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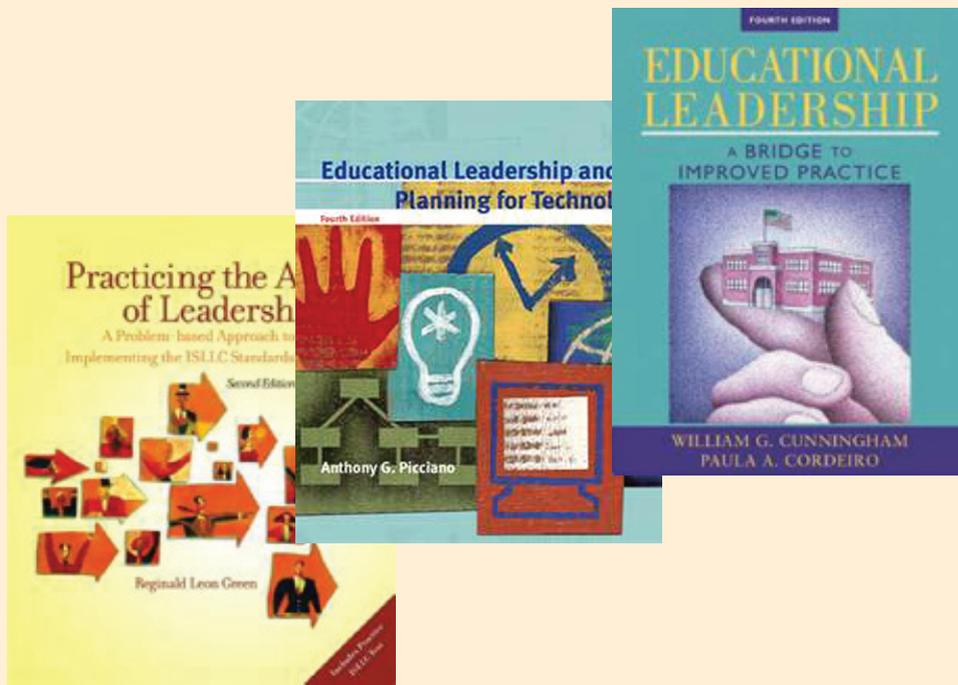
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Introduction

Your Top Eight (or 8,000) Concerns
Marge Scherer

As the publishing year ends, these eight articles in *The Best of EL 2009–2010* highlight the concerns of educators this past year. I imagine that the typical reader—you, perhaps—could add a few dozen more concerns to the list. It has been a year of escalating challenge for schools. And with some pundits predicting that the next 10 years will produce more school change than the past 100 years have, more challenges are certainly ahead. We hope that these articles, written by educators for educators, will help you examine the range of possibilities and clarify your thinking about issues that matter. Our aim for *Educational Leadership* is to help you improve our schools and, ultimately, ready our kids to meet their own challenges.

Do What, When?

The 21st Century Learning Initiative aims to educate young people to acquire and use information, solve problems, work together, and be innovative leaders. These are not easy skills to learn, as our writers tell us. Wary of wholeheartedly endorsing a movement that might direct schools away from their paramount concerns—better curriculum, better teaching, and better testing—authors Andrew Rotherham and Daniel Willingham eye 21st century rhetoric skeptically. Still, although they assert that such skills as critical thinking and global awareness are not new, they

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also acknowledge that «what's actually new is the extent to which changes in our economy and the world mean that collective and individual success depends on having such skills.» One of the most-clicked articles on our awardwinning ASCD website, the article provokes thinking. We are proud to say this entire issue received an Association-Trends Gold Award for Excellence.

My Kingdom for a Leader

From deflated budgets to divisive culture wars, from oppressive mandates to insiders' politics, it's tough to be a school leader. In this issue, leaders describe how to not just survive but thrive. Thomas Hatch here speaks of the need to act as spokesperson, negotiator, and champion of the school's interests. Among his prescriptions: distribute the work, scan and seed the environment, and cultivate a network of allies inside and outside your school.

E Pluribus Unum

A recent tweeter proposes that educators rise up and burn all the bubble tests. Although frustration with testing mania is high, we will not soon be doing away with standardized tests. Our challenge, then, is to make testing serve teaching rather than the other way around. In this issue, authors propose ways to select and create assessments that give stable estimates of students' achievement and provide feedback that improves teaching practice. Here, William Schmidt and Leland Cogan address the first step: establishing challenging and clear content standards that guide classroom instruction and learning. Their article is an AEP finalist in the category of Learned Article. Our cover has also been recognized with a 2010 American In-House Design Award.

Health: The First Basic

Statistics show that a renewed emphasis on promoting a healthy school environment is overdue. Unhealthy foods are still widely available, and curriculum narrowing has scaled back opportunities for physical activity. Underscoring the importance of teaching the whole child, our authors discuss a range of essential human needs that affect learning, for example, nutrition, sleep, and emotional health. Here, Matthew D. Selekman talks about harmful stress as he provides insight into adolescents' self-harming behaviors.

Do You Know Where Your Kids Are?

«Know your students» sounds like common sense, but it is also a principle of cognitive science. In this issue, authors discuss how teachers convince students that learning is worth the effort: They begin by sizing up students' needs and concerns. Authors also elaborate on how to orchestrate differentiated instruction. Here, Robyn Jackson describes how to discover the «currencies» students value and use them to give students access to the curriculum.

Bring Back the Books

With a large percentage of students reading below grade level and many more falling out of the reading habit, a continuing emphasis on reading is essential. Although most schools now teach foundational phonics and comprehension strategies, fewer find time in the day for students to read on their own or allow them to choose their own books. Here, Thomas Newkirk makes the case for slow reading, a productive alternative to scanning and skimming.

Racing to Where?

Our issue on «Reimagining Schools» reviews a dozen new reforms—from entrepreneurial schools to personalized learning, expanded learning time to national standards, open-source education to early college experience. The largest infusion of federal dollars into education behooves all leaders to embrace innovation. Mike Rose reminds us to keep our bearings as we choose worthy reforms.

To Fire or Support?

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What does it mean for the nation's schoolchildren when massive layoffs decimate the teaching force? In this issue, we talk back to those who claim the way to improve education is to fire bad teachers. Yes, some school systems should do a better job of removing inadequate teachers, but isn't it more important to address the complex factors that support effective teaching? Morgaen Donaldson here shows how high-quality feedback not only motivates teachers but also improves teaching practice. This ends our lineup for The Best of EL 2009–2010. Be sure to log in as a member to read all the articles on www.ascd.org/el.

—Marge Scherer

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21st Century Skills: The Challenges Ahead

Andrew J. Rotherham and Daniel Willingham

To work, the 21st century skills movement will require keen attention to curriculum, teacher quality, and assessment.

A growing number of business leaders, politicians, and educators are united around the idea that students need «21st century skills» to be successful today. It's exciting to believe that we live in times that are so revolutionary that they demand new and different abilities. But in fact, the skills students need in the 21st century are not new.

Critical thinking and problem solving, for example, have been components of human progress throughout history, from the development of early tools, to agricultural advancements, to the invention of vaccines, to land and sea exploration. Such skills as information literacy and global awareness are not new, at least not among the elites in different societies. The need for mastery of different kinds of knowledge, ranging from facts to complex analysis? Not new either. In *The Republic*, Plato wrote about four distinct levels of intellect. Perhaps at the time, these were considered «3rd century BCE skills»?

What's actually new is the extent to which changes in our economy and the world mean that collective and individual success depends on having such skills. Many U.S. students are taught these skills—those who are fortunate enough to attend highly effective schools or at least encounter great teachers—but it's a matter of chance rather than the deliberate design of our school system. Today we cannot afford a system in which receiving a high-quality education is akin to a game of bingo. If we are to have a more equitable and effective public education system, skills that have been the province of the few must become universal.

This distinction between «skills that are novel» and «skills that must be taught more intentionally

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and effectively» ought to lead policymakers to different education reforms than those they are now considering. If these skills were indeed new, then perhaps we would need a radical overhaul of how we think about content and curriculum. But if the issue is, instead, that schools must be more deliberate about teaching critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving to all students, then the remedies are more obvious, although still intensely challenging.

What Will It Take?

The history of U.S. education reform should greatly concern everyone who wants schools to do a better job of teaching students to think. Many reform efforts, from reducing class size to improving reading instruction, have devolved into fads or been implemented with weak fidelity to their core intent. The 21st century skills movement faces the same risk.

To complicate the challenge, some of the rhetoric we have heard surrounding this movement suggests that with so much new knowledge being created, content no longer matters; that ways of knowing information are now much more important than information itself. Such notions contradict what we know about teaching and learning and raise concerns that the 21st century skills movement will end up being a weak intervention for the very students—low-income students and students of color—who most need powerful schools as a matter of social equity.

The debate is not about content versus skills. There is no responsible constituency arguing against ensuring that students learn how to think in school. Rather, the issue is how to meet the challenges of delivering content and skills in a rich way that genuinely improves outcomes for students.

What will it take to ensure that the idea of «21st century skills»—or more precisely, the effort to ensure that all students, rather than just a privileged few, have access to a rich education that intentionally helps them learn these skills—is successful in improving schools? That effort requires three primary components. First, educators and policymakers must ensure that the instructional program is complete and that content is not shortchanged for an ephemeral pursuit of skills. Second, states, school districts, and schools need to revamp how they think about human capital in education—in particular how teachers are trained. Finally, we need new assessments that can accurately measure richer learning and more complex tasks.

For the 21st century skills effort to be effective, these three elements must be implemented in concert. Otherwise, the reform will be superficial and counter-productive.

Better Curriculum

People on all sides of this debate often speak of skills and knowledge as separate. They describe skills as akin to a function on a calculator: If your calculator can compute square roots, it can do so for any number; similarly, if a student has developed the ability to «think scientifically,» he or she can do so with any content. In this formulation, domain knowledge is mainly important as grist for the mill—you need something to think about.

Skills and knowledge are not separate, however, but intertwined. In some cases, knowledge helps us recognize the underlying structure of a problem. For example, even young children understand the logical implications of a rule like «If you finish your vegetables, you will get a cookie after dinner.» They can draw the logical conclusion that a child who is denied a cookie after dinner must not have finished her vegetables. Without this familiar context, however, the same child will probably find it difficult to understand the logical form *modus tollens*, of which the cookie rule is an example. (If P, then Q. Q is false. Therefore, P is false.) Thus, it's inaccurate to conceive of logical thinking as a separate skill that can be applied across a variety of situations. Sometimes we fail to recognize that we have a particular thinking skill (such as applying *modus tollens*) unless it comes in the form of known content.

