

## STUDENT AND STAFF PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

At WEDJ, we were committed to performance reviews of our students and staff. Every contact with parents mattered. All homeroom teachers were expected to call each family once a month. I asked staff members to send a record of these calls to me. The families of those teachers who made these contacts were very pleased, however, there were parents who did not receive their regular calls. Unfortunately, this became more problematic when I discovered that several senior teachers on my leadership team were not completing the task. How could the rest of the teachers be asked to make such calls when their role models did not comply with the task? I realized that I needed to spend more time explaining the purpose behind such a directive, so the staff could make more informed decisions about the merits of such practice. While there was mixed buy-in to these ‘Sunshine Calls’ as we called them, there was 100% acknowledgement of the importance of the progress reports and parent-teacher conferences.

The new performance-based report cards were well received by our parents. Many families had shared their discontent with the 1–2–3–4 rating reports used in the past. Most admitted they didn’t understand the number rating system. The new WEDJ Progress Reports gave all families an opportunity to view, for the first time, where students scored A’s and B’s in parts of their course work, rather than an average of scores that can bury specific strengths and weaknesses. Parents could see much more than an overall math or social studies grade, and therefore, could celebrate what’s known, and also be in a better position to provide more precise help. A novice teacher shared the following about her perception of the new report card:

*Rather than a broad report card with a letter grade for the core subjects, this report card broke down the subjects and provided a detailed report on what skills each student had mastered and which ones they were still working on. This method provided everyone with a better idea of the child’s academic and social emotional development.*

Students and parents would come to know what was learned and what still needed more work. The detailing on the report card served to not only educate the students, but clarify for parents the expectations in each course of study. For the most part, the new comprehensive report card was well received, as it made the evidence of achievement transparent. I established a similar performance-based report card for the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy in Detroit in its first year. I still recall how motivated students were to share their results with Jalen. They were genuinely proud of their achievement. By making a “B” (or 80% standard) the passing grade, students

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were forced to go back and learn or improve upon their first efforts. In the workforce, a secretary is not docked pay if a spelling mistake is found in a document. Rather, the page is returned and the correction made. Learning from mistakes may be a common phrase used in many schools, but unfortunately, the message that mistakes equal failure is much more pronounced. For instance, the SAT college entry test subtracts wrong answers from right answers, in order to deviate its scores. We wanted our report card to demonstrate what students had learned, not what they didn't know.

The role of re-assessment is under-rated when it comes to motivating young people. At WEDJ, I would say more students were successful when teachers did not accept mediocre levels of achievement. The expectation was for classroom assessment to happen often, that teachers would keep track of when students achieved at an "A" rate (90%+) a "B" rate (80–89% mastery) or "I" (incomplete mastery). The following is part of the ELA portion of the report for Grade 3:

<i>Grade 3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRESS REPORT</i>			
<i>*By the end of the Grade 3 Program we aim to have all students master the following BOLDED ELA skills: (Note the greyed in tasks are what students aim to do by the end of Grade 4)</i>	<i>Nov.</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>June</i>
<i>Explain with evidence different qualities of a main character (Foundation)</i>			
<b><i>Compare different settings in at least 2 stories</i></b>			
<i>Explain what makes a story humorous with specific examples (Extension)</i>			
<i>Describe beginning, middle, end of story (Foundation)</i>			
<b><i>Discuss words in stories that paint images</i></b>			
<i>Develop and present an oral story (Extension)</i>			
<i>Ask "who" "what", "when", "where", "how" and "why" questions about stories (Foundation)</i>			
<b><i>Ask and responds to "how" and "why" questions</i></b>			
<i>Form and ask comparative questions (Extension)</i>			
<i>Read and print Grade 2 sight words; simple compound, phonetic, and curriculum words, synonyms, with an emphasis on proper and common nouns. (Foundation)</i>			
<b><i>Define and spell Grade 3 words (uses root words, prefixes, and suffixes)</i></b>			
<i>Define and spell Grade 4 words in dictations and everyday use (Extension)</i>			
<i>Discuss extent to which one identifies (or not) with the hero in a story (Foundation)</i>			
<b><i>Recognize self through story</i></b>			
<i>Compare characters in humorous story to self (Extension)</i>			

Figure 5. WEDJ Grade 3 ELA portion of progress report card

Students in grades 3 through 8 had an option to add comments about the new report card from the student electronic survey we conducted in November 2012. For the most part parents were very pleased with the change. 95% of families indicated they liked the new report cards. The following represent a sampling of comments about the new report shared by students:

