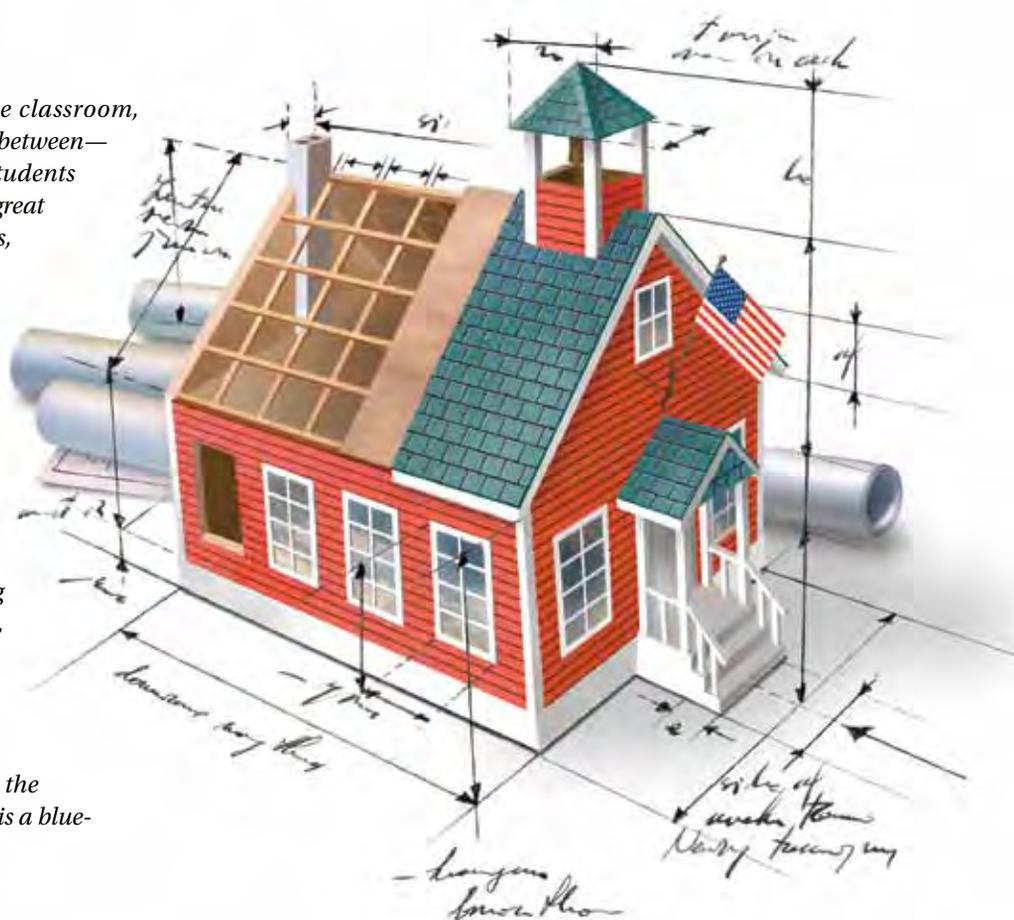


# Continuous Improvement

## Making Evaluation a Tool for Increasing Teacher—and Student—Learning

Professional educators—whether in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: seeing all students succeed in school and life. While they take great pride in their students' accomplishments, they also lose sleep over their students' unmet needs. Professional educators routinely meet with students before and after school, examine student work to improve lesson plans, reach out to students' families in the evenings and on the weekends, and strive to increase their knowledge and skills. And yet, their efforts are rarely recognized by the society they serve.

The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.



Teachers are dedicated to their students. They do their best to ensure that all students learn as much as possible—and they have a strong desire to improve their teaching. No teacher wants a lackluster colleague in the classroom next door. But at the same time, no teacher wants a competent colleague to be punished when a few troubled students turn the school year into a struggle. Listening to the various proposals across the country on how to increase teaching quality, it seems as though few policymakers have grasped these simple truths. Because they know so little about teaching, or about the day-to-day reality of working in a school, these policymakers are unable to offer plans that have much potential to enhance the quality of instruction. Who can create such a plan? Teachers.

