High Quality Teaching and Learning

What EVERY student deserves
Curriculum in Context

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The editorial committee seeks articles that provide perspectives, research and practical information about the issues of and ways to improve learning and teaching in Washington State.
Results now: An interview with Mike Schmoker

By Joan Kingrey

Beginning with this interview with Mike Schmoker, there is a remarkable coherence in the articles in this issue of Curriculum in Context. From multiple perspectives, the message is clear: the level of student achievement is the result of what educators do and support each and every day in classrooms. And, what we teach and how well we teach it matters. I had the opportunity to interview Mike Schmoker on April 29, 2008, to explore his ideas on improving teaching and learning. Dr. Schmoker will keynote the opening session of the WSASCD fall conference on Friday, November 7. There could be no better speaker for this conference.

1) Your book makes the radical claim that “We have the opportunity to blow the lid off school attainment, dramatically and swiftly reduce the achievement gap and enhance the life chances of children” (p.2). Why do you believe that we can make this radical claim?

The main reason is this: It is no secret that in the two areas that are most obvious regarding school attainment, we are not where we should be. Those two areas are: what we teach and how or how well we teach. What Marzano and others have made crystal clear is that most teachers go into the classroom and teach something that varies considerably from any agreed upon set of essential standards. So, that’s the what. The moment we go from a minority of teachers teaching an agreed upon essential set of standards to a majority, that in itself could make as big a difference as anything we’ve ever done in the history of education.

The other piece is the “how,” or the how well. If you tour classrooms, almost anyone will notice within five or six classrooms that the fundamental elements, stressed so ardently by people like Bob Marzano, Dylan Wiliam, James Popham, even going back to Madeline Hunter, are missing. And what are those fundamental elements? They are basically: you teach to a clear standard and in the course of teaching you scaffold your instruction and you do that in such a way to include modeling, guided practice, and checks for understanding. These are fundamental concepts that, according to some of the research we’ve got right now, are the make or break factors that account for whether a small minority of your students are going to learn that day’s lesson or whether a vast majority of the students will. I think most educators are familiar with the fact that we need to teach, as Bob Marzano puts it, in “chunks” and in between each chunk we provide guided practice and checks for understanding. Not to be too repetitious, but those elements are enormously powerful for determining whether or not students learn content and skills. Most classroom lessons do not yet include these fundamental elements, at least not routinely. Whether we regard the absence of these practices as a sad commentary or as a huge opportunity will determine the future of my claim that we can blow the lid off school attainment and enhance the life chances of children.

2) What are the brutal facts that you feel the educational system – each district and school – must confront?

The first brutal fact is that there simply isn’t conformity to a coherent, agreed upon curriculum and meeting essential important standards.
3) Talk about instruction as the number one factor in achievement and what we need to do about making the power of good instruction the norm.

Well, I think that there are maybe two or three ways that we can make effective instruction the norm. One would be: we have to sit down and describe and make crystal clear some of the things we’ve known for a long time about effective instruction, the elements that I described previously: a clear standard, making sure that the typical lesson contains modeling, guided practice, a check for understanding, and an assessment that is linked directly to that standard. Just ensuring these fundamental elements is going to have a profound and, again, a fairly swift impact on instruction.

The other piece to making sure that good instruction is happening is arranging for someone within the system—it could be someone in the building, or someone at the district office—it doesn’t have to be an administrator, it can be a teacher, an instructional coach—someone has to be in and out of classrooms. The purpose is not to provide individual feedback to teachers; some people like that idea while I’m not as enamored by it. But someone needs to visit, if even ten or fifteen classrooms randomly, and then provide some feedback to the school or an academic department or to the whole system to say: we’re simply not seeing enough of these kinds of essential, critical elements of instruction.

And before I get along too far, one of the areas where we have a huge opportunity, and there is a real deficiency, we simply do not provide students with a fraction of the amount of time they need to spend both reading, and by that I mean reading critically— and writing. And that means, not just writing off the tops of their heads, but writing about the history, the science, the literature, the content they’re leaning in their classrooms. All of those have to do with instruction. And all of those are tied directly to research studies and effect sizes that are just enormous - enough to put an enormous dent in the current achievement gap, for instance.

4) How do we change the culture of schools and school leadership that prevents educators from learning from one another?

Well, I think the best way to change the culture is, first of all, to realize that a culture is a function of what we talk about, and what we allow, and what we encourage and reinforce and emphasize and get enthused about. And it is also a function of what we tolerate and what we overlook. In other words, we need to be talking as often as possible about what good instruction is, what it looks like, describing it for people, incessantly. That also means, and forgive me here, setting aside an awful lot of staff development which is somewhat extraneous. In other words, until our staff development allows us to provide consistently effective curriculum and consistently effective instruction, there’s no other place to put our professional development, our emphasis, our resources and our time. That is going to create a culture, an environment, in which a teacher just about cannot work in the system without thinking: “Today I have to be very aware of what I am teaching. It better be something extremely important to children, to their college and career prospects, to the life of their mind and their intellect and to civic life. If it doesn’t fit one of those, I shouldn’t be teaching it.” We should want to create a culture where the importance of such things is talked about so much, that no one could be a teacher in the system without being exceedingly aware of what they teach each day.

Of course, most of the movies, most of the time spent watching movies, as an example, have to go. Most movies take about three days to show. The time we spend doing things like that, or using worksheets, they just don’t pay off for kids. Another way you affect the culture and shape and form a culture, is you talk, very honestly, and with courage about “what we don’t do in this district.” I frankly do not think that in 2008, there’s a good reason for us to say, “well, there is not much we can do about the fact that 20-25% of instructional time is spent on worksheets.” And I don’t think, in 2008, there is any any excuse for us to tolerate the fact, and all my audiences admit this, that reading and writing are the two most important but the two least frequent activities you see students engaged in - even in Language Arts and English. If you want to create a new culture, you talk about the importance of those things, you demonstrate their importance, you teach people how to teach them and then you monitor and inspect classroom practice so that you can report back to the system, to the school, to the academic departments, to the whole system, that we are or are not seeing enough reading and writing, that we are or are not seeing too many work sheets and movies being used in classrooms, we are or are not seeing too much time spent on poster making, arts and crafts or coloring in reading, English and in core academic classes, when we should be having kids read and write.

5) Talk about the buffer and the barrier it represents to the results we can achieve in our schools.

The term “the buffer” is one I borrowed from Richard Elmore who is at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The buffer more or less means what it says: it creates a barrier, a space between constituents such as the community, even the central office, even principals, and the classroom. There’s a barrier between all those entities and the actual classroom and the actual instruction that occurs in classrooms. Now what does that mean for us? It means that, kept at a distance, from the actual workings of the classroom, too many poor practices area allowed to proliferate and good things don’t occur
as much as they might. More recently, I wonder about what might happen if we eliminated it, the buffer between the classroom and the community. I talk to people on airplanes and occasionally to service organizations, and I tell them some of the realities of common, wasteful classroom practice in the last thirty to forty years, and I share with them the widely respected Pianta Study, out of the University of Virginia, where they found that approximately three quarters of elementary school lessons are quite different from what ought to be going on elementary classrooms. And then I tell them real details about what goes on in American classrooms.

And I realize they have no idea, this community of people who send their children to school, they really have very little idea of what actually fills an average school day for students. They assume that more of the good things are happening than actually occur.

6) Why is literacy education the greatest opportunity of all for school improvement?

Well, I believe this for two reasons. First: I know that this is hard to take, and it isn't because teachers don't have a heart or talent to provide good literacy instruction. In fact, I believe they do have the talent and the opportunity to provide it. But the sad fact is, there simply isn't enough critical, purposeful reading going on, certainly in English and reading classes, and there is not enough good literacy instruction in science and history classes. There simply isn't enough reading, period, going on. And I realize they have no idea, this community of people who send their children to school, they really have very little idea of what actually fills an average school day for students. They assume that more of the good things are happening than actually occur.

Second, we don't assign or instruct in the area of writing nearly often enough. Most of the people that will be reading this interview will know there simply has never been either enough writing or enough writing instruction. We tend to assign writing rather than teach it. There is a very big difference. People like David Connelly, out of the University of Oregon, whose Standards of Success study has gotten quite a bit of notoriety, found that the single most significant thing you can do to get students both into college and out as graduates, is to provide them with far more opportunities than they currently have in K-12 to read more and write – in the argumentative, analytical mode. They need far more opportunities for purposeful reading and writing than is currently in place.

7) Talk a little bit about “Professional Learning Communities.” The term is widely used, and misused. What is your definition of a professional learning community?

I go back to the Dufours, Eaker and Judith Little. Basically, a true Professional Learning Community is one where teachers are working with fellow teachers to palpably, and I even want to say measurably, improve the quality of lessons - instructional lessons, daily lessons - and instructional units. This understanding of this primary work of lessons and units is starting to emerge, finally, amongst even among some of the people who had a bland and even somewhat confused understanding of the PLC. It’s finally starting to emerge that if you are truly a PLC, teachers are sitting down, at least a couple of times a month, not to just talk about instruction, or talk about curriculum, but to literally build pacing guides, to build instructional units and then instructional lessons together, to experiment with those lessons and units, which is to say, they implement the lessons and units, and then they examine the results of those lessons and units, those assessment results, and then adjust their practice on the basis of those lessons and units.

You notice I’m saying lessons and units over and over again, that’s kind of my mantra, with anybody I talk to anymore. I say, “Look, if you aren’t in the habit of saying, ‘all right colleagues, here we are at another team meeting, a so-called team meeting, a so called PLC meeting. The real question for us is: what lesson or unit are we building today?’ A PLC should be building a lesson or unit for one or more of the standards that are expected to be taught and assessed using common assessments. If we’re not building those lessons and units together as a team, I just don’t think that that’s a Professional Learning Community.

The National Staff Development Council is starting to talk more than ever about PLC’s being defined by whether or not teams are actually, manifestly building and improving lessons and units. Certainly, if you look at the improvements and the wonderful things that happened at places like Adlai Stevenson High School – these are teams of teachers constantly helping each other to build and improve and refine their instructional lessons and units.

8) What is your advice for school leaders?

Well, my advice for school leaders starts, if possible, with leaders at the state level. If the state is sufficiently and emphatically clear and literally repetitive and redundant about the simple issues of what we teach and how well we teach it, and crystal clear on the fact that each kid in our schools deserves on any given day to be taught an essential, agreed upon standard or skill, then the state is doing what it needs to do. Every kid deserves that and their teachers need to be very clear about what is to be taught and how to provide a good lesson, one that has been thought through and contains those essential elements of a good lesson which James Popham, Bob Marzano, Madeline Hunter, and Dylan Wiliam all tell us about. If leaders at the state level would just be as repetitive and emphatic about what we teach and how well we teach in the simplest and most already widely known terms, I think something wonderful would start to happen in school districts.

