

CASE STUDY

From Compliance to Growth

How Carmel Clay Schools, Indiana Rebuilt Teacher Evaluation Around Growth

Quick summary:

Carmel Clay Schools replaced a compliance-driven evaluation model with the Focused Teacher Evaluation Model, rolling it out over five years across elementary, middle, and high schools. The result: a shared instructional language between teachers and administrators, evaluation conversations centered on growth instead of a final score, and alignment across teacher, school leader, and district leader evaluation.

The starting point

Carmel Clay Schools didn't set out to replace their evaluation system for the sake of replacing it. They set out to fix what it was failing to do.

"We had a model that was very much compliance driven," says Amy Dudley, Assistant Superintendent. "We wanted something that would really look at teachers on where did they want to go, and fix those goals, and look at that deliberate practice."

The district's existing system could document that an observation happened. It couldn't tell a principal what a teacher needed to work on next, or give a teacher a clear picture of their own growth. Evaluation season produced a score. It didn't produce a conversation.

The shift

Carmel Clay adopted the Focused Teacher Evaluation Model, starting deliberately small: elementary schools first, with a specific focus on building understanding of the framework itself before expecting fluency from it.

Five years later, the shift Amy describes isn't really about the framework. It's about what evaluation is *for*.

"It has really helped us move from a very compliant piece of evaluation to an evaluation system that doesn't worry about the final score at the end, but more about the teaching and learning in those conversations," she says.

"It has helped us to create a common framework for our vision of instruction, where teachers and administrators have that common language where they can continue to have those conversations and look at how we're moving the learning forward, for both our students and for our teachers."

That shared language turned out to matter more than the scoring itself.

What it looks like in a classroom

Amy points to a specific example: an English department chair overseeing roughly 45 teachers.

"When I go into classrooms, I just know there's something missing, but I'm not exactly sure what it is," the chair told her. Before the framework, that instinct had nowhere to go. It was a feeling, not feedback.

With the Focused Teacher Evaluation Model in place, that instinct became specific. “It has allowed us to really look at those thin slices of what that instruction needs to look like,” Amy explains, “and where she can give her teachers very focused feedback on areas.” One example: organizing students to interact with content, a distinct, observable strategy the framework names and defines. “The protocols give the teachers a map of what that could look like. It gives them that success criteria of how we can make this happen, and it helps our administrators give our teachers very focused feedback.”

At the district level, that same specificity scales. “It has helped us to really look at what is happening across all 15 of our schools, and to make sure that we have that high level of instruction happening in every one of our classrooms,” Amy says. Principals and district administrators now share the same vocabulary for what strong instruction looks like, which means the standard doesn’t drift from one building to the next.

The phased rollout: slower than expected, and better for it

Carmel Clay’s implementation wasn’t a single districtwide launch. It was a multi-year rollout, and Amy is candid about what they’d do differently.

“We tried to bite off too much with our elementary schools,” she says. The initial rollout combined scoring specific elements with having teachers write individual growth goals at the same time. “It was just too much, too fast.”

For middle schools, they adjusted: the goal-writing component was dropped temporarily, and the focus narrowed to helping staff understand the elements themselves. High school rolled out slower still, given the school’s size and the importance of getting buy-in before asking for fluency. As of this case study, the high school is in year three of implementation and is only now reaching the point elementary schools started from years earlier.

Her advice for districts considering the same path: “Listen to your teachers, listen to your administrators, and make sure you’re going fast enough, but slow enough that everybody can really be on board and engaging in the process. You don’t want to just slam it down their throats.”

Aligning the whole system

Carmel Clay didn’t stop at teacher evaluation. The district also uses the Marzano Evaluation Center’s non-instructional staff model, school leader model, and district leader model, aligned to the same underlying framework.

“As those models all align, it really gives us that framework across all areas,” Amy says, “so that we can have, again, that common language and continuously focus on those conversations on teaching and learning and improving our practice across the entire district.”

The takeaway

Carmel Clay’s evaluation system didn’t become more rigorous by adding more paperwork. It became more useful by giving every layer of the district, teachers, department chairs, principals, and district leadership, the same language for what effective instruction looks like. The final score stopped being the point. The conversation became the point.

Curious what a similar transition could look like for your district?

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