Teachers know what they need: a collaborative, trusting school culture that provides a system of supports aimed at continuous improvement. As for that small percentage of teachers

who cannot attain a reasonable level of performance after having been given real opportunities to improve, they need help finding other careers.

The details may vary from school to school, but all effective support systems will share the same basic formula: a seamless combination of professional development, helpful evaluation, and adequate resources such that all teachers have the tools, time, and trust that are necessary to do their jobs well. To better understand how such support systems could be designed, *American Educator* spoke to four AFT leaders: Maria Neira, an AFT vice president and a vice president of the New York State United Teachers; Marcia Reback, an AFT vice president and president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals; Mary Cathryn Ricker, president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers in Minnesota; and Brenda Smith, president of the Douglas County Federation and of AFT Colorado.

—EDITORS

**Editors: How would you describe the traditional or typical approach to teacher evaluation? Are the results useful?**

**Maria Neira:** Many evaluations can be described as “drive by” and are of little value in helping teachers improve their instructional skills. Typically, teachers are evaluated once or twice a year by the principal or another building administrator. In New York, the tool is usually a checklist that includes 10 or so criteria covering everything from instruction to teacher attitudes. Teachers are rated satisfactory or unsatisfactory, but differences in teaching environment, resources, and learning conditions are not taken into account.

Most administrators are not content specialists in the areas being evaluated, may not be up-to-date with the latest research on pedagogy, and—contrary to New York’s regulations governing evaluations—may have limited training on how to evaluate teachers. As a result, generally, teacher evaluations provide little or no meaningful feedback, so they don’t assist teachers in improving their practice.

**Marcia Reback:** The typical evaluation in Rhode Island is very similar. These checklist evaluations generally don’t lead to professional development. They’re generally not rigorous. Classroom management seems to be the main focus of the evaluation, and it’s typically of little use to a teacher. Such evaluations are so simplistic; they are neither a bother nor a help, just something teachers have to go through.

**Brenda Smith:** I agree with Maria and Marcia on all those points. The evaluator’s lack of content knowledge, especially in high school and middle school, is a major problem. That’s why the focus tends to be classroom management, not improving instruction or reaching all of the kids in the classroom. In Douglas County, we have some walk-throughs, but too often they happen right before Christmas break, or on the last day of school, or at the end of the day when the kids are getting ready to leave. That does not provide a true picture of what happens inside the classroom. Many walk-throughs are poorly timed because each administrator is assigned to roughly 40 people to evaluate throughout the year.

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** I would say that what is typical is accidental at best and neglectful at worst. What I’ve seen both as a classroom teacher and as a union president is that it’s the rare administrator who takes evaluation seriously. Even more rare is the administrator who actually uses it to improve performance and better support teachers. It’s absurd to have someone in the classroom for 20 years and for his or her last really meaningful evaluation to have been 17 years ago when the probationary period ended. As a teacher, that sounds to me like my administrator doesn’t care about my growth, or how I’m meeting the needs of kids, or what I could bring to other people in my building or my content area.

Typically, the evaluation is a “gotcha” game. The teachers’

union traditionally has had a role in teacher evaluation, only it has come at the due process point, which is way too late for the union to help improve teachers’ practice.

**Editors: How should teacher evaluation be done? What role should the teachers’ union play?**

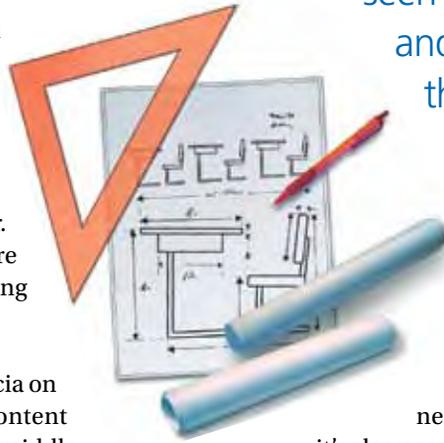
**Marcia Reback:** I don’t think that there’s any union president who has an interest in having less-than-effective teachers in the classroom.