At other times, we know that we have a particular thinking skill, but domain knowledge is necessary if we are to use it. For example, a student might have learned that «thinking scientifically» requires understanding the importance of anomalous results in an experiment. If you're surprised by the results of an experiment, that suggests that your hypothesis was wrong and the data are telling you something interesting. But to be surprised, you must make a prediction in the first place—and you can only generate a prediction if you understand the domain in which you are working. Thus, without content knowledge we often cannot use thinking skills properly and effectively.

Why would misunderstanding the relationship of skills and knowledge lead to trouble? If you believe that skills and knowledge are separate, you are likely to draw two incorrect conclusions. First, because content is readily available in many locations but thinking skills reside in the learner's brain, it would seem clear that if we must choose between them, skills are essential, whereas content is merely desirable. Second, if skills are independent of content, we could reasonably conclude that we can develop these skills through the use of any content. For example, if students can learn how to think critically about science in the context of any scientific material, a teacher should select content that will engage students (for instance, the chemistry of candy), even if that content is not central to the field. But all content is not equally important to mathematics, or to science, or to literature. To think critically, students need the knowledge that is central to the domain.

The importance of content in the development of thinking creates several challenges for the 21st century skills movement. The first is the temptation to emphasize advanced, conceptual thinking too early in training—an approach that has proven ineffective in numerous past reforms, such as the «New Math» of the 1960s (Loveless, 2002). Learning tends to follow a predictable path. When students first encounter new ideas, their knowledge is shallow and their understanding is bound to specific examples. They need exposure to varied examples before their understanding of a concept becomes more abstract and they can successfully apply that understanding to novel situations.

Another curricular challenge is that we don't yet know how to teach self-direction, collaboration, creativity, and innovation the way we know how to teach long division. The plan of 21st century skills proponents seems to be to give students more experiences that will presumably develop these skills—for example, having them work in groups. But experience is not the same thing as practice. Experience means only that you use a skill; practice means that you try to improve by noticing what you are doing wrong and formulating strategies to do better. Practice also requires feedback, usually from someone more skilled than you are.

Because of these challenges, devising a 21st century skills curriculum requires more than paying lip service to content knowledge. Outlining the skills in detail and merely urging that content be taught, too, is a recipe for failure. We must plan to teach skills in the context of particular content knowledge and to treat both as equally important.

In addition, education leaders must be realistic about which skills are teachable. If we deem that such skills as collaboration and self-direction are essential, we should launch a concerted effort to study how they can be taught effectively rather than blithely assume that mandating their teaching will result in students learning them.

Better Teaching

Greater emphasis on skills also has important implications for teacher training. Our resolve to teach these skills to all students will not be enough. We must have a plan by which teachers can

succeed where previous generations have failed.

Advocates of 21st century skills favor student-centered methods—for example, problem-based learning and project-based learning—that allow students to collaborate, work on authentic problems, and engage with the community. These approaches are widely acclaimed and can be found in any pedagogical methods textbook; teachers know about them and believe they're effective. And yet, teachers don't use them. Recent data show that most instructional time is composed of seatwork and whole-class instruction led by the teacher (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Even when class sizes are reduced, teachers do not change their teaching strategies or use these student-centered methods (Shapson, Wright, Eason, & Fitzgerald, 1980). Again, these are not new issues. John Goodlad (1984) reported the same finding in his landmark study published more than 20 years ago.

Why don't teachers use the methods that they believe are most effective? Even advocates of student-centered methods acknowledge that these methods pose classroom management problems for teachers. When students collaborate, one expects a certain amount of hubbub in the room, which could devolve into chaos in less-than-expert hands. These methods also demand that teachers be knowledgeable about a broad range of topics and are prepared to make in-the-moment decisions as the lesson plan progresses. Anyone who has watched a highly effective teacher lead a class by simultaneously engaging with content, classroom management, and the ongoing monitoring of student progress knows how intense and demanding this work is. It's a constant juggling act that involves keeping many balls in the air.

Part of the 21st century skills movement's plan is the call for greater collaboration among teachers. Indeed, this is one of the plan's greatest strengths; we waste a valuable resource when we don't give teachers time to share their expertise. But where will schools find the release time for such collaboration? Will they hire more teachers or increase class size? How will they provide the technology infrastructure that will enable teachers to collaborate with more than just the teacher down the hall? Who will build and maintain and edit the Web sites, wikis, and so forth? These challenges raise thorny questions about whether the design of today's schools is compatible with the goals of the 21st century skills movement.

For change to move beyond administrators' offices and penetrate classrooms, we must understand that professional development is a massive undertaking. Most teachers don't need to be persuaded that project-based learning is a good idea—they already believe that. What teachers need is much more robust training and support than they receive today, including specific lesson plans that deal with the high cognitive demands and potential classroom management problems of using student-centered methods.

Unfortunately, there is a widespread belief that teachers already know how to do this if only we could unleash them from today's stifling standards and accountability metrics. This notion romanticizes student-centered methods, underestimates the challenge of implementing such methods, and ignores the lack of capacity in the field today.

Instead, staff development planners would do well to engage the best teachers available in an iterative process of planning, execution, feedback, and continued planning. This process, along with additional teacher training, will require significant time. And of course none of this will be successful without broader reforms in how teachers are recruited, selected, and deselected in an effort to address the whole picture of education's human capital challenge.

Better Tests

There is little point in investing heavily in curriculum and human capital without also investing

in assessments to evaluate what is or is not being accomplished in the classroom. Fortunately, as Elena Silva (2008) noted in a recent report for Education Sector, the potential exists today to produce assessments that measure thinking skills and are also reliable and comparable between students and schools—elements integral to efforts to ensure accountability and equity. But efforts to assess these skills are still in their infancy; education faces enormous challenges in developing the ability to deliver these assessments at scale.

The first challenge is the cost. Although higher-level skills like critical thinking and analysis can be assessed with well-designed multiple-choice tests, a truly rich assessment system would go beyond multiple-choice testing and include measures that encourage greater creativity, show how students arrived at answers, and even allow for collaboration. Such measures, however, cost more money than policymakers have traditionally been willing to commit to assessment. And, at a time when complaining about testing is a national pastime and cynicism about assessment, albeit often uninformed, is on the rise, getting policymakers to commit substantially more resources to it is a difficult political challenge.

Producing enough high-quality assessments to meet the needs of a system as large and diverse as U.S. public schools would stretch the capacity of the assessment industry, and incentives do not exist today for many new entrants to become major players in that field. We would need a coordinated public, private, and philanthropic strategy—including an intensive research and development effort—to foster genuine change.

Substantial delivery challenges also remain. Delivering these assessments in a few settings, as is the case today, is hardly the same as delivering them at scale across a state—especially the larger states. Because most of these assessments will be technology-based, most schools' information technology systems will require a substantial upgrade.

None of these assessment challenges are insurmountable, but addressing them will require deliberate attention from policymakers and 21st century skills proponents, as well as a deviation from the path that policymaking is on today. Such an effort is essential. Why mount a national effort to change education if you have no way of knowing whether the change has been effective?

A Better, But Harder, Way

The point of our argument is not to say that teaching students how to think, work together better, or use new information more rigorously is not a worthy and attainable goal. Rather, we seek to call attention to the magnitude of the challenge and to sound a note of caution amidst the sirens calling our political leaders once again to the rocky shoals of past education reform failures. Without better curriculum, better teaching, and better tests, the emphasis on «21st century skills» will be a superficial one that will sacrifice long-term gains for the appearance of short-term progress. Curriculum, teacher expertise, and assessment have all been weak links in past education reform efforts—a fact that should sober today's skills proponents as they survey the task of dramatically improving all three. Efforts to create more formalized common standards would help address some of the challenges by focusing efforts in a common direction. But common standards will not, by themselves, be enough.

The past few decades have seen great progress in education reform in the United States—progress that has especially benefited less-advantaged students. Today's reformers can build on that progress only if they pay keen attention to the challenges associated with genuinely improving teaching and learning. If we ignore these challenges, the 21st century skills movement risks becoming another fad that ultimately changes little—or even worse, sets back the cause of creating dramatically more powerful schools for U.S. students, especially those who are underserved

today.

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The Outside-Inside Connection

Thomas Hatch

The success of school improvement efforts depends on the opportunities and relationships that educators cultivate outside the school.

Imagine this school scenario: For the most part, staff members go about their business, doing what they're asked to do. They look at data; they make some adjustments. They work with coaches who have helped usher in a host of different programs. Student performance is adequate but not stellar, yet parents seem satisfied, making relatively few complaints.

If you were the new principal, what changes would you make? Whatever you decide to do, imagine that those decisions are soon followed by

- The development of new state science standards that your school is expected to follow.
- A district requirement for staff members to use new formative or benchmark assessments in reading and math.
- A sudden drop in student enrollment, which means that you will lose at least one or two teachers (including that teacher you just hired who is specially trained in the new reading program).
- A shift in your student population, which means that you will need more certified bilingual teachers.
- Growing parent dissatisfaction with the size of your classes and the number of professional development days when students are not in school.

That says nothing, of course, about the neighborhood sewers that keep backing up and leaving puddles on your playground or the severe economic downturn and the budget cuts that are likely to follow.

In other words, the challenges you face inside the school are connected to and compounded by things that are happening outside. In fact, schools face a number of external demands and

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pressures that they have to address. Moreover, without the connections, support, and expertise that come from interacting with a host of people, organizations, and institutions on the outside, schools cannot develop the goals, staff, or productive work environment they need to be successful (Hatch, 2009).

Distribute the Work

The education rhetoric these days focuses on developing principals who are both good administrators—managing staff and school operations—and good instructional leaders—focused intently on teaching and learning. But the demands of managing the environment mean that principals need to be strong external leaders as well; they need to serve as the liaison to those outside the school and act as spokesperson, negotiator, and champion of the school's interests.

However, relying on the principal to take on all the responsibilities of developing these connections leads to several key problems:

- Already overextended leaders may find themselves overwhelmed when trying to fulfill the responsibilities of managing both the internal and external environments.
- School leaders may spend so much time developing contacts and managing external relationships that they grow distant from the work going on inside the school.
- Leaders who leave the school—like doctors or lawyers who leave their practices for a rival firm—will take many of their contacts and relationships with them; the new leader will have to reassemble the network of relationships that the school needs to be successful.

To combat these problems, school leaders need to distribute the work both outside and inside the school. This distribution of responsibilities can grow out of a shared knowledge of a school's goals. School members who attend conferences, take courses, and just walk around in the community can help explain the school's mission, recruit qualified staff, find resources, and advance the school's interests. Without that common understanding, members of the school community can sometimes do more harm than good by inadvertently spreading conflicting messages about the school or, in some cases, by deliberately undermining their colleagues' efforts.