There would then need to be the same kind of clarity at the district office and then right down to the schools.
Now there’s a negative that has to be tossed in here, and that is, if we are going to be that clear and repetitive and emphatic about what we teach and how we teach, in the most simple but powerful terms, it means we have to stop talking about and even resist the temptation to embrace and implement so many fraudulent, secondary, and trivial kinds of staff development and school initiatives. It is simply too darn crowded out there. We’ve got dozens — hundreds — of faddish but very popular initiatives out there. Every year we have some new emphasis and we never stop to ask, “Look, what is being taught each day? Are we monitoring, are we doing all we can to ensure that something good is taught to every child?” That’s as simple as it gets and it’s not difficult to monitor.

My second piece of advice for school leaders is to ask whether we are ensuring that every teacher knows the fundamental elements of a good lesson. And, what evidence do we have to know if indeed those elements are being practiced or being consistently implemented in average lessons? Further, where we see shortcomings, are we immediately and directly providing feedback, back to the school, the academic department and the system, that these things are or aren’t happening? And, when we find shortcomings, are we then trying to address them with more clarity and staff development that is directly targeted at improving in those areas? These are the challenges that school leaders must face.

9) Your book is both optimistic, and critical about the prospects for education in this country. As you continue to examine the brutal facts about education — are you more optimistic or skeptical?

Well, I think optimism is a choice, and so I’m optimistic. I’m enormously optimistic. I cannot help but think that sometime, hopefully soon, a light will go on in our collective heads, and we’ll realize that when reasonably good instruction is occurring — meaning we’re teaching the right things and we’re teaching them reasonably well — that is life changing. If all the teachers in an academic department or in a school simply resolve to teach something good and important each day, and to teach it according to those already widely known fundamental elements like, again: clear standard, modeling, guided practice, checks for understanding, clear, aligned assessments; and when we realize that if we actually do those things on almost every instructional day, we’ll achieve significantly improved student achievement. And this is a real statistic that several people - Ted Sanders, Bob Marzano, Gerald Bracy - confirm, that we would see something like a 35 to 50 percentile bump up in student learning and attainment in only a three year period. Imagine that—in a three year period. If we just got on board, realize that those simple things make that much of a difference, I’ve got to think, one of these days, we’ll all make that commitment and see a big jump in learning. If we do these things, we’re going to see the achievement gap shrink precipitously and we’re going to realize that the possibilities for public education are far greater than anything we’ve allowed ourselves to imagine.

10) Your book has been widely read since its publication in 2006. If you were to add a chapter or addendum to the book today — what would be its focus or emphasis?

Well, that’s a good question. I think it would be focused on this: if we want better schools and want the whole system to operate as it should, we should, and I’m quoting Steven Covey, “begin with the end in mind.” That “end in mind” would mean something like this: What projects or tasks do we want our kids to be able to complete, or demonstrate at the end of high school? And I’m really encouraged, I’m pretty excited, about what I see happening in places like the New York Performance Standards Consortium. The consortium is among the groups that have said that at the end of high school, students have to complete a literary analysis paper that conforms to the rubric that the consortium provides — a very sophisticated, elaborate project. They have to do an elaborate scientific project and an elaborate higher order, multi-step mathematics project, and a lengthy complex paper for history that demonstrates the ability to read critically and analyze text and primary resources and develop their own arguments and support them in a sophisticated paper. In addition to all those four things, each student must give an oral presentation before a panel that includes community members.

Dr. Mike Schmoker is a former administrator, English teacher and football coach. He has written four books and dozens of articles for educational journals, newspapers and for TIME magazine.

His most recent book is RESULTS NOW: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning, and was selected as a finalist for “book of the year” by the Association of Education Publishers. His previous bestseller, RESULTS: the Key to Continuous School Improvement, is one of the most widely used books by school leaders in the United States.
Engaging Octavio:
Differentiating instruction for ELLs’ academic success

As I walked into the 3rd grade classroom at the local elementary school, I was thinking about ways to help the teacher work with the diversity in her classroom. As a new faculty member in English as a Second Language (ESL) at a nearby university, I had been called by the principal of the school, who had frantically explained that a family of native Spanish speakers had recently located to the area. It was the school’s first experience with beginning ESL students, and the teachers didn’t know what to do with the children. I was asked to help.

I looked around the 3rd grade classroom and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. All of the children seemed engaged in the math worksheet they were discussing, and no one seemed left out. “This is good,” I thought to myself. I explained to the principal that it was good that I couldn’t tell right off which student was the ELL. “Oh,” he replied, “he’s over here.” We walked around a small wall that shielded the class library/reading area from the rest of the classroom. There, in the middle of the space on a beanbag chair, sitting quietly and doing nothing, was Octavio. The principal explained that, since Octavio “couldn’t do anything” in the class because of his “language deficit,” he was asked to sit aside so as not to disrupt the rest of the class.

Octavio’s was an extreme case of lack of engagement in the classroom learning environment. Although probably a less common scenario today than it was when Octavio was in third grade, English language learners (ELLs) and other students are still experiencing a lack of engagement in many school contexts. While not necessarily physically separated from their peers, they are often de facto relegated to the sidelines in mainstream classrooms. There are a multitude of reasons for this, including teachers and administrators who are un- or under-prepared to work with children with language or other special needs and talents and barriers such as lack of time, resources, and support.

Lack of engagement of ELLs, or any student, is a crucial issue because it is clear that student engagement in academic work leads to academic success (Meltzer & Hamman, 2004). Yet engaging all students is a difficult concept for many teachers, and the myriad proposed solutions (e.g., “constructivist” classrooms, interactionism, individuation, discovery learning, and so on) are difficult to understand in concrete, applicable ways. In all my years of teaching and researching teaching, the one concept that seems to be the simplest, most logical solution to meeting the needs of all learners on multiple levels is differentiation of instruction.

Differentiation of instruction
Every class has learners at multiple levels on each skill and concept. Some of these learners, including language learners, may face barriers that a standardized curriculum cannot address in relevant and appropriate ways. Other learners may be gifted in ways and areas that should be supported in the mainstream classroom. Using differentiated instructional strategies that address the readiness, interests, and learning needs of learners (as outlined by Tomlinson, 1999, 2001; Yatvin 2004, and others), students can be challenged at or near their own level in ways that they can achieve academic successes.

The literature describes ways to understand student readiness, interests, and learning needs, and it mentions all kinds of strategies for differentiating. However, teachers need a simpler guideline for instructional practice – I think of it as student choice and the mindset of teacher flexibility. By providing (or assigning students to) different choices for content, tools, products, processes, and/or assessments, teachers can help students aim for standards while working from both their prior knowledge and their strengths. Table 1 presents a brief overview of some of the options that teachers can provide for curricular differentiation.

Teachers often ask how to find the time to figure out all of the different options and make them work in the classroom. The answer is that it is not necessary to use all of the options or to give students choice in everything. Differentiation is up to the teacher—teachers can start slowly by offering options in one component, and work toward offering more choice in other components as they become more familiar and more confident.

Table 1: Curricular Differentiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Examples of Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content/Materials</td>
<td>text sets (a set of readings on the same topic at different levels, visuals, guest speakers, audio recordings, video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>word processor, construction paper, crayons, markers, paints, video camera, cell phone, poster board, drill software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products</td>
<td>posters, presentations, summaries, Web pages, speeches, role-plays, essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>teacher-led, cooperative groups, dyads, individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment/Evaluation</td>
<td>tests, rubrics, performances, checklists, observations, portfolios (for more examples, see Chapman and King, 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Egbert, 2007, p. 189
Focus the Lesson. Identify the standard(s) or curricular goal(s) that you are targeting. Then choose the relevant Grade Level Expectation(s) (GLE) and decide which areas promote student choice most effectively. For example, Washington State mathematics GLE 1.1.1 requires that students can “Represent a number to at least 10,000 in different ways, including numerals, words, pictures, and physical models; and translate from one representation to another” (OSPI, 2006). Opportunities to give students options are already built into this GLE because students can choose a variety of ways to represent numbers if the teacher provides the opportunity to do so.

Describe desired student outcomes. Identify the learning targets/objectives of the lesson, including language, content, and skills to be learned based on the standard or goal. List the measurable outcomes that students should be able to know or do after the lesson. For example, for the standard listed in step 1, one language objective might be for learners to be able to “pronounce the number names correctly,” and another, content-based objective could be to “addressing required vocabulary early in the lesson.”

Reflect on student readiness. Assess whether students have the background necessary to be successful in the lesson. Ask, “What must have been covered already or what must the student have learned about numbers and/or about the language skills needed in the lesson? Are there other skills that must be taught first?”

Make connections. Design experiences that will capture the initial attention of the students by introducing the topic or content in interesting and challenging ways that suit their readiness levels. “Representing numbers” is not necessarily of interest to students from other countries (or to many in the US), so an introduction to what those numbers mean to students in their individual, personal contexts first might incite more interest and connection in studying the required topic than a purely academic connection. In addition, using a variety of modes (i.e., visual, oral, textual, and so on) will help a variety of learners connect to and access the lesson content, as will addressing required vocabulary early in the lesson.

Select components for differentiation. In other words, decide whether you need to provide options or choices in content, tools, process, product or assessment to help all students achieve the objectives. For example, students may choose among several readings in addition to the text, or may work in interest groups, or may choose a product from among a list to show their progress toward the lesson objectives.

Group students. Decide how students will be grouped for the lesson, or what choices they will be given to group themselves. ELLs often work well with a more proficient English speaker from their native language group or a patient classroom buddy.

Create the lesson. Based on the above decisions, develop the lesson.

Activity example
The following example presents one way to address some of the parts of the process in Figure 1, featuring the Math GLE stated in the Focus the Lesson section. There are as many ways to differentiate this lesson as there are teachers.

(Teacher writes on the board as she speaks) “Today we’re going to talk about numbers. First I have some questions. Who would like to have $10,000? What would you do with it? Aside from dollars or other kinds of money, what would you like to have 500 of? 1,730 of? 10,000 of? What would you NOT like to have that many of? Talk about it with your elbow buddy and then whoever wants to share can.”

“Last week we studied about reading large numbers, and this week we will think about what these numbers really stand for. Before we do, let’s review the place names.”

By making a personal connection for students in asking them about their individual wishes and beliefs, the teacher is engaging the students in talking about numbers. She has begun differentiating the lesson by accepting different answers from students and supporting differentiated participation. As she moves to the academic purpose of the lesson, she helps students who do not have key vocabulary in English to attach words to the most important concepts, thereby helping them to access the lesson content while other students review.

The teacher shows the students a large list with a variety of numbers on it and students’ names next to the numbers. She explains while she models that each team of two students has a number for the day. Their first task is to use any of the materials on the art table to represent what that number makes them think of. After they produce their number representation on a piece of poster paper, they can share it with the teacher, other teams, or the whole class.

The teacher determined that some students will work more effectively together on this task than others, so she decided not to let students choose partners but instead to group them herself. She has, however, provided a variety of options to help students reach the objective: she allows them to decide on their own representation, to use whichever materials seem appropriate to them, and to report out in ways that make them feel most comfortable.

The teacher checks on each group as they work, providing ideas, resources, and mini-lessons as needed. As she does so, she constantly assesses the readiness, interest, and learning needs of the students to help her adjust her lesson and plan for the next one.

