

GROW, SUPPORT, AND RETAIN TEACHERS: THE POWER OF PEER OBSERVATION



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INTRODUCTION

Peer observations of teaching are one of the most powerful forms of teacher professional development. Through peer observations, teachers gain highly relevant insights into their teaching. They collaborate alongside peers to try new things, take risks, reflect, and get feedback to enhance their skills. Peer observations present an excellent opportunity for school leaders to support, develop, and retain teachers within their schools.

WHAT ARE PEER OBSERVATIONS OF TEACHING?

The Network for Educator Effectiveness defines peer observation as a developmental process where two peers work together to gain feedback and knowledge about teaching. Goals for the peer observation process are to:

- ▶ Develop a shared understanding of effective classroom practice.
- ▶ Support teachers in building their capacity.
- ▶ Improve instructional skills through critical reflection and continued practice.
- ▶ Increase the quality of teaching and student learning.
- ▶ Benefit both teachers involved (the one teaching and the one observing).

All kinds of teaching can benefit from this type of practice. The only requirement is that some type of teaching takes place. This could be in a classroom during a lecture, a small-group activity the teacher facilitates, a one-to-one session with a student, or an online classroom where the teacher moderates an asynchronous discussion or conducts a session.



Peer observations support key initiatives for schools, including:

▶ **Teacher onboarding and retention**

Peer observation is an invaluable process for successfully onboarding and supporting new teachers and retaining experienced teachers.

▶ **Effective professional development**

Peer observation is one of the most effective professional development activities, providing specific and relevant feedback to enhance teaching practices for a fraction of the cost of sit-and-get PD.



Research findings also support peer observations, including:

- ▶ The process of evaluating teachers to improve their instructional practices is more effective when teachers play an active role. Self and peer observations provide an active role for teachers, resulting in professional growth that far exceeds what they typically gain through traditional PD sessions.
- ▶ Teachers tend to improve their instructional skills during the first five years of teaching. When the peer observation routine is started early in a teacher's career, teachers become used to the practices of examination, reflection, and goal setting that can encourage continual development.
- ▶ Teachers develop their skills primarily through a process of individual trial and error. With peer observations, teachers eliminate the practice of isolated trial and error. Instead, they have the advantage of additional perspectives to brainstorm solutions to questions of instructional practice.
- ▶ Teachers who have more control over their practice are more likely to improve educational outcomes for students. Self and peer observations place the teacher in the driver's seat. They are able to collect data, set goals, and make decisions for themselves.
- ▶ Student achievement increases when teachers participate in a low-stakes program of peer evaluation. This is true both for students in the observer's classroom and for those in the classroom where the observation takes place.
- ▶ Peer observation with feedback and reflection improves professional practice and can be an important part of a teacher's professional development.
- ▶ Improvements in instructional practice can be linked to an increased number of observations. The use of peers as observers increases the number of observations a teacher receives without overburdening the school administrator.
- ▶ When peer observers are matched by grade level or content area, they have more insight into the content knowledge and content-specific pedagogy of the lesson. They can be more accurate observers of instruction, may provide better feedback, and may be of more help in coaching.

PREPARING FOR PEER OBSERVATIONS

Schools that have established a successful program of peer observation emphasize the importance of preparation. NEE recommends four steps to establish an effective program for self- and peer observations:

1 Establish a foundation.

Work with teachers to build understanding of peer observations and why they are important for professional growth. This requires a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and trust.

2 Develop norms and procedures.

Formalizing the peer observation process increases the likelihood that reflection and improvement will result. Norms and procedures should establish expectations for every peer observation.

3 Prepare participants.

Teacher training on peer observations might include watching sample classroom videos, examining the relevant classroom observation rubrics, and discussing how to provide feedback and coaching to others.

4 Conduct observations.

RECOMMENDED PROTOCOL FOR PEER OBSERVATIONS

BEFORE THE OBSERVATION

The teachers involved establish a specific focus for the observation – what the observer hopes to learn or what the observed teacher would like feedback on. NEE recommends teachers agree on one indicator of effective teaching practice as the focus of the observation. This means teachers might select one classroom observation rubric to focus on, ignoring the scoring section of the rubric and only focusing on the look-fors. The pre-observation conversation also provides contextual information about the content, the students, and the teacher.

