

Beyond Testing

The 7 Disciplines For Strengthening Instruction

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With the new requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, and high-stakes accountability tests now in nearly every state, education leaders are under unprecedented pressure to improve student performance. The problem is, many don't know what to do that is different from what they have always done.

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Politicians and media pundits tell us that America's schools are "failing" and need "reforming." The implication is that educators once knew how to educate all students to higher standards and have just gotten lazy or forgetful. But after 20 years of reform efforts that have yielded few improvements, it is becoming clear that the overwhelming majority of school and district leaders do not know how to help teachers better prepare all students for the higher learning standards now required for future learning, work, and citizenship in a "knowledge society." The real challenge in schools today is not just to get more students to pass more tests, but to create new knowledge about how to improve the level of instruction for all students

And so the real challenge in schools today is not just to get more students to pass more tests, but to create new knowledge about how to improve the level of instruction for all students. More testing, alone, will not improve teaching. We must understand clearly all of the elements of a more systemic approach to strengthening teaching in every classroom.

At the Change Leadership Group within Harvard University's graduate school of education, my colleagues and I work with educators to increase their effectiveness at implementing systemic improvements in their schools and districts. As a part of this effort, we've documented the strategies used for improving teaching in those districts that have dramatically raised the level of student achievement for the lowest quartile of students, including those from the most at-risk populations. We have identified seven practices that appear to be central to any successful instructional-improvement effort.

Districts as diverse as Lancaster, Pa., and New York City's Community School District 2 have been pioneers in the development of these practices, but each has implemented them in its own, unique way. So what we call "The Seven Disciplines for Strengthening Instruction" should not be seen as a blueprint. It is, rather, an outline of both a process and a set of intermediate goals that are most likely to significantly improve student achievement. They are described briefly here:

- The district creates an understanding and a sense of urgency among teachers and in the community for the necessity of improving all students' learning, and it regularly reports on progress. Data are disaggregated and are transparent to everyone. Qualitative data (for example, from focus groups and interviews), as well as quantitative data, are used to understand students' and recent graduates' experience of school.

Too many districts use either the "hide and seek" approach to data or the reverse—flooding people with so much information that they drown in it. By contrast, Vicki Phillips, when she became the superintendent of Pennsylvania's Lancaster schools, chose a single piece of data to disseminate throughout the community: the number of students who read at grade level by 4th grade. Then she took students to adult gatherings all over town to dramatize the data. She'd explain that only two out of 10 students in the district left the 4th grade meeting the reading standard. She'd have 10 students standing on stage with her, request that eight of them sit down, and then ask the audience, "Which eight of our students will we leave behind?"

Too many districts use either the 'hide and seek' approach to data or the reverse—flooding people with so much information that they drown in it. We have found that gathering and sharing qualitative data can often create more urgency for change than numbers alone. When we began working with the West Clermont, Ohio, school district, for example, we conducted several student focus groups, which revealed that students longed for teachers who were more respectful of them and offered more challenging, "hands-on" learning activities. Mark Peters, who was the principal of one of the high schools at the time, tells a dramatic story of his conversion to high school "reinvention" during such a focus group, when one of his most at-risk students demanded: "When is it my turn to get a good teacher like the honors kids get? One who will answer my questions and care about my learning?"

- There is a widely shared vision of what good teaching is, which is focused on rigorous expectations, the quality of

student engagement, and effective strategies for personalizing learning for all students.

Achieving this shared vision is much more difficult than most people imagine. Creating agreement on theories of good teaching is comparatively easy. But how many districts can show a videotaped lesson to an audience of school administrators and central-office administrators and have the independent ratings of the lesson, and the reasons for the ratings, be more or less aligned? In the last year, we have used a videotape of a 10th grade English teacher in workshops with educators from all over the country. The grades the audiences give the lesson range from A to D. And in initial discussions of the tape, there is little agreement about what is good teaching.

- All adult meetings are about instruction and are models of good teaching.

In most school and district meetings, the craft of teaching is rarely a subject of discussion. It's as if there were an unwritten agreement between teachers and administrators: "I will pretend this is a meeting and listen to announcements that could as easily be put in a memo, just so long as you leave me alone in my classroom (or school building)." In San Diego, by contrast, Elaine Fink, who heads the district's leadership academy, videotapes her meetings with district superintendents (now called instructional leaders), to analyze both the content and the extent to which the meetings themselves are models of good teaching.

