

# How Four Districts Crafted Innovative Principal Evaluation Systems

Success Stories in Collaboration

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Leadership Initiative at WestEd

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## Introduction

These informal case studies examine the narratives behind the implementation of principal evaluation systems in four school districts: Helena School District, Montana; Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland; New Haven Public Schools, Connecticut; and New York City Public Schools, New York. Each case study focuses on how multiple stakeholders – especially those from district management and labor – worked together to craft innovative principal evaluation systems in their districts. The cases begin with basic demographic data, followed by (a) an *overview* of the current evaluation system, (b) a summary of the *origins* of the current system, (c) a brief narrative of the *process* used to create and implement the current system, and (d) a few key *recommendations* about creating and implementing successful evaluation systems. After reading these success stories, district and school leaders may see new ways to construct their own reforms.

## Helena School District, Montana

*Perspectives from*

Bruce Messinger, Superintendent, Helena School District  
Tim McMahon, Principal, Helena School District

### Overview

For the 2010-11 school year, 12 district administrators representing the elementary, middle, and high school levels piloted an online feedback process called the Vanderbilt Assessment for Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). VAL-ED was developed at Vanderbilt University using the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards as the framework. The process was designed to promote professional growth and development by providing a 360-degree perspective that includes feedback submitted through surveys from staff and supervisors. The pilot information will be included as one component of the principal evaluation process.

Locale Code	Town – Remote
Schools	15
Teachers	578
Students	8080
Free/Reduced Meals	31.2%
English Language Learners	0.07%
Graduation Rate	83.4% (2009-10)
<i>(Data from HSD as of 2010-11, except where noted parenthetically. Locale code from the National Center for Education Statistics website.)</i>	

### Origins

Helena School District (HSD) has been working to improve its principal evaluation system since spring 2009, although Bruce Messinger, Superintendent of Helena School District, and Tim McMahon, Principal, both noted that the district has been working to change the culture around educator evaluation for a decade.

The recent effort, spearheaded by a group of principals and the superintendent’s office, came after the realization that the district’s current principal evaluation system did not facilitate useful feedback to principals. “We would hear principals regularly ask, ‘Is there something I should be working on?’ or ‘Is there something I can do to get better?’ I think we did a fair job of identifying strengths, but I certainly don’t think our evaluative process was very good at identifying things to work on,” Messinger said. Feedback to principals often focused on student and teacher performance, but the evaluation process was not

providing principals with focused, concrete steps for improvement. Messinger remembered thinking, “There must be a better way to do this.”

In addition, the evaluation process was mainly constructed around principals’ self-identified professional goals, but did not incorporate teacher or student feedback. “We really did not have any input from those I would consider my constituents: the teachers whom I work with, the students whom I serve,” said McMahon. A growing sense of the urgency of addressing these problems led to the decision to pilot VAL-ED as the new principal evaluation system for the 2010-11 school year.

## Process

HSD’s process of revamping its principal evaluation system was based on a positive change in the culture around educator evaluation. Both McMahon and Messinger strongly agreed that the new climate at HSD, in which trust and communication are two of the core values, grew out of HSD’s development of a Professional Alternative Compensation Plan (PACP) for teachers. The successful labor-management collaboration involved in creating PACP (implemented in the 2004-05 school year) rested on the district’s use of a carefully crafted consensus negotiation process between the teachers’ union and the district.

The trust and communication fostered by the consensus negotiation process was a strong factor in the decision to redesign the principal evaluation system. According to McMahon, this process “was the beginning of trust between teachers and administrators ... and continued to build the desire to get the teachers’ voice into [principal] evaluation ... we needed to hear ‘what do you think?’” Both Messinger and McMahon were careful to note that the process of agreeing on a new principal evaluation system was not a formal one, since the district does not have an administrators’ union. But collaboration was possible because of HSD’s commitment to a culture in which there is trust and a desire among educators to receive meaningful and constructive feedback.

