

TEACHER EVALUATION FOR HIGHER ACCOUNTABILITY

(Track = Principal and administrators – teachers can benefit)

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Introduction

In this age of accountability-driven schools, what can an Islamic school do to hold its teachers to high standards of performance? Al-Amal School, a K – 12 Islamic School in Fridley, Minnesota, had wrestled with this issue for several years before it introduced standards of performance for its teachers. Rubrics were used to define what constitutes high (acceptable) vs. low (unacceptable) levels of performance. The standards and the accompanying rubrics allowed teachers' performance to be carefully and comprehensively scrutinized, helping the school to recognize commitment, diligence and professionalism on the one hand, and challenge ineffective and slacking practices on the other hand. The introduction of the standard-based evaluation was accompanied by the implementation of a rigorous and ambitious professional development program all of which took place in several stages to ensure positive results and a smooth transition to a culture of accountability.

Clarifying expectations

For many years, Al-Amal School performance appraisal was based almost exclusively on class observations. The Principal and his Assistant observed the teachers during instruction time and provided them with feedback, consisting of narrative description of classroom management, student/teacher interaction, clarity of explanation, among other things. Other areas of performance were not systematically assessed, though they were occasionally addressed. Those include attendance, participation in faculty meetings, lesson plans, communication with parents, professional development activities, classroom organization, etc.

Because teacher evaluation was not always comprehensive, timely and precise, especially with respect to non-teaching areas (attendance, punctuality, communication, preparation, following school procedures, etc), teachers who were slacking off in those areas had nothing to lose because the focus was on classroom performance. At the same time, teachers who were committed and diligent in their work went unrecognized.

This limitation in teacher evaluation led to some teachers' questioning the reliability of the evaluation data when the board of directors wanted to use it for rewards and/or sanctions. In addition, many teachers were not clear as to what areas they need to improve at. Consequently, their poor performance persisted over the years (poor attendance, poor lesson plans, poor communication with the parents, failure to follow school procedures, etc.).

Before the beginning of the school year, each teacher was given a copy of the standards of performance with rubrics for each standard. They were told that those standards would constitute the basis upon which they will be evaluated. Those standards consist of:

1. General Performance

- Lesson plans
- Following school rules
- Classroom organization
- Parent communication
- Attendance/punctuality
- Professional development
- Islamic manners
- Team work
- Meeting deadlines

2. Classroom Performance

- Classroom management
- Teaching material
- Teacher/student relationship
- Knowledge of the subject
- Use of class time
- Clarity of instruction
- Teaching style
- Student evaluation

The essence of each standard was explained and discussed and rubrics were used to determine what constitutes acceptable vs. unacceptable level of performance. Teachers were invited to give their feedback before the final standard-based evaluation went into effect. In addition, teachers were told that the evaluation would be used for the following purposes:

- Self-improvement,
- Bonuses,
- Salary raise,
- Letters of recommendation,
- Renewal of contracts, probation or termination
- Teacher recognition (teacher of the quarter, etc.)

Supporting teachers

Guided by the notion that teachers need to be empowered and adequately supported in order to get positive results from them, Al-Amal School put in place a robust and ambitious staff development plan and ascertained that adequate funding would be provided by the local school district to carry out its staff development activities. The plan of support consisted of:

- Appointing mentors to support first year teachers

- Appointing subject coordinators with strong track record in curriculum and instruction to play a leadership role in the areas of math, Arabic, English, and Islamic studies.
- Assigning teachers into teams to work together and support each depending based on the grade and subject taught. Those teams are to meet on weekly basis to address curricular and instructional concerns, share ideas and resources and find solutions.
- Bringing consultants and experts to provide on-site training in the areas identified as critical for school improvement.
- Sending teachers to attend professional conferences in and out of town.
- Providing teacher resources (magazines, video tapes, books, assessment material)
- Making sure that students get what they need in terms of classroom equipments and teaching material (books, computers, software, etc.).

In order to encourage them to actively and continuously seek professional growth, teachers were told that any improvement effort that they would seek, such as subscribing to professional journals, visiting another school, attending a professional conference, or even reading a book with the purpose of gaining knowledge about effective teaching, etc., would positively reflect on their final evaluation.

Collecting Data

During the period of five months, data was carefully and systematically collected and documented, including data about attendance, punctuality, participation in workshops, staff meetings and conferences, classroom organization, following school policies and procedures. Data about classroom instruction was also collected through various class visits conducted by the Principal. During this time, and following each class observation, teachers received feedback about their instruction in a narrative format so that they can attend to problems pertaining to various aspects of teaching before their comprehensive evaluation is completed.

In addition, data about teacher performance was collected through parents' feedback. Mid-year surveys about teacher performance was distributed to the parents to find out about the level of communication, the degree of helpfulness, the amount and quality of homework given to the children, teacher approachability, among other things.

Meeting with teachers

After five months of observation and data collection, evaluation was completed and each teacher received a "report card", consisting of a comprehensive, detailed, rubric-based evaluation. Upon receiving their evaluation, teachers met with the Principal to go over their evaluation and get their opinions. During the Principal-teacher conferences, areas of weaknesses and strengths were discussed. While most teachers found the evaluation to be fairly reflective of their performance, some teachers expressed disagreement with the marks they received in certain areas, and in cases when the teachers provided compelling data to support their disagreement with certain aspects of their evaluation, the grades were bumped up to their satisfaction. At the end of the conferences, new Performance Improvement Plan for the rest of the school year were prepared and distributed, thus

helping to create a culture of continuous improvement that can advance the quality of teaching and learning.

Using the Evaluation Data

Once completed and revised, teacher evaluation was submitted to the Board of Directors in order to be used for decision-making. The board uses evaluation results for renewal of contracts, rewards, and sanctions and future allocation of resources for staff development. The board found the evaluation to be useful in making data-driven decisions pertaining to staffing, staff development, rewards and sanctions. The board also agreed that a comprehensive and timely performance appraisal was important in reinforcing work ethics and advancing the quality of teaching.

Conclusion

The introduction of standard-based performance yielded insightful information about the quality of teachers' work and contributed to higher accountability. The information collected helped to highlight patterns of performance that exceeded the school expectations and recognize exemplary practices while exposing unprofessional and ineffective practices of others who need more supervision and sometimes corrective discipline in certain job areas.