

Effective Tools for Supporting Struggling Teachers

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Abstract

When a district hires a teacher, the district has a responsibility to provide resources, dialogue, professional learning opportunities, and peer support to ensure that the teacher will be fully prepared to engage and inspire students in the classroom (Liesveld, 2005). When a teacher's struggles are not related to instruction in the classroom, but are more about unacceptable behavior, the principal or supervisor might need to consider a level of corrective action that will help the teacher be successful both in and out of the classroom. Both new and experienced teachers need the tools to create engaging lessons, a grasp of the best teaching strategies common to all successful teachers, and the ability to understand what separates good teacher conduct from bad (Robinson, 2009). In this paper, we explore some practical tools designed to aid administrators as they manage and support teachers navigating the 21st century classroom.

Keywords: struggling teachers, teacher assistance plan, progressive corrective action

Introduction and Background

In a 2009 address to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, then President Obama proclaimed, “Nothing is more important than having a quality teacher standing in front of every classroom” (Obama, 2009). Addressing areas of growth in teachers is a worthwhile task. In addition to providing an important and beneficial service to teachers, building leaders also promote staff morale when they act swiftly and decisively in the face of inappropriate behavior or ineffective instruction. Donald O. Clifton, former Gallup Chairman, reinforced that idea when he wrote, “Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being” (Clifton, 2014). Therefore it is essential to prepare, recruit, and support highly-qualified teachers who are equipped to nurture the socio-emotional and academic needs of the students in their classrooms.

According to a 2016 report by the Kansas Blue Ribbon Task Force however, the number of college students pursuing teaching as a vocation has been in decline in recent years (Weaver, 2016). While measures in the Blue Ribbon Report indicate ways that programs have been working to recruit teachers to the profession, school districts must do whatever they can to grow and retain effective teachers already in the profession by providing the necessary resources and support to ensure teacher success and retention. All teachers want to be successful in the classroom and administrators can increase the likelihood teachers will improve by helping them plan for success. Administrators have a responsibility to provide teachers with a safe, supportive, and fulfilling environment as they seek to be the best teachers they can be.

Struggling and ineffective teachers may need a formal plan of assistance in the classroom or a step-by-step plan to modify their behavior. Effective support for a low performing teacher depends on a competent and caring administrator. Teachers should not be placed on a plan of assistance if the administration's concerns are about inappropriate conduct rather than poor instruction. This article describes when to use each of the approaches, and offers strategies related to those approaches (see Appendix A).

Teacher Assistance Plans

Teacher assistance plans are used to provide instructional support and are meant to serve as feedback and remediation to achieve teacher success. The decision to place a teacher on a formal assistance plan is often based on a teacher's consistently poor ratings from classroom walk-throughs, observations, or feedback as part of the school's regular teacher evaluation process. So, when a teacher repeatedly experiences difficulty in meeting instructional performance standards, it is in the best interest of a district to work collaboratively with him/her to improve professional practice and thereby increase the chance for greater student achievement and engagement (DuFor, 2006). One such way would be to implement a teacher assistance plan (see Appendix B).

The purpose of a teacher plan of assistance is to provide suggestions, resources, and assistance that lead to effective classroom instruction and improved student learning. A successful Teacher Assistance Plan should include: 1) a statement of concerns for the teacher; 2) measurable expectations of acceptable performance, 3) elements of the plan for improvement; and 4) an overview of the timeline, dates for review, and any specified documentation or data. In Appendix B, a sample Teacher Assistance Plan is provided. This guide directs the discussion and planning, but is open-ended to allow mutually agreed upon goals. It helps make expectations clear while giving a specific timeline for improvement. The Teacher Assistance Plan or "TAP" should be seen as a positive, purposeful document that will provide guidance and help the teacher improve, not as a trap to ensnare a low performing teacher.

When provided with timely, specific, and constructive feedback, struggling teachers generally respond by making positive strides in their performance. Remember, a novice teacher may not be afforded the legal rights of an experienced teacher, but schools have an obligation to do all they can to help all teachers succeed. One novice teacher who was able to improve the pace of her lessons and thereby decrease student behavior concerns, commented that the TAP process provided her with valuable resources as well as an avenue for formal constructive feedback. She felt that the structure and clearly defined goals helped her focus on specific areas for improvement.

