) building trusting relationships with teachers and students; (c) identifying and celebrating effective practices; (d) initiating difficult conversations; (e) leading outcome-based meetings with clear protocols; (f) using time strategically; (g) setting clear expectations; (h) monitoring adult practices; and (i) delivering high-quality professional development.

16. *Does the average supervisor have the chops to implement mini-observations?* The basic design of mini-observations actually makes it more do-able than the traditional evaluation model because (a) supervisors have multiple "at bats" to hone their observation and feedback skills; (b) the frequency and informality of the post-mini conversations means supervisors don't have to be perfect every time; (c) in the face-to-face debriefs, teachers can "school" their supervisors about the finer points of their subject and pedagogy and also correct anything the visitor might have misunderstood; (d) feedback after each classroom visit focuses on one "leverage point" at a time so the evaluative task is more limited and do-able; and (e) when feedback conversations take place in the teacher's classroom, they're on their home turf and the power dynamic is more favorable to helpful give-and-take and more manageable for the supervisor.

17. *Okay, but who is going to supervise my supervisor and ensure quality?* That's the job of the superintendent or head of school, and they need to be in your school frequently to monitor the mini-observation process. One of the best ways to check on and build supervisors' skills is conducting co-observations of several classes and then going back to the office to debrief, discuss, and role-play. Superintendents and heads of school should also conduct anonymous surveys of teachers to see how mini-observations are going.

18. *What about inter-rater reliability? Isn't there too much room for subjectivity in this way of working with teachers?* Supervisors can't (and shouldn't) be robots, expected to come up with exactly the same rating for each teacher. Superintendents and heads of school should select, train, and support their supervisors to have good

observation and human interaction skills and use sound judgment as they give feedback to teachers. In the words of Sam Meade et al. (2012), "It is impossible to evaluate teacher performance without a significant role for human judgment."

19. *I don't like the idea of being "graded" and put in little boxes on the rubric. Why not write a narrative evaluation at the end of the year?* Traditional narrative evaluations are time-consuming and can never include the myriad aspects of a teacher's work through the year. There's also a very high skill threshold in writing good narratives, and many supervisors don't have the training and writing skills to do them well. In addition, teachers' don't have input at the supervisor writes narrative evaluations (although of course they can protest afterward). The rubric is a comprehensive, research-based deconstruction of teaching (with some notable gaps on items that are too subjective to evaluate, such as sense of humor). The rubric makes it possible to give more-detailed evaluative feedback on key descriptors of teaching, with the teacher's input to fill in gaps in the supervisor's knowledge, in much less time.

20. *I'm a union representative and like the idea of mini-observations, but some of my colleagues are skeptical. What are the key questions I should get answers to?* I (Kim Marshall) was a union rep when I taught at the King School in the 1970s. Here are the key questions I would want good answers to in order to feel comfortable recommending mini-observations to my fellow teachers: Why are we doing this? What's the problem to which mini-observations are the solution? Will there be enough classroom visits to adequately sample the 900 lessons each of us teaches? Will supervisors stay long enough? Will visits be systematically spread out? How can we prevent mini-observations from being intrusive and disruptive? What are supervisors looking for during short visits? Do the supervisors in our school have a good instructional "eye" and are they being supervised and held accountable by their boss? Will there *always* be a face-to-face conversation after visits so I can put the short visit in context? Will supervisors take into account the bigger picture outside the very short visits to our classrooms? Will we have an opportunity to submit anonymous feedback on the process as least once a year? And will be have meaningful input on our final evaluations?

21. *I'm a principal and really like the idea of mini-observations. How can I convince my teachers and superintendent?* Here's one strategy: convene your faculty for a one-hour meeting, with the superintendent sitting in, and take these steps:

