

# Classroom Observations Designed to Work

**BETTER INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT. BETTER TEACHERS.  
BETTER STUDENT OUTCOMES.**

**Bill Daggett, Ed.D.**

FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

**Linda A. Lucey, Ph.D.**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PROGRAM DESIGN, PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

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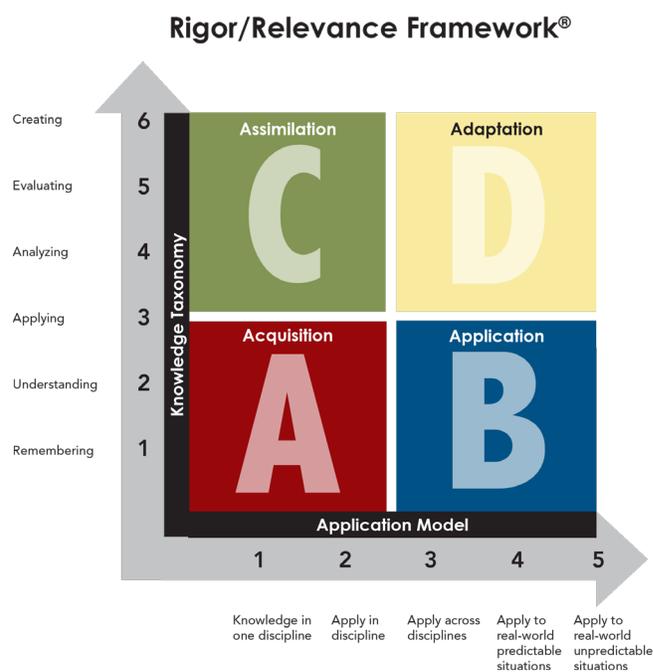
The evidence is abundant and unequivocal: better teachers make for better student performance. As an example, stronger teachers have been shown to influence end-of-year student test scores (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014). In another study, researchers tracked teacher performance and student achievement for three years and determined that students who were taught by teachers who used highly effective instructional practices scored in the 96th percentile. Students taught by the least effective teachers scored in the 29th percentile (Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

It should be no surprise that better teachers' influence on learning extends beyond the classroom and into the future. Effective teachers can increase the odds that a student will go to college and establish higher earning power (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014).

If better teachers correlate strongly with better student outcomes, how can we make better teachers of all of our educators? How can we document and support their growth and ensure development efforts ultimately hit the main target: increased student growth?

Educator efficacy and learning have been long studied, and new ideas or new takes on old ideas are routinely reviewed. While there remains debate about what works and why, new and in-depth research from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) confirms what we at the International Center for Leadership in Education have known from our own research: frequent, collaborative, rubric- and research-based classroom observations and feedback tied to student outcomes can advance teacher efficacy and student achievement (Wayne et al., 2016).

In the past two years, we have conducted 10,363 classroom observations using our Rigor, Relevance, and Learner Engagement Rubrics as part of our Collaborative Instructional Review (CIR) coaching process in more than 300 schools across the nation. The careful tracking and analysis of data has yielded a clear picture of where many public schools struggle and where there is progress. With a total of nine indicators for the categories of rigor, relevance, and learner engagement as CIR's backbone, we also understand why teachers struggle and how they can correct course in their classrooms. The rubrics were built specifically to enhance a teacher's ability to drive meaningful student outcome gains. Its mass and national application and resultant data set have helped us further refine our process toward student achievement goals.



The rubrics have been thoughtfully designed based on the Rigor/Relevance Framework® (Daggett, 2014) as a way for teachers and instructional leaders to translate the four quadrants into effective instructional design and concrete student learning experiences. To get there, we had to understand what didn't work and why. Then, we had to determine all the necessary pieces that must come together to help teachers help students reach and surpass learning goals—so that the observation process could be replicated in 10,000+ and counting classrooms across the country.

## PITFALLS OF COMMON TEACHER IMPROVEMENT APPROACHES

### *Professional development*

It's not unusual for districts or schools to pour resources and time into professional development. In part, this is reasonable. Per an Institute of Education Sciences study, year-long professional development that is content-driven and tied to specific content pedagogy can expand teachers' subject area knowledge. Certain aspects of instructional practice can also improve. Yet the same study found that these teacher gains did not translate into student achievement (Garet, Heppen, Walters, Smith, & Yang, 2016).

Additional research has found that professional development in it of itself rarely bears out on the classroom; when introduced to new skills via workshop, only 15 percent of teachers implement new skills in their classrooms. However, when teachers receive instructional coaching after the workshop, that number skyrockets to 85 percent.

