

Minnesota Principal Evaluation Pilot Study Preliminary Findings through the Mid-Year Conferences (Abbreviated version)

"Voices From the Field"

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Introduction

In 2011, the Minnesota State Legislature mandated that all districts annually evaluate principals with models that meet guidelines in Statute and "enhance a principal's leadership skills and support and improve teaching practices, school performance, and student achievement." In the fall of 2011, the Principal Evaluation Working Group, appointed by the Commissioner and including representatives from the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals and the Minnesota Association of Elementary School principals, submitted an example model to the legislature. The MDE is piloting this example model in 17 school districts during the 2012-2013 school year. Within the 17 districts are eight schools in seven districts receiving school improvement grants (SIG).

The example model consists of three components: 1) principal evaluation by the supervisor; 2) review of the longitudinal student growth data; and 3) feedback from other school community stakeholders, including students, parents, colleagues, and staff.

This report presents preliminary findings and recommendations from a study of the implementation of the Minnesota Principal Evaluation Model at the mid-year point. The study is designed to provide feedback from the 17 districts currently piloting the example principal evaluation model (hereafter referred to as the "example model") that was developed by the MDE. The findings are based on an anonymous online survey requested of principals and evaluators in all 17 pilot districts, and interviews with principals and evaluators in four "case study" districts within the 17 pilot districts selected to be representative of other districts in Minnesota.

The purpose of this report is to provide *preliminary findings and preliminary recommendations* to the MDE leadership team and the working group to strengthen the example model, its implementation, and intended outcomes. A *summative report* following the collection and analysis of data from the end-of-year evaluation process will be submitted in the summer of 2013 to help further refine the findings and recommendations.

Key findings are summarized under each of the following 10 areas (in the full report we include illustrative quotations from the case study interviewees and data from the two surveys).

- 1) Overall perception of the evaluation model.
- 2) Concerns about the model.
- 3) Perceived quality and value of the orientation to the model offered by MDE.
- 4) Modifications made to the model at the district level.
- 5) Reactions to self-assessment and goal-setting components.
- 6) Activities between self-assessment and goal-setting and the mid-year conference.
- 7) Reactions to the mid-year conference.
- 8) Contextual conditions that support the example model.
- 9) Advice from evaluators and principals to MDE to strengthen the model or improve its implementation.
- 10) Recommendations from FHI 360 to MDE to strengthen the example state evaluation model or improve its implementation.

In many cases, findings are consistent for both evaluators and principals. However, there are important differences in their responses that are highlighted throughout. The report concludes with unanswered questions that will be pursued in the second half of the study.

At this mid-point in the pilot and the study, the findings are encouraging with regard to the initial reception of the model and the potential for its future impact, both short-term (the end of the school year) and beyond. Overall, there was a positive response to the example model, coupled with recommendations for changes or additions intended to strengthen its design or implementation. The recommendations section of this report will share these ideas. Some may be able to be completed quickly and others over a longer timeline.

Data Collection in Brief

As noted above, the study is being conducted through interviews and online surveys that gather the experiences and perceptions of both principals and their evaluators (often, but not always, superintendents). Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by a professional service. Districts and interviewees were promised anonymity. The survey and interview questions were designed to address each of the eight steps of the example model:

- 1. An orientation on the principal evaluation process.
- 2. Pre-planning by the principal, which comprises a self-assessment and identification of goals.
- 3. A goal-setting conference between the principal and his/her supervisor to agree on professional growth and school improvement goals for the year.
- 4. A period of evidence-gathering by the principal and the evaluator.
- 5. A mid-year formative review for the evaluator to provide feedback and for the principal to discuss progress achieved to date.
- 6. An end-of-year summative review to discuss all of the collected evidence of principal performance and professional growth. 1

¹ Some student performance data will not be available until the end of the summer.

- 7. A summative performance rating signed by both the principal and the evaluator.
- 8. Development of the professional growth plan and/or implementation of the consequences of a particular summative performance rating.

A second round of interviews and surveys is planned to capture the experiences of principals and evaluators after the summative principal evaluations. Additional information on the two data collection strategies appears in Appendix A, along with the case study interview questions for principals and evaluators in Appendix B (see full report for appendices).