Most teachers differentiate and perform on-going assessment in this way. The key is to move that knowledge of students and flexibility to the broader context of the lesson and the class instead of individuals or small work groups.

Resources for differentiation
There are many resources to assist teachers in differentiating instruction. A few examples are listed below, and others can be discovered by consulting the school’s library media specialist or with other experts via electronic discussion lists.
Readings
One of the most important ways to differentiate is to offer students readings at their competency levels. Teachers can find text sets that offer the same basic information at a variety of levels. The National Geographic Society produces two of the best differentiated reading resources. National Geographic Explorer is published in two leveled editions (Pioneer and Pathfinder); however, the basic content, graphics, and the cover are the same so that students cannot easily distinguish the poorer readers from the more proficient ones. The large number of teacher activities and other resources on the National Geographic Web site (http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngexplorer/teachers/) can assist teachers in using this resource. National Geographic theme sets, published in collaboration with Hampton-Brown publishers, provide content readings in science and social studies at different levels and can be used with a variety of readers. As another, less expensive option, the school library media specialist can also help teachers create differentiated theme sets from among the books in the school and classroom libraries.

Software
Tom Snyder Productions has a number of software packages that can be used to facilitate differentiated instruction. Thinking Reader, is a literature-based package that provides differentiated supports throughout the reading process. Modeling, content-based feedback, and comprehension strategies are central to the scaffolds available to program users. The company offers a free program overview at: http://www.tomsnyder.com/infokits/kit_thithi.asp.

Web-based resources
Resources that teachers can use to differentiate abound on the Web. One of the most useful is NetTrekker d.i. (differentiated instruction), a database of hundreds of thousands of educator-vetted Web sites divided into elementary and high school sections. The readability level is listed for each site, making it easy for teachers and/or students to choose safe and comprehensible readings at any student level. Each site is also marked for the scaffolds it contains, including visual, graphical, sound, and additional language helps. There is a separate section included for ELLs that provides all kinds of language and culture assistance. Teachers can sign up for a free trial at http://www.nettrekker.com/.

Kathy Schrock's Teacher Helpers Web site (http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/fry/fry.html) also helps teachers find ways to easily evaluate the reading level of a Web site or text, and other Web sites such as A Different Place (http://www.adifferentplace.org/) provide lessons and links to help teachers differentiate instruction across content areas and skill levels.

Conclusion
Octavio was literate in Spanish, his first language, and had a clear understanding of many academic concepts, particularly in math. The lesson in Octavio's class that day could have engaged Octavio, in spite of his language barrier, if the teacher had been able to differentiate her instruction in even simple ways. For example, she could have let Octavio and other students raise enough fingers for the answer, or hold up a written answer, or write it down and let other students read it out loud. She could have allowed Octavio to ask questions by pointing or gesturing and given other students in the class the option of working with Octavio. Students, including Octavio, could have drawn pictures or gestured to demonstrate their understanding of the lesson content.

Differentiation of instruction is not a panacea for classrooms. However, it is clear that without support for students from all backgrounds to access and engage in academic content, many of our students may as well be sitting behind a wall, on a beanbag chair, doing nothing.

References


A student’s voice
Are you ready for us?

Classrooms in schools today are very different from each other and it makes a difference in the way students learn. I have experienced many learning environments and have seen a variety of ways in which students learn best. Here is my take on what teachers can do to make their classrooms work the best for all students.

Individuality
Every student learns differently, but all can be successful. Each morning teachers and students wake up and leave for school. We all arrive at school, but the way we arrive, the route we travel and the time it takes varies. The same is true for education. No one learns in the same way or at the same rate and these strengths and weaknesses can be used as an advantage to a teacher. Students can assist teachers with lessons. Teaching demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the subject and by having students tutor each other during class, it not only helps the struggling students, but improves the understanding of the assisting student.

Trust
As a child in elementary school, I remember the relationship that I had with my teacher, and how well I knew my classmates. How can this be replicated in middle and high school classrooms? Teachers must build trust with students and students need to trust their peers. Without trust, the learning process is slowed. When a student doesn’t understand the teacher and isn’t willing to ask a trusted peer for help without judgment, the student may not perform to the best of his or her ability.

Expectations
Reflecting back to second and third grade, I remember my teachers preaching over and over to read thirty minutes every night. Not being an avid reader, I often read for only ten to fifteen minutes. Had my teacher told me to read only fifteen minutes, I may not have read more than five minutes, if at all. My teachers set their expectations high for my abilities. They knew I was capable of achieving those expectations, so I would accomplish more than was required. People in general live up to the expectations that are set for them, so naturally higher expectations eventually lead to higher level learners.

Consistency
Consistency in the classroom reduces chaos and brings more structure to the classroom setting. Instructors want to have fun and be the “fun teacher,” but when the time comes to be more serious and focused some teachers struggle to gain control of their classrooms. Teachers should be consistent and do what they say they are going to do. I can’t tell you the number of times I have had an essay ready on the due date and the teacher extends the deadline for the students who have procrastinated. Giving extra time to students who procrastinate reduces consistency in the classroom and lowers student expectations of themselves and of the teacher. Teachers should be aware that classroom structure needs to be reflective of real world work conditions. Real jobs do not flex on deadlines and tolerating late work and adjusting due dates should not be acceptable classroom behaviors.

Relevance
The age old question for students is why should I learn this stuff? Just to get ahead in college? What if I’m not going to college? Teachers need to constantly remind students of the real life application of lessons and sometimes we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. A lot is expected of students. Students want engaging lessons that are fun and that will assist in learning a concept in the class. Teachers sometimes think that if they simply tell the students something that it will sink in. This may not be true. Sitting down in a class at the end of the day on
Friday and being lectured to, is not conducive to learning! When teachers offer an interesting presentation of the material, chances are that the idea will sink in faster and will stay in our long term memory, not just until the test!

**Motivation**

I often think of school as a student’s workplace. Why do adults go to work every day? They go to work because they get a pay check, a reward for doing what was asked of them. When a student goes to their work - “school” - what do we get in return for doing our work? Most often, it is a letter grade or a percentage telling us how well or how poorly we are performing in each of our classes. To some students, this is not motivation to do their best! Why should I work hard in every one of my classes? Teachers need to be aware of what motivates students to learn and do their best. They need to incorporate real life situations and rewards that mean something to students in their planning. Rewards in the classroom are an important element in teaching and learning. Students want to be rewarded for completing a test or working hard all week. The reward can be as simple as ending class ten minutes early to visit or can be as complex as organizing a pizza party for working hard on a big project. Keep in mind that what motivates one student may not motivate another, so time and thought needs to be spent creating appropriate and applicable rewards.

**Successful classrooms for ALL students**

I believe the key to a successful classroom is to understand that students all learn differently and that no single method of teaching will reach all students. Teachers need to search for new, unique and relevant ways to bring life to learning, to motivate all students to do their best and to make school relate to the real world. Creating a community within the classroom builds a trust whereby students can seek assistance from both teacher and peers without fear of judgment. Consistency in speech and action is an integral part of a successful classroom environment. If students know you mean what you say and that your expectations aren’t negotiable, they will begin to meet those expectations at a faster and higher rate. Two year olds are able to figure out that they don’t have to listen to what their parents don’t mean; don’t you think high school students will catch on too? And don’t forget rewards for success, no matter how small, and for hard work. Students today are tested incessantly and hear from the public how “bad” we are in today’s world. Reward students along the way to let us know we are meeting our goals and that we are on the right path.

It’s time to rethink our classrooms. Make them interesting, challenging and motivating. Remember the old saying “Do what you’ve always done and you’ll get what you always got” This too holds true with teaching. The world is changing and the competition for students is heating up. Creating a classroom designed with each child in mind is a gift to all students. As the school year begins, are you ready for us?

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Riley Germanis is a Junior at Todd Beamer High School in the Federal Way School District. He is class president, a member of the jazz choir, and participates in a bowling league in his spare time. Riley also works part-time at Metropolitan Market in Dash Point.
So what happened to gifted students in Washington State’s reform?

“Gifted and talented students are in every classroom and school . . . Sometimes giftedness looks like disengagement . . . Teachers need to be trained to identify the giftedness and talents in each student and meet their needs.” Fred Schrumpf, Principal Havermale High School, Spokane Public Schools

Since 1993, Washington State has done a remarkable job of coalescing around common essential learnings. Educators, legislators, parents and community members have worked together to determine what students should know and be able to do as they move through school and as they exit the system to enter the next stages of their lives. In the early years of the reform, after the EALRs were established and the WASL was designed, piloted, and administered, schools worked hard and successfully to move Level 2 students over the bar to Level 3 – meeting standard. In the past few years, tremendous efforts have been invested in moving Level 1 students to proficiency, closing the achievement gap in ways that would have been unimaginable not long ago. Schools and districts have disproven conventional wisdom that socio-economic levels are predictors of student performance. Many teachers, administrators and parents now truly believe and act upon the belief that every child can learn -- a concept that has often been given lip service without action plans for making it so.

The group that has been ignored, or has suffered from “benign neglect” has been the Level 3 students and perhaps yet more, the Level 4 students. Many of these students were able to meet standard when they entered our classrooms. We would submit that it is time in our reform process to address the learning challenges of this group.

It would be unfair to say that Washington State has not provided resources for gifted students. WAC 392-170 defines gifted and talented student characteristics and prescribes how districts may apply for funds to establish programs for this population. In 2005-2006, 225 of the state’s 296 districts received Highly Capable Program funds. Moreover, many districts have contributed matching funds to this program, some as much as 50% of total program costs. Most of the identified students were served in Part Time Groupings, and International Baccalaureate/Advanced Placement programs. Other delivery models included resource/pull-out programs, independent study, regular classroom with differentiated instruction, honors courses, cluster grouping, and self-contained classrooms. (Pauley & Johnstone, 2008)

In spite of the obvious commitment in our state to serve gifted students, the optional nature of Washington State’s model indicates that there are undoubtedly numbers of highly capable students in our state who are not appropriately served on a daily basis. Their districts may choose not to apply for funding, they may have to be re-located within their districts to access services, either on a full-time or once-a-week schedule, they may opt out of an offered program, or their teacher, even in an identified program, may not have been trained to serve the unique needs of highly capable learners. Certainly, most classrooms in our state, where students spend the majority of their time, even if identified as highly capable, do not have teachers who are adequately prepared to differentiate instruction for this population. Few programs are available in our state to help teachers gain the knowledge and skills.

The Davidson Institute, a national nonprofit organization that supports gifted students, their parents, and educators has a state-by-state comparison of policies for education of the gifted. (2008) According to their data, other states in our region have mandated programs for gifted students and/or mandate training for teachers of these students. Both Alaska and Arizona mandate programs for gifted students and fully fund these programs with state dollars. They also mandate training for educators who serve highly capable students. States that mandate gifted programs with partial funding are Idaho, Montana, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. Of these, Idaho and Utah also mandate training for educators. From this data, we can see that Washington, with its voluntary programs, and no training requirement or even opportunity for an endorsement, would not be considered a leader in the region for services to gifted students. However, recent action by the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) is about to change this picture.