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- I like wedj report cards because it tells you that you can work at the next grade level
- it let me know what classes I am doing good in and telling me the not so good grade I need to do better in...
- It is a great way to show grades to my parents.
- I like it because it shows all our assignments and what our grade was on them.
- It says "I" instad of "F."
- I love the report cards because I can see my good grades that I earned.
- I love the report cards because they help me learn from mistakes
- They show how well I'm doing

Immediately following the distribution of the new student progress reports, all homeroom teachers took part in Parent Teacher Conferences. The report card served as a guide for setting goals, at the same time as opening a window into the world of education. The mysterious grade books, where teachers keep track of student scores on tests, projects and classroom contributions, would no longer be for teachers' eyes only. The WEDJ performance-based report was a welcomed communication tool, clarifying the specifics about what was mastered in each subject area. The school calendar was revised early on to ensure that *parent-teacher conferences* happened immediately following the distribution of the progress reports. The family participation in these events varied. 56% of our parents came to the first day (October 22, 2012). While parent participation never reached 100% parent involvement, it did improve (73%) when we later tried to offer PT Conferences at the same time as violin and dance performances. At the end of the year, we also organized an impressive science fair with an arts exhibit, so parents could see evidence of learning during the conferences.

In the back of my mind I wanted to try and see if a Saturday might bring out more families, for working parents to have more opportunities to connect with their child's teachers. I know we hosted our first parent-teacher conference at JRLA on a Saturday, and we were thrilled with the 93% turn-out, and given most of those students stayed through the four years of high school and graduated to post-secondary programs, in a challenging urban setting, the giving up of Saturdays by staff to feature these connections with parents seems to have been a worthwhile investment. I regret we did not have a chance to explore Saturday conferencing more at WEDJ. The point of bringing teachers, parents and ideally students together, should be more than about explaining results. More time for each conference would have enabled all stakeholders to co-plan for improvement. Ms. Rave volunteered to search out and present ideas to staff about research-based 'student-led conferencing,' but with so much going on, this initiative wound up on our 'bucket list' for future consideration.

The new progress report was poised to bring some positive attention to WEDJ; this was part of the plan to support and encourage student learning. We understood, at the school level, the value of implementing a new reporting system, and while we were eager to share highlights of the new report card with the WEDJ Board, they

did not appear interested in discussing the new initiative, nor our parent, teacher and student response to it.

Just as students should be assessed using rigorous qualitative protocols, I would argue that the staff, within the school, should be afforded the same due process. The poor practice of evaluating teachers, based on student scores, appeared to be rampant in many charter schools. I did not conform to the idea that teaching performance and student test were interchangeable. While it was commonplace in DC to attach a significant portion of a teacher's performance review to student test scores, I did not buy into such a limited and simplistic view. At WEDJ, our performance reviews were professional and grounded in current educational research. While we addressed, through observation and feedback, the interactions between the teacher and the student, the determination of whether an educator was "developing" or "exceptional", was not based on student test scores. Students can test well in a weak teacher's classroom, and students can test well in an exceptional teacher's classroom. It is irresponsible to evaluate teachers based on the results of standardized tests. To build a team of exceptional educators takes time and hard work.

By October in our first year, I conducted performance reviews of the teacher leadership team (Bradshaw, Carter, Corcoran, Harris, Nugent, Palmer, and Sessoms). I wanted to model for them how to conduct observations using the customized research-based tool, we called 'Red Carpets.' The term serve as a tribute and connection to the school's arts focus. We adapted the criteria for teacher observations from Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teacher Effectiveness*, a widely respected and research-based work. When I wrote the book, *Mining for Gems: Exceptional Practices in Teaching and Learning*, with Jackie Copp, we asked Charlotte to write our 'forward.' I continued to correspond with Charlotte throughout my career, and when we adapted the WEDJ Red Carpet assessments for self, mentor and supervisor performance reviews, I sent her a copy of the tool; she was very supportive of our progressive way of implementing many of her ideas.

After a discussion about each observation, I sent each leader a follow through email detailing recommendations for improvement and validation of teaching strengths. After experiencing the process, I asked each teacher-leader to work with three to six people to complete the first round of performance reviews by November 2012. By May 2013, I had also completed at least one observation of each teacher in the school. Final evaluations for all teaching personnel took into account an analysis of 107 teaching assets/strengths that addressed their instruction, professionalism, planning, parent relationships and student performance. We discussed individual goals that included student performance. At this point each teacher was informed of his or her overall classification for the year. In my first year, I identified two teachers (10%) at the 'developing' level and as such informed them that they had a year to make the transition to the 'proficient' or 'exceptional' standard. Twenty teachers (64%) met the 'proficient' standard and approximately seven teachers (21%) demonstrated work at the 'exceptional' level. In my second year, the two 'developing' teachers were improving and many proficient teachers were on their way to demonstrating

‘exceptional’ status. Over 1.5 years, the staff talent pool had improved the critical mass of exceptional teachers by 25%.