Scan and Seed

Far beyond typical parental involvement activities or show-and-tell sessions for administrators, connections between staff members and parents, community members, district administrators, policymakers, and other educators make it possible to discover common interests and develop the wider understanding and trust that people need to work constructively toward common ends. These connections also give schools the capacity to both scan the environment—to learn about issues, concerns, and new developments outside the school—and seed the environment—to put insiders and advocates into positions of power and influence on the outside.

Getting staff to participate in and lead local and national professional development activities can serve as a crucial avenue for both information and influence. Teachers at Peninsula Elementary School, a suburban high-performing K–5 school in the San Francisco Bay Area, regularly serve on the district's literacy leadership team. In one instance, a veteran 4th grade teacher from Peninsula learned that another teacher on the team had an approach that matched Peninsula's emphasis on direct instruction. After learning that the teacher was getting worn out at her own school, the veteran teacher urged her to apply for a new job at Peninsula. When she was hired, Peninsula gained another advocate for the district's approach to literacy instruction—a crucial avenue of influence when some schools in the district adopted whole-language approaches to literacy that the school found inconsistent with its own philosophy.

Schools can also invite outsiders in to learn more about the school's work and, in some cases,

draw them directly into school activities. For example, Dewey, a progressive, student-centered school in Peninsula's district, organizes orientation meetings, coffees, open houses, and information nights that enable parents and community members to learn about the school. Although in many schools these are seen as obligatory nods toward parent involvement, at Dewey these activities are part of a strategic series of initiatives designed to ensure that everyone understands the basic goals, philosophy, and work of the school. In addition, these informal meetings give the principal opportunities to recruit parents and community members for various roles and responsibilities.

For example, the principal created a community relations committee composed of teachers and parents whose role it was to bring to attention any emerging issues about the school and district. That committee provided crucial support for the principal when a new superintendent came to the district and mandated the use of a new report card that would have supplanted the school's narrative reports. The principal worked with the community relations committee to engage the superintendent's staff and a school board member in a daylong retreat in which they all studied the school's assessment process. In the end, the administrators attending the review recommended that the superintendent give the school a waiver from implementing the new report card.

This effort had two other important consequences. First, the administrators decided to incorporate some aspects of Dewey's narrative approach into the report card the district required other schools to use. Second, the new superintendent began to recognize other instances in which district policies were likely to conflict with Dewey's approach—such as requirements for district-wide professional development—and in some cases, offered the school waivers even before the principal requested them.

Build Networks with Allies

Over time, regular contacts between insiders and outsiders can grow into long-term relationships with allies who understand the school, provide access to resources, and act as advocates in times of crisis. For example, consider the work of Alliance Schools, a coalition of schools and religious and neighborhood groups modeled on the community-organizing tradition of Saul Alinsky and the work of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation. Alliance Schools help build networks of allies by

- Surveying the members of a school and the surrounding community to find common interests.
- Using that information to fuel conversations and identify crucial issues that many members of the community and school care about.
- Pursuing an issue the schools can address in a reasonable period of time (Hatch, 1998; Shirley, 2002; Warren, 2005).

In one instance, members of the Alliance Schools conducted short interviews with staff members and parents in a struggling elementary school. When the members reported their results during a community meeting, parents were surprised to learn that among the biggest concerns of school staff was a rodent problem that the principal had been unable to get the district to address for years. The parents brought their concerns to the superintendent and the school board, and crews were sent out to address the problem the following weekend. Even such small but concrete achievements can help establish the trust, motivation, and social capital that serve as the basis for further school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Schools can also manage the external environment by establishing lasting relationships with key organizations. For example, Manzanilla, a low-performing school in a troubled district in the

Bay Area, fueled its efforts to improve and maintain its bilingual program through partnerships with well-known teacher preparation programs and reform organizations in the area. A highly respected local teacher education program supplied the school with almost 20 student teachers each year and helped staff an after-school English language development program. The student teachers got an extended tryout period during which they could learn about the school and the school could learn about them. The school was able to establish a pipeline to a crucial resource, gaining an influential partner and an advocate who now had a vested interest in the school's success.

Find the Right Balance

By cultivating external relationships and support networks, however, schools also expose themselves to a host of additional demands (Hatch, 2002). For example, Manzanilla's partnerships with the teacher education programs and two local school reform networks meant that staff had to take on a lot of additional work: supervising student teachers, attending network meetings, hosting visitors, presenting at conferences, and completing assessments their network partners needed for their own accountability reports. School leaders need to search for a balance that allows access to crucial resources, personnel, and expertise without compromising their organizational flexibility.

From this perspective, leaders at each level need to decide whether collaboration will help them advance their goals. In some cases, schools may find that they can ignore demands from outsiders. However, many schools—particularly those that have a distinct approach or are designated as low performing—need the information, expertise, and social capital they develop through their contacts and networks of allies to negotiate with powerful partners and shape external demands and expectations to their own needs and goals.

Even the leaders of charter schools, which many presume can escape the burdensome requirements that may come with district and state education bureaucracies, have to think carefully about what kinds of external relationships they need and want. In fact, stepping outside traditional district structures means that charter schools can also get cut off from many of the people who have the information, resources, and expertise the schools could use (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004). Compounding the problem, the intense work of starting and managing a school can consume the entire staff and leave little time to get outside school walls. As a consequence, charter schools can lose access to facilities, teacher candidates, coaches, professional development opportunities, and other resources.

Charter schools do not have to cut themselves off from the outside world. Horizons, an urban charter high school that sought to provide a college-preparatory curriculum for all, established a close working relationship with its local district. That relationship included a contract for the district to provide special education services at the school, opportunities for staff to participate in districtwide professional development, and access to job candidates and student applicants.

At the same time, to better manage the school's relationship with the district, the principal needed to know the laws and regulations on charter schools far better than the district did. For example, when district administrators asked the principal to explain why the school's accountability report noted that «most» of the school's curricular material was on the approved list, the principal knew the district was overstepping its authority and simply replied, «It means most are on the list.»

However, to strengthen his hand in negotiations with the district, the principal also helped establish a network among the local charter schools so they could work together to advocate for common needs—such as access to facilities, personnel, and other resources—and respond collectively to some of the pressures they faced. As the principal put it, «[The charter schools] were

able to agree ... that we really did need to work together even if there was some competition between us. So we started sharing projects.»

These kinds of collaborative relationships provide the social capital that comes from what the principal called a «strength-in-numbers approach.» Without such support from a network of allies—which also may include organized blocs of voting parents—both charter schools and more traditional public schools have limited chances to develop their autonomy and flexibility.

How to Manage the Environment

Schools that distribute the work, scan and seed the environment, cultivate networks of allies, and thoughtfully work to reshape demands put themselves in a strong position to deal with changing conditions in the external environment. The power and social capital that comes with managing external demands, however, suggests several key strategies for school leaders.

Envision a New Organizational Chart

Although managing the environment depends on identifying those who are outside the school and figuring out how to deal with them, in some ways schools can draw their own boundaries. The traditional organizational chart listing those who report to the principal or school leader formally defines who counts as being inside the organization, but schools can also draw in parents, community members, district administrators, and other educators to develop a larger school community.

Instead of treating these groups as outsiders with whom they have to deal, schools can treat them as insiders who have useful information and expertise, can take on key roles and responsibilities, and can help the school expand its network. Rather than treating schools as part of a system in which control and authority are clearly defined, it may make more sense to view the system as a collection of diverse constituencies who have access to different kinds of information, expertise, and authority and who can come together to pursue their interests in many different ways.

Improve the External Environment

Managing the environment outside the school is closely intertwined with the work of making improvements inside the school. Schools that can carry out three key internal practices—developing a shared understanding and a common theory of action, effectively dealing with hiring and turnover, and fostering a productive staff work environment—are in a much better position to manage the external environment than are other schools (Hatch, 2009).

This circular relationship between internal and external practices helps explain why it takes capacity to build capacity and why it is so hard to help schools that do not already have some capacity to manage external demands (Elmore, 2002; Hatch, 2001). Given this problem, efforts to make improvements in the schools that struggle the most may be more successful if they begin with work on the external environment.

From this perspective, some of the funds designated for «failing» schools—focusing on hiring consultants, developing new strategic plans, and implementing new programs—are likely to be better spent on thoughtful improvements to libraries, playgrounds, or other aspects of the physical environment that can serve both the neighborhood and the school community. Similarly, efforts to establish new day-care or after-school programs can serve community needs, enhance student learning, and give adults opportunities for support and meaningful work.

Capitalize on the Snowball Effect

External relationships provide opportunities for more outside contacts, more information, more access, and more allies. Success breeds success—and successful schools can cultivate a competitive advantage. Schools that are relatively high performing and schools that develop innovative

approaches are more likely to attract the attention of people and outside organizations. That attention creates opportunities to develop relationships with individuals and groups that can help the schools to get better assistance, more expert staff, and better resources and to make further improvements.

In turn, the increased visibility brings visitors and recognition to the school that can help validate the school's approach and build a positive and collaborative school culture. Those contacts then give schools the social capital to negotiate with their partners, get support and assistance adapted to their needs, and say no to requests and demands that they believe would detract from achieving their goals.

See the Big Picture

The competitive advantage that comes with the capacity to manage the external environment means that successful schools, ironically, can resist demands to improve, can maintain the status quo, can lower expectations, and can gloss over problems in operations and outcomes. As a result, the work of managing the external environment always has to extend beyond the individual school and take into account the larger purposes of schooling and the role that successful schools may play in helping or hindering efforts to improve surrounding schools and society as a whole (Fullan, 1993, 1999).

Promoting Wide-Scale Success

School improvement efforts that focus largely on scaling-up specific programs or replicating the successes of individual schools without regard to maximizing external relationships and opportunities are likely to continue to fail. To succeed on a wide scale, school-based improvement initiatives have to be accompanied by a concerted effort to create more favorable economic, social, and political conditions that will give all schools a better chance to manage the external environment. Author's note: All school names are pseudonyms. The school examples are drawn from a study of six schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. For more information, see *Managing to Change: How Schools Can Survive (and Sometimes Thrive) in Turbulent Times* (Teachers College Press, 2009); www.tc.edu/ncrest/hatch/managingtochange.

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The Myth of Equal Content

William H. Schmidt and Leland S. Cogan

Uniform assessment will only improve education if we ensure equitable access to learning opportunities.

In the United States, we have long regarded public schools as the great equalizer, providing all students with access to the same high-quality education regardless of their ethnicity, family background, or socioeconomic status. The ideal is that any student willing to work hard and take advantage of the opportunities schooling provides can go as far as his or her abilities allow.