Professional development alone has its merits. But the mere acquisition of new skills does not guarantee their successful use in the classroom. Nor does it necessarily address the end goal of student learning. Information acquisition and application are two distinct skills. For teacher learning to elevate student learning, the research shows that follow-up coaching is key. Without it, the resources invested in professional development often yield little return.

### *Principal-led classroom observations*

Classroom observation is a logical follow-on to high-quality professional development. When applied under a specific set of circumstances, including a shared understanding of rubrics, observation can generate a solid return on professional learning. Yet there is a caveat to classroom observation. Many schools rely on the principal or administrators to conduct classroom observations. The research warns this approach comes with common pitfalls.

While it is true that principals produce more reliable feedback than that of central administration staff, all are susceptible to bias. A review of teacher evaluation from the Brookings Institute found that when an observer knows the teacher or comes into the classroom with preconceived notions, this bias can impair the objectivity needed to deliver worthwhile feedback. Similarly, when an observer walks into a classroom knowing that the students in its walls are high performers, the observer is more likely to view the teacher's instructional practices positively (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014).

Classroom observation has enormous potential to identify where a teacher's practices are or are not driving rigorous and relevant learning in an engaging environment. But the biases that observers might bring into the classroom can lead to unfounded overly positive or negative appraisal of a teacher.

The report concludes that classroom observers from beyond the building will provide more objective and valid observation data.

Even if principals and administrators take measures to remove potentially blinding biases, the reality is that many in these roles lack the time for comprehensive observer training. To provide a teacher constructive, actionable feedback tied to student outcomes takes adequate training. In the absence of this training, observers often default to little more than checking certain points off a list. This approach does not prove effective instructional strategies are in place nor reveal needed points of development (National Education Association, 2010). Observing and engaging rigorously with teachers requires not only training, but also opportunities for reflection and delivery of useful feedback that teachers can

apply (Reform Support Network, 2015). Most principals and administrators do not have the time for observation training that will turn them into qualified observers.

### *Value-added analyses of test scores*

Finally, to track and measure a teacher's role in student learning, many schools rely on value-added analyses of state standardized test scores. It's reasonable to assume that a set of test scores could speak to a teacher's effectiveness; but this would be a mistake (National Education Association, 2010). Test scores alone do not include the context to make sound inferences.

It is fact that some teachers have students in their classrooms that are difficult to teach, facing a challenging home life, or lacking at-level English skills. It is also a fact that some teachers have a classroom of gifted students. In either case, value-added scores will reflect distinct class circumstances and not accurately capture the teacher's role in those scores. Even if there are instances where test scores reflect a teacher's efficacy, the scores cannot uncover how or why a teacher is effective or not. As a methodology for appraising how well a teacher is affecting learning, test scores are invalid, insufficient, and widely viewed as unfair (National Education Association, 2010).

### *What, then?*

What, then, is sufficient? We know that better performing teachers mean better performing students. How can we support all educators toward betterment and document evidence of their progress in a way that is collaborative and fair to them?

## THE PROMISE OF CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS THAT WORK

Classroom observations hold great promise—when built on a foundation of research about what makes learning rigorous, relevant, and engaging. And when executed from a collaborative structure that positions teachers as active agents in their own learning.

Successful classroom observations occur when a series of interlocking components are in place. It is true that classroom observations can fall short of their promise if they lack any of these necessary components. When classroom observation makes a teacher better such that students also improve, it is highly likely that all components are intact. Per research, these components are:

- 1. *Observers must be rigorously coached.*** It must be known that delivering classroom observations is a specific skill (National Education Association, 2010). Coaching needs to establish clearly what the observer is expected to observe and why. Whenever possible, coaching should also be catered to content and grade level so that the observer can give more relevant feedback. For coaching to result in intended outcomes, observers must have opportunities to practice observation and deliver constructive, actionable feedback while maintaining a supportive, respectful demeanor.
- 2. *Observers must be conditioned to account for bias.*** One of the most effective and straightforward ways to achieve this is to use coaches, consultants, or administrators from outside of the building and with little knowledge of a specific teacher or students. Otherwise, special steps will need to be taken to train observers to identify and offset possible biases that could ultimately stand in the way of productive educator coaching (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014).
- 3. *Observations must look primarily at student learning and secondarily at teacher instruction.*** Too often, observers put most of their attention on the teacher (Dynarski, 2016). In turn, they are evaluating teacher performance in a vacuum, as it's not measured against its impact on student learning. The most effective observers will spend most of the time watching students, observing

their work, and analyzing their level of engagement, the rigor of their cognition, and their capacity to apply learning in relevant, flexible ways. It is in witnessing the presence or absence of these factors that observers can determine deficits and opportunities for improvement in a teacher's instruction.

