

An Interesting Idea

Research confirms professional development for school principals is less about formal training and more about building intentional habits that compound over time.

In a 2022 report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, *Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?*, Linda Darling-Hammond concluded that quality professional development that includes relevant, real-world learning, mentoring, and peer collaboration create more effective school leaders resulting in better student outcomes.

Another Wallace Foundation study, *Making Time for Instructional Leadership*, provided research showing that most principals spend the majority of their day on administrative, managerial, and reactive tasks leaving little time for the instructional leadership work that improves teacher practice and student achievement.

The SAM Process provides a unique solution for school leaders. As confirmed by the collection of two decades of experiential data, drawing particularly from daily TimeTrack® and rubric assessment data gathered from 800 participating principals engaged in the SAM process, significant increases in time is spent with teachers to improve practice resulting in greater job and mission satisfaction. The following highlights how effective the SAM process is for developing the instructional leadership skills of principals:

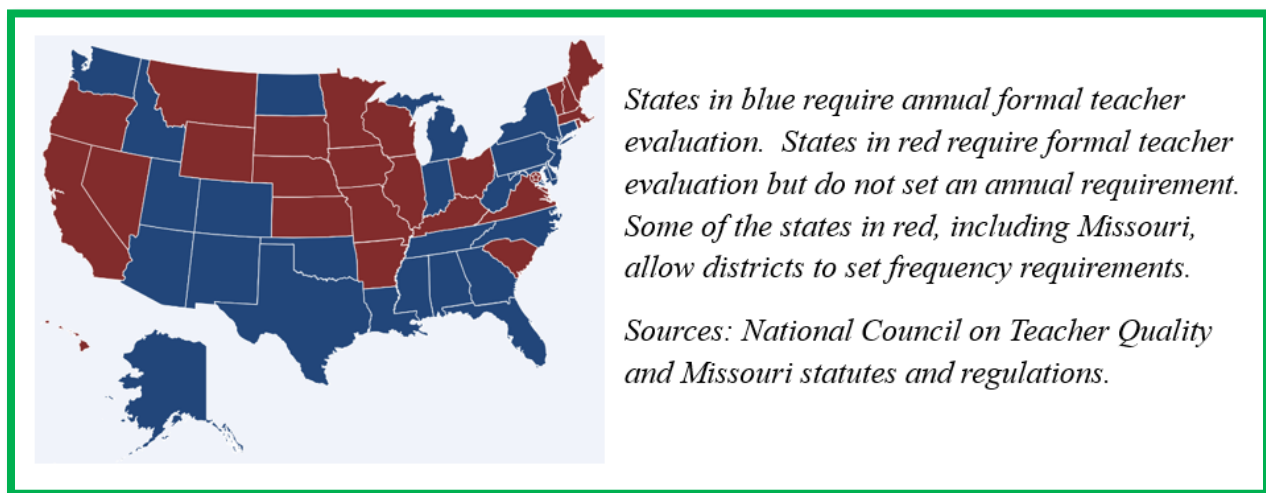
- *SAM principals spend two times more time in classrooms than non-SAM principals.*
- *SAM principals spend three times more time in feedback conversations with teachers than non-SAM principals*
- *SAM principals spend four times more time focused on improved teaching and learning than non-SAM principals.*
- *95% of SAM principals can connect their time with improved teacher practice.*

2025 SAM Team Annual Performance Report: <http://bit.ly/44MbQ8t>

A common finding in the collection of this data is the frustration on the part of SAM principals concerning the time spent on the formal teacher evaluation process in their school district and its limited impact on improving teacher practice. Instead, they advocate for more formative work based on their experience in the SAM process.

Leaders report summative, or formal evaluation, tend to detract from the formative work they engage in with teachers. Leaders point out that the extensive amount of time they must devote to the required formal evaluation process could be better used in coaching, observing, and targeting professional development.

Additionally, SAM practitioners express concern that the formal teacher evaluation process could potentially erode the trust necessary for teachers to engage in improvement.



Teacher unions and other organizations expressing interest in improving teacher practice and student outcomes, have advocated that states and districts increase the frequency and amount of time school leaders spend conducting formal teacher. This assumes increasing the amount of formal evaluation will improve teacher practice.

