

Personnel Evaluation Process:
Santa Ana Unified School District, Downey Unified School District,
Orange County School of the Arts

Kamdon Bailey

School of Education: Concordia University Irvine

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Professor Miller

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Nobody is more integral to the academic development of children than the classroom teacher. Thus, the evaluation and supervision of teachers is extremely important. While there are many influences and impacts on student achievement, teachers need to accept responsibility for the growth of their students, however daunting the task may be. Holding teachers accountable for their performance motivates low-performing teachers to improve (Hunter & Kho, 2025, p.582). The United States has consistently fallen behind other developed nations in the key indicators of literacy and numeracy and, despite efforts to increase accountability for educators, a significant improvement in national outcomes has not been realized (Townley-Schneider & Ramirez, 2019, p.42). According to a 2017 survey from the National Center for Education Statistics, only 36% of our country's fourth graders read proficiently. California ranked below the national average with only 28% of students meeting the standard.

Just as the goal of the teacher is to nurture growth in the student, the evaluation process should encourage growth in the teacher. An effective evaluation process should “harmonize evaluation and empowerment” (Townley-Schneider & Ramirez, 2019, p.43). The state of California has established laws requiring a level of uniformity in the procedures for certificated evaluations (Ed. Code 44660-44665) and also adopted standards for the teaching profession (CSTPs). All procedures not set forth in the law are subject to collective bargaining through the Rodda Act (Govt. Code #3543.2). A 2012 ruling from the Los Angeles County Superior Court, reiterated the Stull Act’s expectation that student achievement be used as a metric for teacher evaluation, but deferred to the discretion of districts and bargaining units to determine what data to use and how to weigh the data in the evaluation process (Townley-Schneider & Ramirez, 2019, p.50). This paper will discuss the personnel evaluation process for certificated staff within

three California school districts and to what degree if any they have included student achievement as a measure of teacher performance. All schools discussed have complied with applicable laws including that evaluations be conducted by certificated administrators. Additionally, each of the schools formal observation and final evaluation forms provide the opportunity to recognize and reward exemplary teaching practices; however, for the purposes of comparison positive evaluations will not be included in the analysis.

Santa Ana Unified School District

Located in North Orange County, this district, which was once the largest in the county, has an enrollment of 35,673 students and a demographic almost 80% hispanic or latino. English Learner enrollment is 38% according to the California School Dashboard, and 91% of the student population is classified as socio-economically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, 2024). Of the 2000 full-time employees, 89% hold a preliminary or clear teaching credential. While literacy and numeracy scores are below standard, both competencies saw growth as measured by the Smarter Balanced summative assessments last year. The certificated staff are represented by the Santa Ana Educators Association (SAEA), a chapter of the California Teachers Association (CTA).

Frequency of Evaluation/Observation

All certificated staff eligible for observation must be informed of the evaluation process and submit an Evaluation Plan form no later than twenty-five days into the semester and meet with their evaluator within fifteen duty days following submission. Temporary and probationary employees, also referred to as non-permanent teachers, are evaluated yearly following the Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment (BTSA) requirements developed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). Each evaluation cycle must consist of no more

than two scheduled formal observations unless the unit member was marked unsatisfactory by receiving “below standard” on three or more elements of a given standard during the first two observations. Permanent unit members, who have been employed by the district the three preceding years, are to be evaluated every other year under the same observation procedure. Highly qualified veteran teachers, who have at least ten years of district service and have met the standards in previous cycles, can apply for a five year waiver, but they must agree to an unscheduled observation.

Evaluation Standards

The evaluation of all certificated employees is based on their competency in regard to meeting the CSTPs. Non-permanent teachers and veteran teachers seeking a five year waiver agree to be evaluated on the first five Standards and two elements from Standard six: *Develops as a Professional Educator*. Permanent teachers agree to be evaluated on three of the first five standards and one element from standard six. The selection of standards and elements for evaluation must be completed on the Evaluation Plan and discussed between the teacher and evaluator at their initial meeting. Any changes must be signed by both parties. A certificated unit member can request that a student portfolio assessment be included as an element of their evaluation but it cannot be added by the evaluator. No information other than the formal classroom observations shall be used for evaluation. Final Evaluation Forms shall be submitted to the unit member thirty days prior to the end of school and coincide with an evaluation conference to review the report. No unsatisfactory rating is allowed unless it has been written and discussed in a prior formal observation meeting. Unit members have the opportunity to submit a written response to the evaluation to be included in their personnel file. All forms must be signed by both parties.

Formal Observation/Walk-Through and Supervision Protocol

Hunter and Kho (2025) assert, “Formal observation cycles are the linchpin of evaluation for development” (p.583). Formal observations shall be scheduled in advance (with the exception of five year waivers) and will last between fifteen to sixty minutes. A written Formal Observation form is completed by the evaluator and given to the unit member within five days of the observation. A meeting should take place within 10 days of the observation unless otherwise agreed. The meeting must include a discussion of any elements that need improvement and progress towards achieving the elements of standard six. The unit member must sign the observation form to acknowledge receipt but not necessarily agreement.