Staff members, who demonstrated what I referred to as ‘damaging’ actions, received immediate attention. Over the course of two years, I had to place five teachers on Performance Improvement Plans (PIP’s). They were usually given one month to turn things around. We had an English teacher who did not submit effective long-term or short-term plans and basically ‘winged it’ for most classes; a visual art teacher who did not plan and oversubscribed to handing out pages from coloring books; a PK teacher who lost kids on a field trip at the Horizon Center and did not see the seriousness of the situation, another art teacher who lost his cool often with the kids, and a Kindergarten teacher who was habitually late. I also had to let a security staff member go immediately when he threatened another staff member.

Based on my own and the reviews of our seasoned teacher leaders, I continued to push for improved lesson planning that promoted a decrease in teacher talk, an increase in on-task student talk and an abundance of ‘hands on’ activities. We also focused attention on communicating to parents what students might be missing out on, even if they were absent for one day of school. It was time to make learning visible, so families could understand more fully why they needed to be just as inspired by school as their children. After all, with such a large population of young people, dependent on the adults in their lives to wake them up and transport them to school, we needed to be sure we paid serious attention to communications.

I was surprised to discover early on that when some teachers were away, they had not prepared emergency lesson plans, so when their substitute teachers arrived, they had little direction to guide them. I spoke to one of our key offenders, and gave him the responsibility of drafting and collecting the staff’s emergency substitute plans. Having a highly-qualified staff meant that every teacher had plans ready for themselves or a substitute teacher to implement.

On another professional level, I was troubled by the need to monitor the data from the daily staff sign-in registry; something I never imagined would be necessary. There were some staff members who roared into the parking lot at, or after, the start of school. For a quality program to happen, the teacher has to be in the classroom well in advance of the students to prepare for that day. I was also concerned about a few staff who left at the stroke of 4:00pm or exited and entered with the students, especially when many of their fellow colleagues were in their classrooms until 5pm and arriving at 7am. One parent had already said to me: “Why should we bring our kids on time, when some members of your staff are late for school?” No question, this mom had a valid point. I asked Mr. Sessoms to track the data and then I brought in the teachers with the largest number of ‘tardies’ and explained why arriving early was a requirement. Most of the teachers, except for one, made the necessary changes in the morning schedule to arrive in time for school.

It turned out to be an extremely awkward situation, however, when my co-leader’s arrival times became more and more inconsistent. There were many days when Mr. Manahan arrived after 10:30am, and it was rare he ever stayed passed

5:30 pm, yet his direct reports ran early morning and after school programs, without any direct supervision. I truly felt that with the challenge we had before us, there was no room for anyone to work from home. I was eager to collaborate with Manahan on new directions, but with the limited amount of time he was spending at school, the co-leading turned out to be in name only. I spoke with Manahan about my concerns, and while he did put in a few 7 am starts, it didn't last. When I learned that more and more of his job was out-sourced, I grew frustrated and texted Goldman one day and asked him: *'When you were Executive Director, how much time did you put in to the school each day.'* When Goldman replied '24-7', and asked 'why?' I let him know about the limited hours Manahan had been putting in. Goldman, however, probably should have been more aware that Manahan was not there much. Realizing that Manahan was not going to change his level of commitment, I let Goldman know that I could not work under Manahan's remote leadership approach, nor would I continue the next year with him in a co-leader role.

As it turned out, Manahan resigned in May 2013, at which time my role shifted to include the oversight of the non-instructional staff. At this moment in time, I discovered that performance reviews for operational staff had not taken place that year. I gathered details of the operation staff job descriptions and developed customized performance review tools for our facilities, maintenance, security, food services, admissions, data and business coordinator roles. I asked Ms. Lawson and Mr. Sessoms to carry out these initial assessments for non-instructional employees.

There was extensive investment of time put into the development of the 'red carpet' performance assessment tools for all staff at WEDJ. I also worked with Ms. Miles (Cordova) and Mr. Carter to establish specific carpets for our special education staff, and teaching assistants. While these elaborate tools served to clarify expectations, guide discussions and support goal setting for individual improvement, I had not been informed by Goldman, as ED or Board Chair of any process for my own performance review.