In spring 2009, HSD began the process of choosing a new principal evaluation system. Having conducted a general search, the group collaborated to sort through the various models and eventually decided on VAL-ED. McMahon stated that among the factors that made VAL-ED an attractive system was its research-based “critical competencies” for principals. Messinger stated that the district group did not see VAL-ED as the “total solution,” but rather as a good starting point. The group agreed to pilot VAL-ED for the 2010-11 school year.

## Recommendations

Messinger highlighted *process* as a key to successful collaboration. “Process matters,” Messinger said, adding that HSD’s culture of collaborative governance, along with its use of the consensus negotiation process, has resulted in greater ownership and buy-in from stakeholders than a hierarchical decision-making process. In one stage of the consensus process, participants stated the “best possible outcomes,” which helped to establish shared priorities. From McMahon’s point of view, “Once you’ve reached consensus on shared priorities [or best possible outcomes], everything else is easy, because everything else we do feeds those shared priorities.”

## Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland

*Perspectives from*

Rebecca Newman, President, Montgomery County Association of Administrators & Principals

David Steinberg, Director, Administrative & Supervisory Professional Growth System

### Overview

For Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), evaluation is just one piece of a comprehensive professional development system for principals, the Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System (A&S PGS). Six standards, adapted from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards, form the bedrock of the A&S PGS. Each standard delineates specific performance criteria, including evidence of student learning and a series of descriptive examples. Principals are evaluated formally on a cyclical schedule, but they must also participate in a formative annual review in non-evaluation years. In formal evaluation years, principals receive a summative rating in the form of “meets standard” or “does not meet standard.” The A&S PGS uses multiple measures in its evaluative component.

Locale Code	Suburb – Large
Schools	200
Teachers	11,673
Students	144,064
Free/Reduced Meals	30.7%
English Language Learners	13.0%
Graduation Rate	90% (2009-10)
<i>(Data from MCPS as of 2010-11 except where noted parenthetically. Locale code from the National Center for Education Statistics website.)</i>	

### Origins

The origins of the collective bargaining agreements around the A&S PGS extend back to the 1990s, when MCPS first incorporated the concept of “continuous improvement” into its professional development system. Although all of the district’s stakeholders were invited to participate in the process, district officials were unsure how best to formalize the evaluation process for staff. In the mid-1990s, with support from the National Mediation Board, the district’s three major employee unions – the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP), the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500 – agreed to use interest-based bargaining as their primary negotiation method. This approach led to a new

era of collaboration. In 2003, the district superintendent agreed that MCPS would negotiate salaries and benefits with all three of the major unions at the same bargaining table. As Rebecca Newman, President of MCAAP, recalled, “We looked at ourselves as 22,000 employees jointly negotiating with MCPS for the best deal for all employees.”

This collaborative climate helped lay the groundwork for successful interest-based negotiation around MCPS’s A&S PGS. The evaluative components of the A&S PGS were based on the evaluative components of the Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS). First piloted in 1999, the TPGS relies on the district’s Peer Assistance and Review program in its approach to evaluation. The A&S PGS and TPGS were both designed to foster a “professional learning community built on trust and mutual respect” (*A&S PGS Handbook*, p. 3). “We all agreed that our primary focus was student success,” Newman said, “and that we wouldn’t support underperforming employees, no matter what position, because that had a negative impact on children.”

## Process

Using an interest-based process designed to build trust among stakeholders and constituents, MCPS began developing the A&S PGS in spring 2002. Two task groups – a steering committee and a design team – both comprising teachers, principals, support staff, and community representatives, constructed six standards, each with its own performance criteria and descriptive examples. During the 2003-04 school year, the design team continued its work in developing the six standards. According to David Steinberg, director of the A&S PGS, every one of the nearly 900 administrators in the district was invited to give feedback on the wording of the new system. After the standards were finalized, the district implemented the system during the 2004-05 school year.