Informal observations by administrators can be conducted with reasonable frequency throughout the school year. Studies have shown that “teachers who get feedback more often are more likely to find it helpful for enhancing their teaching plans” (Krasniqi & Ismajli, 2025, p.12). Walk-throughs including district personnel, community members and or staff members should be done on a voluntary basis only. Areas of strength or concern may be brought to the unit members attention by a designated evaluator or site administrator. Although these brief interactions cannot be used for evaluation, the ongoing dialogue can be used to note progress and offer feedback (Townley-Schneider & Ramirez, 2019, p.45). Informal observations and walk-throughs should not exceed five to ten minutes and should be done with minimal disruption.

Self-Reflection Growth Model Evaluation

Starting in 2018, the district and union agreed to pilot a growth model evaluation process to supplement the traditional observation and evaluation procedure. Any permanent unit member can choose this model where the evaluator functions more as a mentor and guides the staff

member on a journey of self-reflection and guided professional growth. At the beginning of the evaluation cycle, the staff member ranks their progress on each element of the CSTPs using the self-assessment form. After self-identifying growth areas, the unit member completes an Evaluation Plan Form with measurable goals aligning to specific CSTP elements and a plan to assess progress towards the accomplishment of the goals. Meetings are held with the evaluator at the beginning of the year to approve the goals, at the midpoint of the year to measure progress, and for a final evaluation at the end of the year. At each point in the process, the teacher provides data and samples to show the impact of their growth strategies on student achievement. This collaborative process is less of a “Super” lesson or “dog and pony” show (Townley-Schneider and Ramirez, 2019, p.48) and more of a holistic view of a teacher’s practices backed by measurable data. The Final evaluation form includes a data analysis, final reflection, and recommendations for next steps.

Downey Unified School District

Located in South Los Angeles County, this suburban school district has an enrollment of 22,462 students and a demographic 75% hispanic or latino. English Learner enrollment is 13% according to the, and 79% of the student population is classified as socio-economically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, 2024). Of the close to 1000 full-time employees, 86% hold a preliminary or clear teaching credential. Downey students are proficient in literacy and while they have not met the standard for mathematics they showed a 12 point growth as measured by the Smarter Balanced summative assessments last year. The certificated staff are represented by the Downey Education Association (DEA), a chapter of the California Teachers Association (CTA).

Frequency of Evaluation/Observation

Unlike Santa Ana, Downey Unified does not explicitly state evaluation timelines in their CBA. Instead, human resources is responsible for creating and distributing the evaluation calendar and deadlines to impacted parties each year. Evaluators are to notify teachers of the evaluation policy, procedures and district educational philosophy within forty-five days of the start of the contract year. Downey has different evaluation frequencies for temporary and probationary employees, with temporary contract teachers being evaluated once every three years and probationary staff members once a year. Each evaluation cycle must consist of no more than three scheduled formal observations unless the unit member was marked as “needs to improve” on Standards 1-6 during a previous observation, in which case an additional observation will be scheduled to confirm validity of the areas of need. Permanent unit members, who have been employed by the district the three preceding years, are to be evaluated every three years under the same observation procedure. Similar to Santa Ana, highly qualified veteran teachers, who have at least ten years of district service and have met the standards in previous cycles, can apply for a five year waiver. In the case of temporary and probationary employees, all final evaluations include a recommendation for re-hire or termination.

Evaluation Standards

In addition to observations, Downey allows data from products, judgments, tests, and anecdotal records to be used in the evaluation process. Board policy defines this information as, “students’ progress toward meeting district standards of expected achievement for their grade level in each area of study and, if applicable, towards the state-adopted content standards as measured by state-adopted criterion-referenced assessments”(B.P 4115, 2024). Together with the rating administrator, teachers have the opportunity to participate in conferences to establish objectives and standards (aligned to the CSTPs) upon which they will be assessed. Self

evaluation is encouraged by the district but not a requirement of the evaluation process. However, the CBA does not specify a number of standards that must be assessed in each cycle, as is the case with Santa Ana. During the discussion of criteria, an evaluatee can request a written plan of assistance and training needed to help him or her meet the desired level of instructional performance (A.R. 4115, 2024). This showcases the Board's desire to have employees take responsibility for their improvement and take initiative to request assistance. Mutually agreed upon objectives will be signed by both parties, or referred to the assistant superintendent of educational services if a dispute cannot be resolved. Final Evaluation Forms shall be submitted to the unit member prior to the end of school and coincide with an evaluation conference to review the report. Any unsatisfactory rating on the evaluation report must also have been included in writing on a previous observation or conference report. Unit members have the opportunity to submit a written response to the evaluation to be included in their personnel file. All forms must be signed by both parties.

