

# **The Documentation Process: The Administrator's Role And the Interplay of Necessity, Support and Collaboration**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Traditional teacher documentation procedures pit the administrator against the teacher. The process is adversarial and erodes the quality of the intervention. Teachers who are unsuccessful in meeting campus/school district expectations can be successfully acclimatized to the campus culture through a documentation process that combines affective traits with technical necessities. The quality of the intervention is a function of the administrator's skill and support team collaboration. The result is a documentation process that assists both the administrator and the teacher in forming a curative plan for teacher development.**

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## **Introduction**

The word "documentation" usually connotes an adversarial process that results in a reluctant change. In referring to subordinates, it can be viewed as a form of professional counseling or formal and written reprimands. Its *prima facie* definition is simply the official record of a sequence of events that gird some profound conclusion. Educational professionals may be more familiar with the connotative meaning and

respond accordingly depending upon their position within a school's organizational framework with teachers on one side and administrators on the other. The animosities inherent in adversarial relationships are compounded for educators; teachers and administrators are often unable to shed their collective, homogenous perceptions as discrete entities in favor of adopting a collaborative approach to problem solving. This "us vs. them" mentality is evinced in every aspect of the school environment from student discipline to professional development and threatens to derail even the best school organizations.

Good, solid teachers are in small supply. When a school district or a specific campus is fortunate enough to find them, solid teachers must be nurtured and treated as the primary expert resources within the organization. The process of choosing and retaining a competent faculty is difficult enough as a single task but is even more so if the parties involved come into the new relationship hindered by the attitudes and perceptions of previous ones. The fact of the matter is that accountability is the prevailing theme; teachers must be appraised and school administrators are saddled with the dubious and alienating responsibility of appraising them. Documentation is a part of the process and, whether it is used to help teachers grow professionally, or to substantiate an initiative toward non-renewal, it is a task that is best accomplished when teachers and administrators share realistic assessments of strengths, weaknesses and goals.

Few school districts provide campus administrators with a blue print for documenting teachers. They provide guidance expressed through sweeping generalities that are subject to the individual administrator's interpretation. Compounding this problem is the lack of targeted, professional development to ensure that the quality of an administrator's documentation can withstand the scrutiny of a hearing officer or that of the court system should the possibility arise. Administrators are often left to discover correct documentation processes through trial and costly error, circumstances that continue to divide teachers and administrators.

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the campus administrator's role in the documentation process. It will demonstrate ways to incorporate the necessary technical aspects with the ideal appraiser's affective leadership skills to construct a model that is effective, based on collaboration and less threatening than traditional methods.

### **Step 1: Analysis and Preparation**

Campus administrators will notice shifts or trends in student or teacher behavior that will indicate whether intervention needs to occur. These trends may present

themselves in the form of alarming numbers of students being referred to the principal's office by a certain teacher; an increased number of complaints from parents and students; frequent emergency calls to classrooms; and sometimes, complaints from a teacher's own peers. Trends such as these signal the interruption of the school's daily processes, indicate that expectations are in conflict, and create dissonance between or among school groups that were previously in harmony. The administrator must observe these behaviors, gather information and analyze data to determine the underlying causes. In the event that teacher behavior is the cause, the administrator should act to bring the school's climate back into balance. This action commences by preparing a meeting agenda of specific concerns and issues to address with the teacher. It is crucial for the administrator to bear in mind that his actions may be perceived as accusatory and confrontational. It is very important that the issues proposed for discussion are essential to the school's benefit and that to allow them to remain unaddressed would have detrimental effects. Another reason that speaks directly to the value and power of relationships is that the process, once begun, will have lasting impact on the teacher which may take years to dissipate.

### **Step 2: The Meeting**

Once the meeting agenda is prepared, the actual meeting must be scheduled with the teacher. The administrator should invite members of the teacher's support team (the department chairperson, team leader, director of instruction, mentor teacher, etc.) and inform all attendees of the meeting's purpose. Unless the issues to be addressed are especially egregious, the administrator should adopt a conciliatory approach; his gestures should be benevolent in nature couched in terms of collaborative discussion to establish facts, identify problems and work toward solutions.