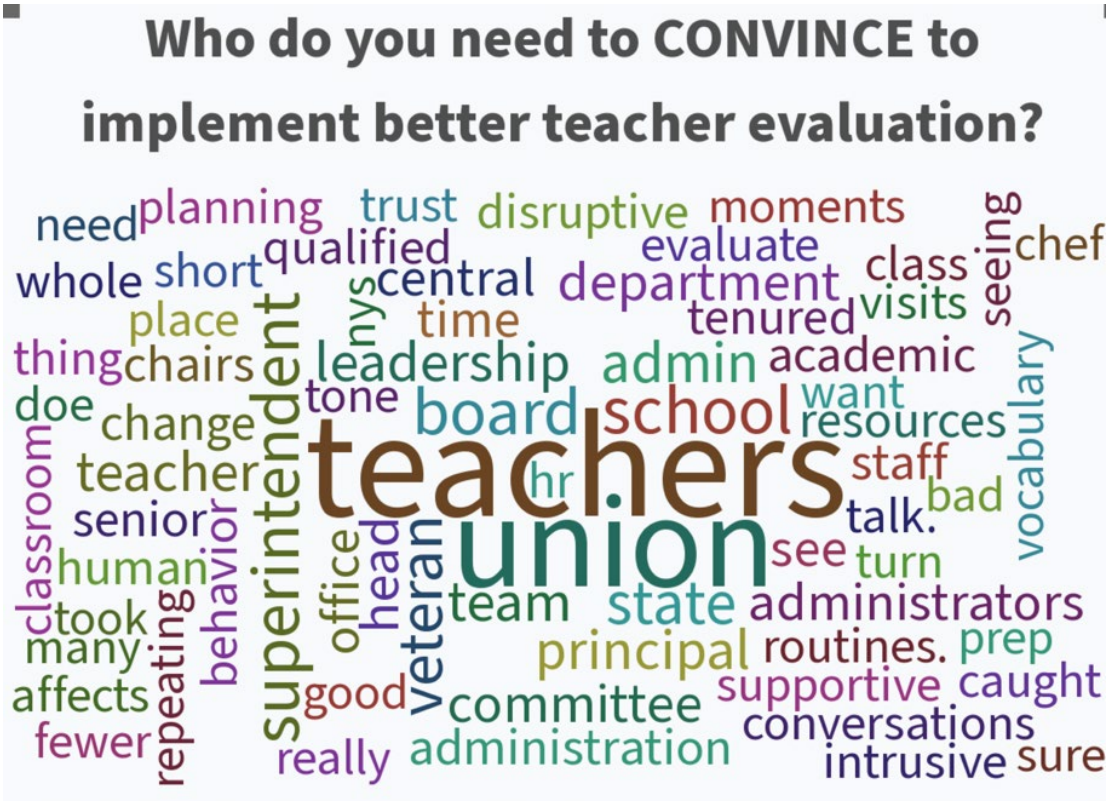
- Explain the basic idea of mini-observations: short, frequent, systematic, unannounced visits with face-to-face conversations and a brief narrative summary every time.
- Acknowledge that it's very different from the traditional model. Some schools are implementing it successfully, but for us it's a bit of a leap of faith.
- Have teachers get in groups and brainstorm worries about mini-observations, rational and irrational.
- Pull the group back together and elicit all the worries, with one person writing them on an easel sheet (there are usually about eleven worries). Don't argue

with them; just get them out there to show candor and openness and prepare the group for the next steps of persuasion.

- Show a 10-minute video of a teacher in action, using one that has some solid teaching and areas for improvement.
- Have the whole group brainstorm first the teacher's effective actions, then possible areas for improvement.
- Ask people to discuss with one elbow partner which coaching point they believe is the most important.
- Then have everyone get up, choose a partner they don't usually work with, and do a five-minute role-play of a conversation with the teacher in the video, with one person acting the teacher, the other the supervisor. Even people who hate role-playing usually get into this exercise.
- After five minutes, call time, thank colleagues for engaging, have everyone sit down, and elicit comments on how the conversations felt, what were the most common coaching points, and any particularly good opening lines or funny moments.
- Explain further details of how mini-observations might work, including a brief written summary sent electronically to the teacher after the conversation, the number of visits per year, a mid-year check-in with the rubric, rubric ratings at the end of the school year, with teacher input, and what might be involved contractually in implementing the plan in your school.
- Have an open discussion about next steps: perhaps a study group to read articles and think it through, a field trip to a school implementing mini-observations, a pilot with a few volunteers.

These steps usually produce a willingness to engage in further discussion and perhaps a pilot or full implementation. The Best of Marshall Memo website's section on Performance Evaluation has 14 article summaries (available as a PDF or podcast) that can be a good starting point for a study group on the subject: www.bestofmarshallmemo.org.

22. *I'm at teacher leader and want to gather support for mini-observations. Who do I need to convince to make this happen?* Here's a word splash showing involving teachers' and administrators' responses to this question in a recent webinar:


Who do you need to CONVINCE to implement better teacher evaluation?
teachers
union
superintendent
board
school
leadership
admin
academic
department
central
qualified
planning
trust
disruptive
moments
evaluate
class
seeing
chef
visits
tenured
time
place
short
whole
need
thing
chairs
change
tone
want
resources
staff
bad
talk.
vocabulary
teacher
hr
senior
human
classroom
behavior
office
head
veteran
team
state
administrators
see
turn
took
many
affects
fewer
repeating
good
committee
principal
routines.
prep
supportive
caught
conversations
intrusive
sure
administration
really
doe