DURING THE OBSERVATION

The observing teacher pays specific attention to the identified focus of the observation. The observer notices what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing throughout the observation. The aim is to gather as many details as possible but not to make any subjective comments or judgments. The observer stays neutral and provides useful feedback for the teacher to use in reflection. The teacher takes notes and records them in an agreed-upon format, such as the NEE POWERHub online peer observation tool.

AFTER THE OBSERVATION

Within a day or two, the two teachers meet to discuss what was learned during the observation. Begin with the observer describing what was observed and asking the observed teacher questions about how instructional decisions were made before and during instruction.

- Observers might ask themselves questions such as: What did I see? What did I hear? What questions occurred to me about what I observed? What evidence do I have? How does the evidence relate to the observation focus? What did I learn from this observation? Based on the evidence, what constructive suggestions or changes could I make if asked?



When selecting indicators, start small to build confidence and understanding.

It will be best to start the peer observation process using only one or two indicators of effective teaching practice. Some of the indicators typically used for peer observation include:

- **New teachers:** Select an indicator that is part of your beginning teacher support program. Classroom management might be a good choice (*NEE Indicator 5.2: The teacher manages time, space, transitions, and activities*).
- **Experienced teachers:** Common goals for experienced teachers are to increase critical thinking and student motivation (*NEE Indicator 4.1: The teacher uses instructional strategies that lead students to critical thinking or NEE Indicator 5.1: The teacher uses motivational strategies for the affective engagement of students*). Both of these indicators are examples of high-leverage practices that have a high correlation to improved student learning outcomes and academic performance.

Other indicators might work best for teachers who have very specific functions related to their position or role in the school. A building principal or instructional coach can help identify the most appropriate indicators for use in the peer observation process.

- ▶ Observed teachers might ask themselves questions such as: What happened? What was I thinking and feeling? What did I do well, and how do I know? What could I do differently, and how do I know? What can I do to find out more about the focus for development? What could be my next steps?

After the conversation, the teacher who initiated the peer observation will complete a post-observation reflection to document what they learned, their goals for using the information, and the next steps they will take in their instructional practice.

USING THE NEE POWERHUB ONLINE PEER OBSERVATION TOOL

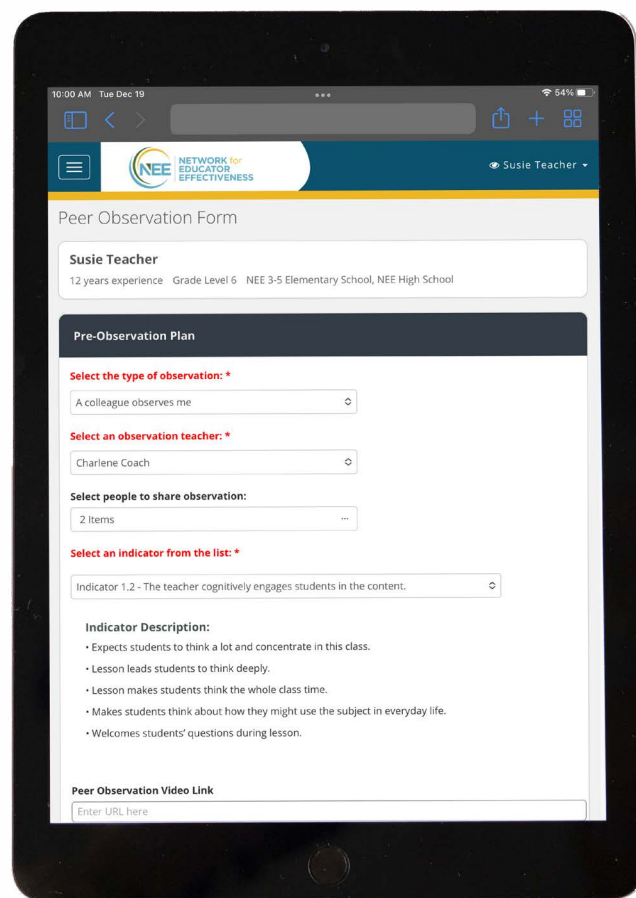


NEE provides an online space to facilitate an effective and meaningful peer observation process. The NEE POWERHub online peer observation tool assists teachers with scheduling, storing data, documenting reflections, and planning next steps. The content of the peer observation remains between the two teachers involved unless the initiating teacher selects to share it.