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** Hear, hear!

**Marcia Reback:** The unions usually get scapegoated for the people who should not be in the profession. I think one of the

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—MARY CATHRYN RICKER



roles of the union is to negotiate good, solid, rigorous evaluation systems for teachers that lead to support and improvement. If there is no improvement, then it’s necessary to have some exit strategy. Of course, it’s also necessary to represent a teacher who believes that he or she has been treated unfairly.

An evaluation system that doesn’t lead to a support system isn’t worth anything. The purpose of the evaluation has got to be to reinforce good practice and to improve practice. Evaluation should not be a show or event that happens once a year or once every three years; it must be something continuous and meaningful for teachers.

More AFT locals are adopting peer assistance and review. It is the union’s way of guaranteeing due process for teachers. It is the union’s way of making sure that people who need support get support. It is the union’s way of actually being the gatekeeper into the profession. It is a way of professionalizing teaching and making it much more akin to other professions like medicine and law. (See page 39 for a brief explanation of peer assistance and review.)

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** In St. Paul, we are currently developing a peer assistance and review system for evaluation. As we negotiate, we are insisting on a full-spectrum program, meaning it helps all of our teachers improve. We want the program to be open to new teachers, to experienced teachers who others believe are struggling, and to experienced teachers who identify themselves as needing some help, even if they are already terrific teachers. For example, let’s say you’ve taught seventh-grade English for 13 years, but now you are moving to a high school English position.

You may want to ask for a consulting teacher. Our program does not just intervene with teachers who are struggling; it's truly a system of support that everyone can access to get stronger. We're also incorporating our supports for teachers who want to earn national board certification into the peer assistance and review program.

One thing I really like about the program is that it offers leadership opportunities that allow exemplary teachers to stay in the classroom.

**Maria Neira:** Teacher evaluation itself is just one component of a larger process related to entering and developing in the profession. But, as Mary Cathryn has described, it can be a powerful tool

teachers must be involved in defining the standards of excellence, both for students and for their own profession.

**Brenda Smith:** Building on Maria's comments, I see the teachers' union role as providing ongoing professional development. We, as an organization, need to be proactive, especially in cases when we know of struggling teachers. Along with other locals across Colorado, in Douglas County we are building professional development courses on classroom management, reading, and mathematics that can be used across the state.

**Editors: In most schools, teacher professional development and evaluation are separate. Why do you think they should be connected? How would a seamless development and evaluation system benefit teachers and students?**

**Maria Neira:** Traditionally, professional development activities have been the result of initiatives imposed by district-level decision makers. When these development opportunities happen to address a problem that a teacher has encountered, they are very useful. But when they don't, they can seem like a waste of time. Teachers are proud of their profession and realize that, as in any complex endeavor, there is always room to improve. But professional development activities need to be highly relevant to their immediate conditions; teachers do not have time to waste.

Good professional development is long-term and embedded in the teaching context. With a direct connection between evaluation and professional development, the evaluation becomes one of the tools for planning and decision making around one's own professional growth. This direct connection always makes sense, but becomes absolutely necessary at a time of limited resources.

A model of continuous professional development based on the growth of individual teachers is the basis of a comprehensive teacher evaluation system. This process can guide individualized and highly focused professional development plans. These plans address research-based approaches for continuous improvement in *all* aspects of the profession (e.g., planning, teaching, and collaborating with colleagues and families).

This model also provides a much fairer way of determining if a person is not well-suited for the challenges of the profession. A comprehensive development and evaluation system will ensure that everyone is provided with the supports necessary for success, and guide evidence-based decisions related to continued retention in the profession.

