

from the Director's Desktop



Kristen Amundson
Executive Director

The Poetry Lesson

When my principal said he'd be observing my second period class, I swallowed hard. This would be my first evaluation in my new school, and these were not my best students—or anyone's. Passing English 11 was the only way they could graduate, and a high school diploma was the absolute limit of their educational aspirations.

I was determined not to put on a performance for the principal. As with every other evaluation in my teaching career, I taught the lesson I would have taught if there were no observer. (Over the years, this strategy produced some wonderful memories, including the principal who tried to listen in on a small-group activity until one student said, "Dr. Holden, in this class, no one gets to sit silently and let others do the work. What do you think about Romeo's decision here?")

The day's lesson was part of a poetry unit, which the students approached with the same enthusiasm I imagine they showed the dentist. Their typical reaction to figurative language: "Why can't the guy just say what he means?"

But that day, the poem spoke to them. "Something just like that happened to me," said one boy who usually sat silent in the back. Another girl chimed in: She had felt what the poet expressed.

It was magic. The students connected to words on a page. They understood that others shared their experiences and feelings. And they had at least a glimmer of why the school board and I thought it was so important that they slog through poems, short stories, and novels.

I was sure the principal had seen all that. I looked forward to our post-evaluation conference.

His first words set me straight. "You didn't call the roll."

I pointed out that it was March. I knew these students, I told him, and I never wasted class time calling roll. He remained unconvinced until I opened my grade book and showed him the attendance for the day.

His oral and written evaluation said nothing about connection with literature. There was nothing about the fact that these students were completely engaged. I hadn't called each name out loud, so I was not an excellent teacher.

This edition of the *Standard* deals with the important issue of teacher evaluations. Research consistently shows that, of all the in-school factors that influence a student's learning, teacher quality makes the biggest difference.

The best teachers do want to improve their practice, and state boards of education can develop evaluation systems to raise the level of teaching in every classroom. Yet there are no easy recipes for structuring the best teacher evaluation system. It takes hard work and a deep commitment throughout the system.

What comes easily are poor evaluations, replete with check boxes that fail to measure learning in any meaningful way and manage to frustrate good teachers in the process. I cannot for the life of me remember the title of the poem I taught that day. But I have never forgotten what the evaluation conference felt like. ■