Key Findings

Principals' and Evaluators' Perceptions of the Example Model and Orientation to It

The majority of principals and evaluators embraced the example principal evaluation model as an opportunity to increase their leadership skills. Although principals and evaluators had some concerns about the initial design of the example model, many of these were addressed with district modifications. Orientation to the model by the MDE was well received in general and provided a framework and examples for district implementation.

Study Question 1: How did principals and evaluators view the example model?

Finding 1.

Both principals and evaluators generally had a positive view of the example model, especially with regard to how it promotes principals' professional growth, defines the role of the principal as an instructional leader, keeps that as their focus, and holds them more accountable for results.

More specific findings on how the model is viewed include:

- It provides evaluators and principals with more opportunities to engage in authentic dialogue about principals' professional growth.
- It helps keep principals' focus on being instructional leaders and on progressing on their professional and school performance goals.
- It supports a school culture of learning and professional behavior.
- It helps create effective schools and improve school performance.
- It sets high standards for what principals should know and be able to do.
- It encourages setting high standards for student performance.
- It provides timely feedback for principals and the opportunity to meet and set new goals.

Study Question 2: What concerns did principals and evaluators voice about the example evaluation model?

Finding 2.

Two primary concerns were raised by both principals and evaluators. The first was how they would shift from the rich professional dialogues about professional growth and meeting school improvement goals in the first half of the process, to a single, quantifiable, evaluative number as required by the summative review. The second major concern was what both saw as the "overwhelming" number of standards and indicators.

Other concerns mentioned in the interviews included:

- The timing of when the state MCA data arrive too late to be used in an end-of-the-academic year summative review.
- Lack of timely and specific feedback from the evaluators.
- Inadequate support from districts to help principals meet their goals such as the lack of professional development aligned with the performances and indicators that would help principals address their professional growth goals.
- The possibility that this could be a "gotcha" model, leading to a principal's dismissal without adequate direction and support for professional growth.
- Issues with the administration and interpretation of the results of the stakeholder surveys (covered in more depth later in this report).

Study Question 3: What did principals and evaluators see as the quality and value of the orientation to the example model?

Finding 3.

Both principals and evaluators agreed that the MDE conducted an excellent orientation that introduced and explained the example model, its purposes, how it was designed to work, and how it could be implemented. The vast majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their orientation training provided them with a clear understanding of the model's goals and components, and that the orientation adequately addressed the initial questions they had about the model and its implementation.

Specific reactions included both positive impressions and recommendations for improvement:

- Example documents were useful but both principals and evaluators would like even more examples for each specific level -- elementary, middle, and high schools,
- There was appreciation for the low-stakes nature of the pilot so they could work the "kinks" out.
- The one-on-one support provided to the districts by the MDE staff to answer questions was valuable.
- Orientation training helped some of the pilot districts to modify their existing principal evaluation model to align with legislated requirements (discussed in Finding 4).

- The Evaluator Checklist provided guidance to evaluators on their roles and responsibilities.
- The importance of having both evaluators and principals attend the orientation trainings so they are "on the same page."
- An option for additional training on the model was recommended.
- A little over half of the survey respondents reported that they had promising practices related to their evaluation model that they would like to share with other districts.
- Several recommended creating a MDE web site that contains the legislation, example model, supporting materials, and additional trainings that principals and evaluators know about and have access to including the opportunity to read materials in advance of the orientation session.

Study Question 4: What modifications to the example state model did districts make?

Finding 4.

Districts implemented several different modifications to the principal evaluation model. These included the use of previously proven district practices that they believed increased the rigor and robustness of the process (e.g., using a principal's narrative in the self-assessment rather than a number); simplifying and focusing the performance measures (e.g., the development and use of "power standards"); and the use of available district interim measures such as MAP, AIMS Web or DIBELS to gauge progress on achieving goals for the mid-year conference.

Other modifications included:

- Scoring the stakeholder feedback component based on the principal's reflection on the survey results rather than the survey score itself (especially where there were issues with survey administration and validity).
- Linking principals' school improvement goals to their buildings' school improvement plan goals.
- Focusing primarily on the principals' selected professional growth goals.

These modifications appeared to improve the efficiency of the principal evaluation process and ensured the alignment between the evaluation process in place and principals' goals.

