Observation Best Practices

Below you will find a list of general observation best practices pulled from the work of expert Corwin authors Jim Knight, Diane Sweeney, and Tonya Ward Singer. These are general observation tips based on their specific works and are intended to help you think through your observation approach and process for using the app to gather data, reflect, refine, and strengthen practice over time.

Jim Knight’s Focus on Teaching: Using Video for High-Impact Instruction centers on the power of video observations which allow individual educators, coaches, and teacher teams the opportunity to actually see what their teaching looks like.

- Establish trust between the subject of the observation and the observers
- Make participation, e.g., allowing oneself to be videotaped, a choice
- Focus on intrinsic motivation and safety, including celebrating teachers’ strengths
- Establish boundaries
- Implement and offer video observations for coaches and administrators in the course of executing their responsibilities, not just teachers

Diane Sweeney’s Student Centered Coaching: A Guide for K-8 Coaches and Principals focuses on working on observations in teams and across entire districts.

- Help teachers become accustomed to collaborative work by creating ongoing conversations that focus on teacher practice and student learning
- Regularly use student work to guide collaborative conversations among teachers
- Include the principal in collaborative conversations to build a bridge of trust between the school leader and teachers
- Engage teachers in informal classroom observations
- Train a facilitator, such as a coach or lead teacher, to help manage informal peer observations
- Before observing, establish focus areas of interest with your teams or network of educators
- The focus area should be observable and connect to the school’s plan for teaching and learning
- Make sure the observation data relates directly to the focus area and is non-evaluative and descriptive
- After the observation, come together as a team to reflect on the data collected and determine next steps for professional growth
Tonya Ward Singer’s observational protocol, described in *Opening Doors to Equity: A Practical Guide for Observation-Based Professional Learning*, covers the process of identifying the focus area for observations as well as how to reflect and share observation data in a productive, non-judgmental way. This protocol is intended for use by teacher teams.

- Identify the focus area by using three key factors:
  - An opportunity for student learning
  - An opportunity for teacher learning
  - Alignment with school/district initiatives
- After the observation, take a few minutes to read notes and gather thoughts before speaking
- Take time for individual reflection to allow every member of the team time to gather thoughts, prioritize evidence, and write down specifics to share
- Each person only speaks when sharing a note and waits for all others to share before extending the conversation
- Structure post-observation conversations to build in accountable and equitable participation