

GIVING TEACHERS USEFUL FEEDBACK



Many schools hesitate to have conversations with teachers about how to improve. But one exceptional school in D.C. shows that when a school commits to regular feedback, teachers thrive – and students excel.

Academic Outlier

A vast gulf in academic achievement separates public schools in Washington, D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods from those in its most affluent. Achievement Prep, which serves 4th-8th graders in D.C.'s impoverished 8th Ward, is an outlier.

Many of the 210 students start school up to three years behind. In 2011, most of the 52 incoming fourth graders tested below a second grade reading level, with some unable to read at all.

Yet in 2011, 60% of Achievement Prep's "scholars" scored proficient or advanced in reading on the DC-CAS tests, while just 28% of their neighborhood peers did.

While many factors are contributing to the school's success, one stands out: the school's complete commitment to helping its teachers grow as professionals by giving them rich and regular feedback.

Quick Hits

Achievement Prep structures feedback around "quick hits": small, manageable pieces of a teacher's craft that could be easily improved.

At least once every two weeks, all 18 teachers receive a short, 15-minute observation and a real-time follow-up email, outlining particular strengths (pluses), questions for consideration (questions), and small, concrete suggestions to implement in the next class period (quick hits).

Achievement Prep's approach grew out of conversations with other high-performing schools, and its own teachers' frustration with the more traditional approach to feedback: a pre-meeting to set one or two year-long goals, infrequent observations, and a debrief session.

Not only did the arduous process detract from teachers' planning time, but it also felt daunting for administrators and limiting for teachers.

Sample Bi-Weekly Feedback Email

<p>+ Pluses</p> <p><i>Things that are going well; good job.</i></p>	<p>? Questions</p> <p><i>Let's brainstorm and figure this out in the next two weeks.</i></p>	<p>▲ Quick Hits</p> <p><i>Quick reminders to make sure you're tuned into simple things.</i></p>
<p>24 out 24 scholars are on task and actively engaged upon entering into the classroom.</p>	<p>It took the average scholar 14 minutes to complete their independent practice question, but three finished in 11. How can you push those scholars to the next level during that time?</p>	<p>Format matters: you are not requiring scholars to answer in complete sentences.</p> <p>Make your thinking public. You walked scholars through steps 1 and 2, but did 3 without explaining why.</p>

“I may not get to talk to you until 6:30 tonight. But that doesn't mean that you should teach fourth and fifth period without requiring those scholars to answer in complete sentences.” – Susie Cannon, Lead Observer

“When you just have huge overarching goals, people don't feel like they're growing. If you're always waiting for that in-person follow up meeting, people stay stagnant professionally versus being able to make small growth every day,” explained Susie Cannon, Director of Academic Achievement and the school's lead observer.

Between 2010 and 2011, Achievement Prep doubled the number of observations each teacher received each year, from 20 to nearly 40. That same year, every single teacher in the school reported that observations helped them improve student outcomes – a testament to the value of the bite-size, real-time feedback.

Setting Goals with Teachers

Of the two goals Susie assesses in her bi-weekly observations, one of them is set by the teacher, which invests the teacher in feedback and focuses the observer.

“I think it becomes a lot easier to give meaningful feedback to teachers when teachers are working on goals that they've identified as areas they want to grow,” said Susie. Just as importantly, it allows Susie to hone in on development areas.

“We go into observations with a focused lens on one or two specific areas. Both the teacher and the observer know where we're working to improve; there's no 'gotcha',” explained Founder and Head of School Shantelle Wright.

Instead, if the teacher's stated goal is to improve

questioning, Susie or Shantelle can show up at the right portion of the lesson and give targeted suggestions on questioning techniques.

“The feedback is excellent because it's a constant process,” explained Stephanie Fong, a 5th grade History teacher. “I set goals on a weekly basis, and then make quick changes in order to see immediate improvement.”

Holding Time Sacred

How does the school find the time for so much feedback? “We're really intentional about keeping Susie's time sacred,” said Shantelle.

The vast majority of Susie's time is spent in classrooms, and every minute is accounted for on a detailed weekly schedule. Competing priorities pop up constantly; the schedule keeps her focused.

“Without a very specific detailed calendar about where you're going to spend each minute, it's very easy to continuously say 'I'm going to deal with this problem later' or 'I'll get in that class tomorrow,’” Susie said. “You're not as quick to put that off if you know that you have 10 more observations scheduled the next day.”

All that feedback translates into unprecedented clarity and support for teachers – and results for students. In 2011, every single Achievement Prep teacher said expectations for effective teaching were clearly defined, and that the school was committed to helping them achieve their key goal: helping their scholars excel academically.

THE PILOT LIGHTS PROJECT profiles promising human capital initiatives that are lighting the way towards larger reforms. Each profile highlights concrete steps taken by schools, districts and states to elevate the teaching profession and advance student learning.