'Critical Questions' Series
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What School Factor is the Most Important?

Standards, testing, and aligned curriculum are clearly important when designing school systems. By focusing on these factors, governments and schools drifted to solutions that are easier to legislate, fund, and coordinate. But real organizational change is much more complex and involves people who interact with these factors.

Standards are ubiquitous at the federal, state, and local levels. For the first time in formal education, schools and student have a clear idea about what is expected of them. Yet, ask any teacher or school administrator and they will express at least some level of frustration with standards. This frustration is not necessarily that they disagree with the content of the standards (although this issue is hotly debated in some areas). The angst is more about the amount of time needed to teach all of the standards. Marzano (2003) stated,

> *"We now have a quantitative basis with which to answer the question: Can the 200 standards and 3,093 benchmarks be taught in the actual time available for instruction? The answer is a resounding no!" (p. 25).*

While it is critical to codify what students should know and be able to do, standards are seen by some educators as being too restrictive and overwhelming. What was originally meant to establish the floor for student learning became an unachievable ceiling. This effect is evident in the low pass rates on certain state tests. For example, barely 50% of 10th grade students passed the mathematics WASL in 2007 and only 34% of 10th grade students passed the science WASL in 2007. While high stakes testing can provide snapshots of how students are doing (or not doing) at a macro level, they fail to provide the diagnostic detail needed to inform classroom practice (Stiggins, 2002). Educators and officials are clamoring for explanations and solutions to the point where the mathematics and science tests were postponed as a graduation requirement. One proposed solution is a restructuring of the standards and a close examination of the alignment of curriculum materials.

Quality curriculum is important. Developers and publishers are now addressing standards, learning theory, and research-based instructional strategies in recent editions. Practically all contemporary published curriculum materials are aligned with standards and are highly structured with prescriptive components such as timelines, questioning strategies, scripted lessons, and prepared assessments. However, prescriptive curriculum materials, even if based on research about how students learn, cannot get around the "teacher factor" – how a teacher implements such materials in the classroom. Smith (2000) noted,

> *"The major weakness and, indeed, strength of the process model is that it rests upon the quality of teachers. If they are not up to much then there is no safety net in the form of prescribed curriculum materials. The approach is dependent upon the cultivation of wisdom and meaning-making in the classroom. If the teacher is not up to this, then there will be severe limitations on what can happen educationally."*

Smith argues that curriculum is more of an interaction – or praxis - between curriculum materials and teacher practice. There is no such thing as a teacher-proof curriculum. No matter how good or innovative the curriculum materials may be, or how aligned the program is with standards, the teacher is the key to effective implementation.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that teachers are the most important factor in school change (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). Sanders (1998) value-added research of the past decade clearly demonstrated that teacher effectiveness is the major factor predicting student academic progress. More specifically, the instructional strategies used by teachers are connected with gains in student achievement (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). The instructional strategies employed by teachers make a huge difference in the learning of students.

If teaching is indeed the critical factor in student learning, then the focus should shift to developing quality teachers. It is the one factor that stands to have the greatest impact on students. Although it is beyond the scope of this short treatise, a few common sense issues related to professional development are germane.

One shot, workshop-based professional development is passé. It's common knowledge that teachers seldom apply what they learn during workshops in their classrooms. In spite of this fact, school districts and funding agencies devote enormous resources into workshop-based training. Teachers dutifully attend, receive their stipends or clock hours, and return to the classroom with little support and scant application. Regardless of their ineffectiveness, workshop models of teacher professional development remain prevalent because they are efficient.

Subsequently, a significant body of research related to professional development emerged in the past decade. Effective teacher professional development commonly includes reflection and effective feedback on practice, professional collaboration, application in the classroom, fostering a culture of shared and positive beliefs about student learning, use of student assessment data, mentoring, coaching, teacher leadership, and support systems (e.g. Marzano, 2003; DuFour, 2005).

What are educators and government officials to do? Stop tinkering with standards, tests, and curriculum. Devote more attention to the teacher factor. Reduce the use of one-shot teacher workshops. Instead, shift towards fostering collaboration and application-oriented professional development. Develop staff development plans that funnel resources to effective collaborative models that are building-based. Since school systems are not naturally designed to foster effective learning communities, distributed leadership, scheduled time, and various incentive structures must be in place to support the system. Educators should develop district budgets and work with external funding agencies to reconfigure how professional development funds are used. As Schmoker (2005) argues,

> *"There is no good reason to delay this reform. It is time for a concerted effort to push for its inclusion in state department requirements, in every pre-service and leadership training course, and in every discussion among*

principals and teacher leaders that purports to improve teaching and learning" (p. xiv).

While this short discourse is not designed as a comprehensive review on the subject, my hope is that it sparks some interest and investigation into the power of focusing on the teacher factor via effective professional practice. For the sake of students, education communities should shift the focus towards developing their greatest educational resource, teachers.

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