Additional Means of Support

After sharing a completed Teacher Assistance Plan with the struggling teacher, an administrator's next step might include providing resources which support the growth of the teacher's practice. While print materials and experienced colleagues can offer much assistance, turning to online materials is also an option. The internet contains hundreds of sites designed to inform and support teachers. One such site is

K-12Toolbox.org (Frazier & Stiffler, 2018). The K-12 Toolbox—developed collaboratively between a former Integration Technology Specialist and a former Superintendent—contains a carefully selected assortment of guiding questions designed to prompt teachers to examine their instructional practice and focus on the needs and interests of students. Educators are able to instantly access targeted videos, articles, and resources for each of the Toolbox's guiding questions. This innovation provides easily accessible support for teachers seeking proven instructional strategies.

The K-12 Toolbox was not designed for the purpose of evaluating teachers. The intent is for the approach to be formative in nature, which provides teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators with a non-threatening and user-friendly instrument for the improvement of classroom instruction. Teachers can use the guiding questions to focus on areas in need of improvement. The website also provides easily accessible support for teachers and administrators as they work together to provide classroom lessons that mirror best practice and engage students.

Progressive Corrective Action

The second type of formal plan administrators can use for struggling teachers is a Progressive Corrective Action. When a teacher's struggles are not related to instruction in the classroom but rather are more about unacceptable behavior, the principal or supervisor should consider some level of corrective action that will help the teacher be successful both in and out of the classroom. School administrators support staff morale, promote ethical treatment, and fundamentally protect students, teachers, and other staff members when they act swiftly and decisively in the face of any activity by an educator that might be viewed as inappropriate.

Statements of Expectations, Conduct, Ethics, etc. can be helpful tools for administrators dealing with a teacher's inappropriate behavior. It is important that districts start with clearly stated and defined expectations for teacher conduct. The intent is always to help the teacher improve (see Appendix C for the Statement of Ethical Conduct).

Progressive Corrective Action uses increasingly firm steps when a teacher fails to correct a problem after being given a reasonable opportunity to do so. The best approach in a corrective action is to use the least severe action that you believe is necessary to correct inappropriate conduct. Administrators should only increase the severity of the action if the behavior is not corrected. When teachers are struggling with inappropriate behavior, administrators should progress along the four following levels of corrective action.

Counseling

Counseling sessions are used to bring a problem to the attention of the teacher before it becomes so serious that it has to become part of a written warning or affects their employment status. If some progress is seen, the counseling step can be repeated to give corrective feedback which allows the teacher full opportunity to correct the problem.

1. Conduct the entire counseling session in a "low-key" manner. Be friendly, yet firm.

2. The session should be done in private. Tell the teacher the purpose for the discussion. Identify the problem.
3. Seek the input from the teacher about the cause of the problem.
4. Where possible, jointly identify a solution to the problem; otherwise, identify your desired solution.
5. Let the teacher know that possible disciplinary action (up to and including dismissal) may follow if the problem is not corrected.
6. Try to get a commitment from the teacher to resolve the problem.
7. Schedule follow up. Provide feedback.
8. Summarize the conversation in an email or note to the teacher.

Written Warning

Initiate this step by repeating the process used in the *counseling step*, i.e., talk before preparing any written action. After this discussion, prepare the written warning. Build in information, responses, and commitments made in the discussion. The written warning will have three parts:

1. A statement about the past, reviewing the teacher's history with respect to the problem.
2. A statement about the present, describing the who, what, when, etc. of the current situation, including the teacher's explanation.
3. A statement of the future, describing your expectations and the consequences of continued failure.

Suspension with or Without Pay

When suspension with or without pay is used, see the sequence described under the *counseling* section. Again, the situation is discussed with the teacher first.

1. The teacher's explanation is obtained and, then, a decision is made about the appropriate disciplinary step.
2. The length of the suspension is not as critical as the step of suspension. One to three days emphasizes the seriousness of the situation.
3. The written record of the suspension is prepared after the discussion with the teacher. It specifies the start and end dates, emphasizes that it is a final warning, states the reason, and is given to the teacher at the start of the suspension so that the reasons for not working are clearly understood.