Indeed, U.S. society delights in the stories of those who triumph over adversity through their own talent and effort. Such stories affirm the myth of American individualism. Correspondingly, we view failure as the result of a lack of effort, talent, motivation, application, or perseverance. In the case of schooling, we assume that unequal achievement outcomes are not the result of unequal access to education opportunities, but rather the result of an unequal distribution of individual abilities and ambition.

Is this assumption justified? Or is it simply a satisfying myth that eases the national conscience? Unequal Access to Content ...

The U.S. education system is, in fact, not one system but at least 50 different state systems, each with its own set of standards establishing what students should learn and what teachers should teach. This every-state-for-itself approach leads to far too many topics being packed into standards, as illustrated by the curriculum standards from two U.S. districts that participated in the 1999 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In one district, the curriculum calls for students to be introduced to concepts of perimeter, area, and volume in 4th grade

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as one topic among 14 that are to be taught that year. This district then focuses more deeply on this topic in grades 6–8. In the other district, concepts of perimeter, area, and volume are intended to be taught every year from 1st grade through 8th grade as one of 17 to 25 topics to be covered each year.

Our examination of state mathematics and science standards, conducted in the context of an international comparison of such documents, found that both individually and as a set, U.S. standards were «a mile wide and an inch deep» (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1997, p. 122). U.S. standards covered many more topics at each grade level than was typical in other countries. Particularly in the early years, the expectations expressed in U.S. state standards far exceeded those in the countries that performed best on the TIMSS 8th grade assessment (Schmidt, Wang, & McKnight, 2005). U.S. textbooks followed the same pattern, earning the distinction of ranking first in the world in terms of their scope, size, and weight.

This broad, encyclopedic nature of standards and textbooks yields disparate classroom emphases. Because the time available for teaching and learning in the school year is finite, teachers must do triage among the laundry list of topics included in standards and textbooks. Not surprisingly, in the face of documents that embody incoherent and unrealistic intentions, these highly trained professionals teach substantially different content—often even within the same state, district, or school.

We analyzed teachers' reports of the relative instructional emphases they placed on a range of mathematics and science topics in 13 U.S. states and 14 U.S. school districts that participated as «countries» in the 1999 TIMSS. We found that across the states and districts, the topics taught in 8th grade differed by nearly a year as measured by the international grade placement (a measure of the relative grade level at which topics are typically covered internationally) (Schmidt, Wang, & McKnight, 2005).

Another factor exacerbating U.S. students' unequal access to mathematics is the prevalence of tracking in middle school mathematics. Analyzing the forms that listed all the mathematics classes taught within each U.S. school participating in the 1995 TIMSS, we found that the vast majority of U.S. 8th graders attended schools that tracked students into three types of 8th grade mathematics: regular, prealgebra, and algebra (Cogan, Schmidt, & Wiley, 2001). The self-reports of teachers whose students participated in the 1995 TIMSS show that the relative grade level of the content in these three types of courses differed widely. In schools that tracked students, the mean international grade placement in algebra classrooms was more than a year higher than that in regular 8th grade mathematics classrooms. Whether we consider the title of the course offered or the more refined international grade placement indicator, U.S. schools clearly provided unequal access to 8th grade mathematics content.

... Leads to Unequal Learning Outcomes

Media coverage of TIMSS results usually compares the United States as a whole with other participating countries and decries the disappointing picture of decline as students progress through school, with U.S. 4th graders performing above the international mean, 8th graders performing at about the international mean, and 12th graders performing below it (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996, 1997, 1998).

This coverage commonly doesn't highlight the fact that student performance within the United States varies greatly from state to state and from district to district. Although U.S. 8th grade performance was the same as the international mean in the 1999 TIMSS benchmark study, the performance of the 13 U.S. states and 14 U.S. school districts that participated as «countries» in

the study virtually spanned the performance range (Mullis et al., 2001). Seven states and eight districts performed significantly higher than the international mean, three districts performed significantly lower than the international mean, and the rest scored at about the international mean. Thus, U.S. states and districts differ not only in the access to mathematics content that they offer students, but also in their student performance outcomes.

One of the most important findings from our analysis of the 1995 TIMSS (Schmidt et al., 2001) was that achievement differences from country to country were significantly related to what was taught. This conclusion was possible because of the rich portrait of math and science instruction available from the 1995 TIMSS curriculum analysis. For each country, we looked at the intended content (what officials intended for teachers to teach) and the enacted content (what teachers actually taught in their classrooms). In most countries, we determined the intended content by looking at the national curriculum (or, in the handful of countries without a national curriculum, by looking at other formal statements of intended content at the regional or local level). In all the countries, we determined the enacted content by surveying teachers about what they had covered. Analysis of these rich curriculum data, along with our more curriculum-sensitive measures of student achievement, revealed that the mathematics content teachers covered in their classrooms was significantly related to their students' performance even when researchers adjusted this relationship for student background factors (ethnicity, parent education level, socioeconomic status, and so on). This relationship was evident at every level—classroom, district, and state.

Schooling does make a difference in student achievement. Specifically, the curriculum itself—what is taught—makes a huge difference.

Need for Curriculum-Sensitive Assessment

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) explicitly affirmed the fundamental democratic goal of schooling in the United States. In the wake of this legislation, issues of suitable standards for all students and equitable access to adequate learning opportunities have acquired a new urgency in education reform. States and individual districts are being compelled to make explicit what it means for all students to have equitable opportunities to learn essential and challenging content (Achieve, 2002).

NCLB brought attention to some important issues, such as the need to establish high learning standards for all students. But the fundamental flaw in NCLB is the disconnect between the assessments that are used to determine education outcomes and the content standards that guide and inform classroom instruction and learning.

Using the 20 specific mathematics topic scores we created from the 1995 TIMSS data, for example, we found that when students were given access to specific curricular content, there was a significant benefit for student performance in those content areas (Schmidt et al., 2001). The total mathematics score, however, was insensitive to important differences in curricular emphasis (Schmidt, Jakwerth, & McKnight, 1998).

Is this an important distinction, or is it just another dart to throw at the accountability endeavor? Clearly, we believe that this distinction is fundamentally important. Unless assessments are sensitive to important differences in instructional content coverage, student achievement gaps can be misattributed to individual background factors that are not within schools' control. For example, school districts in which most parents have a college education tend to have higher levels of student performance. But also important—and within the control of schools—is the fact that in such districts, the content standards and the instructional content coverage tend to be more rigorous, especially in the middle grades.

Equal Curriculum Access

The real issue behind differences in student performance is unequal access to a high-quality, challenging curriculum. In multiple analyses conducted with international data across countries and with U.S. data across states and districts, we've demonstrated the significant relationship between classroom instruction and student achievement. Access to instructional content is always more strongly related to differences in student performance than are the student background factors often cited to explain such differences.

In the United States, we have a much better track record in ensuring uniform, equitable assessment than in ensuring uniform, equitable access to learning opportunities. Our current accountability and assessment system is disconnected from our plethora of content standards. We assume equality of content coverage and use assessments that are not curriculum sensitive, which then reveal unequal outcomes—leading many to believe that students who fail do so because of their own lack of effort, talent, and motivation.

Fixing this problem will require coordinated efforts among teachers, administrators, and education policymakers. It will require creating challenging, clear content standards to guide classroom instruction and learning; creating curriculum-sensitive assessments that are specific to these standards; and measuring the actual content of classroom instruction. Without all three, we will never be able to address inequities in access or in student performance.

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Helping Self-Harming Students

Matthew D. Selekman

Schools can reduce the likelihood of self-harming epidemics and manage student difficulties when they occur by following a few practical guidelines.

Student self-harming is one of the most perplexing and challenging behaviors that administrators, teachers, nurses, and counseling staff encounter in their schools. Approximately 14 to 17 percent of children up to age 18 have deliberately cut, scratched, pinched, burned, or bruised themselves at least once (Whitlock, 2009), with 5 to 8 percent of adolescents actively engaging in this behavior (J. Whitlock, personal communication, September 27, 2009).

Self-harming behavior is not a new phenomenon among adolescents. Mental health and health-care professionals have typically viewed such behavior as a symptom of an underlying psychological or personality disorder as a possible suicidal gesture suggesting the need for psychiatric hospitalization or as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by sexual or physical abuse.

However, both research and practice-based wisdom indicate that the majority of self-harming adolescents do not meet the criteria for diagnosable DSM-IV1 psychological or personality disorders, have never had suicidal thoughts or attempted to end their lives, and have never experienced sexual or physical abuse (Selekman, 2009). Most self-harming adolescents use the behavior as a coping strategy to get immediate relief from emotional distress.

Preteens and adolescents today are growing up in a highly toxic and materialistic world. They are bombarded daily by violent, sexualized, and self-destructive media messages and themes that encourage them to grow up rapidly and become junior adults. They also have too many daily choices regarding specific material «must-have» possessions, extracurricular activities, dressing and fitting in with popular peers, possible college attendance, and so forth. Several stressors play

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a major role in fueling self-harming behavior among adolescents today.

Fitting in with Peers

In adolescence, being rejected by your peers is the equivalent of social death. The peer group is much more demanding today than it used to be, and it changes at a frenetic pace. Adolescent students who lack strong social skills often struggle to stay afloat and may resort to extreme behaviors endorsed by more popular and powerful peers; they may experiment with cutting as their entry ticket into the high-status, inner-circle clique. Adolescents who can't afford highly prized popular possessions like the iPhone or designer clothing may resort to stealing them.

Many adolescents and children also spend far too much time online, communicating with their peers on Facebook or on MySpace—or «Mean Space,» as some people now call it. Some adolescents have been victimized by peers who play the on-and-off befriending game or spread terrible rumors about them as a form of underground psychological warfare. I have worked with a number of adolescents who were the victims of these vicious and emotionally devastating character assaults. Fitting in and staying connected to socially well-positioned and popular peers become more challenging because of the intense politics of these social networking sites.

Overloaded Stress Circuits

Another frequent complaint I hear from both self-harming and other adolescents is feeling overwhelmed by multiple life stressors. In addition to juggling their social connections, the students are trying to manage massive homework loads and are often pressured by their parents to perform at a high academic level. Some adolescents are growing up in achievement-oriented families, in which the parents put undue pressure on them to get straight As. In addition, the parents often push their adolescents to schedule too many extracurricular activities to make them as attractive as possible to top colleges and universities. To cope with the stress, some of the more emotionally vulnerable adolescents turn to self-harm, resort to eating-distressed behaviors like bulimia, or engage in substance abuse.