The evaluative components of the A&S PGS were also developed using interest-based negotiation. Steinberg said, “We wanted it to be more than an evaluation system; we wanted just as much focus on *developing* as on *evaluating*.” Newman agreed, noting that “you have got to demonstrate that you are doing everything you can to help [struggling educators] be successful, and it’s not all for them; it’s also for their peers who are watching and want to know if you are serious about supporting them.” Newman’s and Steinberg’s statements underscored their belief that the evaluative component of the A&S PGS depended on a commitment to high-quality professional development.

One sensitive point in the negotiations concerned the new summative rating scale of “meets standard” or “does not meet standard.” “With no middle ground, some administrators were concerned that it would be more difficult to demonstrate they were meeting the standard,”

said Steinberg. The major factor that helped resolve this issue was the addition of the “consulting principal” – a peer who would support underperforming principals, and who would play a central role in the evaluative process. With peers making independent judgments about performance, administrators were more likely to trust the new system of “meets standard” or “does not meet standard.”

## Recommendations

Steinberg and Newman strongly agreed that the first step in developing a robust and sustainable evaluation system is to reach agreement on the standards of great teaching, learning, and leadership. “You need to have a common language for the features of quality work. For example, what are the ‘look-fors’ that tell you that this is quality instruction?” Steinberg said. A further example of this common language is the set of leadership standards, criteria, and descriptive examples contained in the *A&S PGS Handbook*. Having agreed on standards and a common language for performance, school leaders are aware of expectations and are conversant with the evaluative components of their professional development system.

Both Steinberg and Newman reported that interest-based bargaining has been, and remains, an invaluable tool in building trust among multiple stakeholders. In addition, both cautioned against jumping directly to sensitive issues. “Do something simple before you do something really hard, like tying evaluation to student performance,” Newman said. “Don’t go there yet. Build the capacity of your teachers and the scores will come.”

MCPS has posted resources on principal evaluation here:

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/development/teams/admin/admin.shtm>

## New Haven Public Schools, Connecticut

*Perspectives from*

Garth Harries, Assistant Superintendent, New Haven Public Schools  
Laoise King, Chief of External Affairs, New Haven Public Schools

### Overview

In collaboration with the administrators' and teachers' unions, New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) has created a principal evaluation and development system based on student learning, school performance, and promising leadership practices. The cornerstone of the system is a series of conferences between principals and their supervisors, with the goal of supporting effective leadership by providing regular feedback for leaders at all stages of their development. The system provides a summative numerical rating that incorporates 360-degree feedback from teachers and other staff through annual school climate surveys.

Locale Code	City – Midsize
Schools	45
Teachers	~1,600
Students	~20,800
Free/Reduced Meals	80% (2009-10)
English Language Learners	11.9% (2009-10)
Graduation Rate	77.7% (2008-09)
<i>(Data from NHPC as of 2010-11 and CT State Department of Education's website except where noted paren-thetically. Locale code from the National Center for Education Statistics website.)</i>	

### Origins

The origins of NHPS's reforms in principal evaluation go back to the launch of the School Change Initiative in winter 2009. According to Garth Harries, Assistant Superintendent, and Laoise King, Chief of External Affairs, the first version of the Initiative included non-union options. "We contemplated approaching the state legislature to seek exceptions to the state collective bargaining laws for districts engaged in large-scale school reform efforts – that is, to allow a district to unilaterally change work rules in a few targeted low-performing schools," said King. According to Harries, the approach was not constructive and led to controversy. "This was not the atmosphere we wanted to create," he remembered.

"We quickly abandoned that idea in favor of working collaboratively with our unions to make the contract more flexible," said King. By September 2009, the district had crafted a

new contract with the New Haven Federation of Teachers (NHFT), which paved the way for agreements on revamped evaluation systems for teachers and principals.

Before the successful round of contract negotiation, the district convened multiple stakeholders who collaborated to create a “Statement of Joint Beliefs.” This common set of beliefs set the tone for collaboration. “Rather than having a narrow discussion of contractual issues, we had a broader discussion about addressing the interlocking issues, not all of which are about labor-management, that matter to people on a day-to-day basis,” said Harries.