**Marcia Reback:** I'd agree, and add that when evaluation is taken very seriously and is continual in the course of a teacher's career, then it helps to build a professional culture in the school.

Many of us are veterans who've been doing the job for 12 years or 21 years; we know what our curriculum is and we know what our content is, and we become less thoughtful about what we're doing because we have done it over and over again. But in a continual evaluation and support process, we are forced to think

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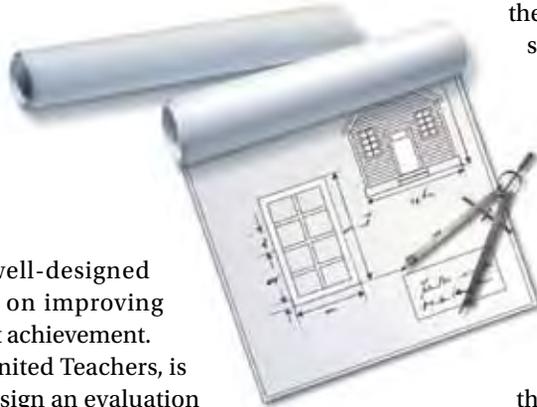
—MARCIA REBACK

when carefully designed. A well-designed evaluation system is focused on improving teaching and increasing student achievement.

My union, New York State United Teachers, is engaged in a pilot project to design an evaluation system that would be comprehensive, accurate, and fair. With a grant from the AFT's Innovation Fund,\* we've put together a team of union leaders, district teachers, and administrators from five school districts in New York: Albany, Hempstead, Marlboro, Plattsburgh, and North Syracuse. We're working with national experts to create and link three critical elements: teaching standards, a meaningful and comprehensive teacher evaluation system, and differentiated professional development that includes a peer assistance and review process. This system will establish a clear definition of teacher effectiveness and be based on multiple sources of evidence to measure teacher effectiveness—including evidence of student learning. A critical element of this will be trained evaluators who focus on reliability.

A range of measures of teacher effectiveness are being explored, since different measures are needed to capture different aspects of the profession. Some examples we are considering include evidence binders, student work, evaluations by administrators, peer review, and classroom observations. Of course, our ultimate goal is improving student learning.

Unions have a responsibility to students, the profession of teaching, and the community. Often, that means we have to take risks as we explore new forms of collaboration. As AFT President Randi Weingarten has pointed out many times, there is far too much focus right now on standardized tests. To find a better path,



about what it is we're doing. Then we look at our current pupils and make decisions based on what they're doing—not on what we've always done—and that yields a different *modus operandi* in the schools. You find teachers talking to one another more about what they're doing, the students they have in common, and their lessons. With the right system, teachers relish the opportunity to get feedback.

The national focus on teacher quality is bringing around a lot more formalized opportunities for professional practice, such as schools with built-in planning time for teams or grade-level groups, and the core of this is evaluation, particularly self-reflection. It's a regulation in Rhode Island that in the secondary schools teachers have common planning time. I also think there's growth in lesson study going on in the schools, taking a page from what Japanese teachers do.

**Brenda Smith:** A big piece of this is creating a safe environment. Teachers know where their strengths and weaknesses are. If we truly want the profession to grow and get better, we have to be able to have conversations about our weaknesses and who could help us improve. And the type of environment we have with our traditional evaluation system doesn't foster openly examining one's weaknesses. We're still afraid to admit what our weaknesses are because we're afraid that we will not get the support we need to improve, but that the weakness will be noted on an evaluation checklist and used to decide if we can continue as teachers. So support and evaluation have to come together in a fluid process that builds trust and encourages people to talk about where they believe they need to improve.

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** When evaluation becomes the tool that is used to continuously support and improve your work, you feel as though you are in a whole new profession, completely different from the one we inherited. The closer the decision-making point is to students, the more likely it is that students will be affected in a positive way.