Quick-Fix Solutions

Adolescents are growing up in a media world where one of the most popular messages is that we must obliterate stress and other problems as quickly as possible. What better way to get rid of all your problems than to take a pill, which many advertisements on TV suggest is the ultimate solution for physical, psychological, and behavioral difficulties.

In some cases, adolescents may witness their parents abusing prescription medications, smoking, and drinking for stress relief. The message they receive is that stress is a bad thing—that people can't channel it into constructive activities but must quickly eliminate it.

Self-harming adolescents have discovered that their brain chemistry can serve as a 24-hour pharmacy (Plante, 2007). When adolescents self-harm, their bodies immediately secrete naturally manufactured endorphins into their bloodstreams to protect them from physical pain. These endorphins rapidly numb the emotional distress they may be experiencing. As with drug addiction, longtime self-harming adolescents not only report feeling loss of control, compulsion to engage in this behavior, and physical tolerance of the pain but also experience mild withdrawal symptoms like anxiety and irritability when they abstain from self-harming (Selekman, 2009; Whitlock, Muehlenkamp, & Eckenrode, 2008). Thus, self-harming has become one of the most popular painkilling and sedative drugs for youth today.

Emotional Disconnection and Invalidation

In families of self-harming adolescents, emotional disconnection and invalidation are common family dynamics. For whatever reason, one or both parents are not emotionally and physically

present to comfort their adolescents when they are emotionally distressed. When the parents are present, they tend to respond in invalidating ways, such as by yelling, threatening, becoming hysterical, dishing out extreme consequences, distancing themselves, or not listening. So some adolescents take matters into their own hands—they self-harm to soothe themselves.

Further, extreme emotional disconnection from their parents often leads self-harming adolescents to gravitate toward other disconnected and often unsavory peer groups, an affiliation that tends to reinforce their self-harming behavior. Adolescents may feel that they belong and are respected in these groups. However, their involvement may expose them to other self-destructive behaviors, such as bulimia, substance abuse, and risky sexual behaviors.

Another factor that contributes to emotional disconnection in families is the computer screen. Developing emotional intimacy by means of a screen of some sort has become much more important to some adolescents than having human contact. Brazleton and Greenspan (2000) found that children and adolescents spent, on average, five and one-half hours a day in front of a screen. On the basis of what I hear from adolescents and parents in my private practice, this figure has gone up. Close to 70 percent of 8- to 18-year-olds have a TV in their bedroom (Taffel, 2009); laptops or personal computers have most likely replaced many of these.

Parents often do not provide firm guidelines for screen usage and do not regularly monitor the Web sites their children visit. There are many toxic Web sites and so-called online support groups for self-harming individuals where adolescents can witness people brutalizing their bodies, see other graphic images, read poetry and stories with self-harming themes, and learn new methods for self-harming.

Fears About the Future

Some of the self-harming adolescents with whom I work are anxious about whether they'll get into college or be able to pursue certain career paths, especially given the current grim economic situation. Some have seen their parents lose their jobs as well as their retirement savings. Some have had difficulties finding part-time jobs because few places are hiring.

Those whose college attendance depends on getting a scholarship may experience high levels of anxiety about not letting their parents and themselves down with their academic and extracurricular performance. Self-harming and other equivalent behaviors can give some students temporary relief from these anxieties and fears.

Signs and Symptoms

On the basis of what we know from clinical experience and research as well as from the adolescents themselves, most adolescents who self-harm tend to cut or burn themselves on their arms, legs, abdomens, or the bottoms of their feet, all places they can cover up. Many self-harming adolescents wear pants and long-sleeved shirts even when the weather is warm to cover up their scars, fresh cuts, or burn marks.

We have to worry most about those who cut or burn themselves around their eyes and on their necks. These students—as well as those who deliberately display the scars, cuts, or burn marks on their arms and legs—are often waving a red flag, indicating they're in emotional trouble. In many cases, a friend or peer will become alarmed and seek out a teacher or other school staff member to share his or her concerns.

Many self-harming adolescents have difficulty managing their depressed, anxious, and angry feelings. In some cases, they cannot articulate their feelings, possibly because of repeated invalidation in their interactions with their parents. Self-harming, bulimia, and substance abuse are adolescents' solutions. Anthony Favazza, a leading authority on self-harming, found that close to

50 percent of his female patients had concurrent problems with bulimia (Favazza & Selekman, 2003).

On a cautionary note, tattoos, body piercings, or dark Goth-looking makeup and clothing may not indicate self-harming. There is a difference between self-decorating to be cool—as a symbol of peer group tribal connection—and engaging in these behaviors to rid oneself of emotional demons.

What Schools Can Do

School personnel need to be familiar with the territory of adolescent self-harm. They need to understand the common causes, signs, and symptoms; the difference between self-harming behavior and suicidal behavior; constructive and empowering ways to respond; and effective treatments.

Schools can provide two major interventions on the junior and senior high school levels that can help reduce the likelihood of self-harming epidemics.

Intervention 1: Create a Support Group

Once you have red-flagged self-harming students, you can refer them to an on-site intervention group that capitalizes on their strengths to teach them how to become more resilient, effectively cope with stress, and take on leadership responsibilities in their schools and communities.

I have developed one such model that improves students' coping skills—the Stress-Busters Leadership Group.² Over nine sessions, students look at their strengths and «protective shields»; learn skills related to mindfulness, meditation, loving kindness, and compassion toward self and others; focus on finding balance and harmony in their lives; learn how to navigate family minefields; and acquire effective tools for mastering school stress. Ideally, a male-female cotherapy team of school social workers, psychologists, or counselors is best for gender balance. However, one counseling professional can also effectively run the sessions. (See p. 50 for a description of a session.)

Students who have completed the program often stay involved in prevention work in their schools and communities. Graduates serve as ideal gatekeepers for identifying self-harming students and for getting them to see a counselor or participate in a new group. Finally, groups like these can reverse self-harming and other self-destructive behavior epidemics in schools by accentuating at-risk students' strengths and honing their leadership abilities.

Intervention 2: Educate Responding Adults

Adult inspirational others serve a major protective function for at-risk children and adolescents (Anthony, 1984; Selekman, 1997, 2005, 2009). These can be teachers, coaches, extended family members, family friends, neighbors, clergy, and community leaders. Adult inspirational others are often compassionate, possess strong social skills, and are good at identifying and accentuating the strengths in children and adolescents. They consistently make themselves available to young people for connection, support, and advice. In every school, some staff members have served this role for at-risk students without even knowing it.

Eight practical guidelines can help adults effectively respond to self-harming students.

1. Because teachers and school nurses are often the first responders, it is crucial that they be respectful listeners to self-harming students; validate the students; build trust; and serve as a bridge to get the students to a school psychologist, social worker, or counselor for further help. If the self-harming student has a strong relationship with the teacher, it may be useful for the teacher to sit in on counseling sessions. Teachers and school nurses should ask the student these questions:

o How can I help you?

- o How has the cutting helped you?
 - o How does cutting fit into your life right now?
 - o I'm happy to be there for you, but I also need to connect you with one of our social workers because of our school policy. Would you like to see a male or a female social worker (when the option is available)?
 - o If I can arrange it, would you like me to sit in on your first meeting with your social worker?
2. At all costs, school personnel need to avoid responding to self-harming students with disgust, anxiety, or fear. They must not lecture the students about the dangers of this behavior, play detective and ask to see their cuts or burn marks, or interrogate and further invalidate them. Instead, they should strive to understand the meaning of this behavior for the student, how the behavior has been helpful, and how they can now be helpful to the student. It is important to remember that each self-harming student's story is unique. Self-harming students need to know that teachers and other school personnel care about them and are available for emotional connection, support, and advice when needed.
 3. Once a referral is made to the school counseling staff member, the counselor needs to determine in conjunction with his or her supervisor and the student whether the school can successfully counsel the student on-site or whether parent involvement is required. For students who have just begun experimenting with self-harming or who have engaged in this behavior only intermittently, a trusting relationship with a school counselor may generate alternative coping strategies. I recommend that the student also participates in an on-site intervention group, such as the Stress-Busters Leadership Group.
 4. If the student has been self-harming regularly and is engaging in other self-destructive behaviors like bulimia, substance abuse, and risky sexual activity, the school needs to contact the parents immediately for referral to a private practitioner or community-based program for family therapy that specializes in treating these adolescent behavioral difficulties. Concurrent participation in an on-site intervention group is also recommended.
 5. For students who have been self-harming regularly; who are cutting themselves more deeply; or who are cutting or burning themselves around their eyes, necks, and private parts, this is a medical/psychiatric emergency. These students should be taken immediately to the nearest hospital emergency room for evaluation.
 6. Although only a small percentage of self-harming students become suicidal, if these students have not responded well to both on-site and outside counseling, struggle to cope with multiple life stressors, and clearly voice suicidal thoughts, they need to be immediately taken to the nearest hospital emergency room.
 7. Identified school personnel who have been serving as inspirational adults for other disconnected at-risk students can provide added support to self-harming students who are trying to reduce or stop engaging in this behavior. These adults can closely collaborate with the involved counseling staff members for guidance and back-up if necessary.
 8. Graduates of intervention groups who are interested in schoolwide prevention work help identify at-risk students who are self-harming, get them to counseling staff, and spark their interest in participating in a new group for added support. The school can ask these graduates to cofacilitate new intervention groups and get involved in the school peer counseling program.

More Than Just a Problem

As provocative and perplexing as this behavior may seem, we must not lose sight of how bright,

creative, and talented many self-harming students are. With compassion, guidance, and support, we can empower self-harming students by being respectful listeners and accentuating their natural gifts.

A Look Inside a Stress-Busters› Leadership Group Session

In the initial session in the Stress-Busters› Leadership Group—called What Are My Strengths and Protective Shields—the group leaders get to know the participants by having them discuss their key strengths, talents, hobbies, and interests as well as any important positive changes that have recently occurred. After discussing group rules and confidentiality, leaders ask members what they would like to get out of group participation and what they would like to change in themselves. The leaders negotiate with each group member some doable and measurable goals and ask each participant to track his or her progress.

In a 15–20 minute presentation on resiliency, leaders describe the major protective factors that have helped at-risk children and adolescents overcome adversity. Group members discuss which of these protective factors they are already using and how such factors helped them manage specific stressful events. Group members learn about positive psychology research, which focuses on strengths and virtues (Peterson, 2006), and take the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (available online at <http://www.viastrengths.org/>). Group members will discuss the results in the next group session.

Participants then engage in an exercise called visualizing movies of success. Group members close their eyes and picture a blank movie screen. Using all their senses, they project on the screen a movie about something they accomplished that pleased them and made them feel proud. This can include doing a good deed, handling a difficult family situation well, performing well with their band, doing something that surprised them about their abilities, and so on. Participants then share their movies with the group.

