



A Chance for Change

Can professional learning communities stop mediocre instruction and, ultimately, save education?

Mike Schmoker

Could public schools, from urban to affluent, be on the verge of an unprecedented breakthrough in effectiveness? Yes, as we'll see in a moment. For Robert Gordon (education adviser to Massachusetts Senator John Kerry), simple, reasonable changes in schooling would allow us to achieve “a social miracle ... an America where birth doesn't dictate destiny.” Importantly, school board members—like you, like myself, a former school board member—may be the linchpin to such historic success.

But there's a catch. As Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, has famously found, swift, dramatic improvement requires an encounter with the “brutal facts”—those awkward, unpleasant truths that organizations prefer not to address—or even talk about. In education, what are the pertinent facts that, if addressed, would work this “social miracle”?

First the good news: Among factors that affect student learning at all levels and could erase our horrific achievement gap, instruction is king. It has a larger impact on student success, college admission, and college graduation than all other factors combined.

Here's where it gets brutal. Every close study of actual classroom practice reveals that instruction is typically mediocre, or worse—even in so-called “good” schools. In most classrooms, there is a massive gap between effective practice and actual practice. The primary reason for the poor state of instruction is that we do not, in all honesty, supervise it. Therefore, good instruction is voluntary—and rare.

These facts are established by research studies and close analyses of classroom practice in every discipline. They explain why we have not made tremendous strides toward better schools in the past 20 years. Perhaps most interesting, every audience of teachers and administrators I have spoken to across North America has admitted that these facts are indisputable.

Taking on the buffer

The great irony of our time is that the brutal reality of poor instruction is seldom addressed or even mentioned at school

board meetings. It isn't written about in the education section of newspapers or honestly discussed at faculty or central office meetings. Amidst the din of our perennial plans and programs, this fact works silently to cripple every well-meant improvement initiative, feeding cynicism, starving hope, and denying our children the education they need and deserve.

But there is good news here. If we bring our instructional shortcomings to light and address them even imperfectly, we will have an immense, near-term impact on school quality and the achievement gap. To make such progress, we must take on what Harvard University's Richard Elmore calls “the buffer.”

The buffer consists of long-held traditions and policies that create barriers around the school and classroom. It discourages anyone from taking too close a look at what actually goes on inside the school. The buffer makes it awkward for school board or community members, and central office or building administrators, to ask for information that would reveal the chasm between good and poor teaching practices, and between effective and merely token instructional supervision. An immense opportunity awaits those who break this silence.

I am not alone here. In every camp, there is a growing acknowledgment that the real reason for everything from high school to college dropout rates is that most daily lessons (not all, fortunately) lack clarity and focus. The most basic, widely known elements of a good lesson are ignored. This is almost as true in high-scoring schools as it is in less advantaged settings.

I have visited hundreds of classrooms around the country with teams of local teachers and administrators. For most of them, it is an epiphany, as they confront the consequences of our long, sad tradition of neglecting to monitor or supervise instruction.

Curricular chaos

We truly can have the schools we want. But that won't happen until we address the manifest shortcomings in instruction and its supervision. We need to challenge a system that assures that “the typical child in the typical school ... lives in an educational environment of deep and pathological inco-

herence and ineffectiveness,” wrote Richard Elmore, a Harvard University professor and a policy analyst at the Albert Shanker Institute.

How incoherent? How ineffective? Let’s begin with curriculum, with what teachers actually teach (versus what is contained in the “curriculum guide”). Of all aspects of instruction, this has the greatest effects on student learning. If teachers taught to an agreed-upon set of curriculum standards that conform even reasonably well with the best essential state standards, achievement would skyrocket. There’s nothing new here, but education author and researcher Robert Marzano’s meticulous synthesis of the research makes it incontrovertible.

Why then, in the age of standards and accountability, haven’t we seen dramatic increases in learning? Because even hard-working teachers, functioning in unsupervised isolation, lapse easily (as I did) into what we’ve always done—or like to teach. Most teachers teach to a “self-selected jumble” of topics and standards, according to researcher Susan J. Rosenholtz. In most schools, and at the same grade levels, the actual, taught curriculum standards vary wildly from teacher to teacher.

Such curricular chaos is rampant across the disciplines. It is painfully evident in reading and literacy instruction. Almost every audience of educators I have spoken to has admitted that the two activities most likely to be neglected in English or reading classes are reading and writing. They acknowledge that this situation has devastating consequences for anyone wanting to succeed in high school or college.

Many school board and community members I speak with are unaware of the explanation for this alarming reality. Decades ago, a host of inane, unproven practices crept into our schools while crowding out the most important, straightforward activities that equip students intellectually and prepare them for college and careers. Those activities are purposeful reading and writing.

Instead, from the earliest grades, students can be found coloring, cutting and pasting, watching movies, and completing worksheets in ratios—I’m not exaggerating here—that overwhelm meaningful reading and writing activities. Lucy Calkins, among the most respected literacy educators in the United States, laments this as the triumph of “literary arts and crafts” over authentic literacy. Former Senator Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.) is currently the chairman of the National Commission on Writing, an organization trying to bring this to the public’s attention.

The way out

This curricular chaos and poor instruction are the result when a system does not require, encourage, or reward good instruction or its constructive supervision. What schools call “supervision” is nothing of the sort. It has evolved into routines that eliminate the friction between teachers and administrators and ensure that poor practices predominate year after year,

with serious consequences for students.

There is a fairly simple way out. We can turn the tide immediately by instituting the most effective, widely recognized structure for guaranteeing effective teaching and coherent curriculum: professional learning communities. In essence, they require teachers to work in teams to do two simple things:

- Select the most important skills and standards that they will hold one another accountable to teach and test during the school year—on a roughly common schedule.

- Meet, at least twice a month, for 40 to 60 minutes, to prepare and refine standards-based lessons and units to promote success on common, teacher-made assessments, conducted at least once a quarter.

Another critical layer: Teams should also meet at least once a quarter—briefly—with a principal or department head to share evidence that they are indeed teaching the agreed-upon standards, to share assessment results and successes, and to discuss ways to improve performance during the next quarter. It is absolutely vital that successful results from effective lessons, units, or quarterly assessments be celebrated at faculty, central office, and school board meetings. We become what we honor and celebrate frequently.

As many of you already know, professional learning communities are not the next “new thing.” For more than a generation, a legion of researchers in education and industry has recognized this arrangement as the fastest, surest path to improved performance. Many schools and organizations have demonstrated that swift, dramatic improvement is almost inevitable with this approach—especially where (as in education) it has been entirely absent. I’ve visited and written about dozens of high-poverty schools making 30 or 40 point gains in math, reading, and writing in a single year. Adlai Stevenson High School, near Chicago, realized sustained, record-breaking improvements on every kind of assessment over a 10-year period in this way. There was an 800 percent increase in AP success; average ACT scores rose from 21 to 25, a giant leap.

School boards must be the driving force for this momentous shift from business as usual. This time, they can be confident that this is the real thing, the state of the art for improving schools. All that is required now is leadership, clarity (with barrels of repetition and reinforcement), and a frequent, calm insistence on plain, public evidence of improvement.

Of course, we don’t have to do any of this. But if we don’t, let’s at least stop pretending that we are serious about better schools and about closing the achievement gap. But if we do, we immediately will begin to improve the life chances of tens of millions of children whose success is the reason most of us became school board members. ■

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