## Process

NHPS’s principal evaluation system is closely aligned to its teacher evaluation system. In fall 2009, a committee, which included leadership from NHFT and the administrators’ union along with teachers and parents, was created to focus on teacher evaluation and development. Shortly thereafter, a parallel committee, comprising representatives from the same stakeholder groups, was formed to adapt the work so that it would be appropriate for a principal evaluation system. Harries said, “The anchor of our collaboration around principal evaluation has been the teacher evaluation system.” According to NHPS’s *Teacher’s and Administrator’s Guide*, the “work was guided by the core motivation of recognizing the professionalism of teaching, including the importance of performance-based professional evaluation, and respect for professional voice in the school and district decision-making” (p. 2).

The committees used a negotiating framework based on the following components: (1) start with common goals (e.g., a joint statement of beliefs), (2) validate concerns, (3) avoid a broad brush, (4) connect relevant issues, and (5) put the time in. These components identified shared priorities and established trust. Harries emphasized that “we built trust through the process, but I wouldn’t necessarily say we had that trust before the process.” In addition, the concept of “collective responsibility” was central in using the negotiation framework to construct fair and productive educator evaluation systems. By spring 2010, NHPS’s Board of Education had approved both committees’ recommendations.

Harries said administrators embraced the idea of reform but still had some basic concerns about their evaluation system. One, he said, “involved avoiding the ‘blame-game’ with parents, teachers, principals, or central office administrators.” The committee worked through this concern in part by emphasizing the use of James Comer’s School Development Program, also known as the Comer Process, which promotes a “no fault” atmosphere in schools.

## Recommendations

For other district leaders who are just embarking on the process of creating evaluation systems, Harries offered this advice: “Don’t deal with narrow issues; deal with a comprehensive and coherent set of issues.” This idea echoed one described by leaders in other districts who have developed effective evaluation systems: participants must start by identifying shared priorities before negotiation can move forward. “It is important to have collaboration and buy-in from the rest of the community,” King emphasized, “so that all of the stakeholders have a voice in things that are eventually going to affect them.”

NHPS has posted resources on principal evaluation here:  
<http://www.nhps.net/scc/index>

## New York City Public Schools, New York

*Perspectives from*

Peter McNally, Vice President, NYC Council of School Supervisors & Administrators  
David Brodsky, Director, New York City Department of Education, Office of Labor Relations

### Overview

In 2007, principals signed a landmark performance agreement, in the form of a revised Principal Performance Review (PPR). This agreement provides increased autonomy for principals to run their schools in exchange for increased responsibility for the academic progress of their students. The PPR has three main components: Academic Performance, Attention to Populations with Particular Needs, and Compliance with Legal Mandates/Key Policies of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). These components contain several sub-components that fit into a rubric used to compute a final evaluation (e.g., Academic Performance includes the Quality Review tool, which helps measure instructional and organizational coherence within a school). Under the new PPR, principals are eligible for revised “performance differentials,” wherein a principal may earn a monetary bonus for exceptional performance.

Locale Code	City – Large
Schools	~1,700
Teachers	~80,000
Students	~1.1 million
Free/Reduced Meals	~75% ( <i>NY Times</i> )
English Language Learners	~15%
Graduation Rate	~60% (2005-09)
<i>(Data from NYCDOE as of 2010-11 except where noted parenthetically. Locale code from the National Center for Education Statistics.)</i>	