Study Question 5: What reactions did principals and evaluators have to the self-assessment and goal-setting process and conference?

Finding 5.

In general, principals and evaluators liked the self-assessment opportunity and appreciated that it helped them to identify strengths and weaknesses and select appropriate professional growth goals. Some principals also obtained evaluations from staff members or their school leadership teams and used the data in selecting their professional growth goal(s).

However, there are some important discrepancies to note between the principals and evaluators. Overall, 38% of principals surveyed encountered obstacles in the goal-setting process, yet most evaluators reported their role as helping principals develop SMART goals. In addition, more principals than evaluators did not find the self-assessment template useful and about a fifth of principals did not feel they left the conference with viable action plans—although all evaluators thought they had. Especially in high-poverty districts, principals were less likely to agree that evaluators had the knowledge and skills to guide them through the goal setting and self-assessment process and reported that supports for goal attainment were often left up to the principals to identify and secure.

In general, difficulties were encountered in setting realistic targets for improvement and helping principals set goals that would lead to significant outcomes. In at least one district, the superintendent set the goals for the principals.

Other important perceptions from the principals and evaluators include:

- Principals using the rubric for their self-assessment (vs. Form A) had a better understanding of what different levels of performance on the indicators meant.
- Some districts streamlined the performance measures and indicators either by reducing their numbers or revising the wording so principals understood them better.
- Larger districts encouraged district assessment and instructional coordinators to work with principals to help set goals and measures; the evaluator signed off on goals.
- While principals found student achievement data, student growth data, and district goals most useful in helping them set school improvement goals, evaluators put a higher priority on district goals, principals' self assessment results, and student achievement data as most useful in setting principals' goals.
- Lack of stakeholder data used in the goal-setting process was likely the result of the timing of the survey data collection in the spring.
- Principals often focused on their two or three identified professional growth goals, with attention to developing skills in other performance measures coming though other district responsibilities, activities, and trainings.

Study Question 6: What evaluation-related activities occurred between the self-assessment and goal-setting conference and the mid-year conference?

In preparing for the mid-year conference, principals worked on their action plans and collected evidence. Most principals collected student assessment results (including growth measures) to show progress on their school goals and evidence of progress on their professional growth goals.

Finding 6.

During the period between the self-assessment and goal-setting conference and the mid-year conference, both principals and evaluators were often refining and deepening their understanding of the model while principals worked on their action plans, monitored school progress, and collected evidence to illustrate the progress they made on their goals. Evaluators conducted observations and school visits and set expectations for the mid-year conference. Evaluators' survey reponses indicated the majority provided feedback to principals on the performance measures and indicators.

In addition:

- District principal/administrative team meetings were often used to discuss the performance measures and what they looked like in practice.
- One district created "power standards" to help focus principals' attention on the standards that are likely to have the most impact on teaching and learning.
- Principals used their professional learning communities (PLCs) to help make progress on school goals including SMART goals for PLCs to achieve.
- Conversations continued between the evaluator and principals, allowing principals to modify some of their goals and refine the data collected for their evidence of progress.
- Evaluators' greatest challenges were finding time to provide principals with useful evidence, review principals' evidence in advance of the mid-year review, and conduct observations of principals.
- Principals tapped their instructional coaches (such as in math and literacy) to help teachers improve instruction in these subjects.
- Principals sought to meet their professional goals by increasing their number of classroom observations, providing timely feedback to teachers using a tablet-based technology called ObserverTab, providing an administrative calendar to reachers, and communicating more frequently with teachers, parents, and community members.
- Districts either selected or developed stakeholder surveys. A commonly selected survey was the *Five Essentials* developed from research conducted by the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research. Some surveys posed issues for many of the districts, including lack of alignment to the performance measures; lack of baseline data for surveys being used the first time; sampling issues (especially for parents); and lack of norms for how typical districts score and reporting inaccuracies. Districts addressed evaluation model issues as they arose, including sending memos and agendas, as well as scheduling meetings to help principals be ready for the mid-year conference.

Study Question 7: What Types of Evidence were Gathered and Used to Prepare for the Mid-Year Conferences?

Finding 7.