Termination

This is the last step of any corrective action plan and is used when earlier steps have not produced the needed results.

1. A discussion with the teacher *must* occur before a final determination is reached. Inform the teacher about the nature of the problem. See sequence described under *counseling*.
2. The teacher must be given an opportunity to explain his or her action and to provide information.

3. If the teacher takes advantage of the above opportunity, you must investigate where appropriate and give consideration to the information provided.
4. A written notice of termination is prepared after the discussion and consideration of all available information.

The following three essential elements need to be present at each step of progressive action and discussed prior to taking corrective action.

1. The teacher is explicitly informed of the unacceptable behavior or performance and is given specific work-related examples. It is not sufficient to assume that the employee knows what the problem is.
2. The teacher is informed of the consequences of failing to comply with the changes in behavior. Try not to frame this as a threat, rather it gives the teacher reasonable expectations of the consequences if change does not occur.
3. Be clear and direct throughout the process. This is definitely not the time to “sugarcoat” the issue. You and the teacher will ultimately be glad the seriousness of the behavior was discussed in a straightforward manner.

With Progressive Corrective Action, the goal is to modify the unacceptable behavior or improve performance. The goal is not to punish the teacher but to strongly alert the teacher of the need to correct the problem. A relatively new teacher and coach was accused of being too friendly with one of the female students in his 6th grade classroom. By counseling with the teacher on three occasions and explaining why what he saw as harmless interactions might be construed by others as inappropriate, it helped him adjust his behavior and avoid further concerns and interruptions to student learning.

Note that there is no rigid set of steps nor is there an inflexible rule that all steps must be followed before terminating an employee. Administrators should consult Human Resources or the school’s attorney at any step of the process (with your supervisor’s permission), but it could be especially important at the steps of suspension and termination.

It is important to note that faculty handbooks or other written agreements explaining Progressive Corrective Action should include language specifying that the corrective action procedures are not required procedures and that you as the employer reserve the right to depart from them when appropriate.

Summary

Building leaders promote staff morale and provide an important service to teachers when they act swiftly and decisively in the face of a teacher’s inappropriate behavior or ineffective instruction. We have a responsibility to provide teachers with a safe, supportive, and fulfilling environment as they seek to be the best teachers they can be. Administrators can increase the likelihood teachers will be effective in the classroom by helping them plan for success. Struggling and ineffective teachers may need a formal plan for assistance in the classroom or a step-by-step plan to modify unprofessional behavior. When a teacher repeatedly experiences difficulty in meeting instructional performance standards, it is in the best interest of a district to work collaboratively with him/her to improve professional practice. New and experienced teachers, alike, need the tools to create engaging lessons, a grasp of the best teaching strategies common to