In training new SAM teams, NSIP founder Mark Shellinger asks participants if they think formal teacher evaluation improves teacher practice. Since starting the SAM Process in 2005, ***not a single principal has ever said yes***. Surveys of classroom teachers garner similar reactions.

However, simply increasing the requirements of a formal teacher evaluation process and the time spent implementing it does not guarantee an improvement in teacher practice. Despite a massive effort to overhaul the teacher evaluation process between 2009 and 2017, those efforts largely failed at improving teacher practice (Efforts to Toughen Teacher Evaluations Show No Positive Impact on Students). The underlying assumption that increased time on evaluation leads to improved teacher practice simply did not prove to be true despite a very large investment of time and money. A study by Harvard University found the same thing, that “increasing teacher evaluation systems does not automatically improve practice.”

The Hechinger Report similarly found that evaluating and penalizing teachers rarely works. The notion that spending more of a principal’s limited time on something that doesn’t work won’t suddenly make it start working and will have limited to no impact on improving teaching practice and student outcomes. It follows that spending more time on something that does lead to changes in practice is ultimately what is best for students. As noted in an article from EdWeek, “teachers who believed that evaluation systems were meant to promote their growth and development were more likely to rate those systems as fair.” In other words, when teachers interact with a school principal who is an instructional leader, who is invested in their growth as a teacher, they are more likely to experience growth based on the feedback from that instructional leader.

Findings from a survey of teachers from the American Teacher Panel, which is conducted by the RAND Corp., show that those teachers who receive feedback more frequently are more likely to say that the input helped them improve their teaching practice. In a similar finding, the RAND study found that “76 percent of teachers said they made improvements to their instructional practices as a direct result of their evaluations. Teachers who were observed more frequently were more likely to report an improvement.”

The National SAM Innovation Project (NSIP) invites the Wallace Foundation to consider a proposal that will test three questions:

- 1. “Is the SAMs process more effective for improving teacher practice and student outcomes than summative evaluation?”***

2. *“Would decreasing time required for summative evaluation further increase time spent on formative work?”*
3. *“How would this effect the value of the formal teacher evaluation process?”*

The SAM Process infrastructure is uniquely well-positioned to test this question. There are several distinct ways that the SAM Process can improve teacher practice and also bring more value to the formal teacher evaluation process. It has been proven to improve administrator and teacher relationships, to lead to improvements in teacher practice, and can provide essential data that will better inform the formal evaluation process itself.

TimeTrack® data already distinguishes between distinct categories of principal activity, making it possible to isolate time spent on summative evaluation tasks versus formative coaching and instructional leadership work. In particular, it collects data on feedback to each teacher based on different categories and specific days and times. Most research tools would have to build that data collection capacity from scratch. The SAM Process has years of experience doing this.

In addition, the SAM Process communicates to teachers that the teacher’s growth and development is important to the principal and that the ultimate goal of the entire process is to support them in their development and improvement. The TimeTrack® tool keeps a running record of the time that a principal spends with each teacher and includes features to ensure that the principal provides meaningful feedback. This ensures that each teacher feels that they are supported by their administrator.

The SAM Process can assist in a shift of a principal’s limited time to functions that more directly impact teacher practice. Our proposal suggests that a control group of teachers of participating principals be placed on a three-year, formal teacher evaluation cycle. Teachers maintain their current evaluation rating in the two years of the cycle when they are not engaging in the formal evaluation process. In the first year of this three-year cycle, the teacher engages with the principal through the SAM process. Regular observations and interactions take place, and feedback is captured in the TimeTrack® system. In the second year of this three-year cycle, the teacher continues to engage with the principal through regular observations and interactions and feedback, and data is captured in the TimeTrack® system. In the

third year of the three-year cycle, the teacher and principal once again engage in regular observations and feedback, and data is captured in the TimeTrack® system. In the spring of this third year, the principal uses this accumulation of data to summarize the changes in teacher practice and captures this within the formal teacher evaluation system. This is the basis for the teacher's updated performance rating. This rating provided by the principal is far more accurate as it is based on a larger number of observations over a three-year span. The three-year cycle is fairer and more beneficial to the teacher as it is based on the ongoing relationship with the principal and includes a far wider sample of interactions and observations.