Few of the principals collected parent and student feedback in preparation for the mid-year review. Likewise, evaluators were least likely to provide principals with or make available parent and student feedback. The vast majority of the principal respondents did, however, collect student assessment results, interim progress on meeting school goals, student growth data, and evidence of the professional development completed in the course of the year.

On average, evaluators provided principals with or made available to principals three pieces of evidence. The majority provided principals with evaluator observations and feedback, as well as student growth and student assessment data. Evaluators were least likely to provide evidence of professional development and interim progress on meeting school improvement goals.

Contextual Conditions that Support the Principal Evaluation Process

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that districts had certain infrastructures to support principals' goal setting, monitoring and goal attainment. The most obvious of these was a data warehouse that could be accessed by principals. Other supports included things like district or school coaches to help improve instruction and supportive, trusting relationships with their evaluator.

Study Question 8: What supportive conditions did districts have in place to support the example evaluation model?

Finding 8.

The most supportive district condition for implementing the principal evaluation model was a district data infrastructure that provided student achievement data on multiple (and often interim) measures that a principal could access (or someone could access for them) and aggregate and report in different ways that informed their decisionmaking. Data were used to set meaningful goals; the evidence was used to review progress toward school improvement goals and enabled principals and evaluators to engage in evidence-based discussions.

Other important district conditions mentioned in the interviews included:

- The capacity of the evaluator to create a relationship of trust with principals and provide feedback (often though a cognitive coaching model) that would help principals take responsibility for their own professional growth.²
- Central office staff (especially those familiar with data) to work with principals on goal

² Cognitive coaching is a model developed by Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston that advocates for self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying behaviors to achieve individual goals.

- setting.
- School instructional coaches either at the district level or school level gave principals access to instructional expertise that could be shared with their teachers to improve teaching and learning in their schools.
- The alignment of the principal's school improvement goal with the school's improvement plan promoted focus and reinforced the principal's motivation to meet the school improvement goals.
- Specific, timely, and periodic feedback from the evaluator to the principal was highly valued, especially when followed-up with a dialogue about strategies for improvement.

Advice about strengthening the Example Model or its Implementation

These last two sections provide advice collected from principals and evaluators, followed by a set of recommendations from FHI 360. Some of this advice may not be new to the MDE principal evaluation leadership team, but it is worth mentioning as part of this report because it comes from a representative sample of the pilot districts which are implementing the model. The FHI 360 recommendations are designed to highlight some system-wide issues where coordination and timing could help support implmentation of the model.

Study Question 9: What advice did evaluators and principals give to MDE to strengthen the model or improve its implementation?

Finding 9: Advice to the MDE

The pilot districts primarily wanted more specificity and guidance in the examples first provided by the MDE; principals also wanted a timeline of events and activities. One evaluator described the model a "framework" that needs to be fleshed out into a more complete model with guidance, examples, and best practices from pilot districts. At the same time, the lack of model specificity and the low-stakes nature of the pilot also prompted districts to tailor the model to their particular district context.

Other advice offered by principals and evaluators included:

- Create a master calendar of evaluation model events and processes and identify roles of principals and evaluators (or ensure each district does).
- Ensure that districts help principals understand the model and what will be expected of them and what they should expect of the evaluator.
- Encourage evaluators to provide *timely* and *specific* feedback to principals.
- The MDE should continue to send out reminder emails to districts about the key evaluation events along with the documents they will need at each step in the process.
- Develop a statewide stakeholder survey aligned to the performance measures.
- Create a master list of state trainings and growth opportunities related to the model.
- Collaborate with the state administrator associations to take on a training role in the components and processes of the principal evaluation model.

• Accelerate the reporting of the state MCA data to better fit the timing of the evaluation model and state SIP reporting requirements.

What recommendations would FHI 360 make to the MDE to strengthen the example state evaluation model or improve its implementation?

The case study and survey findings suggest several recommendations that could strengthen the design of the model and create more district implementation supports.