### **Editors: How could such a system affect teachers' careers?**

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** One thing that is so powerful, yet tends to be overlooked, is that this type of continuous improvement system creates pathways to leadership that involve tried-in-your-classroom practice—not the stereotypical ladder to leadership that is administration. Professional development delivered to teachers by teachers provides powerful leadership positions. There's a lot of cachet that a teacher leading a professional development session brings when he or she says, "Stop by my classroom on Monday to see this practice in action." When teachers support each other like this, they gain power over their profession.

**Marcia Reback:** We want our best teachers in the classroom with our kids. One great feature of peer assistance and review is that it offers an opportunity to do something different for three to five years and then return to the classroom. It is not a road to another career. But teachers who have served as consulting teachers often say that it's the best professional development they have ever had.

### **Editors: With the national focus on quality instruction,**

## What is peer assistance and review?

**Marcia Reback:** Peer assistance and review is a system in which exemplary teachers, carefully selected by both union and management, take on the responsibility of working with teachers who are newly hired into the school district and, in some instances, working with veteran teachers who are referred for assistance. After receiving training, these exemplary teachers, called consulting teachers or peer coaches, give assistance by spending many, many, many hours in their assigned teachers' classrooms, helping them improve their practice, conferring with them, and providing written feedback. Ultimately, consulting teachers make recommendations to a board—made up of a large number of union and management representatives—with respect to whether each teacher they've worked with should continue in the profession or be let go.

The consulting teachers usually work with about 8 to 12 new teachers. If they have a veteran teacher who needs

assistance—someone who has been referred by the principal, the teachers in the school, or a combination—then the consulting teacher typically works with fewer teachers so that plenty of time can be spent in the veteran teacher's classroom and every opportunity for improvement can be pursued. To the extent possible, consulting teachers and teachers in the program are matched by subject and/or grade.

Normally, the consulting position is available to teachers for no more than a three- to five-year period, and then they cycle back into the classroom. Peer assistance and review is not meant to be a pipeline to becoming a school administrator—it's really a peer program. In most



contracts, consulting teachers make a commitment to return to the classroom for at least two years before seeking an administrative post.

Peer assistance and review began in Toledo, Ohio, almost 30 years ago. Today, there are a lot of districts with peer assistance and review programs; each has its own culture. They've all been modified and customized to meet the needs of their locals.

To learn more, see "Taking the Lead: With Peer Assistance and Review, the Teaching Profession Can Be in Teachers' Hands" and "Peer Assistance and Review: A View from the Inside," both of which are in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm).

**there have been a variety of proposals to base teacher compensation on the results of student achievement tests. What are the merits and drawbacks of such proposals?**

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** A lot of the compensation proposals out there right now are fairly ill-informed and rudimentary. Achievement test-based measures tend to create demoralizing and divisive incentives. In contrast, teachers tend to create evaluation systems that are rigorous and value support, peer feedback, and collaborative learning.

Outside education, evaluation systems tend to be more complex—whether it is a mechanic evaluating why your car isn't running or a doctor evaluating why your cough hasn't gone away,

working closely with our district. We've all agreed that there are multiple ways to identify the success of a classroom and we are developing our own measures. Once good measures are in place, we will explore using this system to make decisions about teacher tenure.

As one of our measures of student success, we are examining how to use the results of our Colorado state tests of reading and mathematics to recognize whole schools' accomplishments. But since the state achievement tests were not designed to evaluate teachers or schools—and only about 30 percent of our teachers have students who are tested—I think we should give the test results very, very little weight in the comprehensive evaluation system. We're considering making the state test less than 5 percent of the school evaluation.

We have found that it doesn't matter whether the performance pay is \$400 or \$1,200; teachers participate because they want to improve their schools—not for the money. The group incentive is simply a tool that allows the necessary collaboration to happen. What really matters is for teachers to drive the system. The teachers must take the lead on how to move a school forward and what goals they are working together to accomplish.