As a conclusion, participants acknowledge the various strengths of group members. Students also create victory boxes out of old shoe boxes, which they decorate in any way they wish. Each day, they write down on slips of paper personal victories or accomplishments, along with the thinking and actions that helped them pull off each victory. They share with the group at least one of their most meaningful personal victories that occurred during the week.

Endnotes

1 DSM-IV refers to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM-IV includes all currently recognized mental health disorders.

2 For a more in-depth blueprint for running Stress-Busters› Leadership Groups, see my book, *The Adolescent and Young Adult Self-Harming Treatment Manual: A Collaborative Strengths-Based Brief Therapy Approach* (Norton, 2009).

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Start Where Your Students Are

Robyn R. Jackson

Good grades. A quiet classroom. These are often what teachers value. But what if students come to class looking for something else?

Cynthia quickly moved through the classroom, collecting the previous evening's homework assignment. While her back was to the door, Jason hurried in and slid into his seat. Without turning around, Cynthia said, «I saw that, Jason.»

The class erupted in laughter as Jason blushed. «Take out your homework, and I'll be around in a second to deal with you,» Cynthia instructed.

When Cynthia reached his chair and noticed that Jason did not have any work out, she moved past and finished collecting the other papers. She got the class started on a warm-up exercise and called Jason to her desk.

«Where's your homework?» she asked.

«I forgot to do it,» Jason muttered.

«So you're not only late to class, but you also don't have your homework? Hmm, this is serious,» Cynthia said. «Do you know what you owe me?»

«Detention?» Jason guessed.

Cynthia shook her head. «No indeed. You need to make things right with me. Tomorrow when you come to class, you need to be here early with your homework—and a Snickers bar. And it better be fresh!»

Jason looked up, startled, then smiled widely. He went back to his seat and got to work. The next morning, he arrived at Cynthia's class with not one but two Snickers bars and cheerfully handed

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in his missing homework assignment.

When Cynthia first told me this story, I have to admit that I was shocked. It seemed that she was letting Jason off the hook. «Cynthia, please tell me you aren't shaking kids down for candy,» I mocked.

She laughed and then explained that too often, we make too big a deal of it when students make mistakes. We treat their mistakes as personal affronts and, as a result, kids are afraid to mess up—afraid that if they do, there is no road back. Over the years, Jason had adopted a cavalier attitude because he believed that once he made a mistake—and he made them all the time—he had ruined the entire school year. By having him give her a Snickers bar, Cynthia showed him a pathway to redemption.

«It isn't about the Snickers bar,» she explained. «It's about giving kids a tangible way of redeeming themselves and recovering from their mistakes.»

Cynthia is starting where her students are.

The Currency of the Classroom

Currency is a medium of exchange. Any behavior that students use to acquire the knowledge and skills important to your class functions as currency. For instance, if we teachers value student engagement, we take time and expend effort to make our lessons interesting to students. In exchange for our efforts, students give us their attention, curiosity, and participation. If students value adult approval, they work hard to abide by classroom rules and do well on assignments. In exchange for their efforts, we show them our approval in the form of praise, special classroom assignments, and attention.

But sometimes students come to school with currencies we find problematic. For instance, a student might use sarcasm as a way of earning the respect of his peers because it shows how clever and funny he is. However, teachers don't usually welcome sarcasm in their classrooms because they see it as a sign of disrespect; instead of gaining their admiration, it usually incurs their censure. If students don't feel that we understand or value their currencies, they often assume that there is no place for them in the classroom—and they opt out. What's worse, sometimes students do carry the preferred currency but resist spending it in the classroom because they resent the fact that it is the only currency we accept.

Currencies even influence the way students acquire the curriculum. The explicit curriculum is the stated objectives, content, and skills that students are expected to acquire. But to access that curriculum, students need to understand and possess certain underlying knowledge and skills.

For example, the explicit curriculum may require that students multiply fractions correctly or explain how geographic features affect migration patterns. But for students to do this, they need to have the right currencies. They need to know how to take effective notes, study from these notes, independently practice applying their skills, learn from their errors and self-correct, pay attention in class, monitor their comprehension, and ask for help when they do not understand.

To demonstrate that they have mastered the material, students need to understand how to write an essay or solve a certain number of math problems correctly under timed conditions. Many students struggle in school not because they can't learn the explicit curriculum, but because they don't have the currencies needed to access this curriculum.

These types of exchanges happen all the time in the classroom. As teachers, we communicate which currencies we require and accept in our classrooms; our students do their best to acquire and trade in our accepted form of currency. When they already possess—or can obtain and effectively use—our accepted form of currency, they thrive. When they can't, they flounder. In fact,

most conflicts in the classroom are the result of a breakdown in the currency exchange.

A Winning Strategy

When we don't understand the concept of currencies, we often attempt to mitigate classroom problems by attempting to connect with our students through their interests or to backfill any learning gaps we discover. We may even try to reward students in ways that make sense to us but that are inconsistent with what they value. When we focus on superficial traits without also paying attention to students' currencies, we miss important information about what students can do and what they value—and even our noblest attempts to connect with them can backfire.

When I first started teaching advanced placement (AP) English, I attempted to get my students to sign up to take the AP exam by telling them how much it would help them in college. I explained the importance of having a capstone event that would really test how well they had achieved the course's objectives, and I showed them statistics on how much better students did in college after having taken the exam. I even broke down the economic advantages of having earned college credit in high school and the effect that doing so would have on their overall college costs.

Nothing worked. They didn't sign up for the test. It wasn't that they didn't see the benefit of taking the test. They knew it was important. But I realized that I wasn't starting where they were. I was trying to motivate them using my preferred currencies, not theirs.

So I changed my tack. I started a competition among my three AP classes to see which class would have the greatest percentage of test takers. All of a sudden, students were racing to sign up for the test. Within a week, 95 percent of my students had signed up. Although my students could intellectually see the value of taking the test, it wasn't until I connected signing up for the test to something they valued—in this case, it was competition and the camaraderie of affiliation with the «winning» class—that they actually signed up.

Starting where your students are goes beyond playing getting-to-know-you games to understand their likes and dislikes, their interests and hobbies. Such efforts can quickly become superficial. Can you really effectively get to know all 20–35 students in your classroom or make a personal connection with each one fast enough or deeply enough to help each student find a way to access the curriculum? Even if you could, can you really make logical connections between the curriculum and their lives every single lesson, every single day? Our students may be amused by our attempts to discuss with them hip-hop artist Jay Z's latest hit or the plot of an episode of the TV show Gossip Girl. However, will doing so really help them connect with the curriculum in a way that enables them to leverage their skills and talents to meet or exceed the objectives—especially when that curriculum is not always immediately relevant to their worlds or when we don't understand their worlds well enough to make a plausible connection?

Instead of forging superficial connections, starting where your students are is about showing kids how to learn in ways that work best for them. It's about creating spaces in the classroom where our students can feel comfortable being who they are rather than conforming to who we think they should be. It's about helping kids feel safe enough to bring with them their skills, strengths, culture, and background knowledge—and showing them how to use these to acquire the curriculum.

Getting Started

If we want to start where our students are, we have to understand how currencies are negotiated and traded in the classroom. The first step is to clarify the currencies we value. What do we consider to be a good student? How do we reward students for doing well? What do we think should motivate students?

When we understand our own currencies and recognize that they may be different from those our students value, we open ourselves to recognizing alternative currencies. For instance, earning good grades is a currency we may recognize. Maybe your students are not motivated by grades but really want the approval of their friends. When you recognize that being motivated by grades is really your preferred currency and that approval from friends isn't good or bad, that it's simply an alternate form of currency, you can find ways to leverage this currency to help students learn. Thus, you may stop trying so hard to get students to value grades and instead set up a classroom culture in which students push one another to do their very best. Understanding your currencies helps you withhold judgment and abandon the idea that your preferred currency is more valuable than those of your students.

Next, we need to unpack our curriculum so we have a better idea of the underlying skills— particularly the soft skills—that students need to be successful. For example, I once worked with a school whose students were struggling. The teachers complained that the students never did their homework. We sat down as a group and examined the homework assignments. One teacher assigned students to read a chapter of the textbook and take notes in preparation for a class discussion the following day. When we unpacked the assignment, we realized that to complete it, students would have to spend about two hours reading the densely written 19 pages, take 25 pages of notes using Cornell note-taking sheets, and look up 10 vocabulary words. Students would also have to organize their notes in such a way that they could refer to them quickly as support for any arguments they wanted to develop as they participated in the discussion. Now we understood why so many students were not completing their homework.

Once you understand the soft skills that are implied by the curriculum, the next step is to determine which of these soft skills your students already possess and which ones they will need to acquire. You can accomplish this through a quick pre-assessment or by observing how students interact with the material and with one another.

Or you can ask them directly. I often conduct focus groups with the students in the schools with which I work. I show them a list of the soft skills they will need to be successful in a particular class and ask them whether they know how to do these things. On the basis of their feedback, their teachers and I can determine what we need to preteach students to help them successfully tackle a particular lesson.

Our students often carry currencies that can help them learn, but we don't recognize that these currencies are valuable because they don't look like the ones we value. For instance, a student may have a different organizational system for his notebook that works better for the way he thinks, or a student may process information better by talking about it rather than writing about it, or a student may have a method for solving mathematical equations that differs drastically from the one you taught but that is equally sound.

I once coached a teacher who was having difficulty with a student who interrupted her while she was teaching to ask questions and offer comments of his own. He wasn't intentionally being disrespectful, but it drove her crazy. After meeting with the student and his parents during parent/teacher conferences, she noticed that the family all talked at once. It was how they processed information. They thought aloud. At the same time. Loudly.

Once she recognized that his interruptions were not because he couldn't control himself, that they were just how he processed information, she no longer saw them as annoying, but as evidence that he was thinking and eager to share his thinking with the class. She then was able to figure out a way to help him process the information without disrupting the class. She showed him how

to keep a journal during class discussions to write down his thoughts as they came to him and to select one or two comments to share. Eventually, he learned how to participate in class discussions without the journal and to share his thinking appropriately.

Yes, But . . .

When I tell the Cynthia story in the workshops I give, many teachers become dismayed. Although they enjoy hearing about Cynthia's Snickers bar strategy, it doesn't feel comfortable to them. It's a great story, but what about those of us who are uncomfortable with forging a connection over candy?