Strengthening the Model

- 1. Create several possible models/strategies for calculating the summative evaluation score and share them with district evaluators and principals to give them high-quality options.
- Accelerate the reporting of the MCA data so that it fits within the model timeline for the
 evaluation process. If possible, create predictive MCA scores from other interim
 assessments such as AIMS Web, MAP, READ 180 that can be used in mid-year
 conferences.
- 3. Continue to work with McREL to develop brief, yet valid and reliable stakeholder surveys for teachers, parents, and perhaps students aligned to the performance measures and indicators. Create statewide norms and norms by district size and demographics.
- 4. Encourage the use of district interim measures (such as MAP, DIBELS, AIMS) to assess progress on goals for the mid-year conference.
- 5. Promote flexibility in the implementation of the model, such as allowing districts to identify power standards to help focus principals' attention on the leadership skills most likely to improve student achievement.
- 6. Refine the language used in the rubric descriptors so the practices described by indicators are better understood by principals.
- 7. Encourage principals to set their own school improvement goals aligned to their school improvement plan.
- 8. Create an ideal timeline for each component of the evaluation process to be shared with both evaluators and principals. Align other state policies and supports with this timeline.
- 9. Continue to engage evaluators and principals in streamlining and improving the evaluation system, perhaps using focus groups in meetings of the administrators associations.

Creating Supports for Principal Evaluation

- 1. Better understand and address the additional needs that high poverty districts and schools face in implementing the evaluation model.
- 2. Help evaluators and principals understand the link between the performance measures and indicators and the research on these skills in raising student achievement.

- 3. Create a calendar of training opportunities across the state aligned with the performance measures or the components of the example evaluation model.
- 4. Create a cadre of evaluators who can work with rural districts, especially in districts where the principal is also the superintendent.
- 5. Provide guidelines to districts on how to coordinate the MDE training for school improvement grant schools (SIG) with the principal evaluation model.
- 6. Create an online clearinghouse of evaluation handbooks, recording forms, documents, training modules, and best practices organized by the model components and, where applicable, by level of the system (elementary, middle and high schools).
- 7. Work with the state administrator associations to provide training on implementing different components of the model.
- 8. Engage regional service centers in creating supports and training for the model.

What unanswered questions remain regarding the example evaluation model?

During the FHI 360 analysis of the data, the following questions were raised.

- 1. How can the model be used to both evaluate principals and empower them to improve their skills as instructional leaders? The evaluation culminates by assigning a summative rating, but the real growth of the principal occurs through goal setting, feedback, coaching, and other supports. (From the survey: "Downplay the evaluative part of this [process], it just gets in the way. Principals are by nature extremely accountable and naturally work hard to improve. Trying to box that up as a number just hurts them and the organization, leading to false accountability." From the case study: "Many principals are more into management and less into instructional leadership. The evaluation will measure how effective they are, but we're [aiming for] professional growth."
- 2. How can the example model be used to help growth for principals all along the experience continuum, from a veteran principal to a new principal, and those in between? For example, a case study interviewee cautioned: "I think that [to assume that] this skill is just [going to] develop because we have the instrument is not true for the emerging principal."
- 3. What level of fidelity to the model is essential for the evaluation process to produce the desired results? How can the MDE ensure that evaluators implement the model with that level of fidelity? Is there a possible school board role to ensure implementation along a timeline that uses effective evaluation practices and supports?
- 4. How can one ensure rigorous goal setting with realistic and attainable targets? Can guidelines be developed?
- 5. How should the evaluation model be translated into and supported by district policies?

6. What supports and resources are needed to scale this evaluation model up statewide, from 17 districts to 519?

Summary

FHI 360 has appreciated the opportunity to study and provide feedback on the implementation of the Minnesota Principal Evaluation Model. Clearly, the model is thoughtfully designed and headed in the right direction based on best practices of principal evaluation models. It has the potential to substantially improve the effectiveness of and supports for principals to be instructional leaders that raise student achievement.

The next steps for MDE, both leading up to and following the summative report from FHI 360, will include:

- strengthening the design of the model,
- modifying some of the tools used to evaluate principals, and
- aligning the model with other state policies, partners and supports.

These steps would be followed by creating a strategy and locating resources to implement the model across the state.

As summarized by a principal: "I would say, yes, there is more of a time burden [to engage in the principal evaluation model]. But I think it's worth it. And I'm going to say, again, I feel that the work that I've done this year with my school improvement plan, with my connection to my teachers and professional development, my own self-evaluation, I believe is making me a better principal. And I guess my question would be: Is that not the goal? I feel it is."