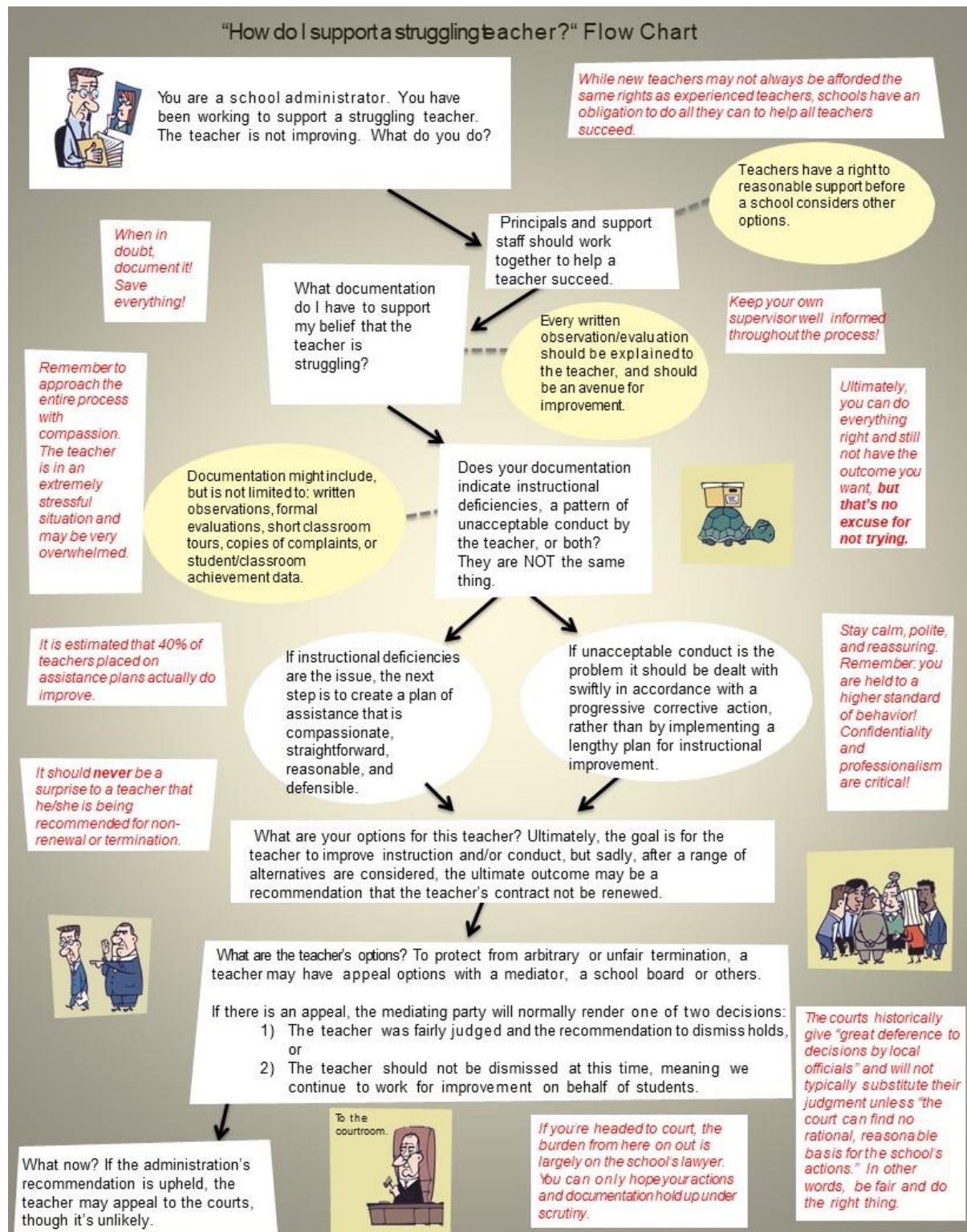
all successful teachers, and the ability to understand what separates good teacher conduct from bad (Robinson, 2009).

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Appendix A

“How do I support a struggling teacher?” Flow Chart



Appendix B**Teacher Assistance Plans****Teacher Assistance Plan***Sample*

Teacher: _____ School: _____

Grade/Subject: _____ Date: _____

Purpose

To provide suggestions, resources, and assistance that lead to effective classroom instruction and improved student learning.

Statement of Concerns*Usually 3-5 concerns that could include, but are not limited to the following:*

1. Lessons lack detail and structure.
2. The teacher struggles to provide appropriate pacing within the lesson.
3. Lessons lack minimal opportunities for student engagement.
4. The teacher doesn't systematically monitor student progress.
5. The teacher doesn't provide consistent and timely feedback to students.
6. Teacher shows a lack of effective and consistent classroom management.
7. The teacher struggles to maintain an appropriate demeanor when disciplining students.
8. The administration's regular informal attempts to help the teacher improve instructional performance failed to result in acceptable teacher classroom performance.

Measurable Expectations for Acceptable Performance*Usually 3-5 expectations that could include, but are not limited to the following:*

1. Lesson plans include proven instructional strategies
2. Lessons contain engaging activities selected to stimulate student interest and knowledge retention.
3. Lesson plans include objectives and standards being taught.
4. Teacher provides positive feedback, maintaining student dignity when providing correction.
5. Teacher conducts appropriate progress monitoring of lessons.
6. Teacher develops lesson plans that include the appropriate lesson design elements properly sequenced and effectively described in sufficient detail to be used by a substitute teacher.
7. The teacher provides a caring and safe learning environment for all students regardless of their gender or ethnicity.
8. The teacher maintains a professional demeanor when instructing students.