I once coached a teacher who was having difficulty with her 6th graders. Whenever she gave them an assignment, they would spend the period talking to one another, finding any excuse to get out of their seats. No matter how often she threatened them, she couldn't keep them focused. I offered to observe her classroom and provide her with some feedback, but after being in her classroom for 30 minutes, I didn't see any gross misbehavior. The students were squirrely, but most of their talking was about the work. After school let out for the day, I met with her to discuss what I saw. Before I could begin, she said, «Do you see what I have to deal with? I'm exhausted. They just won't behave!»

«What would your class look like if your students were all well-behaved?» I asked.

«They'd all be in their seats quietly working,» she said. «They'd raise their hands and ask permission before they got up to do anything, and they would also raise their hands before talking so that everyone can be heard.»

I listened to her list and realized that she was talking about her currencies. She valued a quiet classroom and thought that was how students learned best. However, her students valued being able to discuss what they were learning with their classmates and getting up and moving once in a while. That was how they learned best. I explained to the teacher the concept of currency and then asked, «If you were sure that your students were talking about the lesson, would you allow them to talk quietly in class as they were working?»

She thought for a moment; I could tell she was uncomfortable with the idea. Finally she said, «I suppose so, but I'm afraid it might get out of hand.»

We finally figured out a way for her to structure the students' conversations so that she could still feel that the class was orderly and productive. She decided to pause during the lesson and allow students time to turn to their neighbors and discuss the information before moving on in the lesson. That way, students had a chance to process the information during the lesson and were less likely to talk about it later on. She found a way to acknowledge their currencies while honoring her own.

Finding Common Ground

When you recognize and honor students' currencies, you don't abandon your own. Rather, you find a common currency that you both carry. This creates a safe place for both you and your students to be who you are. In Cynthia's case, she wanted Jason to acknowledge his mistake and correct it; Jason wanted a chance to do so without feeling like a failure and a bad person. The candy bar provided the common ground. Had Cynthia asked for an apology or demanded that Jason redeem himself by staying after school and repaying her the time he missed in class by being late, she might have alienated him. But by finding a common currency, she was able to quickly get Jason back on track.

For you, that common ground might be something less tangible. Maybe you are more comfortable lecturing, but your students are not good note takers. So you provide them with a note-taking

sheet that helps them learn in the way that you are most comfortable teaching. Or perhaps you don't like lavishing verbal praise on your students, but verbal praise is their preferred form of currency. So you develop a set of code words you can use with students that signal to them that they have done a good job.

When you start where your students are, when you find that common currency you both carry, you communicate to students that it's OK to be exactly who they are. You create spaces for students to leverage who they are and what they know to access the curriculum.

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The Case for Slow Reading

Thomas Newkirk

Teachers can enhance students' pleasure and success in reading by showing them how to slow down and savor what they read.

«Speed her up, 401!»

—The president of Electro Steel in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*

Open any newspaper and you are likely to find a story of some school whose students have read a million, two million—some big number of pages. As a payoff, the teachers wear pajamas for a day, or the principal shaves his head or agrees to eat worms, a reward to the delighted students. Then Pizza Hut or some other franchise that sponsored the event hands out coupons for nonnutritious food to the voracious readers.

It's all great fun, a good story, a terrific photo op. But something bothers me about this picture—it's as though reading has become a form of fast food to consume as quickly as possible, just one more cultural celebration of speed.

This association of good reading with speed permeates our schools, from the hugely popular Accelerated Reading Program, to «nonsense word fluency» tests in which young children have to decode «words» at a rate of more than one per second, to standardized tests in which reading is always «on the clock.» To be quick is to be smart; to be slow is to be stupid.

The High-Speed Reading Blur

As a confessed slow reader, I would like to make a case for slowness. By slowness, I don't mean the painful, laborious decoding some students must do or the plodding march through some assigned novels that may take weeks. Any pleasure or success in reading requires fluency and the ability to read with some pace.

But there is real pleasure in downshifting, in slowing down. We can gain some pleasures and

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meanings no other way. I think of the high-speed trains in Europe that I always wanted to ride, ones that hurtle through the French landscape at more than 200 miles per hour—that is, until I learned that at these high speeds, even the distant scenery becomes a blur. The retina simply can't take in a clear picture at that rate of movement.

The same thing can happen in reading. I'd like to explore what we miss when we define good reading as fast reading and to argue for what Ellin Keene has called «dwelling» in the texts we read.

Author and media theorist Neil Postman provides a foundation for this argument in his classic book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979). Schools, Postman argues, should act on a thermostatic principle; a thermostat acts to cool when a room is too hot and heat when a room is too cool. According to Postman, schools should act to check—and not to imitate—some tendencies in the wider information environment. «The major role of education in the years immediately ahead,» he writes, «is to help conserve that which is necessary to a humane survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture» (p. 25).

Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse. Postman frames this imperative as a moral one. But, like the slow food movement, we can make a case on the basis of pleasure. The term taste applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down.

Silencing Reading

First, some background on how we got here. The greatest debate on reading instruction occurred early in the 20th century. The «reader» of McGuffey's famous textbooks was an oral reader. Comprehension was part of the picture, but to be an ideal reader, the student had to be able to perform orally. If a teacher addressed the reading rate at all, it was to caution the student about reading too fast. But this approach became increasingly viewed as antiquated, inefficient, and mismatched to the ways people read outside school.

In a classic study of the psychology of reading, Edmund Huey (1921) claimed that oral reading had a ceiling of about four words per second, whereas silent readers could process texts at two or three times that rate—with no diminishment of comprehension. It was time, he argued, for reading to go silent. Lip readers and subvocalizers (like me) were viewed as too stubbornly tied to the sound of words, too limited by the inefficient mechanisms of breath and speech. Huey did claim that silent readers retained a form of inner speech with traces of sound awareness, but at the higher and more efficient speed of reading, readers only sampled sounds—the train was moving too fast.

So reading went silent.

This is the world of reading that we have inherited—one suited to the faster pace of 21st-century life, one better matched to the new abundance of books and magazines. (Who wants to rush through reading if only a few books are available?) Yet our attraction to sounds, to the rhythms of speech, and to a human voice in the text is primal. We attend readings, listen to books on tape, or feel the presence of a narrator in fiction—all of which return us to the «inefficient» rate of regular speech. Authors like Richard Ford painstakingly read their nearly finished novels aloud; writers continually attest to the importance of finding the right «voice» for their work. Some of us begin our classes by reading a poem aloud, and we ask our students to read their work aloud in workshops. In church, we may listen to and meditate on a single verse from the Bible, one we have heard many times before. And we are alienated by authorless, bureaucratic letters—like the

ones I get from the IRS informing me of my annual arithmetic mistakes.

Slowing Down

So I would like to propose some strategies for slowing down and reclaiming the acoustical properties of written language—for savoring it, for enjoying the infinite ways a sentence can unfold—and for returning to passages that sustain and inspire us. Many of these strategies are literally as old as the hills.

Memorizing

Memorization is often called «knowing by heart,» and for good reason. Memorizing enables us to possess a text in a special way. My father tells the story of waiting with my uncle outside a probate office in Covington, Kentucky, after the death of their mother. No one seemed in any hurry to assist them, and Uncle Charles, never known as a great student, sighed, «The law's delay, the insolence of office.» At that moment, he called to mind a phrase from one of Hamlet's soliloquies that he had memorized 50 years earlier. We all should own some texts in that way.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is a regular activity in elementary classrooms, but it dies too soon. Well-chosen and well-read texts are one of the best advertisements for literacy. By reading aloud, teachers can create a bridge to texts that students might read; they can help reluctant readers imagine a human voice animating the words on the page. Besides, some passages seem to beg to be read aloud.

One of my favorites comes from Harry Crews's essay, «The Car,» where he describes the love of his young life:

After the Buick, I owned a 1953 Mercury with three-inch lowering blocks, fender skirts, twin aerials, and custom upholstery made of rolled Naugahyde. Staring into the bathroom mirror for long periods of time, I practiced expressions to drive it with. It was that kind of car. (1998, p. 367)

When I read this aloud, I just love the sound of «rolled Naugahyde.»

Attending to Beginnings

Writers often struggle with their beginnings because they are making so many commitments; they are establishing a voice, narrator, and point of view that are right for what will follow. These openings often suggest a conflict. They raise a question, pose a problem, create an «itch to be scratched.»

Readers need to be just as deliberate and not rush through these carefully constructed beginnings. As teachers, we can model this slowness. Take the memoir of the well-known children's writer Jack Gantos. In his opening paragraph of *Hole in My Life* (2002), he refers to the book's cover, with its repetition of a mug shot of a bearded, mustachioed young man with an ID number stamped across the photo:

The prisoner in the photograph is me. The ID number is mine. The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was twenty-one years old and had been locked up for a year already—the bleakest year of my life—and I had more time ahead of me. (p. 3)

Clearly, he had committed a serious crime to be locked up in a medium-security prison for more than a year at such a young age. How could a 20-year-old dig such a deep hole for himself? What kind of crime put him there? How did he survive this «bleakest» year of his life? What connection does this experience have to his later success as a children's writer? There is also a slowness to this opening, as though he is making his admission, piece by piece. Gantos has given us a road map for the rest of the book—if we pay attention.

Rethinking Time Limits on Reading Tests

We currently give students with disabilities additional time to complete standardized tests; we should extend this opportunity to all students. Tests place too high a premium on speed, and limits are often set for administrative convenience rather than because of a reasoned belief in what makes good readers.

Even as a strong reader, I felt pressed in the reading passages section of standardized tests to exceed my normal reading rate. I would resort to survival strategies I never used voluntarily—skimming, sampling, and beginning with the questions.

For reluctant or slow readers, the testing situation can be humiliating, and they quickly learn that they are set up for failure. They often just fill in (or make designs with) the bubbles on the test. But in the real world, we frequently compensate for our lack of speedy comprehension by persevering and spending more time on a task. These patient, slower workers are often extraordinarily valuable. In the folktale, the turtle always wins.

Annotating a Page

In this activity, students probe the craft of a favorite writer. They pick a page they really like, photocopy it, and tape the photocopy to a larger piece of paper so they have wide margins in which they can make notations. Their job is to give the page a close reading and mark word choices, sentence patterns, images, dialogue—anything they find effective

For example, this sentence appears on the opening page of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996): «Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood» (p. 11). We can hear the way McCourt repeats the words worse, miserable, and Irish, creating an ascending scale of misery. It's a great sentence that deserves attention.

A variation of this activity is a quote-and-comment assignment in which students copy out passages by hand that they find particularly meaningful and then comment on why they chose those passages. Copying a passage slows us down and creates an intimacy with the writer's style—a feel for word choice and for how sentences are formed. At the end of a unit in which my students have done a great deal of reading, we celebrate by selecting passages we want to hold on to and reading them aloud to the class. It always interests me to see which passages the students select.