In the initial stages of the meeting, the administrator should ask the teacher to offer a self-assessment of her performance in terms of the agenda concerns, that may include her relationships/interactions with students and parents, compliance with campus/district expectations, or any of the myriad other possible causes for discussion. The administrator must record the teacher's response. At this point, the administrator should present each issue to be addressed along with any supporting evidentiary statements, documents or materials and allow the employee to respond. It is necessary to record the employee's response to each issue in an attempt to provide a complete and accurate record of the meeting. It is also important to note within the record whether the teacher's account of a situation differs markedly from the account revealed through the administrator's investigation. Teachers who do not feel threatened by this scenario will usually answer the administrator's questions honestly. They will verbally express their frustration by giving a summation of the difficulties they have experienced and conclude they do not know how to improve the situation. It is crucial to the process that the administrator and members of the support team acknowledge statements of this nature and respond with specific suggestions for appropriate professional development.

This stage of the initial meeting must also include the teacher's contributions or suggestions regarding her professional development and it is critical to the process to evince this in the written record as well. The suggestions for the teacher's professional development should already have been carefully considered by the administrator and the support team to ensure that they are appropriate and in alignment with the teacher's behaviors or deficits. The administrator and support members should refrain from overt criticism; they must be objective in terms of considering the teacher's suggestions and strive to maintain the spirit of cooperation that will increase the teacher's degree of trust, thereby encouraging her confidence in and acceptance of the plan for her improvement.

### **Step 2A: Intervention for Immediate Change**

There are occasions when teacher concerns are so egregious that they must be addressed through the use of more stringent intervention tools. Most school districts have procedures to follow when the circumstances demand immediate change. In many states, this aspect of the teacher appraisal system is called the *Intervention Plan for a Teacher in Need of Assistance*. It is more commonly referred to by administrators as a growth plan and can be implemented at any time during the school year provided that there is sufficient documentation to warrant it. This plan requires strict adherence. It is appropriate for serious teacher behaviors, determines appropriate professional development at the administrator's discretion, uses formal paperwork with specific goals and timelines for improvement, and includes an evaluative component to determine whether teacher behavior has changed. The necessity of this approach, in contrast with the collaborative, benevolent approach described earlier, is dictatorial and bureaucratic and is likely to be met with considerable resistance from the teacher. Teachers on growth plans may become ineligible to transfer to other campuses within the school district and may also be ineligible to receive merit or yearly increases in salary. It is safe to say that a teacher who finds herself on a plan of this type before the end-of-year summative evaluation is very likely being considered for non-renewal.

### **Step 3: Written Feedback**

After the initial meeting, the administrator should provide the employee and other attendees with written documentation of the meeting in the form of a letter or memorandum that enumerates the general points of discussion, accompanied by a summary of the employee's responses. Copies of the written documentation should be given to those building professionals or support team members (principal, associate principal, director of instruction) who may not have been in attendance but who certainly have a need to know that the meeting occurred. This is the step that is most overlooked

by inexperienced administrators who operate from the assumption that a simple conversation is enough to document that a meeting took place. The purpose of the written documentation is to establish exactly *what was discussed*. None of the attendees, especially the teacher, is bound by a sense of honesty to corroborate the administrator's verbal account of the issues addressed. Verbal recollections, especially after considerable time has passed, are often deemed unreliable and courts have held that discussions, in the context of teacher appraisals, are invalid without a written record of the account. Failure to document may preclude the administrator from including damaging information on the summative evaluation. To wit, a Texas teacher who received a "below expectations" mark on her summative evaluation challenged it. She stated that no written documentation was given to her prior to the summative that indicated concerns about her teaching. She added, "She would have expected to see documentation throughout the year had she been doing anything wrong in the classroom" (Bowen, 2006, p. 2). The mark was later upgraded. Consistent written feedback provides a chronological account of incidents that is difficult to alter or dispute if the parties have contributed to it as an acceptable form of communication.

