

The Tulsa Model Does Not Mean It's Time to Retire

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You need to implement the Tulsa Model for evaluation. What does that mean for you as a principal? It does not mean that it's time to retire. It does mean that it's time for change. And while the Tulsa Model is change to the max for many principals, this new process is also a chance to get better at what we do—helping teachers do their best so students can do their best.

The first change for most of us is the Rubric. For me, it was a gift. Our principal group had asked our superintendent (three superintendents ago) to let us draft a Rubric so it could help us help teachers. We wanted something specific to show teachers what was needed to be at their best. We were told it would tie our hands and be too hard to use if we wanted to release a teacher. Now, our current superintendent not only agreed a Rubric was needed, but had the sense to let all stakeholders be a part of developing it.

Why did we want a Rubric, and how does it help? In the past, it took principals seconds to check the “Satisfactory” boxes, and the evaluations were complete. Now, it takes effort on the part of very busy principals. But we want our teachers to succeed, our students to succeed and our schools to succeed. I am confident that you will find the Rubric as the start of that success...and your extra time well spent.

The Rubric lets us drill down with each teacher and discuss, in specifics, what strengths they have and what areas of growth need to be addressed. You can be specific in the discussion of what a successful teacher looks like. I have met very few teachers who do not want to be great teachers. The Rubric gives them a road map to success. It also makes us, as principals, the leader in the discussion.

Following observations and completion of the Rubric, a lot of my colleagues found that teachers they thought were great teachers were really just great classroom managers. As principals, we know there has to be classroom control—but that is not teaching. The conversation, then, with the teacher can be: *“Look, you have tackled things that may have prevented you from teaching, so here is where you go now. Here is what you need to do to make your teaching come alive, involve students and make a difference for learners.”* These conversations are now specific and meaningful for all involved.

The Rubric is powerful because it has the ability to prevent emotions and personal feelings for teachers from clouding your observation. The conversation becomes easier if I see a teacher who can talk the talk of great instruction, but not provide evidence in his/her classroom: *“I know you know the curriculum, and I know you understand the concepts, but can you tell me how you are putting these to practice in your classroom? I was in your room today and did not see how you were focused on the bottom 40% to help instruction. We have spoken as a group on how the Rubric takes us away from the mentality of individual instruction for students—and takes us to good classroom instruction over all. I did not see that in today's observation. Can you talk to me about what I missed?”*

This opens the dialogue around what you are looking for, and what might have been happening but not seen during the observation. It also tells you and the teacher exactly what you will be looking for when you return for more observations.

A concern for many seasoned principals is the use of computers for evaluations. (*Please note: Not all districts have this requirement.*) I started the year doing observations on paper with the idea that I would later add them to the computer. I had every excuse: What if the computer didn't work? What if I hit the wrong button and lost everything? What if I was too focused typing and missed something great that happened in the teaching? Then, I found I had 30 paper observations and nothing on the computer. After two late nights, I vowed to do better. Yes, I still have concerns—but I have found it is quicker for me to focus on the lesson, enter observations directly into my computer and offer immediate feedback to the teacher.

Before, I would meet with the teacher in my office to review the paper version, but it was challenging to get some to actually come to my office. Now, they have my notes when I walk out of the room, and, in almost every case, they come to my office the same day to talk about the observation. This process allows them time to think about my observations and comments—and come prepared to discuss. It is better for me, and my teachers report it is better for them.

The Tulsa Model also helps us address teachers who are performing at minimum on the Rubric. It is much better for us as professionals to say: *"This is what I see. This is what we have to see for students to have success."* If we have specific guidelines and teachers do not meet them, it is more effective for us to offer specific instruction that has to change and follow up on observations for specific areas of change. The Rubric eliminates the "I feel so sorry for this teacher" and focuses on *"After my help, this teacher does not have it in him/her to make the changes needed, so this person is not the one my students need to be successful."* We can no longer look the other way or move teachers to other assignments. All teachers are held to the same standards—standards that you would want for your own child's teacher.

Is the Tulsa Model the perfect system? Maybe not. Is it a better system for teachers and principals? I think so. With the Tulsa Model, stakeholders (including teachers) have provided input around the design. The observation and evaluation process may take more time for everyone involved, but the time is worth it for all parties.

I hope the Tulsa Model will bring about a state of great teachers.