

## INFORMAL OBSERVATIONS – WHAT’S BEST PRACTICE?

The teacher evaluation flexibility options allow district PDE committees to design 3-year evaluation cycles for teachers rated Proficient or Exemplary, that include at least 1 formal, in-class observation during the time period, and 3 informal, in-class observations all other years. The following questions and answers can help guide your PDE toward practice that best meets your teachers’ and district’s needs.

### 1. What’s the purpose of an informal observation?

An informal observation gives the evaluator the opportunity to get and/or maintain the ‘big picture’ of a teacher’s performance in the classroom to determine whether or not the practice is, generally, proficient, or if the evaluator sees changes that would warrant doing a formal observation for deeper analysis.

### 2. During an informal observation, does the evaluator have to collect evidence for what was observed and document that?

No. Since the purpose of the informal observation is to maintain a general picture of a teacher’s practice, collecting evidence isn’t a necessary, or the best, practice. Once collecting evidence is introduced into the process, it creates more paperwork and moves the observation toward a more formal process. One purpose of the flexibility option is to streamline the process and cut down paperwork. Many evaluators feel that, once they have worked with a teacher and done observations, they don’t need to formally observe and collect evidence of the teacher’s proficiency every year. If the evaluator feels, after doing an informal observation, that s/he needs to do a formal observation and collect evidence of practice, that can be done.

### 3. Must an informal observation result in feedback to the teacher? If so, what could that ‘look like,’ if there’s no evidence of practice collected?

The teacher evaluation guidelines require that all observations be followed with timely feedback, which could be written or oral. If no evidence is collected, the feedback from the evaluator might be something as simple as *“I observed your students while they were working on their group projects. I saw all students actively engaged as you moved from group to group to answer their questions, ask them questions, and provide help. There is no need for a formal observation to be conducted at this point.”*

### 4. Should an informal observation have a specific focus?

It’s important that the PDE Committee agrees to what a ‘focus’ is for an informal observation. A ‘focus’ would be a specific aspect of a teacher’s practice that an evaluator would look to observe during an observation, such as questioning techniques or oral feedback given to students. Given that, there are two schools of thought on whether or not an informal observation should have a focus.

The first is that, since one purpose of the informal observation is to get or maintain a general picture of a teacher’s practice, there should be no focus to it. Having a focus could lead to some of the steps of the formal observation ‘creeping into’ the process, such as asking or requiring that a pre-observation form be completed so the evaluator has more information about the upcoming class.

The second is that, since one strong purpose of evaluation is to strengthen teacher practice, the teacher can have the evaluator act as ‘another set of eyes’ who can informally observe something specific the teacher is working on. Even without collecting specific evidence during the observation, the evaluator can give feedback – which could be statements of what s/he saw, or questions – that will help the teacher refine the practice.

District committees should discuss how they’ll approach this: Will all informal observations be announced? Unannounced? Have a focus, or no focus? Will we use a combination of approaches? Will the approach be left to the mutual agreement of the teacher and evaluator? What guidance will we give teachers and evaluators about this?

**5. Should an informal observation be announced or unannounced?**

Generally, informal observations are unannounced, but they could be done either way. If an informal observation is announced, and there should be a focus to the observation (#3 above), which then allows the teacher and evaluator the chance to select a class to visit in which what the teacher is working on will actually be seen. However, that won't necessarily result in the evaluator getting an overall picture of the teacher's practice. If an informal observation is unannounced, there shouldn't be a focus for it, since the evaluator may visit the classroom and not see what is expected to be seen in the focus area.

**6. Does an informal observation result in an evaluation 'rating' for the teacher?**

No. There is no evidence collected, so giving a rating is not appropriate.

**7. If there is no rating given, how are the observations used in the overall evaluation?**

At the end of the year, when the reviews of practice and informal observations have been completed, and if there has been no need for a formal observation results in anything lower than a Proficient rating, the teacher's overall Practice Rating should be considered to be at least Proficient. The district PDE Committee should discuss and decide how earning a Practice Rating of Exemplary would occur.

**8. If there is no evidence collected during an informal observation, must the teacher upload other data into the data management system connected to that observation?**

No, there is no need for this, because the observation won't result in a 'rating.' Again, the purpose of the observation is for the evaluator to get or maintain the 'big picture' of a teacher's performance in the classroom and determine whether or not a formal observation is needed.

**9. Do we have to document that informal observations were conducted?**

Yes, since that's part of the process, they need to be documented. This should be simple, and include the following information: date and time of the observation; length of time of the observation; when and in what form feedback was given; and whether or not it will be followed by a formal observation.

**10. Can an evaluator conduct more than 3 informal observations in those years of the cycle?**

The flexibility don't specifically state this; what they do say is this: *"Teachers who receive and maintain a performance evaluation designation of proficient or exemplary shall be evaluated with a minimum of one formal, in-class observation no less frequent than once every three years, and three informal, in-class observations conducted in accordance with Section 2.3(2)(b)(1) and 2.3(2)(b)(2) in all other years....."* The phrase "shall be evaluated with a minimum of..." allows an evaluator to conduct more than the three informal observations required by the guidelines; additional informal observations must be followed by feedback the same as any other observation. What's most important is for the PDE Committee to establish a process they believe contributes most effectively to better teaching and learning.

**11. As our PDE Committee discusses the use of informal observations, what questions should we ask ourselves?**

- a. What do we agree is the purpose of an informal observation?
- b. Should informal observations focus on a specific aspect of practice, be general, or be left to the evaluator and teacher to mutually agree on?
- c. How long should an informal observation last?
- d. Should informal observations be announced, unannounced, a combination of the two, or be left to the evaluator and teacher to mutually agree on?
- e. Will feedback be verbal, written, a combination of the two, or left to the teacher and evaluator to mutually agree on?
- f. What will be the expected time frame for feedback to be given after an informal observation?
- g. How will we document that informal observations were conducted?