- There are well-defined standards and performance assessments for student work at all grade levels. Both teachers and students understand what quality work looks like, and there is consistency in standards of assessment.

For years, the accepted wisdom was that curriculum alignment would improve teaching. While this work has value, it is far less important than alignment on the standards for student work. It matters less that a district agrees on which books will be covered at different grade levels than on whether there is agreement on what students should write about what they read—and what should be the standard for student work at all grade levels. Data about student work are also indispensable in the assessment of teaching. A teacher may have taught an apparently coherent and thoughtful lesson, but the real question is: What do students know and what are they able to do as a result of the lesson?

- Supervision is frequent, rigorous, and entirely focused on the improvement of instruction. It is done by people who know what good instruction looks like.

Effective supervision—done either by peers or administrators—is almost nonexistent in most districts. In too many, an annual perfunctory checkup by an administrator—who may or may not know what good teaching looks like—is all that passes for supervision. And the major preoccupation of many administrators is whether or not a teacher has good "classroom management" skills. Too few have the ability to assess the level of rigor in the classroom; even fewer know how to effectively coach teachers for improvement. By contrast, in New York's District 2, former superintendents Anthony Alvarado and Elaine Fink conducted regular school walk-throughs with every building principal to discuss each individual teacher's work. The district also recruited and trained the best teachers to work part of each school day in their buildings with small groups of teachers on instructional improvement. Vicki Phillips pursued a similar strategy in Lancaster.

- Professional development is primarily on-site, intensive, collaborative, and job-embedded, and is designed and led by educators who model the best teaching and learning practices.

In too many districts, time and money for professional development are squandered because efforts are sporadic and not aligned to a few carefully chosen improvement priorities that are informed by and monitored with data. For Community District 2, however, improving literacy instruction was the only professional-development priority for the first five years of Mr. Alvarado's superintendency, and he and his colleagues searched all over the world for the very best literacy teachers to lead these efforts, finally importing a group of teachers from New Zealand. With their help, everyone became a literacy teacher, with the result being that test scores in all subjects improved. When the district then turned its attention to improving math proficiencies, it was able to equal the successes of the literacy work in only two years, because the capacities and confidence of the system had been fundamentally improved.

- Data are used diagnostically at frequent intervals by teams of teachers, schools, and districts to assess each student's learning and to identify the most effective teaching practices. There is time built into schedules for this shared work.

This kind and use of data is very different from what is required to create understanding and urgency for change. Highly effective districts create their own assessments, which are given four to six times a year at every grade level in reading, writing, and math. The tests are scored internally for quick turnaround, and the results are used to track each student's learning progress, so that early interventions can be made. Teams of grade-level teachers, as well as whole school faculties, are then given time to study the data. When one teacher's scores are better than his or her colleagues', the team works to understand which teaching practices may be getting these results, instead of using the data to stigmatize an "underperforming" teacher.

We have learned that these Seven Disciplines are not a buffet, where a district can choose one or two for implementation without regard to the others. Rather, they represent an interdependent systems approach to the improvement of instruction. While not all may be implemented at once, none can be skipped, and some must come before others. For example, few educators may feel the need to define good teaching, if the need for change is not well-established. And definitions of good teaching are incomplete if they do not include data about student work. Effective supervision requires

a shared vision of good teaching and standards for student work and is driven by a variety of informative data. The same data also inform planning for effective professional development and the content of school and district meetings.

We must understand clearly all of the elements of a more systematic approach to strengthening teaching. We have also come to understand that these disciplines must be imbedded in a larger, districtwide transformation effort that includes attention to what we call the "arenas of change," or the "4 C's."

In addition to developing the competencies of educators to do this new work, creating a school and district culture that supports active engagement and collaboration for continuous improvement is essential. It is also vital to attend to the classroom, school, and district conditions that support the improvement of teaching and learning, such as having adequate quality time for meetings and professional development, and to know and work with students individually. All of this work must, in turn, be informed by a deeper knowledge of the context of our work: a better understanding of the worlds from which our students come and those for which they must be prepared.

We support the idea that shared accountability for improving student achievement is a powerful tool for increasing educational equity. But we observe that our profession's developing knowledge of how to achieve this new goal has not kept pace with the imposition of new accountability measures.

Rather than arguing the merits of more testing, we believe that the real conversation among educators should be around questions such as these: What does good teaching look like, and how do we create systems of schools and districts where every teacher has the opportunity and the support needed for continued improvement?

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