
Prologue

Once there was a land where education was considered a most important priority, yet student performance was unsatisfactory. From “education presidents” to continuous reform efforts to national goals, much time and rhetoric were expended to resolve the problem. The real educational process, though, took place in individual classrooms, between students and teachers everywhere.

In the schools, administrators were deeply concerned and exhorted teachers to produce better results. Experts devised ever more complex appraisal systems. Most required several visits to each classroom by an administrator. Otherwise, though, the administrators remained in their offices most of the time. Managing budgets and paperwork had become a full-time job in itself. When they did conduct performance appraisal observations, specific feedback to improve teacher performance was seldom included. Instead, teachers received ratings in several areas defined as important to good teaching performance.

Today’s world of educational reform is little more than make-believe.

Though rare, it wasn’t unheard of for teachers to be rated without a single visit by the administrator since the process was often considered a nuisance and a waste of time. As long as a teacher received a good rating, the process was considered complete. Appraisal systems were often best suited for the rare situation where seriously deficient performance required documentation.

Teachers tried to find ways to improve their students’ achievement, too. They attended many conferences, seminars, and courses. But the implementation of conference ideas in the classroom was largely an unsuccessful proposition. Teachers were on their own when it came to implementation and rarely received feedback or follow-up help.

Consequently, teachers never knew for sure how they were doing. Except for the infrequent appraisal visits, no one, including other

teachers, ever saw them teach. They never saw their colleagues teach either. It just wasn't done. A curious tradition had developed whereby teachers were isolated in their classrooms. It was called professional autonomy.

Teachers were also extremely busy. They were under pressure from educational leaders to find new ways to engage their students in collaborative group learning and problem-solving experiences, to name just two departures from centuries' old tradition. This was not the stuff of teacher training in college, not a reflection of how schools themselves were organized and administrated, but new strategies that teachers were expected to learn, perform, and continuously refine, despite little or no training. Add that to increasing societal problems, growing student diversity, and professional isolation, and little joy remained in the teaching profession.

The world was rapidly becoming a more complex place. Even small businesses were expanding beyond national boundaries. Global commerce required new ways of communicating and working together. Group efforts requiring interpersonal skills, problem-solving abilities, communication, feedback, and trust seemed necessary to maximize business opportunities. Even more urgently, these skills were needed to address some of the issues threatening the planet, such as the deterioration of the environment, caused largely by people, businesses, and nations acting in isolation.

In our complex world, people need better ways of communicating and working together.

Eventually, some teachers began to wonder, how can we best address student performance when our own professional development is not optimal? What are other teachers doing? How can we improve?

Uncertainty was rampant. Teachers knew that they didn't have to be sick to get better. But typical performance appraisal systems and staff development models seemed to have serious flaws. Frequent feedback and follow-up was needed. Isolation was a tremendous handicap. This book introduces a unique tool capable of addressing these dilemmas: 2 + 2 for teachers.