The NEE POWERHub online peer observation tool can be used in various scenarios:

- ▶ For a teacher who wants a colleague to observe their instruction and provide feedback.
- ▶ For a teacher who wants to observe a peer to gain knowledge or skills.
- ▶ For self-reflection if a teacher wants to use a video recording to watch and reflect on their own teaching.

The tool helps teachers work through a research-based protocol for peer observation to ensure consistent and high-quality feedback. There are three sections of each peer observation within the NEE POWERHub, and teachers can work back and forth to collaborate on each observation.



1 Pre-observation plan

The teacher who requests the peer observation completes this section to specify the type of observation that will be conducted, identify the peer teacher, select the focus of the observation, and add contextual details. The teacher can also select whether to share the observation with other individuals, such as an instructional coach, mentor, or administrator. If conducting a self-observation, the teacher also enters the video recording link.

2 Observation data

The teacher who is doing the observation completes this section of the observation by entering comments, notes, and data about the specified focus of the observation.

3 Post-observation reflection

The teacher who requested the observation completes this section to guide their thinking about the observation and planning for next steps. The teacher responds to a set of reflection prompts to describe what they learned and commit to taking some action as a result.

The NEE POWERHub peer observation tool simplifies collaboration to support, grow, and retain teachers.

Request a demo at neeadvantage.com/neepowerhub/

PEER OBSERVATION TRAINING

The following training activity will help teachers understand the benefits of peer observation and learn to use the NEE POWERHub online tool. Teachers will develop a shared definition of the indicators they will observe and a shared understanding of the look-fors associated with those indicators. The training activity can be used with a group of teachers all focused on the same indicator or a group of individuals or pairs of teachers focused on different indicators.

Time required: 60-90 minutes

The materials for this training are available in the NEE Data Tool.

EDHUB LIBRARY

To access NEE's EdHub Library, log in to the NEE Data Tool and click EdHub on the left-side menu. Scroll down the page to view the list of topics.

- ▶ The *Indicator Video Exemplars* topic offers short recordings of classroom instruction that show good- to best-use practices of the NEE indicators.



- ▶ The *Indicator Scoring Practice Videos* topic allows teachers and administrators to use the NEE Classroom Observation Scoring Rubrics to score the teacher in the video on their use of a specific indicator.
- ▶ The *Peer Observation* topic provides four activities to introduce the peer observation process, orient teachers who will participate, and demonstrate how to use the NEE POWERHub online tool.

NEE CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SCORING RUBRICS

To access NEE’s Classroom Observation Scoring Rubrics, log in to the NEE Data Tool and click Help and Resources on the left-side menu. In the search bar, type “Classroom Observation,” then click to download the PDF document *Classroom Observation Scoring Rubric*. The document includes all 27 scoring rubrics, which include several sections that help teachers focus on the integral parts of each instructional practice.

- ▶ A clarification page accompanies each of the most widely used indicators. This page defines and illustrates exactly what is meant by that indicator.
- ▶ The look-fors provide exact descriptions of the teacher behaviors for each score on that indicator.
- ▶ Student survey connections are listed for each indicator to give examples of what students might say about a teacher who is highly skilled in using that indicator.

POWERHUB ORGANIZER

To access a Word Document version of the NEE POWERHub organizer, login to the NEE Data Tool and click Help and Resources on the left-side menu. In the search bar, type “POWERHub,” then click to download *NEE POWERHub Organizer for Peer Observation & Self-Reflection*.



PEER OBSERVATION TRAINING ACTIVITY

1 Introduction

Have all participants complete the “Teacher Pre-Activity for Peer Observation” before the beginning of the session. It is the third activity listed in the *Peer Observation* topic within EdHub.