Individualized Plan for Improvement*Plan could include:*

1. All weekly lesson plans will be turned in before school on Monday mornings
2. Principal, or other administrative support staff, will continue supporting the teacher in the area of classroom management.
3. The teacher will receive regular verbal and/or written feedback from the principal and the assistant principal regarding performance progress, and the review of student data.
4. The teacher can seek professional development opportunities that support classroom instruction.
5. The teacher may visit other classrooms as part of a professional learning opportunity.
6. The teacher will coordinate with the Principal to determine schools or classrooms to visit.
7. The teacher will have access to an instructional coach for the duration of the plan.
8. An instructional coach will provide the teacher with regular feedback.
9. Administration may recommend books, articles, or specific workshops/conferences to the teacher for learning and reflection.

Timeline; Review Dates; Documentation required*Suggestions:*

1. The official beginning date for this Teacher Assistance Plan (TAP) is _____.
The end date for this plan is _____ (*timelines will vary, but plan duration is normally 3 to 6 months*).
2. The administration will observe the teacher's classes on a regular basis.
3. An administrator will conference with the teacher about progress each week on Fridays during planning time unless another time is necessary because of a conflict. In the case of rescheduling, both parties will agree to a time and date.
4. Lesson plans will be turned in every Monday morning by 7:45 AM.
5. At the end of the time allowed for the TAP, the plan will be assessed and a determination made whether to discontinue the TAP, extend the TAP, or take further action in accordance with district policies and procedures.

The teacher may choose to submit an attachment to this report. The signatures below indicate that both parties were in attendance and the teacher has read and understands the information outlined in the assistance plan. The teacher's signature does not mean that the teacher necessarily agrees with the information contained herein.

Teacher: _____ **Date signed:** _____

Administrator/Supervisor: _____ **Date signed:** _____

Cc: Supervisor
Personnel Department

Appendix C**Statement of Ethical Conduct****Statement of Ethical Conduct****Students**

The educators' code of ethics states that teachers should help all students develop their talent to its fullest potential.

- Teachers should allow students to independently pursue learning and to access different points of view.
- Teachers should not suppress or misrepresent subject matter.
- Teachers should foster in their pupils honesty, integrity and consideration for others and model those qualities.
- Teachers should treat students considerately and justly.
- Teachers should try to protect their students from physical or mental harm.
- Teachers should not intentionally allow students to be embarrassed or disparaged, nor should they discriminate against them.
- Teachers do not use their professional relationship with students for private gain.
- Unless for a significant professional reason or when required by law, teachers do not disclose confidential information about their students.

Practice and Performance

The teachers' code of ethics requires teachers to demonstrate competence in the classroom, hold high standards for personal performance, and demonstrate personal integrity.

- Teachers accept responsibility and accountability for their performance.
- Teachers only accept positions for which they are qualified, and they fulfill the terms of their contract.
- Teachers also improve their effectiveness and engage in professional growth.
- Teachers are responsible and demonstrate initiative and integrity in their teaching and professional actions.
- Teachers accept responsibility and consequences for their actions and judgments.
- Teachers obey written school policies and applicable laws and regulations.
- Teachers do not purposely misrepresent school policies, and they distinguish their personal opinions from school policies.
- Teachers do not accept any gift or privileges that could influence their professional actions and decisions.

Parents and the Community

The educators' code of ethics acknowledges that quality education requires the efforts of educators, parents, and community.

- Teachers make conscious efforts to communicate to parents all information that affects the progress and welfare of their children.
- Teachers also recognize that parents have the right to consult them concerning their children.
- Though teachers give their best advice concerning their students, they always respect parental authority.
- Teachers recognize and respect the diversity of their students and their families.
- Teachers positively influence school/community relations.

Profession and Colleagues

Teachers treat all members of the profession equitably and work to advance the field of education.

- Teachers extend to their colleagues respect and professional courtesy, and they support their colleagues' freedom of choice.
- Teachers assist their junior colleagues and those in training. However, teachers do not help any unqualified person obtain a position in the profession.
- Teachers do not make false or malicious statements about fellow educators nor reveal confidential information about a colleague unless required by law.
- Teachers recognize their obligation to advance the profession and improve their effectiveness as educators.

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