Formal Observation Protocol

Formal observations shall be scheduled in advance and will last a sufficient duration to give the evaluator relevant data to contribute to the evaluation. Opposite of Santa Ana, a meeting should take place within five days unless otherwise agreed, and a written Formal Observation form is completed by the evaluator and given to the unit member within ten days of the observation. The meeting must include a discussion of any elements that were deemed unsatisfactory or needs improvement on standards 1-5. The unit member must sign the observation form to acknowledge receipt but not necessarily agreement.

Orange County School of the Arts

A Charter of the Santa Ana Unified School District and Orange County Department of Education, the Orange County School of the Arts has an enrollment of 2,346 students and a balanced demographic of asian, hispanic or latino, and white ethnicities. English Learner enrollment is 3% according to the, and only 16% of the student population is classified as socio-economically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, 2024). Of the 130 full-time employees, 82% hold a preliminary or clear teaching credential. OCSA students score above the standard in literacy and numeracy; however, their lack of support for the small English learner population has resulted in a 33% decline in progress as measured by the Smarter Balanced summative assessments last year. The certificated staff are represented by the Orange County School of the Arts Teachers Association, a chapter of the California Teachers Association (CTA).

Frequency and Evaluation Protocol

OCSA requires all members of the bargaining unit to be evaluated every other year. Evaluators must notify teachers of the procedures and criteria for evaluation prior to November 1 of each evaluation year. Each evaluation cycle consists of two scheduled formal observations, one in the fall and one in the spring. Observations will last no less than forty-five minutes and will coincide with a pre and post observation conference. Data collected from observations will be documented and shared with the teacher to inform the teacher's professional development and support their continued success. Supervisors of first and second year teachers, will meet with each employee before January, to review the teachers performance in the first semester and identify any problems that could result in the denial of permanent status. Off-cycle teachers, not up for evaluation, are required to submit written performance objectives for the year that are then approved by an administrator to monitor professional growth until their next evaluation.

Evaluation Standards

The district allows for the use of informal and formal observation data in the final evaluation of bargaining members, and includes program participation, professional communication and appearance in their assessment. The instructional standards have been adapted from the CSTPs to fit the vision of the school. There are six standards covering subject matter competency, accessibility of content, rigor of content, and professional growth. Each standard contains core questions for students and teachers that can be used to measure whether the standard is being met. Evaluators will discuss any deficiencies written in observations prior to including them in a final evaluation and hold a conference to make specific recommendations for improvement. The member will be given the opportunity to respond to the concerns in writing and have their response included with the evaluation.

Unsatisfactory Evaluation and Peer Assistance and Review (PAR)

All of the referenced districts have the same process for remediating a teacher. If “needs to improve” or “unsatisfactory” is cited on an official evaluation form, it is the job of the administrator, working with the teacher, to create a remedial action or performance improvement plan. The plan should include areas where improvement is needed, suggestions for improvement, additional resources and staff development, techniques and a reasonable timeline for measuring improvement. This plan is to be attached to the evaluation and included in the personnel file. Orange County School of the Arts includes an informal process of pairing a mentor teacher and providing “staff development” release time for coaching, co-planning, and co-teaching.

Santa Ana Unified and Downey Unified, have a more formal review process for employees who receive an unsatisfactory evaluation. Teachers are referred to and must participate in the Peer Assistance and Review Program. In this program, participants are paired

with an exemplary veteran classroom teacher who is selected by a seven member peer review panel. The consulting teacher will conduct observations, monitor progress, coach, conference and provide a final written peer review to the referred teacher and panel. The peer review process is not an evaluation of the teacher and does not replace or remove the responsibility of the administrators as evaluators in compliance with the Stull Act.

Analysis of Strategies

Each of the school districts uses a slightly different evaluation strategy. While informal and formal observations are the backbone of the evaluation, Downey is the only district that explicitly utilizes student achievement and growth as a component to measure teacher performance. Orange County School of the Arts is the only district that allows informal observations and teacher participation to be used as a justification for a final evaluation.

Santa Ana Unified uses a Differentiated Supervision evaluation model, requiring newer and struggling teachers, who may have been remediated, to undergo an “intensive development,” while at the same time, allowing veteran teachers to choose a cooperative or self-directed evaluation (Townley-Schneider & Ramirez, 2019, p.47).

Downey Unified, which is known as a high performing district with very little teacher turnover, uses a value added evaluation model (VAM), including assessment data to rank employees based on the performance of their students in relation to district and national achievement goals. Adopted by most states in large part as a response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, some districts have continued to use a VAM even after the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) returned evaluation to local control (Amrein-Beardsley et al, 2023, p.3). Fortunately, this is not Downey’s only metric for making certificated personnel decisions as the validity of such practices has been challenged.

Orange County School of the Arts offers only a single evaluation strategy that most aligns with the clinical supervision model. Even the provided observation document includes a table for taking meticulous observation notes. Their evaluation criteria appears to place more value on whether a teacher fits into the culture of the school, than if they are meeting the instructional needs of students. As a charter school, they are able to select students to attend who in large part will be successful in spite of the instructional practices of their teachers and thus creating a comfortable learning environment is most likely of more value to administrators.

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