So, what is conventional wisdom about teaching gifted students? Why would an educator need specialized training to deal with the best and brightest students in the class?

Recent research indicates that there is an effect on student achievement when a teacher is under-certified (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, 2003). Further evidence relating to expert-novice studies also supports the idea that expert teachers definitely impact student learning (Berliner, 2004). If logic follows, then how do teachers not possessing an expertise in teaching the gifted effect the learning of such students?

Eugene G. White (2007) past president for the American Association of School Administrators stated, “The
selection of gifted students is child’s play compared to finding effective ways to teach, coach or guide them. It is much easier to leave them behind than it is to truly enrich, encourage, enlighten and liberate them — yes, liberate or free them to truly grow their gift.” In support of this statement, Mr. White also commented that “Professional development (of teachers) is essential—and the great thing about this is—when you train teachers to work with gifted children, they’re better prepared to work with all students.”

Based upon such insights and upon research conducted in the area of experts and novices, Hanninen (1988) investigated the question: Is special preparation of teachers who are to teach gifted/talented learners a factor in how they approach the teaching of such students? In the research conducted by Hanninen (1988), teachers who had teaching experience plus at least one college level course and three workshops in the area of gifted education were defined as “experts.” Novices represented those teachers who were in their pre-service preparation program or were certificated teachers with as much as 10 years teaching experience with no training in the area of teaching the gifted.

In the investigation, the experts and novices were presented with five different scenarios describing individual students who had qualified as gifted. Each respondent was asked to describe the instructional areas to be developed and to discuss what strategies each would consider using. For example, how would you respond to the following scenario?

“Susan transferred to Highlight Elementary School in the middle of her third grade year from a private school for gifted children located in a large metropolitan area where she and been enrolled since her kindergarten year. Reflective of Susan’s high creative ability was her interest in playing and listening to music. She was fairly accomplished on the piano and was now learning to play the recorder and guitar. Susan shared that she spent much of her time at home writing poems, songs, plays or stories. Susan’s mother indicated in the parent conference that during her first grade year, Susan played a leading role in a children’s theater. In respect to school, Mrs. Smith, Susan’s teacher, observed that Susan was well liked by most of the other students and that she seemed to be good not only at organizing her own activities, but also at organizing other children to become involved.” (Hanninen, 1988, p. 139)

In responding to this scenario, one teacher with expertise in gifted education said, “Since no information has been provided regarding Susan’s academic skills, my inclination would be to use her creative and artistic ones as vehicles for academics.” A second experienced teacher of the gifted replied, “The study of eminent composers, musicians and authors should be included in her studies, and a connection between music, literature and historical events should be made through the use of Bruner’s concept of basing a curriculum on broad based generalizations.” A novice teacher with more than 10 years of teaching experience, but with no training in gifted education responded, “The areas to be developed are the language arts.” (Hanninen, 1988, p. 139)

A qualitative analysis of the responses to each of the five scenarios presented to the experts and novices resulted in significant differences which are presented in the following table.
Through that analysis, eight categories were identified. (Hanninen, 1988, p. 142) (See Table 1 on page 14.)

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if experts in the area of gifted education perceive the possible approaches to teaching gifted/talented students in the regular classroom differently than novices. In a categorical analysis of responses to five scenarios, it seemed evident that there is a task performance difference between experts and novices. Thus, such results have critical implications for training teachers to work effectively with gifted students, e.g. designing in-depth activities, training in how to use different theoretical structures, programming of academic subjects, etc.

For the past 25 years, Whitworth University’s Center for Gifted Education, has been training teachers to serve the needs of gifted students and their families through their Master of Arts in Teaching degree, with an emphasis in Gifted Education, and through individual courses offered in their summer institutes and throughout the academic year. Four years ago, an Advisory Board composed of educators, parents, and community members with a strong interest in serving the needs of gifted students was formed to help the Whitworth Center conceptualize and frame initiatives that would enhance services to this population, to their families, and to those who seek to educate them with excellence.

One of the topics selected by the Gifted Advisory Board to research and discuss was the idea of an endorsement for teachers of highly capable students. As noted previously, Washington State lags behind neighboring states in services to this population. A Director of Gifted Education from Coeur d’Alene, Idaho who serves on the Advisory Board helped us understand the challenges and benefits of state mandates and opportunities for teacher training in this area. Although there was strong support among the members for the idea of an endorsement, there was also an understanding of the burden a mandate for the endorsement might place on rural and remote districts that might be unable to hire an endorsed teacher to serve

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**Table 1**

Analyzing Differences in Responses to Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics of Novice Responses</th>
<th>Characteristics of Expert Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of Responsibility for Learning</td>
<td>Teacher initiated and teacher directed</td>
<td>Student initiated and student centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of Suggested Activities</td>
<td>Tends to parrot the obvious described in the scenario.</td>
<td>Goes beyond the given of the scenario.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Organization Schema</td>
<td>Responses are spontaneous and ideas less tied together.</td>
<td>Uses theoretical base to organize recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming of Academic Subjects</td>
<td>Generally ignored the need for individualizing regular academic subjects.</td>
<td>Emphasizes using such alternatives as mastery learning, compacting, advance placement, and acceleration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of the Learning</td>
<td>Focuses upon the resources available within the classrooms and sometimes extends to include the total school setting.</td>
<td>Focuses upon the greater community and its resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Suggested Activities</td>
<td>More general.</td>
<td>More specific.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration Given to Student’s</td>
<td>Will tend to mold to fit the regular school program.</td>
<td>Takes seriously a student’s interest and will give suggestions for expanding that interest even outside the regular school program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming of Non-Academic</td>
<td>Tends to apply such areas to academic topics only.</td>
<td>Will tie nonacademic topics in with academic topics as well as extend such interests independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their highly capable students, and, thus, might not be able to serve them at all. About this time, the Professional Educator Standards Board developed what is called a “Specialty Endorsement.” This endorsement is available for educators, with prescribed competencies and training, but is not mandated in order to serve the designated population. It seemed a perfect fit for our initiative.

Also, in the past four years, National Standards for Teachers of Gifted and Talented Students were being developed by the Council for Exceptional Children—TAG Division (Talented and Gifted), along with the National Association for Gifted Children. These standards were approved by NCATE (National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education) in 2006. Margo Long, Director of Whitworth’s Center for Gifted Education, was invited to contribute to the national standards development group. For the first time, university programs have clear, researched-based standards upon which to design programs to train teachers of the gifted. The 10 standards address issues such as characteristics of gifted learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, language and communication, instructional planning, ethical practice, and collaboration. (Johnsen and VanTassel-Baska, 2007).

In order to propose a “Specialty Endorsement” several components must be in place. There must be National Standards, there must be one or more colleges or universities willing to provide the program, there must be a demonstrated need for the endorsement, and the competencies must not be provided in another endorsement. With all these things in place, it seemed the ideal time to propose a “Specialty Endorsement” for Gifted Education for Washington State. Several partners joined Whitworth in the proposal – organizations that have worked on behalf of gifted learners for many decades – WASET (Washington Association of Educators for Talented and Gifted), Northwest Gifted Child Association, and Washington Coalition for Gifted Education.

On May 22, 2008, the Professional Educator Standards Board approved the “Specialty Endorsement for Gifted Education.” A task group will be formed to determine the competencies needed to earn this endorsement based on the National Standards for Teachers of Gifted and Talented Students. When these are approved by PESB, colleges and universities may propose programs based on these standards for approval to PESB.

So, in a state that has shown an on-going commitment to highly capable learners, the “missing link” of highly trained teachers to meet the challenges of our Level 3 and Level 4 students is coming to pass. In 1993, a member of the Washington Round Table spoke of the fact that the highly technical businesses in our state could not find qualified workers from Washington schools to meet their hiring needs. Last January at the OSPI conference in Spokane, an executive from Microsoft gave this same message. Perhaps with this specialty endorsement in place, we will have the tools to challenge the very learners that are needed in this highly competitive market. More importantly, students who may be underachievers, will find personal fulfillment and joy in learning as educators understand their unique learning needs.

References


Dr. Sharon Mowry is Associate Professor at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, and Director of Principal Preparation and Professional Teacher Certificate programs.

Dr. Gail Hanninen is School Improvement Facilitator at Havermale High School, Spokane, Washington, and adjunct faculty at University of Idaho.
You’re invited to join educators from across the state at this year’s annual conference: “Getting to the Heart of it: Sound Practices to Reach All Learners.” With the leadership of conference co-chairs, Helene Paroff and Debbie Lahue, the conference program and speaker line-up supports the latest thinking about promising practices. Steve Gering, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning for Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, will serve as our keynote speaker at our full-day Action Lab program. We are also fortunate to have Dr. Mike Schmoker, author of Results Now, as our keynote speaker for the opening session on Friday.

The Thursday Action Labs will feature the following outstanding education experts:

Nancy Weber – Differentiation: Teaching High-Ability Students in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Dr. Larry Lowery – Inquiry-Based Science: The Biological Basis of Thinking and Learning

Dr. Sandra Atkins – Mathematics: Developing Computational Fluency by Incorporating Number Sense and Algebra Sense

Cheryl Allen and Jodi Wilson - Literacy

John Hellwich and Janel Keating – Assessment FOR Learning: How Formative Assessment Practices Can Increase Learning For All Students

Kelly Gallagher – Teaching Adolescent Writing

For the conference finale, two fabulous Saturday Institutes are offered. Dr. Marcia Tate, author of Worksheets Don’t Grow Dendrites, will present a session entitled, 20 Instructional Strategies that Engage the Brain. Dr. Dennis Sparks, author of Leading for Results, will present, Leading for Results: Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Relationships in Schools.

The 2008 Annual Conference program promises to carry on the tradition of exceptional professional development and networking for educators across the spectrum. On behalf of our fabulous WSASCD Board of Directors, we hope to see you in Spokane! Check out our website at www.wsascd.org for registration information after May 1, 2009.
Getting to the Heart of It: Sound Practices to Reach All Learners

2008 WSASCD Annual Conference

November 6-8, 2008
Spokane Convention Center and Doubletree Hotel
Children of Promise
High poverty, high minority, high performing

Every school district faces a variety of challenges and opportunities, and all start from radically different points in terms of student performance.

Toppenish School District is no exception. Located on the Yakama Indian Reservation in a community sustained by agriculture, the Toppenish School District serves many students of migrant and immigrant farm-worker families. The distressed economy offers low wages (Toppenish’s average income is $14,000 per year), hazardous working conditions, and seasonal employment. A majority of the adult population (56%) has not graduated from high school, and 38% have less than a ninth grade education.

Unemployment on the Yakama Nation Indian Reservation is high, and many children come from low-income families with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). A language other than English is spoken in a majority of the homes (64.1%), and almost a third of Toppenish adults were born outside of the United States (32.6%). The district itself has 3,208 students, and there are an additional 1,155 children age five and under in the community. Hispanic (79.5%) and Native American students (15.6%) comprise over 95% of the student population, and virtually the same percentage is eligible for free and reduced lunch (95.3%). English Language Learners (ELL) account for 59% of students, 32% of the population are migrant students, and recent immigrants (students in the country less than three years) make up another 16%.