**Marcia Reback:** In the national debate, ideas about how to improve teaching seem to be on independent tracks. While there's no question that we need to get away from the checklist-style evaluation, the drive to create robust development and evaluation systems is on one track, and the drive to incentivize teachers to increase students' test scores is on a completely separate track. To me, the first track is substantive and the second is ideological.

I don't think there is any evidence that students get a better education because their teachers have a chance of making more money if test scores go up. But I do think there are often unintended consequences, such as teachers feeling pressure to narrow the curriculum and being afraid of having English language learners in their classrooms. In order to truly become professionals, we need rigorous evaluation systems, we need self-reflection, and we need opportunities during the day to work with colleagues and to focus on the students.

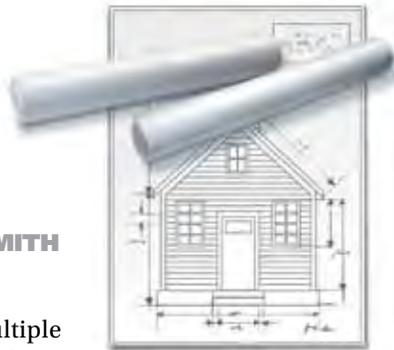
Schoolwide bonuses may be helpful in getting all of the teachers rowing in the same direction and fostering a collaborative, professional culture. However, drilling down to individual teachers' impact on students' test scores is ripe for error. Evaluating teachers with students' test scores is a politically driven idea, not a research-based idea.

**Editors: All of you have been working on these issues for several years. How has your thinking changed over time? And what concerns do you have going forward?**

**Marcia Reback:** When I was a young union president 40 years ago, I thought the "drive-by" evaluation was a really good thing. I thought a simple checklist that made it very difficult for an administrator to rate teachers "unsatisfactory" was really good for our members; it would be easy for us to defend them and ensure they kept their jobs. Over time, as I became influenced by AFT Presidents Al Shanker, Sandy Feldman, Ed McElroy, and Randi Wein-

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—BRENDA SMITH



evaluation systems tend to rely on multiple sources of information to diagnose problems and make decisions.

**Brenda Smith:** In Douglas County, we adopted an optional performance-pay program in 1994. Having done this for so long, we've learned a lot along the way. For example, since the beginning, we've had both individual incentives and group incentives in which teachers can identify a goal, such as increasing reading scores by a certain amount by the end of the school year. This has shown us that group incentives work better than individual incentives, and that it's important that the teachers decide what their goal should be. The teachers have to drive the system.

There are two major problems with individual incentives. One is that, at the individual teacher level, the models for using students' test scores to evaluate teachers are far too error-prone. The other is that incentives focused on the individual make teachers compete with each other. Teachers need to work collaboratively. Group incentives in which teachers select their group goals foster that collaboration.

Over the years we've made various changes to the system. In the last couple years we've finally realized that we've had the cart before the horse: we are just now seriously questioning how we identify our outstanding teachers. Of course, being able to clearly state what knowledge, skills, and practices make for an exemplary teacher should be the foundation, the starting place.

Now, we're trying to build an effective evaluation system that has multiple measures of student success as well as useful feedback for teachers. Our school board is very supportive and we are

garten, I've done a 180-degree turn.

I am now convinced that it is part of the union's work to make sure the teachers are in the best position possible to do their jobs well, and that it is our responsibility to ensure they are in fact doing their jobs well. We have a stake in making sure only competent teachers are in our classrooms, and we should be helping those competent teachers become exemplary teachers.

I think it is great that there is so much focus on teacher quality now because it has caused everyone in the schoolhouse to start thinking about it. Unfortunately, the national narrative seems to be all about "gotcha." The support system we've been discussing is what is really important; the fact that there will be some weeding out of a very small percentage of teachers should not be the focus.