#### **Step 4: Self-Reflection**

Many teachers affected by this process are not teachers who are new to the profession but are experienced professionals who are having difficulty transitioning to a new campus. Every school campus has its own climate, culture and sub-cultures that are based on the quality of the relationships among the various stakeholder groups. Teachers new to the internal environment must acquiesce to some degree of assimilation in order for the campus to maintain balance, consistent behavior and expectations. Left unchecked, aberrant teacher behaviors disrupt the internal environment's ebb and flow and erode relationship quality. It is for this reason that teacher acclimation is so important. Though criticisms may be hard to accept, teachers affected should make every effort to incorporate the campus mission, practices and philosophy as their own. In anticipation of this change, the appraiser and the support team must allow the teacher an opportunity for self-reflection without outside intervention. In the best cases, the teacher will recognize her need for improvement/development and will adjust accordingly. In the interim, the appraiser must be cognizant that behavioral change is a multi-step process that takes patience and time.

#### **Step 5: Follow Up**

In the event that problematic teacher behaviors continue, more prescriptive measures to encourage behavioral change must be introduced. The administrator and support team must again meet with the teacher to address the concerns raised and should

provide supporting evidence of incidents at issue. As in the initial meeting, the teacher is expected to provide a response and contribute to the record. At this point, the appraiser and support team must re-establish the expectations for the teacher's behavior and should align said expectations with the domains of the formal assessment instrument. For example, Texas uses the Professional Development and Appraisal System, or **PDAS** to assess and evaluate teacher performance in eight domains that measure behaviors in the classroom and within the scope of the teacher's role. Each directive should be expressed in behavioral terms accompanied by definite timelines for compliance (Texas Education Agency). Two examples are written below:

**Example 1:** Schedule and attend an observation with your mentor or a master teacher in your department by November 12, 2007.

**Objective:** To observe strategies for encouraging appropriate interaction with reluctant learners.

**Example 2:** Attend and demonstrate active participation in scheduled team meetings.

**Objective:** Compliance with campus and district expectations.

Again, the administrator must provide written feedback to all attendees and persons with a need to know. The written document must include clear directives and expectations written in specific behavioral terms and should require the teacher to provide specific, acceptable evidence of compliance.

### **Step 6: Active Monitoring**

After the follow up meeting, members of the support team must randomly monitor the teacher in settings authentic to the concerns addressed. They should provide pertinent feedback to the administrator, who should also monitor the teacher as needed. Each incident of non-compliance should be documented and reviewed with the teacher following the same procedures for written feedback discussed earlier. Continued documentation and review is vital to the process because it demonstrates the administration's commitment to guiding and assisting the teacher's professional growth to entities that may have cause to review the documentation for procedural faults.

### **Recommendations**

Teacher documentation is a delicate process. Its effectiveness is a function of the administrator's discretion, consistency, accuracy and timeliness. The administrator's

actions should be ethical and objective, which should be reflected in the corresponding written documentation. He should always have a colleague read written correspondence for tone and should avoid communicating by email unless it is to schedule a meeting. Administrator overzealousness at any juncture translates as aggression to courts and as a hostile working environment for the teacher. The building principal communicates with Human Resources regarding the teacher's possible non-renewal. It is imperative that the administrator keep the principal apprised of any incidents that occur. The support team should make the teacher aware of and provide the teacher with opportunities to demonstrate improvement and compliance. Frequent review and feedback are integral to the process and transform it from punitive to assistive. Viewed in the context of quality control, these recommendations will help to ensure process validity and integrity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this article was to provide a comprehensive guide through the administrator's role in teacher performance documentation. The documentation process is inherently adversarial and can be dictatorial and bureaucratic. The process illustrated in this article is collegial and collaborative and calls upon the appraiser to incorporate affective traits with technical aspects. The result is a curative plan for teacher development.

### **References**

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