In spite of these stark numbers that commonly imply barriers to academic achievement, success has become the norm and student achievement continues to skyrocket in the Toppenish School District. Toppenish is comprised of four elementary schools, one middle school (grades 6-8), a high school and an alternative middle and high school. Two of the four elementary schools, Lincoln and Garfield Elementary Schools, were selected as 2007 Schools of Distinction, schools that had shown exceptional growth over the period of 2001-2007, receiving the 2007 State Superintendent’s Learning Improvement Award, which recognizes the top 5% of schools that have improved student reading and mathematics scores on the WASL over the last six years – only 51 elementary schools state-wide received this honor. A third elementary school in the district missed the achievement by under a percentage point, and the fourth, a dual language school, boasts some of the highest Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores for a dual-language school in the state.

The graphs on page 19 show the progress made by the two Toppenish Schools of Distinction. Both Garfield and Lincoln Elementary Schools have over a 98% poverty rate and a 45% transitional bilingual (ELL) and a 97% ethnic minority student population. Despite these traditional indicators of low performance, both schools have increased achievement to be on par with statewide scores.

With increasingly successful elementary schools, Toppenish Middle and High Schools are also showing increases in student academic performance. The latest reading assessment scores show sixth, seventh, and eighth grade cohort growth to be 3%, 11%, and 8% respectively. The middle school’s reading and mathematics curriculum is aligned with teachers meeting as grade-level teams and subject teams in professional learning communities. Likewise, achievement is the norm at the high school; over 94% of the senior class graduated in June 2008 under the new reading, writing, and math graduation requirements, the largest percentage of graduates in over thirty years. Of these graduates, 96% of them are pursuing post-secondary education. Terry Bergeson (2007) is correct in rejoicing that, “From Curlew to Coulee City, from Tacoma to Toppenish…wonderful things are happening in the classroom.”

The Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) was contracted by OSPI to provide the independent, third party expertise and data analysis to determine the process for recognizing schools demonstrating exceptional improvement. Utilizing their large research foundation, CEE was also able to identify several common practices from effective-schools research that were common throughout the Schools of Distinction. Four of these elements have been major factors in the remarkable improvement in student achievement in Toppenish Schools: effective leadership, a culture of collaboration, high quality instruction and assessment, and system support for improvement.

Effective leadership
Ash and Persall (2007) define the principal’s role as Chief Learning Officer (CLO) of the school and recognize that this officer’s primary responsibility must be to “fashion learning opportunities for the faculty and staff so they can develop into productive leaders” (p.16). They state that further responsibilities of the CLO include “building an organizational climate that encourages and supports leadership throughout the school” (p.19). Steve Myers, Superintendent of
By Jeanette Ozuna, Trevor Greene and Anastasia Sanchez

Forth grade reading scores

![Graph of Forth grade reading scores]

Forth grade math scores

![Graph of Forth grade math scores]

the Toppenish School District, fosters a collaborative and collegial environment throughout the school district that has encouraged instructional leadership at the building level. As the District CLO, he participates in learning communities, promotes and requires the extensive use of student assessment data by teachers and administrators, including himself, in an effort to improve instruction and student learning. Additionally, he requires daily classroom observations in an effort to create instructional transparency, improve pedagogy, and increase student engagement. These efforts corroborate Waters and Marzano’s (2006) finding that there is, “…a statistically significant relationship (a positive correlation of .24) between district leadership and student achievement” (p. 3). Toppenish superintendent Steve Myers has created a focused, results-oriented, data-driven environment with stable district leadership.

A culture of collaboration

The creation of instructional leadership capacity in the Toppenish School District has occurred through professional learning communities and has provided a smooth transfer in the accountability of learning to teachers, learning teams, and administration. Principals, teachers, coaches, and, at times, the superintendent and curriculum director, participate in daily PLC’s. This paradigm shift in delivering instruction has been a catalyst for personalizing differentiated learning based on the diverse individual needs of students. Using this forum to analyze data and adjust instruction, coupled with side-by-side learning, has sparked enthusiasm to improve student achievement. Egos are “checked at the door” and student needs take priority in decision-making and instructional delivery.

At the middle school level, teachers willingly collaborate as subject and/or grade level teams one to three times per week. Data is gathered, entered into a matrix, reviewed at PLC’s, and lesson plans are adjusted based on student needs. Instruction is no longer performed in isolation; visibility of data exists across all grade levels since teachers see one another’s student scores. Thus, teaching in isolation is no longer the norm. The SIOP Model (Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol) has opened teacher doors to peer coaching and observations. Similarly, elementary teachers look at data collected from classroom-based assessments, the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP), to identify areas of concern and to develop plans of action to improve teacher instruction and interventions for students.

All classroom data is transparent, with teachers asking the critical questions of their colleagues and of themselves: “What did you do to achieve higher scores? What must I do differently to raise student achievement?” Peer coaching and observation are also key elements in answering these questions. PLCs have led to high levels of trust, problem solving, and a willingness to address conflict in the name of student achievement.

High quality instruction and common assessments

High quality instruction in the Toppenish School District is a result of goal setting, targeted professional development in specific areas, teacher collabora-
tion, and curricular alignment with state standards and GLE’s. The first step to improving instruction and student learning is collecting student assessment data and analyzing it to monitor progress toward goals and to make the necessary adjustments in teaching strategies.

Frequent and common assessments are an important factor in increasing student achievement. “‘Beat-the-odds’ schools are figuring out ways to customize instruction and intervention so it exactly suits each student’s needs, putting in place a whole set of interlocking practices and policies geared toward winning a marathon (instead of a sprint), [ways that involve] a vital cycle of instruction, assessment, and intervention” (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2006, p. 7). The Toppenish Schools of Distinction have created a climate that is data-driven and results-oriented through the use of frequent and common assessments. Doug Reeves points out in his report on High Performance in High Poverty Schools (2003) that schools with the greatest improvements in student achievement consistently use common assessments with an intensive focus on student data from multiple sources.

As Reading First schools, the DI-BELS assessment has been fully implemented across all grades. Benchmark testing is done three times per year with progress monitoring on a bi-weekly basis for the most at-risk students. Additional diagnostic assessments are used to pinpoint specific skills deficits. These include the CORE phonics survey and utilization of Open Court program assessments. The assessment data is reviewed continuously in the PLC’s to determine instructional interventions and groupings. MAP testing is also done three times per year with students in grades two through five. The RIT scores from the MAP assessments provide correlations to WASL scores and indicate growth in skills between assessment periods. (MAP data is most effective when reviewed on an individual basis at the subtest level. The information can then be used to effect classroom instruction and grouping to provide specific skill deficit instruction.) This approach allows a laser focus to instruction rather than a scattergun approach to remediate “reading problems.”

Additionally, common assessments for math were developed by a district team to assess progress toward math goals, common assessments which, like the reading assessments, provide a focused approach to skill remediation and efficient student grouping for interventions. MAP testing is also done in math three times per year to measure student progress. In ten case studies (Herman, et al, 2008), researchers describe the practices of 35 schools that turned around student performance; a strong focus was found towards improving teaching and student learning by analyzing student assessment and classroom data and regularly monitoring progress and adjusting instructional strategies. Lincoln and Garfield Elementary Schools in Toppenish exemplify these practices. Principal Gary DeCoteau attributes the success of Lincoln Elementary School students to “… dedicated teachers, staff development training, the Open Court curriculum, and the continual evaluation of data” (G. DeCoteau, personal communication, June 5, 2008).

**System of support for improvement**

Another factor that contributes to the success of the Toppenish School District is a system that provides sufficient, and up-to-date, instructional materials and sets standards of how instruction will occur throughout the school district. Materials are aligned with the state standards and supplemental materials are provided for struggling students. Instruction is focused on student achievement, holding principals and teachers accountable for students’ individual progress. It is not acceptable to say, “I taught it; they didn’t get it.” Teachers review data and develop intervention plans to improve instruction, an ongoing continuous cycle that takes place weekly during PLC’s.

As educational leaders, who set the standards and examples for teaching and learning, the principals play a vital role in the success of continuous school improvement, communicating a clear purpose that is supported by the district
level administration. Since they are also charged with setting high expectations and achievement goals for all students, they move people and combine resources to develop a plan of improvement. The principals practice distributive leadership by relying on knowledgeable teachers and staff to share the expertise for the benefit of all. Matt Piper, principal of Garfield Elementary School of Distinction, believes that, “It is our professional development – completed with hardworking, collaborative, grade-level teams—that has switched our focus to student learning and outcomes. We are beginning to make our professional practices more transparent as we continue to be more open to—and learn from—one another” (M. Piper, personal communication, June 5, 2008).

Job-embedded professional development is another system change that has contributed to the success of the children of Toppenish. The “drive-by-approach” to professional development is no longer used. Training is specific to the needs of the teachers of Toppenish, accomplished through the commitment and belief in the peer-coaching model. Toppenish began by placing reading coaches in the elementary schools through the Reading-First program. The success and acceptance of this model led to placing reading/literacy coaches at the middle and high school levels as well as at the alternative school. Mathematics coaches have also been added at all levels. This form of intensive and targeted professional development helps teachers to learn new skills and content knowledge that can be directly applied to instruction. The ongoing coaching support aids in translating these “learnings” into successful daily practice.

System support has also been provided through early-release time. The district provides a minimum of twelve early releases for professional development each school year, time dedicated to school improvement activities that focus on increased student achievement. Across-grade-level teaming as well as across-building teaming is used to align curriculum and share successes. At the district level, system support is provided through a collaborative budgeting process. All stakeholders meet to define common goals and allocate resources, monetary and human, to meet these goals. In Toppenish School District, equitable does not necessarily mean equal. Schools are allocated resources based on identified needs and achievement gaps.

In Toppenish, results-oriented, data-driven leadership has provided the catalyst for focusing district personnel toward measurable student achievement. Effective “professional learning communities” have become pedagogic institutions where continuous teacher reflection, dialogue, and sharing of best practices are encouraged and expected. High-quality instruction is focused and based on common and frequent assessments that are becoming the norm and that provide consistent and intentional data analysis for adjustment of instruction. Lastly, “systems of support” for improvement assure positive momentum in addressing teaching and learning. The Toppenish School District is proving that high-poverty, high-minority students can become high-achieving learners through sound teaching practices that intentionally target all learners.

The Toppenish Schools of Distinction designation has made a positive impact on the community of Toppenish. Our schools have been recognized for their efforts toward continuous improvement leading to a sense of celebration and pride in our students, staff, and community stakeholders. These efforts, spearheaded by collaboration among district and building level leadership, have led to a spirit of cooperation and a belief that high student achievement can be the norm for all Toppenish schools.

References


Practices that lead to achievement—What are they?

