

The Key to Improved Teaching and Learning

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Wonderful news has emerged for those seeking to improve student achievement. Two different comprehensive syntheses of research on the factors impacting student learning have come to the same conclusion: the most important variable in the achievement of students is the quality of instruction they receive on a daily basis (Marzano, 2003; Hattie, 2009). To ensure students learn at higher levels, simply improve teaching.

The question remains, “How?” The challenge is particularly daunting in the traditional K-12 culture which regards each school as a series of independent kingdoms (classrooms) staffed by relatively autonomous sub-contractors (teachers) who are responsible only for what happens inside their individual classrooms. In this culture of isolation, the individual teacher becomes the focus of improvement.

School districts typically create elaborate teacher supervision plans in the hope that superiors can evaluate subordinates into better performance. Teachers are provided financial incentives to pursue random graduate courses at varied colleges and universities or to attend a myriad of disconnected workshops. Districts have continued with these traditional strategies despite compelling evidence that they have little impact on the quality of teaching.

Furthermore, the assumption behind this approach – improving the effectiveness of an individual teacher will improve the organization – is patently false. The intense focus on the individual discounts the conditions and constraints of the systems within which they work. As W. Edwards Deming observed, put a good person in a bad system and the system will win every time.



Systems Thinking

A “systems approach” to school improvement represents the antithesis of a culture based on individual isolation and independence. Systems thinking concentrates on *interdependent* relationships, connections, and interactions of the component parts of a larger system. The focus is on creating powerful systems that promote the continuous improvement of the entire organization.

The Professional Learning Community at Work (PLC) model offers a systems approach to school improvement. Teachers are organized into grade level, course specific, or interdisciplinary collaborative teams in which educators *work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable*. A process is put in place to ensure teams clarify the essential learnings for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction; establish consistent pacing; create frequent common assessments to monitor student learning, and agree on the criteria they will use to judge the quality of student work. Each team then uses the evidence of student learning to identify individual students who need additional time and support, to discover problematic areas of the curriculum that require the attention of the team, and to help each member become aware of his or her instructional strengths and weaknesses.

The collaboration and interdependence of these horizontal teams extends to vertical teams as well. If a fundamental goal of the third grade mathematics program is to prepare students for success in fourth grade mathematics, third grade teachers must work closely with fourth grade teachers if they are to achieve that goal.

A Systematic Approach to Intervention

Because the traditional approach to schooling has considered the individual classroom teacher the primary agent for ensuring student learning, what happens when students’ struggles have been left to the discretion of each teacher. It is widely understood (and accepted) that some teachers will allow students to turn in a late homework assignment; some will not. Some teachers will allow a student to re-take a test; some will not. Some teachers will come early and stay late to provide assistance to students; some will not and others cannot. Some teachers will insist that students continue working on a paper or project until it meets an acceptable standard; some will assign a failing grade and move on. Schools have played a form of educational lottery with the lives of their students because what happens when students struggle will depend on the idiosyncrasies of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

The PLC concept demands a *systematic* approach to intervention. It eschews the randomness of traditional practice and guarantees all students will be the beneficiaries of a coordinated, methodical, multi-layered, fluid plan of intervention—regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

This plan will:

- Provide students with additional time and support for learning if the current level of time and support is not leading to their success,
- Ensure timely assistance, with support provided as soon as there is evidence a student is experiencing difficulty, and
- Require rather than invite students to utilize the extra time and support.

The District as a PLC

The PLC concept also extends beyond the individual school when district leaders become emphatic about certain conditions that must be evident in all schools. Those conditions should include:

- Each school must demonstrate a commitment to high levels of learning for all students.
- Teachers must be organized into teams and given time to collaborate.
- Teams must provide students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum for every course and grade level, must develop frequent and varied common assessments, and use the evidence of student learning to fuel the continuous improvement of both the team and each of its members.
- The school must create a system of intervention that provide students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty in their learning.
- The school must have a plan for extending and enriching the learning of students who are proficient, a plan that gives more students greater access to more challenging curriculum and the support to ensure their success in that curriculum.

Although district leaders are “tight” on these essential elements of an effective PLC, they are “loose” in allowing each school the autonomy to create its own strategies for creating these conditions. They create processes to enable schools to learn from and support one another. Traditional administrative meetings are transformed into an intense collaborative effort where a principal presents all available evidence regarding student learning in his or her school, discusses steps the school has taken to promote the various elements of the PLC concept, celebrates the progress that has been made, and calls attention to areas of concern. The other principals and central office staff then brainstorm solutions to problems and offer strategies that may have worked in other schools. Action research and ongoing learning are the norm. Leaders at all levels are expected to take an interest in and contribute to the success of every school.

But isn't it about the Individual Teacher?

The PLC process does not diminish the significance of the individual teacher. If the classroom teacher remains the most important factor in student learning, the challenge facing schools is, “How can we persuade our teachers to embrace more effective instructional strategies?” The most powerful strategy of persuasion is presenting teachers with irrefutable evidence of consistently better results. As one research study concluded, “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with actual real-life data” (Patterson, et. al., p.51). The transparency of results from the frequent common assessments that serve as the lynchpin of the PLC process provides that ongoing evidence of effectiveness. When teachers see that students taught by a colleague consistently perform at higher levels on team-developed assessments, they become more receptive to changes in their instructional practice. Furthermore, the positive peer pressure of the collaborative team process fosters improvement. Most educators are moved to seek new practices rather than continually preventing their team from achieving its goals because of their poor results.

Conclusion

After synthesizing over 800 meta-analyses on the factors that impact student achievement, John Hattie concluded that the best way to improve schools was to organize teachers into collaborative teams that clarify what each student must learn and the indicators of learning the team will track, to gather evidence of that learning on an ongoing basis, and to analyze the results together so that they could learn which instructional strategies were working and which were not. In other words, he urged schools to function as Professional Learning Communities. Robert Marzano came to a similar conclusion when he described the PLC concept as “one of the most powerful initiatives for school improvement I have seen in the last decade.” The quality of the individual teacher remains paramount in student learning, and the PLC concept is our best strategy for creating the system that ensures more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time. *

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