**Observing / listening to what the teacher is doing and saying**

20%

**Observing / listening to what the students are doing and saying**

80%

**The Visit**

4. *Observations must be made against a known and shared rubric that establishes clear expectations of student learning and related instructional practice (Wayne et al., 2016).* Clear, specific, consistent rubrics that are shared with all involved parties let everyone know factors of observation and what they're working toward to affect student achievement.
5. *The rubric must strike a balance between being robust and not complicated, while also being directly tied to research-based pedagogy and student outcomes.* A rubric is only as useful as it is derived from what has been known to work in enhancing student learning. Checklists will not unearth what is and is not driving learning in the classroom. Yet cumbersome, overly complicated, arbitrary rubrics impede an observer's ability to home in on precise indicators of rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning. Feedback is most helpful to teachers when it is based on multiple ratings; what's key is that they are limited to points tied to student performance and standards (National Education Association, 2010).



6. *Observations must be frequent to produce meaningful data.* Many studies confirm what we've observed ourselves: a single classroom observation and round of feedback amounts to time and resources wasted. The more frequent the observations, the more the investment pays off through reliable data (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2014).
7. *Feedback must be actionable and on a loop to support teachers through long-term improvements the raise student achievement.* Similarly, the more frequent the feedback, the more likely teachers are to apply new insights to instruction that boost student outcomes (Wayne et al., 2016). Key to feedback with this kind of potential is that it be both specific and actionable. In turn, the observation process becomes an ongoing dialogue amongst partners in the shared goal of expanding achievement levels for all students.

## COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL REVIEW PROCESS: DESIGNED TO ADVANCE STUDENT LEARNING

ICLE's Collaborative Instructional Review (CIR) process was built with all the necessary components of productive and positive classroom observations in mind. The program was intentionally designed to provide teachers the research-based support they need to have a direct and positive impact on student outcomes.

The heart of the collaboration between our highly trained coaches, instructional leaders, and educators are our [proprietary rubrics](#). Derived from our Rigor/Relevance Framework® (Daggett, 2014), the rubrics distill what research says lends to and indicates rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning. The rubrics succinctly, yet specifically detail nine indicators—three for rigor, three for relevance, and three for engagement—of the kind of learning and instructional design that when applied with fidelity will push students to achieve. By focusing primarily on what students are doing and saying in a classroom and secondarily on the teacher's instructional design, observers determine if a teacher is beginning, emerging, developed, or well developed in each indicator.

The rubrics establish transparent and clearly outlined expectations for all partners. In doing so, they guide a formative, not evaluative process; instead of functioning as a tool to highlight deficiencies, the rubrics list goal posts toward which teachers can move. The rubrics explicitly state what progress and success look like in learning, allowing coaches and instructional leaders to support their teachers and celebrate improvements. With all observations and feedback made within the framework of the rubrics, conversations leave teachers feeling motivated, not judged or deflated.

The rubrics also serve as a tool for instructional planning. With practiced reflection and regular guidance from designated observers, teachers become adept at vetting their own instructional design against the rubrics.

Our instructional coaching approach is based on a four-step process, and an online tool supports and guides all participants through each step:

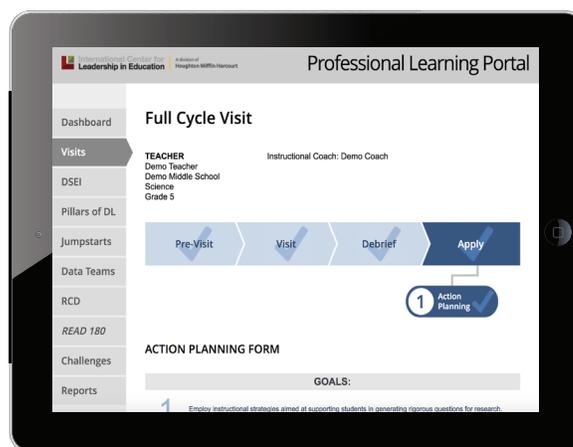
**Step 1: Pre-Visit**—Using the pre-observation planning form, the teacher and the instructional leader or coach build knowledge, clarify expectations, and establish a focus for the classroom visit based on the rubrics.