The answer to this question was elusive the years I served as a building principal. In some classrooms students did not notice when I visited, while in others every student’s head turned as one of them shouted “So who’s in trouble?” Why was it that the students in some classrooms were so engaged and busy that not one of them noticed my presence, and in other classrooms I garnered every student’s attention? The difference was not found in the textbooks and curriculum being used, but in the teacher’s classroom practices. I attempted to use this insight as I worked with teachers that were not as successful engaging students in rigorous tasks. While I had a picture in my head of what classrooms with rigor, relevance and relationships looked like, these teachers clearly did not. We were trying to communicate, but speaking different languages. We did not have a common language to talk about instruction. As well, I had what is now considered an outdated view of my role in the process. I was to visit classrooms, clipboard in hand, and watch what the teacher did. I was there to inspect and evaluate. It was not very effective, and when I think about all the hours I spent inspecting, my reaction is to want to apologize to all the teachers I worked with. If I had known then what I know now! Since leaving the principalship I have had the enriching experience of working with educators in many different school districts, increased my awareness of a principal’s role in improving instruction and have also had the time to reflect on practice. I would like to share my insights about sound practices, learned from the educators I have had the good fortune to serve as well as current research in instructional practice. While there are no magic bullets, seven research based practices can be identified in successful schools and classrooms.

Instructional frameworks
The use of an instructional framework or a common language is the foundation for successful practice. One of the first instructional frameworks was written by Madeline Hunter. Instructional Theory into Practice (ITIP) provided a picture of the “how” of classroom practice. Since then, numerous instructional frameworks have been developed. A review of rubrics and frameworks developed within the last ten years that have wide-spread use either nation-wide or in the state of Washington and are aligned to standards, was conducted by McGregor (2007). Six themes emerged from the review, and are noted in the table below.

Any instructional framework that attempts to include everything that is known about effective practice would be so large it would be unusable. The decision must be made then to include what is most important. The six prac-

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**Practice 1**
The teacher designs effective, standards-based instruction
*The lesson plan is mapped to state and/or district standards-based instruction, with clear goal(s) and objectives, and student tasks.*

**Practice 2**
The teacher delivers high-quality, student-centered instruction
*Instruction and facilitation of learning is clear, well-paced, and utilizes research-based strategies.*

**Practice 3**
The teacher promotes high levels of student engagement
*The teacher creates an environment that promotes a high level of student involvement in his or her learning.*

**Practice 4**
The teacher uses assessment for student learning.
*The teacher has developed clear assessment strategies for assessing students before, during, and after the lesson.*

**Practice 5**
The teacher uses a positive behavior management strategy.
*Expectations of student behavior are clear. The teacher monitors behavior in a manner which is subtle, positive, and preventative.*

**Practice 6**
There is clear evidence that students are learning.
*Evidence of student learning is explicit and observable.*
practices identified in McGregor’s (2007) research are clear and succinct. Within these practices it is also important to include language that asks teachers to think intentionally about how they create learning environments that enable children from all cultures and backgrounds to be successful. Culturally relevant teaching “fosters the kinds of social interactions in the classroom that support the individual in the group context” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If we are to reach each and every child, then culturally relevant practices are required to ensure that education is appropriate for every child. Effective teaching practices overcome barriers students bring to the classroom (Abbott, Fouts 2003). However, when teachers and students do not look alike or come from different backgrounds, there must be intentional reflection about connecting with these students. A celebration and recognition of the diversity in a classroom enables each student to be successful. Using an instructional framework that asks teachers to consider varied backgrounds and cultures ensures this intentional reflection. While effective and culturally responsive teaching and learning are found for the most part within the six practices identified by McGregor (2007), being explicit rather than implicit is important. “All children to achievement” does not allow for anything less than powerful teaching and learning and recognition of the power of students bringing prior knowledge and their culture to the classroom.

**Implementing best practices**

The creation of an instructional framework that provides a clear target and common language is necessary, but not sufficient to see these practices in classrooms. While there is a clear and consistent body of research about teaching practices that close the achievement gap for all students, many teachers were not trained in these practices. The challenge is to then use an instructional framework and support teachers in making changes in practice. Schmoker (2006) states “most, (though not all) instruction, despite our best intentions, is not effective but could improve significantly and swiftly through ordinary and accessible arrangements among teachers and administrators” (p. 10). Seventeen percent of classrooms in the State of Washington were identified as “clearly observable” when scored using a rubric of effective teaching practices (Abbott, Fouts, 2003). A study of six teachers employing powerful teaching and learning (Baker, Olsendam, Gratama, and Arrington, 2005) sought to identify how these teachers had developed these teaching practices with the underlying question, “Can all teachers develop these skills?” Based on the interviews in this study, and in alignment with Schmoker’s (2006) findings, most teachers can develop these skills. Being a highly effective teacher is different than being a highly effective golfer or musician. How to help adults develop these skills, then, becomes the challenge. Teachers identified the following supports that helped them develop into powerful teachers: modeling of powerful teaching by mentors/fellow teachers, open classrooms where teachers watch each other and give non evaluative feedback and most importantly, a culture of trust (Baker, et. al 2005). Adults, like students, don’t learn best in isolation. While an instructional framework is a necessary tool, used in isolation by individual teachers it alone will not change practice to any great degree.

**Professional learning communities**

One of the most significant practices to emerge is the creation of professional learning communities. Using an instructional framework within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) combines two practices that together create a safe learning environment for teachers and a common language and clear target around effective teaching practices. As Danielson (1996) writes, “… research has clearly demonstrated that the effects of reflection improve teaching. Using a framework to guide such reflection enhances the value of the activity and makes teaching more purposeful, thoughtful, and rewarding” (p. 53).

We also know that Professional Learning Communities alone are not sufficient in raising student achievement. In a 2002 study Supovitz concludes: “The results suggest that although these types of organizational reforms may succeed in improving the culture within which teachers teach, they alone are unlikely to improve instruction and student learning. The communities that develop are often not communities engaged in instructional improvement” (p. 1591).

For principals and teachers, the structures that support changes in classroom practice are teachers engaged with each other in dialogue around instruction, using an instructional framework to guide the discussion. In working with Wallace Elementary School, one of the top five high poverty/high achievement schools in Washington State, I had the opportunity to see first hand how a Professional Learning Community can transform practices. Currently Wallace is in year 3 of implementation of PLC’s. A fifth grade teacher talked about teaching the same way for 24 years, until the staff began to work in grade level teams, meeting 3-5 times a week. Subsequently his practice has changed and student achievement has soared. When asked why he changed classroom practice he replied: “Because of the commitment I made to my colleagues.” Was it commitment to his principal? “Not so much” he replied. And this was said while seated next to his principal, who smiled and acknowledged the power of teachers working together toward a common goal. “Excellence: Expect it, Believe it,
Dr. Alison Olzendam is the Co-President and Founder of the Powerful Teaching Group, and an adjunct professor at Washington State University.

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Achieve it” is their guiding phrase for the work they do together.

To that end, a seventh effective practice supporting implementation of powerful teaching and learning includes the addition of Professional Learning Communities as the structure for infusing the Instructional Framework into classroom practice. The combination of the two reflects the progression of thought and practice in education. An instructional framework is a valuable and necessary tool for teachers. To be most effective it needs to be the basis of conversation within a Professional Learning Community. The addition of the seventh practice becomes the vehicle for having thoughtful, intentional conversations about instruction.

**The principal’s role**

A teacher’s professional practice has changed dramatically, from formerly working in isolation to frequently collaborating on practice. The principal’s role has also changed dramatically, from inspection to coaching teachers in reflection of their own practice while supporting them to implement changes. It is essential that everyone in the system reflects on their practice, intentionally thinking about what they do and why. Principals need to model effective teaching practices in their work as well, faculty meetings being one example. If a principal conducts faculty meetings that are rigorous and relevant, allowing adults to construct knowledge, the culture comes full circle. In a conversation with Todd Baddeley, principal at Hanford High School, where teachers are successfully raising student achievement by working in instructional teams, he described his role as “a counselor who does data.” It is time to put away the clipboard. The principal as coach is much more effective in helping teachers to develop skills and construct their own knowledge about practice.

**Conclusion**

Educators are a conscientious, hard working group of professionals. I see examples every week. This energy and work ethic needs to be captured and transformed into a common focus to raising student achievement through a common language and collaboration and support among teachers and their administrators. The schools where this work has already begun are characterized by teachers who are energized by the success they are having with students and supported through the culture change in which they work. These teachers are focused on best practices and are working collaboratively in a trusting environment. Their leaders are coaches, who are also focused on best practices and supporting the work they do. The combination of an instructional framework and Professional Learning Communities provides the focus and support for teachers to create classrooms where all of our children can achieve.
Creating coherence in Spokane Public Schools

On a particularly warm afternoon in August 2002, associate superintendent of teaching and learning, Dr. Nancy Stowell, and superintendent, Dr. Brian Benzel,

launched Spokane Public School’s (SPS) reform effort. Both leaders were relatively new to their positions in Spokane, and had strong interests in curriculum and instruction coupled with concerns about the relatively average student performance reflected on the state accountability measure, the WASL. Key district administrators were gathered together for the annual back-to-school workshop. From the beginning the message was clear; it would not be business as usual. Spokane Public Schools was going to make family background, race and other external variables obsolete predictors of student achievement. We were scaling up our reform efforts to achieve high performance for all students. New initiatives included: reorganization of principal supervision; implementation of curriculum aligned to state standards; end-of-unit assessments that would provide early warning to teachers about student achievement; specific time set aside for leadership development; and the use of data to drive instructional practice.

Predictably, significant change with a focus on student achievement and accountability was met with mixed sentiments. Practice had always been private and building centered. New reform measures called for making classroom practice public, forming professional learning communities and engaging in rigorous professional development aligned with student achievement goals. The relationship between students and teachers in the learning process would be central to the interests of the district. Resources, support and materials were to be adjusted to serve learning and teaching, and principals would serve as instructional leaders in addition to their more traditional management roles.

Looking back on those early efforts at system-wide reform from the vantage point of today’s perspective, it may be helpful to share the story of how Spokane Public Schools began to improve student achievement for all students by developing a model for system coherence. This is not a story that defines or prescribes steps for improvement. It would have been much easier had this been the case. By design, leaders in the system formed professional learning communities and as a result, reform efforts were dynamic, not linear.

Background
In 2002, Spokane Public Schools served approximately 31,000 students and with respect to instruction, the district operated as a system of schools, not as a school system. There was wide variation in student achievement and little collaboration across sites. SPS had a significant achievement gap with students of color underachieving in mathematics and reading in a pattern that persisted over time. School cultures could be characterized as entrepreneurial in nature, operating as individual satellites to the larger school district.

The beginning of systems thinking
School districts are complex organizations which must respond to many stakeholders with differing points of view concerning the mission of public education. Michael Fullan in his book, Change Forces with a Vengeance, describes the facets of tri-level reform and the pressures system leaders face, both from internal and external sources. An external force that would fundamentally change public education came in 2002 in the form of the federal education reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the eighth reauthorization of ESEA. This national reform measure provided leverage for systems-thinking strategies already being considered for implementation in SPS.