2 Review Clarification Page

Have participants spend a few minutes reviewing the clarification page of the Classroom Observation Scoring Rubric for the selected indicator. This establishes a shared understanding of exactly what the indicator is and is not. Ask participants to share any questions or comments they have about the indicator. The goal is to reach agreement on what is to be observed.

3 Review Look-fors

Have participants review the column on the right side of the scoring rubric, which contains classroom behaviors for each of the scoring levels. These classroom look-fors are grouped to correspond with the typical behaviors associated with a classroom at each level of effectiveness. Ask participants to review the behaviors most desired for this indicator. Participants should disregard the scoring descriptions on the left side of the rubric, as the peer observation process does not engage in evaluative scoring.

4 Examine Videos

Have participants watch a couple of exemplar videos on the focus indicator. Ask participants to (1) focus on the behaviors related to the selected indicator and (2) avoid being distracted by unrelated behaviors. After each video, ask participants to reflect on why they think it was considered an exemplar for that indicator.

5 Reflection

Have participants do a think/pair/share activity about what the selected indicator might look like in their classroom or setting. The participants should be specific about what behaviors, techniques, and strategies in their classroom would relate to this indicator. After adequate discussion time, give participants an opportunity to share out with the full group.

6 Practice

Participants are now ready to role-play a peer observation using one of the Indicator Scoring Practice Videos. Give each teacher a copy of the printed version of the NEE POWERHub organizer. Talk about the organizer with the group, and fill in the *Pre-Observation* section together with information the group proposes as realistic.

Show the video, and have participants enter data in the *Observer Comments and Notes* section based on what they see in the video, paying attention to behaviors related to the focus indicator.

Ask participants to share the data they collected. Use the following questions to guide your discussion:

- ▶ What look-fors did you observe?
- ▶ What missed opportunities did you observe?
- ▶ What nonjudgmental data could you provide about the lesson to help the teacher achieve an accurate view of their instruction?

7 Conclusion

Project the online version of the NEE POWERHub tool and walk participants through its use. Explain any requirements your district set for sharing the organizers with a mentor teacher, instructional coach, or the teacher’s evaluating administrator.

CHEAT SHEET: NEE PROCESS FOR PEER AND SELF-EVALUATION

Establish foundation

- ▶ Introduction for teachers
- ▶ Build understanding of value
- ▶ Develop trust through self-evaluations and sharing video clips

Develop norms and procedures

- ▶ Establish district policies
- ▶ Set building procedures for peer observations
- ▶ Develop norms and reach teacher agreement

Prepare participants

- ▶ Participants complete pre-activity for peer observation, available in EdHub
- ▶ Complete NEE Peer Observation Training Activity

Before the observation

- ▶ Requesting teacher creates an organizer in the NEE POWERHub online tool
- ▶ Schedule the observation and set purpose
- ▶ Teachers meet to discuss focus of the observation and pertinent contextual information

During the observation, the observer:

- ▶ Pays attention is on the identified focus
- ▶ Notices what the teacher and students are doing throughout the observation
- ▶ Aims to gather details without judgment or subjective comments
- ▶ Takes notes and enters them in the POWERHub online organizer

After the observation

- ▶ The observation data focuses and directs the conversation
- ▶ Begin with objective statements of what was observed
- ▶ If the observer is offering feedback, the observed teacher reflects on the implications and creates a plan for their next steps
- ▶ If the observer was there to learn, ask questions about how instructional decisions were made before and during instruction.
- ▶ Questions observers might ask themselves: What did I see and hear? What questions occurred to me about what I observed? What evidence do I have? How does the evidence relate to the observation focus? What did I learn from the observation? Based on the evidence, what constructive suggestions or changes could I make if asked?
- ▶ Questions the observed teachers might ask themselves: What happened? What was I thinking and feeling? What did I do well? How do I know this? What could I do differently/better? What can I do to find out more about the focus for development? What could my next steps be?
- ▶ The teachers also reflect on the peer observation process This allows the overall process to be adjusted, if necessary, to increase its effectiveness
- ▶ The teacher who initiated the observation and created the POWERHub organizer completes all sections, sharing it with other stakeholders as appropriate.

CONTACT US

Contact NEE for additional guidance and support, or to learn more about NEE's comprehensive evaluation services.

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