NSIP has a long relationship with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MDESE. The SAM Process is included in the state's Leadership Development System and the MDESE Associate Commissioner, Paul Katnik, is vice president of the NSIP Board.

NSIP will work with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to identify two groups of school principals. Principals assigned to the control group and to the treatment group will be from schools with similar demographics to minimize confounding variables such as numbers of teachers and students. a control group of principals who will complete the regular formal teacher evaluation process annually.

- a. a treatment group of principals who will complete the formal teacher evaluation process on a three-year cycle.

A formal evaluation of each teacher is required by state statute and described by regulation set forth by the state's Department of Education. The statute and regulation do not specify how frequently the process of evaluation must occur. As defined by some local boards of education, it is an annual process, while other local boards of education define this as a cyclical process.

All participating principals will be active in the SAM Process, so TimeTrack data is consistently collected. An additional indicator will be added to the TimeTrack® system to capture the amount of time all participating principals are specifically spending on the formal teacher evaluation process.

TimeTrack data will determine how the principals are spending their time in the off-cycle years when they are not completing the formal teacher evaluation

process. Time not spent on evaluation will be on formative work with their teachers: walkthroughs, coaching conversations, instructional team facilitation, professional development, and data review with teachers. Critically, it will reveal whether principals actually use time not spent on evaluation for formative purposes or simply absorb it into other management tasks.

Improved teacher practice will be assessed by pre-and-post interviews with principals, classroom teachers, and randomly selected parents.

Student outcome measures will include achievement data, growth measures, or other indicators depending on what the participating schools already collect. The challenge in any study is isolating the effect of the evaluation change from other variables. In this case, TimeTrack® longitudinal data would help control principal behavior as a variable.

The SAM Process's emphasis on reflective use of TimeTrack data will be used to examine whether principals are more reflective and intentional about how they use the SAM Process to connect with teachers and chart growth and change in practice. That would add a qualitative dimension to what is essentially a behavioral and outcomes study.

Taking advantage of the common practice of evaluating teachers on a three-year cycle provides opportunity to compare administrative functions which result in greater impact on teacher practice. Missouri is a feasible starting point given its flexible evaluation requirements and lack of specific frequency rules. Because cyclical teacher evaluations currently exist, we believe NSIP and MDESE can successfully work with Missouri districts, and the relevant employee associations and unions, for approval of the study as outlined. NSIP currently works in districts throughout Missouri: large, small, rural, and urban.

NSIP's existing relationships in Missouri, and across 26 states, provides a network and the data infrastructure to design a rigorous study that explores various administrator functions and, given the limited amount of time an administrator has, make conclusions about which types of functions deserve the greatest amount of time.

We can find no studies testing whether required summative teacher evaluation will increase principal formative work and improve outcomes.

The Race to the Top era saw many attempts at evaluation reform. A large study co-authored by UNC researcher Matthew Springer, which its authors describe as providing the broadest and most generalizable evidence of the efficacy of teacher evaluation reforms in the U.S., concluded that despite billions of dollars spent changing teacher evaluation systems, the reforms had almost zero positive effect on student outcomes across 44 states.

At the federal level, by 2015 the core idea of linking teacher evaluation to student outcomes was effectively abandoned when ESSA was reauthorized, explicitly prohibiting the federal government from prescribing any aspect of a teacher evaluation system.

In the first decade of this century, The Wallace Foundation helped NSIP prove that, with the right tools, principals can both manage their school successfully and spend the majority of time each day on tasks designed to improve teacher practice and student outcomes.

In this second decade, NSIP invites the Wallace Foundation to partner on a study that could have major policy implications and, perhaps, increase the positive impact of time principals spend with teachers.

If the study determined that shifting the majority of a principal's time to formative work and improving teacher practice and outcomes were far more positive for teachers and schools it would provide evidence that spending too much time on compliance-driven, ineffective evaluation systems which consume principal time in ways that are net negative for schools. Such a finding would be transformative in designing more carefully the amount of time and focus a principal spends on their various administrative duties and which of these duties lead to the greatest changes in teacher practice and improvements in student outcomes.