No Child Left Behind called for annual testing in grade bands. Washington State interpreted this to mean state accountability testing would take place in grades 4, 7 and 10 in reading, writing and mathematics. NCLB has had the effect of strengthening a school system’s ability to organize resources to support teaching and learning by requiring evidence of student achievement for all students. This requires districts to collect and analyze data, to align curriculum and assessment to state and national standards, and to develop instructional leaders to monitor and support classroom instruction. While NCLB rightly earns criticism for punitive measures and a failure to fully fund public education, the positive effect has been to create urgency to eliminate the achievement gap and increase student achievement for all students.

A focus on the instructional core
The goal set for student achievement in Spokane Public Schools is simple: all students will succeed at each grade level and graduate from high school well prepared for a variety of post secondary pursuits in a democratic society. These words reflect the single goal of our Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is the result of over two years of thinking, researching and learning together as a school district. The creation of the plan was facilitated by the Strategic Leadership Group which is a representative group of teachers, building administrators, district level administrators, and union officers. During the development phase of writing the Strategic Plan,
there were multiple opportunities for teachers, parents, and administrators to provide guidance and input. The result represents the best thinking of the three anchors in the school district: district administrators, teacher leaders and union representatives.

The Strategic Plan serves to focus the resources and energies of the district on student achievement and classroom practice. This focus on the classroom brings coherence to the system. We have identified four essential elements of classroom practice that inform our improvement efforts and our theory of action: (1) teachers’ have deep knowledge and skills in content, including thorough knowledge of content pedagogy; (2) students’ are engaged in their own learning and in the content; (3) a rigorous core curriculum engages students by being relevant, engaging and connected to “real life”; and (4) the classroom culture is socially just and culturally competent. Together, these four elements frame our thinking about a quality classroom.

**Theory of action to support the instructional core**
A theory of action is the organization’s collective belief about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes (Elmore et al., 2007). The SPS theory of action helps to make visible our collective beliefs about student learning and informs classroom, building and district practice about what actions to take and more importantly; what actions not to take. The following is an initial draft of SPS’s theory of action:

If teachers, coaches, principals and district leaders are engaged in rigorous professional development that increases their capacity to improve instruction, then classroom teaching will be more powerful, resulting in boosting achievement for all students and eliminating the achievement gap.

The purpose of a theory of action is to focus the system’s energy, resources and attention on a specific set of strategies that SPS believes will improve student achievement for all students and eliminate the achievement gap.

**Supporting strategies**

**Strategy one: A rigorous common core curriculum alignment to state and national standards**

Strategy is a set of actions a district deliberately takes to provide capacity and support to the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance district-wide (Elmore et al. 2007). SPS’s theory of action reflects our belief that all students must engage in a rigorous common core curriculum.

To ensure the district’s curriculum is appropriately rigorous, curriculum documents were designed to guide and direct instruction and were aligned to state and national standards using Phi Delta Kappa’s Curriculum Audit Standards as a guide (English, 1988). This was the first system-wide reform strategy implemented in SPS. Curriculum documents in SPS include curriculum guides, program guides, and assessments for each of the curricular units of instruction.

In addition to aligning curriculum, the strategy called for a materials replacement plan needed to support effective instruction. Many of the existing materials did not align to state standards and did not reflect the lived reality of many of our students. In general, our materials told the story of the white dominant culture, omitting the stories and contributions of other cultures. A four year focus on materials replacement with social justice as one criterion for selection has resulted in a more culturally balanced collection of resources.

**Data for the improvement of instruction**

Assessment is the cornerstone to standards-based reform. Student achievement data provides feedback to the system on improvement efforts. Data is collected from end of unit assessments in literacy, mathematics and science at the secondary level. We are beginning the data collection process in grades K-6. The assessment department has used data to develop a data dashboard that will provide real-time information to teachers and principals about student achievement. While WASL data has been available for several years, we are finding the combination of formative and summative assessment data to be key to improving practice. Data deconstruction protocols like Data Driven Dialogue (Lipton and Wells, 20002) demystify the assessment process and provide practitioners with valuable information about student achievement and instructional practice.

**Strategy two: Professional development**

There can be little doubt that improving instructional practice will improve student achievement (Lee et al. 1999). SPS values a highly qualified teaching force and allocates significant resources for professional development for the purpose of improving student achievement. One strategy for delivering school-based professional development has been content coaching, which has been incorporated into our professional development model since 2002. In addition to coaching, the district offers a wide array of professional development opportunities sponsored by the curriculum coordinators and teacher leaders. The development of teacher leaders to support instructional delivery has been a successful model used to provide school-based professional development.

The focus of professional development is to help teachers and administrators analyze student performance data, improve content expertise and engage students in the district’s rigorous common core curriculum. To support professional learning, collaboration time was bargained in 2006 and provided common planning time for teachers to work together to examine instructional challenges and receive support from colleagues on how to improve classroom
practice. Working in content or grade level teams has reduced teacher isolation and has helped teachers to increase their content knowledge and pedagogy.

Teacher expertise in using data has become increasingly sophisticated. Because the data dashboard system allows for sharing information city wide, a student’s data travels with them as they move from one school to the next. Having data immediately available allows for effective progress monitoring and the probability that intervention will be “just in time,” resulting in deeper understanding and improved performance.

Strategy three: Cultural competence

Professional educators today must have content expertise, understand and interpret data, engage students in rigorous core curriculum and be culturally competent. Cultural competence in SPS refers to having high expectations for each student. It also means that professional educators must create spaces in which children feel comfortable bringing the totality of their lived experiences into the learning situation (Shields, 2004). When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated they are more engaged in learning and experience greater school success (Dodd, 2000). To teach our students we must know them as individuals. We must believe that all students can learn.

The Strategic Plan is straightforward: our mission is to prepare and equip all children from all groups to leave K-12 education ready for post-secondary pursuits in a democratic society. We are an inclusive institution with moral obligations for the success of each child.

Strategy four: Assessment for learning

There is no getting around the conclusion that effective leaders must cultivate their knowledge, understanding, and skills (Michael Fullan, 2001). Principals and other systems leaders are charged with new leadership roles and benefit from time spent learning together. Monthly principals’ conferences serve to engage system leaders in new learning to support the instructional core. For the past two years the focus for principal professional development has been on Assessment for Learning. Assessment for Learning founded by Dr. Rick Stiggins, is a model for holding academic press and social support as equal and necessary attributes of the reform process.

Assessment for Learning is the practice of frequently checking students’ progress during instruction and providing descriptive feedback so that students can accurately name the next steps in their learning (Stiggins, 2006). Assessment for Learning balances the need for supportive classroom relationships with effective content and instructional expertise necessary for the improvement of instruction.

Our journey is far from complete. This spring marks the end of our fifth year of reform in SPS. The continuity of leadership for this work has been sustained through Dr. Stowell’s transition to the role of Superintendent for Spokane Public Schools, following Dr. Benzel’s retirement. The continued thoughtfulness and sponsorship of the Board of Directors for SPS has been essential to the ongoing commitment to the single goal of the district’s Strategic Plan: all students will succeed at each grade level and graduate from high schools well prepared for a variety of post secondary pursuits in a democratic society. We have accomplished significant measures that serve to improve instruction for all students including an aligned curriculum delivered in classrooms across the district, good access to student academic achievement data that informs instructional practice, and a system-wide belief that all students can learn. Collaboration about problems of practice is now part of the fabric of our district and the Strategic Plan goal has oriented the entire system to support the classroom.

Continuing support in the form of resources, increased capacity, state funding improvements and sustained energy will be required to continue the work. We have an extraordinarily talented group of professionals dedicated to increased academic achievement for each student. The future looks bright for Spokane Public Schools.

References


Driving right: Navigating the age of alignment

My ’94 Protégé pulls to the right, and the only time I know it is when my wife borrows my car and reminds me that I need to get it in for an alignment. She’s right, usually is. But it’s my car. I understand it, and it understands me. We fit. Unconsciously, I correct a bit to the left, and lead my loyal partner through our daily-driving dance. And though I placate my darling wife with patient promises of “getting it in next week,” I never do. In part, it’ll cost more than my car’s worth, and I fear—truly—that I’ll have correctly aligned wheels on a vehicle that no longer runs. Of course, that’s not entirely rational, and my continuing on is taking a risk, but somewhere lurking in my mind is the notion that it’ll be okay. And it’s the same notion in a different venue and on a different level that drives me to take risks in my classroom.

Over the past several years, a great amount of work has gone into aligning curriculum and instruction at the state, district, and building levels. In my department’s last text adoption, we went with Holt Rinehart Winston’s “Washington Edition” primarily because it “correlated with the EALRs.” By now, I’m sure that all publishers offer such editions; however, at the time HRW was first off the press, so they got the nod. Why wouldn’t they? Who doesn’t want to be aligned? And if the “work” has already been done…well, it was the obvious choice. And so with new levels of specificity and an abundance of assessment data, it seems that educators across the state are steering safely down the road. Of course, work remains and continues. In my department, we’ve spent the last three years working on grade-level, “horizontal” alignment, and we’ve only begun to scratch the surface of the far more complex process of vertical alignment. We’re not alone. Everyone is doing the same work, district to district, building to building. And that’s good. The collaborative dialogue has had a monumental impact on teaching and learning in our state. Examining, clarifying, and aligning what we teach has opened the door to looking at how we teach. Yes, we’re doing great work, but I fear in the end it may be the wrong work. Let me explain.

First, I believe in standards and assessment. I’m a fan of the WASL…well, at least the idea. Second, I believe in collaborative cultures and authentic accountability. We have to continue the dialogue about teaching and learning. Third, I believe in aligning curriculum and sharing best practices. What and how are huge. Fourth, I believe in the power of teachers. We have an immeasurable impact in the classroom. Finally, and most importantly, I believe in the promise of kids. Their potential far exceeds the confines of content, because learning comes from teaching kids, not from teaching curriculum. I wonder if instead of taking the curriculum to the kids, we shouldn’t be bringing the kids to the curriculum. That requires a side-step from what’s tangible and safe. It necessitates letting the car pull right a bit. It means knowing ourselves and knowing our kids through exploring the unrealized and untapped potential of both.

Upon entering the profession 12 years ago, I received what I thought at the time was sound advice, “Education’s not about reinventing the wheel.” It made sense to an inexperienced teacher. For a time I begged, borrowed, and stole all that I could. In a hurried, harried existence it was efficient, but it wasn’t effective. It never really fit. I knew it. Even worse, my kids knew it. And so I learned. I began to reinvent the wheel, or rather to modify it to fit me. In a rush of understanding at a conference last summer, I realized education is about reinventing the wheel.

I love conferences. I love that inspired, energized feeling of learning. And for a brief while, I’m on top of the world, but as always the moment fades, and the newly polished practitioner loses his luster. That changed last summer, though, for one reason: Kelly Gallagher. In late
Monte Syrie is an English teacher at Cheney High School.

August, five of my department members and I attended Mr. Gallagher’s workshop, Teaching Adolescent Writers. Though I’ve had many great learning moments over the past twelve years, none was as significant as my few hours with Kelly. And remarkably it’s not as much what he presented but how he presented it.