The one thing I regret about all this is the focus on student test scores. My experience indicates that our fixation on scores has narrowed the curriculum. I know of gifted programs, art programs, and athletic programs that have been eliminated. In addition, I've seen an increase in the number of coaches who are in classrooms, and the number of remedial classes that have come into existence. As a result, electives are disappearing. Some of the things that make school an enjoyable and pleasant place for kids are disappearing to get the reading and mathematics scores up. Higher scores are not always synonymous with a better education.

**Brenda Smith:** My biggest concern is that the district as a whole does not understand how the overhaul of the development and evaluation system we are working on is going to affect everything. Many of the major departments will have to be revamped, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment. My fear is that we won't have the funding or the will to revamp the bureaucracy. In order for this to work, everything must be based on what we want kids to learn and be able to do.

But those concerns won't make me any less excited about this work. I think unions have to be proactive in crafting the right system to support teachers and increase student learning. If we don't, changes in teacher evaluation are going to be imposed on us. I've seen it in the districts surrounding Douglas County. The union knows how to do this the right way, so we have to be the ones developing the system.

**Maria Neira:** Traditionally, the principal has had the role of evaluator. We must realize that embracing a broader view of evaluation, with teachers assuming new responsibilities in that process, will be a challenging shift for some. Yet, this shift is occurring. As with any significant change, time is needed for this practice to be fully embraced—for all parties to see the value in these types of processes.

Carefully developed teacher evaluation systems—based clearly on standards and performance indicators—enhance all teachers' careers. When professional development is individualized and focused on helping teachers meet their students' needs, teachers are able to accomplish their student learning goals and

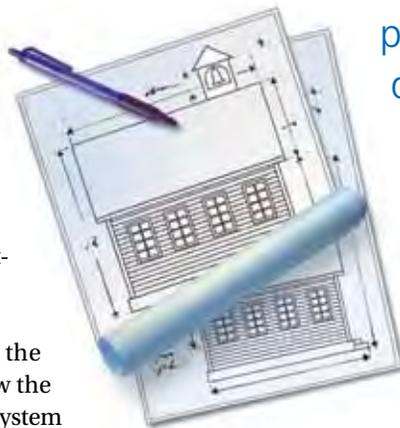
experience much greater career satisfaction.

And, since this continuous improvement model relies on teams of trained evaluators and professional development providers, highly effective teachers have increased opportunities to take on leadership roles related to peer review, coaching and mentoring colleagues, and designing curriculum and professional development.

One concern I have is that there is sometimes a risk, especially in difficult economic times, to oversimplify the challenge of measuring teacher effectiveness. Teaching is an extremely complex endeavor, and systems of evaluation will need to mirror that complexity. It may be tempting for those not familiar with the demands of the profession to use measures that are too narrow, or that may be easy to implement, but that in the end are

"There is far too much focus right now on standardized tests. To find a better path, teachers must be involved in defining the standards of excellence, both for students and for their own profession."

—MARIA NEIRA



not adequate to address overall teacher quality or improve student learning. As a profession, we must rise to the challenge of defining these measures for ourselves. The devil is in the details, but taking the less-traveled road is a must for our profession.

**Mary Cathryn Ricker:** My main concern is that our efforts will be misunderstood and misinterpreted. This is not something that can be boiled down to a sound bite for the media or explained to policymakers in just a few bullet points. This is about creating comprehensive, constructive systems for continuous improvement. I feel great urgency in taking our profession back from people who want to return to 19th-century working conditions for teachers while expecting 21st-century results.

Fortunately, we've been able to work well with our superintendent and school board. We began by showing them that the current system was broken and that it was in their best interests to move away from it. Our members and our district's leadership have gotten very excited about this notion that peer assistance and review can serve all teachers—those who are new to the district, those who are struggling, and those who are strong and want to grow even stronger by working with their colleagues on a specific goal.

As we get ready to implement this in the fall, my nightmare scenario is that we don't have enough money to do this well, and so we go back to doing what we've always done just because it is inexpensive. That would not be good for our students or our profession. At the end of the day, this is all about meeting the needs of our students. □