

Rediscovering Powerful Instruction

Pulling Back the Curtain on Transformational Schools



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Planning with Data, Improving Instruction, Managing Resources, Closing the Gap

How do you transform a school measured by student growth and success?

I have always believed “educational reform” is somewhat of pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other, really not staying in one place too long. There are two main concerns or impacts with this pendulum to school reform.

First, if you truly take away all the bells and whistles, educational shifts (extreme movements of the pendulum) are typically the same approach, wrapped up differently with new names, and usually producing the same results. This means the same old approaches are implemented

with the promise of doing something different. This is the definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over but hoping for a different result. Just because you give an approach new wrapping and use of text heavy vocabulary, it doesn’t change the product. The fact is, at the foundational level, the approach (instruction, programs or belief) remains the same, still netting the same result.

The second issue or concern is the focus or trend never stays “current” long enough to grab hold. As an institution, there is a belief a “silver bullet” will fix all your school’s/ district’s academic growth issues. This rapid turnaround and belief new programs will be the fix only creates a

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false sense of hope and reality. It also deviates and diminishes the impact a teacher and their instruction has on a student’s academic growth. For some reason, we forget the number one indicator of student growth and achievement is teacher effectiveness, NOT the newest and “greatest” program. So schools and districts

abandon programs or approaches simply because it did not yield the results promised. However, if you look deeper, the issue is not the program or approach, it is the instruction coupled with the program/approach yielding it powerless (there is one approach most districts have thrown out, but that's for a different time).

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

As a school administrator who has lead the charge of transforming several urban and rural schools, I have seen trends come and go. Teachers and their craft are being replaced by programs. Some believe if we implement these programs, we will see a drastic increase in test scores. However, the costly reality of this belief or approach (relying, trusting and investing in the new-fangled “game changers” for school transformation) is we continue to tear away at the core of teaching — teachers teach kids, programs do not — they only serve as a vehicle. Vehicles are powerless without a competent driver [teacher].

If we do not begin to shift our focus by increasing teacher capacity around pedagogy and content knowledge, everything else is for not. The focus must be instruction and not curriculum, materials, or any other slew of resources at our disposal. Don't get me wrong, there are some highly useful products available to support instruction and assessment; however, they have zero impact or effect if we do not have purposeful, intentional and powerful instruction taking place in the classroom.

Think of all the money schools and districts spend on computer-based programs in order to become a technology-based school. Technology has a role in schools, but it cannot overshadow the importance placed on instruction. If you spend more on programs than you do on increasing/growing teacher capacity, where have you placed your focus and priority?

This shift in focus does send an unintentional message to your staff and colleagues. As the leader within the building, you need to know how to find balance in maintaining the focus on instruction while still placing impactful tools and resources in the capable hands of staffs. Be careful: Once you have found the balance, the inadvertent mishap is teachers who do not have a strong pedagogical approach or depth of content begin to rely on the resources or materials given to them, thus removing the intentionality and purpose of their use. This, in turn, diminishes the impact.



“Have you grown instructionally and continue to be the lead learner on instructional effectiveness? Do you know the effect size of teacher clarity, reciprocal teaching or corrective and immediate feedback?”

Consider that last paragraph. Take a minute to reflect on your own instructional knowledge and relevance in today's instructional setting. Do you continue to view instruction through the lens in which you were taught and the one you used in your own classroom? Have you grown instructionally and continue to be the lead learner on instructional effectiveness? Do you know the effect size of teacher clarity, reciprocal teaching or corrective and immediate feedback? If not, I challenge you to immerse yourself in building your own capacity around effective instructional strategies versus instructional materials and programs. You need to know their impact and when or when not to support certain instructional strategies (and with whom). This leads to more intention and purpose when working with your staff. It places the focus on increasing the intentionality in their instruction versus intentionally using the curriculum or program.

POWERFUL INSTRUCTION VS. POWERFUL PROGRAMS

This shift in knowledge and focus, if leveraged correctly, allows you to begin the process of transforming your school to one based on the powerful instruction (academic growth) you have to offer students versus the programs you may have to offer. This shift is an entirely different conversation around building reliance, perseverance and driven students based on self-discipline versus just compliance. It is a shift in thinking for some and can be a tough

sale, especially to communities and schools with a misconception around the impact effective instruction (and what that even is) has on academic growth and achievement versus the impact a program can make. In the end, if you stay the course, the data will tell the story.

In closing, forget the fluff, the products and the all the vendor booths at your next conference. Instead, find ways to increase your instructional knowledge and how to apply that knowledge. Get out of your building, watch amazing teachers do supernatural work. Do not stop there — talk with them, learn their craft, begin shifting the focus from programs and approaches to intentional and purposeful instruction driven by a desired outcome.

After all, good instruction never goes out of style. ■