He offered the most complete package of writing instruction I’ve ever seen. As silly as it sounds, it’s as if he took all the cluttered, fragmented instructional ideas and dreams in my head and put them together, seemingly for me. And he made it seem so simple. I’m certain that I wasn’t alone in this. The “he-did-this-for-me energy” was palpable in the room. But he didn’t do it for us. He didn’t reinvent the wheel and place it on a pedagogical pedestal for all to assimilate and apply. He made better of the “best” by making it fit him. He did it for himself and his kids. I am not Kelly Gallagher. I am not an under-study who can simply follow the script and fill in.

So what’s the point? Why attend workshops and conferences if we can’t be he or she who’s on stage? The answer I discovered is simple: to learn. Learning is inspiration. It’s that euphoric drive to do and be more. We’ve all been there. We know. But we know, too, that they’re fragile, fleeting moments that are too soon gone—unless, unless we change our perspective and make the best of best practices by making them our own.

Inspiration dies if we don’t put it to work. Best practices abound; they always have. Indeed, I just think we’re more intentional now about sharing. And as we share in this age of alignment, let’s have the wisdom, the courage to reinvent our wheels.

Earlier, I mentioned that we may be doing the wrong work, and I now realize that perhaps this was not entirely fair, for many folks have put a lot of their lives into the vital venture of aligning the work that we do. So I’ll retract it, but only in part because I’m still concerned. My concern is born out of the fear that we believe—on many, probably too many levels—that if we build it, they will come, and this gets back to what I also mentioned earlier regarding bringing kids to the curriculum. Bountiful best practices and astutely aligned curricula are meaningless if we can’t connect them to kids.

Bringing implies leading, and leading is predicated on trust. I’ve often heard from frustrated colleagues the expression “you can lead a horse to water…” What’s thrilling about this statement is that it emphasizes student ownership and responsibility. What’s frightening—no, terrifying—about this statement is the fact that thirsty kids won’t drink. And I have to believe it’s because they’ve been lead to a mirage one too many times in their experience. Sadly, shamefully I’ve presented some mirages over the years, and I know the pain of losing that sacred trust. For the most part, especially later, students don’t trust us. We don’t do a good enough job of making things relevant, and generally, we do a dismal job of making real connections. We spend so much time becoming experts on curriculum and instruction and so little time becoming experts on what matters most: kids. I am not suggesting that we all brush up on our psychology. The solution is much simpler, but it requires more than a discernible drift to the right. For this, we may need to steer off the road.

Last year I risked thirty-plus hours of instructional time. For roughly one hour a week, my students and I engaged in “community circle,” which was loosely-based on the version from the TRIBES program. We sat in a circle on the floor and discussed anything from “favorite candy” to “what haunts us.” This was not easy. I, as you, take my job quite seriously and guard very jealously the time I have with my kids. What’s more, I take my charge as a sophomore English teacher especially seriously. I have to get the kids ready for the WASL. No, I alone do not get students to pass the test, but I’m their last experience before the big day. So why in the world would I jeopardize crucial contact time for something as silly as candy? A hunch. No, not a data-driven decision. Rather, I believed that an intentional investment in establishing relationships with my kids would create the basis for the trust required to bring my kids to standard and beyond.

Though it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made, it was not done lightly. In fact, it’s one of my toughest professional decisions ever. For I had to let go. I imagine it’s always been difficult for teachers to trust their instincts and let go. Today, I have to believe it’s even tougher, and tomorrow, I fear, is nearer to impossible. Our heads have made great strides in the last decade, but let’s not lose touch with our hearts. Kids don’t need transaction; they need connection. They need relationships, so when they come to the water, they’re not only willing to drink but also free and bold enough to splash around.

I guess by now we’re talking about something a little bigger than a middle-aged man’s fourteen-year old car that pulls to the right. Indeed, we’re talking about a road paved with good intentions, drivers with extraordinary talent, and passengers with dreams bigger than we can imagine. And it’s for them that we must keep our eyes on and off the road during this critical time in our paramount profession.
To be of use: The story of professional development coaches in the Renton School District

The professional development coach will provide support, training, coaching and mentoring which builds school and teacher capacity to improve student learning.

(Excerpt from PDC job description)

Jumping in head first
In 2005, Renton’s improvement plan identified the following essential understandings related to professional development: (1) Effective instruction has a positive impact on student learning; (2) Professional development has its greatest impact when it is building embedded and coordinated with the curriculum; (3) Data is a tool for seeking solutions; (4) System wide change efforts that move on several fronts where each part supports and reinforces each other make more impact on student learning than any single change can accomplish; (5) Collaboration of important stakeholders is vital to school improvement; (6) Significant improvements in classroom practice cannot happen in the absence of active support and leadership from the district; (7) Student learning is the concern and responsibility of everyone. The action plan called for the creation of a 1.0 FTE Professional Development Coach (PDC)/Facilitator in every building on or before fall 2006, funded through a combination of district, Title I, Title II and I-728 funds. The Professional Development Coaches were identified as the mode of delivery for these new essential understandings.

Professional Development Coaches in Renton became a reality when every certificated elementary teacher received a written invitation to apply to be a Professional Development Coach. A team of 13 principals and directors interviewed and hired 11 PDCs for the 2005-06 school year. Imagine how unnerving it was to be sitting at the end of a long conference table surrounded by all the elementary principals taking notes on your every word! It’s a wonder we weren’t scared away.

With limited introductions and a skeletal job description, our first meeting proved to be a challenge. We were given the task of creating a one-day staff development training for first year teachers which was to occur the following week. It was like a reality TV show! We quickly determined each other’s strengths, assigned tasks, created an agenda, and planned to feed and welcome more than 100 new teachers to the Renton School District. Although the planning effort was a struggle, the end result was a great success for us and the new teachers. We gained understanding from each other and about each other. This was the beginning of our own learning journey.

Over the course of our first year, we attended workshops that addressed mentoring skills, data analysis, curriculum implementation and alignment, relationship building, differentiated instruction, collaboration, and assessment. Veenman and Denessen’s (2001) study suggests that a training program positively affects the coaching skills of prospective coaches. The first and most significant training we attended together was the University of California at Santa Cruz’s (UCSC) Mentor Academy that consisted of five 3-day training sessions. The five sessions were (1) Foundations in Mentoring, (2) Coaching and Observation Strategies, (3) Using Student Work to Guide Instruction, (4) Providing Professional Development, and (5) Coaching in Complex Situations. This valuable and essential training, combined with a myriad of other workshops and conferences, took us out of our assigned buildings on a regular basis. It was difficult to balance our own need for professional development and the need to establish trusting relationships with our staff. It was a fine line and another lesson learned.

Submerged in the task
The first year, our duties and responsibilities were unclear and varied. The confusion was compounded because the position originated as a .5 FTE position at each building. Some PDCs were split between two buildings; some were split between two jobs. For example, one PDC was a coach and a classroom teacher, while several other PDCs were Educational Associates (equivalent to assistant principals) and coaches, walking the very fine line of coaching and evaluation. It was a year of initiation and transition.

Some teachers misunderstood our responsibilities and were uncomfortable with our presence in the buildings, while others welcomed the support and encouragement to grow professionally. We were able to grow with patience because we felt supported by our district and building leadership, and we were united as PDC’s in our commitment to improve student learning. “If a learning event is intended to be transformational, then there must be a period in which the participants are unsettled, wondering and challenged” (Butler, 1996). Our bi-monthly meetings as a team of PDC’s provided support and focus to our work. These meetings were essential for maintaining our morale and reinforcing our purpose in the schools; we celebrated successes and brainstormed solutions to individual and group challenges. Amidst the struggles, we remained hopeful, trusting the process and keeping our sights
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on our tasks at hand and the powerful results of our collaborative work.

**Do what has to be done, again and again**
During the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years, we have seen many changes. Along with a new superintendent, we have had three different advisors in as many years. Although our district made a substantial budget cuts, the commitment to professional development remained strong. In 2006-07 our positions grew from a .5 FTE to a 1.0 FTE in each elementary building.

Because we are now full time in one building, we have been able to build strong collegial relationships which allow us to take our work to the next level. Our work with new teachers is rewarding. Through goal-setting, observation, problem-solving, and reflection we are able move them forward as professionals. We foster community, continuity and camaraderie among new teachers by hosting monthly district-wide trainings on topics of concern to new teachers. An equally important facet of our position is creating opportunities for veteran teachers to reach their professional goals and the goals of the district. We team-teach lessons, provide resources and research to support the curriculum, and model effective teaching strategies. Just as teachers differentiate instruction for their students, we differentiate our professional development based on the need of our teachers.

In the fall of 2007, the school board and superintendent made a bold schedule change for the entire district. This change provides more time and staff development opportunities with teachers, making our position more transparent, which has been positive. Every Friday, teachers, leaders and support staff have 90 minutes of collaboration time built into the contractual work day. This provides quality time for small groups of educators to analyze student work and achievement data, review and discuss new curriculum content, and plan instruction that ensures all students learn. Teams might be organized by grade level, cross-grade level or subject matter. “A number of schools demonstrate that when we grant these teams both autonomy and responsibility for short-term results, we will find that their on-the-ground expertise has an incalculably larger and more direct impact on instruction and achievement” (Schmoker, 2006, p.121).

**Moving things forward**
In order to sustain the forward momentum of our work, we are exploring strategies for balancing the need for continual change and improvement with the importance of recognizing and celebrating accomplishments along the way. As our district moves towards a model of distributed leadership, it is our responsibility to nurture teacher leaders. Our position is ongoing and ever changing; there is no finish line. As Showers (1985) articulated, “Coaching has several purposes. The first is to build communities of teachers who continuously engage in the study of their craft…. Second, coaching develops the shared languages and set of common understandings necessary for the collegial study of new knowledge and skills… Third, coaching provides a structure for the follow up to training that is essential for acquiring new teaching skills and strategies” (p 43-44). We are that support structure.

**Work that is real**
We are the Renton PDC’s. Our story and our learning develop and unfold as work becomes more complex and challenging. We will maintain our focus using data and research to reach the diverse needs of our students in the Renton School District. It is difficult to collect quantitative data on the impact that the PDC’s have on student learning. Currently, we use staff survey data to document our effectiveness and help guide our practice. As the role of PDC evolves to meet the incessant challenges of educating our students, we are confident that we will continue to influence teacher professional growth and student learning. As we continue our work, we are committed to strengthening the effectiveness of our teachers. We will grow and nurture established relationships while we support, train and coach our teachers to ultimately improve student learning. It is satisfying to be of use.

**References**


ARE YOU AND YOUR COLLEAGUES serving K-12 students in creative ways? Can you shed light on legislative trends that might benefit educators across the state? Can you illustrate recent educational research claims through stories from schools and classrooms on the front lines? If so, consider taking some time to clearly and persuasively contribute to the intellectual life of the WSASCD community. Please e-mail a 50-100 word preview of your contribution to kingrey@wsu.edu and we will promptly send a submission guidelines form for your 1000-2500 word article. If you have questions, please e-mail editor Joan Kingrey at the above address.

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