### Origins

The roots of the current PPR go back to the early 1990s, when the NYCDOE and the NYC Council of School Supervisors & Administrators (*known as CSA*) worked together to establish the first version of the PPR. That agreement was closely aligned to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, and included summative performance ratings. By the mid-to-late 1990s, the NYCDOE and the CSA had also established performance differentials to provide financial incentives for exceptional principal performance. David Brodsky, Director of the NYCDOE Office of Labor Relations, stated that starting in 2005, the NYCDOE wanted “an explicit incorporation” of student achievement into the PPR. That year, the NYCDOE started piloting a non-

summative evaluation component that included student data. The NYCDOE and CSA spent about two years searching for a way to tie principal evaluation to student achievement and eventually came to an agreement. The revised PPR rubric weights student performance and progress – in the form of scores on New York state achievement tests – at about 32 percent of the total PPR. Peter McNally, Vice President of the CSA, said, “We feel that our present PPR, which emphasizes student achievement, is very reflective of the domains as stated by ISLLC standards, which are a good overall reflection of a principal’s work.”

## Process

According to both Brodsky and McNally, the negotiation process was difficult. The two sides, following a traditional collective bargaining model, encountered numerous challenges. Both agreed, however, that the foundation of the bargaining was a shared interest in crafting an evaluation system that would include student achievement as a fairly weighted measure of principal performance. According to McNally, “[The CSA] has always embraced accountability and understood the rationale behind it.” Brodsky agreed, stating that “[the] CSA has been a really good partner with us on the accountability front ... we couldn’t get there unless [the CSA was] willing to buy into that paradigm – moving away from the traditional modes of assessing principals.” While an agreement that would incorporate student achievement into the PPR was the basis of the collaboration, substantial work had to be done to establish how it would be implemented and how it would affect principals.

Not surprisingly, a particularly challenging part of the negotiations was determining how much weight student achievement data would have in the final PPR rating. The NYCDOE initially argued that a sub-component of the PPR, the Progress Report (which grades each school with an A, B, C, D, or F and is based on student progress [60%], student performance [25%], and school environment [15%]), should be a dominant factor in the overall PPR rating. Brodsky said, “These debates on weighting were conducted in good faith and were healthy discussions ... The NYCDOE was looking to see more weight attached to the Progress Report, and the CSA didn’t want it to be that high. Ultimately, we wound up compromising.” By 2007, the CSA and the NYCDOE had agreed to develop an evaluation instrument that balanced the data of the Progress Report with the other areas of the PPR (e.g., site visits, school surveys, self-directed goal-setting, and peer review).

The CSA, along with the NYCDOE, implemented an extensive rollout and support plan for the new PPR. “When this union agreed to the new PPR, we had to go out and meet with our members – hold meetings in each borough with hundreds of principals in auditoriums – to explain in detail all of the components of the PPR,” said McNally. The CSA now uses its

professional development structure to continually educate leaders about the PPR, holding mock Quality Reviews (another key component of the PPR, in which experienced educators conduct a two- or three-day school visit) to help prepare school principals and supervisors for their evaluations. “Because this service is provided by the union,” McNally emphasized, “it’s a safe place, a trusting environment, a non-evaluative environment.” McNally and Brodsky agreed that a thoughtful rollout and support plan was crucial in winning buy-in for the new PPR.

## Recommendations

McNally and Brodsky both said that “transparency of data and communication” continues to be the key to collaboration. In terms of data, the collaboration depended in part on trust that the data and research around the mechanics of the PPR were sound, fair, and accessible. In terms of communication, there was trust that both sides were being honest and open about their motivations and priorities. “If two sides hit an impasse, it can be useful to ‘think out loud’ collectively, not unilaterally, because if you’re ‘thinking out loud,’ then they’re hearing your thought process, and they sense you’re not trying to game them,” Brodsky said.

Another part of successful collaboration, according to Brodsky, “boiled down to persistence – we ended up in a place that neither side thought was perfect, but represented the best place where we could find common ground.” McNally offered a similar point about persistence, asserting that “there is a lot of dialogue between us and the NYCDOE. We meet on a regular basis with the NYCDOE’s Office of Accountability, always checking to see what has been agreed upon, what needs to be tweaked.”

NYCDOE has posted resources on principal evaluation here:  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/default.htm>



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