**Step 2: Visit**—Guided by the online tool, the instructional leader or coach uses the rubrics' continuums to capture evidence of student learning, including instructional strategies.

**Step 3: Debrief**—Using evidence collected about the observed student learning, the instructional leader and teacher engage in a collaborative discussion. The coach supports the teacher in reflecting upon the lesson and determining next steps. The coach takes care to provide specific points of action the teacher can take with feedback.

**Step 4: Apply**—The teacher applies the feedback into future planning and instruction.

The process then repeats, creating a feedback loop and sustained support process for teachers to elevate their craft so that their students, too, can elevate their learning.



## EXPERTISE AND INSIGHTS FROM 10,000+ CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

In just two years, we have conducted observations using our [Rigor, Relevance, and Learner Engagement Rubrics](#) in 10,363 classrooms across the country. Insights from this mass application have allowed us to capture a high-level, national perspective of student learning. The aggregate data has allowed us to see trends in America’s public school classrooms—some optimistic, and some illuminating broad needs for improvement through application of rigorous, relevant, and engaging instruction.

<b>RIGOR</b>	Beginning	Emerging	Developed	Well Developed
Thoughtful Work	28%	48%	26%	3%
High-Level Questioning	36%	32%	20%	2%
Academic Discussion	41%	45%	19%	5%

Table 1: Percentage breakdown for rigor indicators.

<b>RELEVANCE</b>	Beginning	Emerging	Developed	Well Developed
Meaningful Work	37%	44%	16%	3%
Authentic Resources	37%	38%	21%	4%
Learning Connections	37%	37%	21%	5%

Table 2: Percentage breakdown for relevance indicators.

<b>LEARNER ENGAGEMENT</b>	Beginning	Emerging	Developed	Well Developed
Active Participation	20%	39%	33%	8%
Learning Environment	18%	30%	40%	12%
Formative Tools and Processes	39%	37%	20%	4%

Table 3: Percentage breakdown for learner engagement indicators.

From a high level, our data show that the focus of professional learning must shift toward supporting teachers to enhance learning opportunities; we need higher percentages in the developed and well developed columns. In general terms, the data show that while the majority of learning across our classrooms is minimally rigorous, rigor is more commonly observed than is relevance. As an example, we see high-level questioning and thoughtful work emerging in more classrooms than not; yet we see substantial room for most teachers to implement these important markers of rigorous cognition into their class design.

Relevant learning, where students apply skills with flexibility and in ways that are pertinent to college and careers, is less frequently observed in classrooms. In fact, it is in this category that we've witnessed the greatest need for teacher practice. In our experience, educators often struggle to bring college- and career-ready relevance into their instructional design. It is an area where a collaborative instructional observation process can create significant gains.

We can confidently report that our classrooms are ever more engaging. Per our data, observers often witness students actively participating in their learning, while contributing to a respectful classroom where productive struggle is honored and encouraged. It is a specific aim of ours to work with teachers and instructional leaders to increase use of formative student assessments so that students can reflect on their own learning and role in it.

By and large though, we are heartened by the current level of engagement in our classrooms. Especially since highly engaged classrooms make for more fertile ground for rigorous and relevant learning—the needed elements of higher student achievement. Ultimately, this is the goal of educators, and this is our goal as partners in the Collaborative Instructional Review process.

### ARE YOUR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SUPPORTED ON THE PATH TO THE GROWTH THEY DESERVE?

As we all set out to support our teachers bettering their craft so that students better their learning, we have to ask ourselves what our classrooms look like. Do we see evidence of students thinking rigorously, applying skills relevantly, and actively engaging in their own learning? As a guide to making this crucial determination, [our rubrics](#) can be used to create a baseline of your classrooms/student learning.

We also have to ask ourselves what our teacher support systems look like. Are we relying too heavily on value-added analyses? Are we putting time, energy, and money into professional development without reinforcing new skills with coaching and opportunities for teachers to practice applying those skills in classrooms? Is professional development tied to student outcomes? Do those doing classroom visits meet the requirements of qualified observers who can make a difference? Are all the components in place for a classroom observation process that will help our students learn more and make significant achievement gains?

If your teacher support systems fall short of meeting what the research says works to foster rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning, how can you correct course to get the greatest return on your investment?

41% of classroom observations were marked only at the beginning level of academic discussion, revealing a broad need for more rigorously planned class dialogue.

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