Reading Poetry

Even in this age of efficiency and consumption, it is unlikely that anyone will reward students for reading a million poems. Poems can't be checked off that way. They demand a slower pace and usually several readings—and they are usually at their best when read aloud.

My colleague Tom Romano begins every one of his classes by reading a poem aloud. He invites his students to comment on images or lines that strike them, although without engaging in the overanalysis that killed poetry for many of us. More than any other genre, poetry calls on us to see the world differently, to break out of conventional perception: Images can «arrest» us—they can, as Webster's online dictionary says, «cause [us] to stop.»

Take the ending of Emily Dickinson's famous poem, «A Narrow Fellow in the Grass,» where she describes the moment of panic when she sees a snake:

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

We might comfortably have expected «Numbness at the Bone.» But zero arrests us and forces us to feel something new, the momentary weakness or helplessness we may experience when seeing

a snake. We can't help but pause.

Savoring Passages

Children know something that adults often forget—the deep pleasure of repetition, of rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them («And Max said, «BE STILL!» and tamed them with the magic trick...» [Sendak, 1963]). There are passages that continue to move me, like the ending to James Joyce's short story «The Dead» (1916/1967), which I read each winter. The main character, Gabriel, confronts his own emotional failings:

Yes, the newspapers were right, snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. (p. 651)

I am always touched by the dark beauty of this ending, by the deep sadness of Gabriel as he contemplates the snow, the early death of his wife's first love, and the remains of his life.

We never really «comprehend» these anchoring passages—we're never done with them; we never consume them. Like sacred texts, they are inexhaustible, continuing to move us, support us, and even surprise us (until I wrote out the passage, I had missed the word mutinous).

This is, after all, the way people have read for centuries—and it is a way that my father read near the end of his life. He was never a religious man in the churchgoing sense, but in his last years he returned every day to Psalm 46 in the King James Bible, which begins:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

It was the passage my brother read and reread to him as he lay dying, as his earth was being «removed.» By this time, his Bible was so worn that it had to be held together by rubber bands. As the minister said at his memorial service, «Here is a book that has seen some use.»

Not all our reading, nor all our students' reading, can or should have this depth. We read for various purposes. But some of our reading should have such depth, inefficient as that might be.

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Reform: To What End?

Mike Rose

We need a different orientation to school reform—one that embodies a richer understanding of teaching and learning.

This is an exciting time for education as the federal government, state houses, and private philanthropies are all focusing on school reform. A lot of good ideas are in the air—thoughtful proposals for ways to change things, to imagine a new kind of schooling in the United States.

The history of school reform has taught us, however, that good ideas can become one-dimensionalized as they move from conception through policy formation to implementation. Also, in the heat of reform, politics and polemics can become an end in themselves, a runaway train of reform for reform's sake. In addition, reforms can have unintended consequences. As a reform plays out in the complex, on-the-ground world of districts, school boards, and classrooms, it can lead to counterproductive practices. In the case of No Child Left Behind, for example, we saw the narrowing of the curriculum to prepare for high-stakes tests in math and language arts.

At this moment, when we're focusing so much attention on school reform and so much is possible, it would be good to step back and remind ourselves what we're ultimately trying to achieve. What is the goal of school reform? Most would agree it's to create rich learning environments, ones with greater scope and more equitable distribution than those we currently have.

As we reimagine school, some basic questions should serve as our touchstone for reform: What is the purpose of education in a democracy? What kind of people do we want to see emerge from U.S. schools? What is the experience of education when we do it well?

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Happy as a Crab

One example of good teaching I saw comes from my book *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (Penguin, 1995/2006), an account of my travels across the United States to document effective public education. This 1st grade classroom in inner-city Baltimore has 30 students, all from modest to low-income households—the kinds of kids at the center of many school reforms.

As we enter the classroom, teacher Stephanie Terry is reading a book to her students, Eric Carle's *A House for Hermit Crab* (Simon and Schuster, 1991). Hermit crabs inhabit empty mollusk shells; as they grow, they leave their old shells to find bigger ones. In this story, a cheery hermit crab is searching for a more spacious home.

There's a glass case in the classroom with five hermit crabs—which Stephanie supplied—and 13 shells of various sizes. More than once during the year, students have noticed that a shell had been abandoned and that a larger one had suddenly become animated. As Stephanie reads the book, she pauses and raises broader questions about where the creatures live. This leads to an eager query from Kenneth about where in nature you'd find hermit crabs. «Well,» says Stephanie, «let's see if we can figure that out.»

She gets up and brings the case with the hermit crabs to the center of the room, takes the crabs out, and places them on the rug. One scuttles away from the group; another moves in a brief half circle; three stay put. While this is going on, Stephanie takes two plastic tubs from the cupboard above the sink and fills one with cold water from the tap and the other with warm water. Then she places both tubs side by side and asks five students, one by one, to put each of the crabs in the cold water. «What happens?» she asks. «They don't move,» says Kenneth. «They stay inside their shells,» adds Miko.

Stephanie then asks five other students to transfer the crabs to the tub of warm water. They do, and within seconds the crabs start to stir. Before long, the crabs are moving like crazy. «OK,» says Stephanie. «What happens in the warmer water?» An excited chorus of students replies, «They're moving! They're walking all over! They like it! They're happy like the crab in the book!» «So what does this suggest about where they like to live?» asks Stephanie.

That night, the students write about the experiment. Many are just learning to write, but Stephanie told them to write down their observations as best as they could, and that she would help them develop what they write. The next day, the students take turns standing in front of the class reading their reports.

Miko goes first: «I saw the hermit crab walking when it was in the warm water, but when it was in the cold water, it was not walking. It likes to live in warm water.»

Then Romarise takes the floor, holding his paper way out in his right hand, his left hand in the pocket of his overalls: «(1) I observed two legs in the back of the shell; (2) I observed that some of the crabs change [their] shell; (3) When the hermit crabs went into the cold water, they walked slow; (4) When the hermit crabs went into the warm water, they walked faster.»

One by one, the rest of the students state their observations, halting at times as they try to figure out what they wrote, sometimes losing track and repeating themselves. But in a soft or loud voice, with a quiet sense of assurance or an unsteady eagerness, these 1st graders report on the behavior of the classroom's hermit crabs, which have now become the focus of their attention.

There's a lot to say about Stephanie's modest but richly stocked classroom and the skillful way she interacts with the children in it. But I'll focus on two important points: what Stephanie demonstrates about the craft and art of teaching and the experience of learning that she generates for

her class.

Growing Good Teachers

Everyone in the current reform environment acknowledges the importance of good teaching. But most characterizations of teaching miss the richness and complexity of the work. The teacher often becomes a knowledge-delivery mechanism preparing students for high-stakes tests.

Moreover, reform initiatives lack depth on how to develop more good teachers. There is encouragement of alternative pathways to qualification (and, often, animosity toward schools of education and traditional teacher training). There are calls for merit pay, with pay typically linked to test-score evidence of student achievement. There are general calls for additional professional development. And, of course, there is the widespread negative incentive: By holding teachers' «feet to the fire» of test scores, we will supposedly get more effort from teachers, although proponents of this point of view never articulate the social-psychological mechanisms by which the use of test scores will affect effort, motivation, and pedagogical skill.

But when you watch Stephanie, a very different image of the teacher emerges. She is knowledgeable and resourceful across multiple subject areas and is skillful at integrating them. She is spontaneous, alert for the teachable moment, and able to play out the fruits of that spontaneity and plan next steps incrementally as the activity unfolds. She believes that her students can handle a sophisticated assignment, and she asks questions and gives direction to guide them. Her students seem comfortable taking up the intellectual challenge.

What is interesting is that none of the current high-profile reform ideas would explain or significantly enhance Stephanie's expertise. Merit pay doesn't inspire her inventiveness; it doesn't exist in her district (although she would be happy to have the extra money, given that she furnished some classroom resources from her own pocket). Standardized test scores don't motivate her either. In fact, the typical test would be unable to capture some of the intellectual display I witnessed in her classroom. What motivates her is a complex mix of personal values and a drive for competence. These lead her to treat her students in certain ways and to continue to improve her skill.

A Human Capital Model

Some professional development programs are particularly good at capitalizing on such motivators. Several years earlier, Stephanie participated in a National Science Foundation workshop aimed at integrating science into the elementary school classroom. Teachers met for several weeks during the summer at the Baltimore campus of the University of Maryland, one of several regional training sites around the United States.

The teachers were, in Stephanie's words, «immersed in science»; they were reading, writing, observing presentations, and doing science themselves—all with an eye toward integrating science into their elementary school curriculums. The summer workshop extended through the year, as participating teachers observed one another's classrooms and came together on selected weekends to report on how they were incorporating science into teaching and give presentations themselves. «It gave us a different way,» said Stephanie, «to think about science, teaching, and kids.» Because we are in the reimagining mode here, let me offer this: What if we could channel the financial and human resources spent on the vast machinery of high-stakes testing into a robust, widely distributed program of professional development? I don't mean the quick-hit, half-day events that so often pass for professional development, but serious, extended engagement of the kind that the National Science Foundation and the National Writing Project might offer—the sort of program that helped Stephanie conjure her rich lesson with the hermit crabs.

These programs typically take place in the summer (the National Writing Project runs for four weeks), although there are other options, including ones that extend through part of the school year. Teachers work with subject-matter experts; read, write, and think together; learn new material; hear from others who have successfully integrated the material into their classrooms: and try it out themselves.

Electronic media can be hugely helpful here, creating innovative ways for teachers to participate, bringing in people from remote areas, and further enabling all participants to regularly check in as they try new things. Such ongoing participation would be crucial in building on the intellectual community created during this kind of teacher enrichment program. All of this already exists, but we could expand it significantly if policymakers and reformers took into account this richer understanding of the teaching profession.

Although pragmatic lifestyle issues certainly come into play in choosing any profession, the majority of people who enter teaching do so for fairly altruistic reasons. They like working with kids. They like science, literature, or history and want to spark that appreciation in others. They see inequality and want to make a difference in young people's lives.

The kind of professional development I'm describing would appeal to those motives, revitalize them, and further realize them as a teacher's career progresses. Enriched, widely available professional development would substitute a human capital model of school reform for the current test-based technocratic one. And because such professional development would positively affect what teachers teach and how they teach it, it would have a more direct effect on student achievement.

Learning-Friendly Environments

For me, the bottom-line question is whether a particular reform will enable or restrict the kind of thing we see happening in Stephanie Terry's classroom. The hermit crab episode is, of course, drawn from a few days spent in just one classroom, but it represents some qualities I've seen again and again in good schools—K-12, urban or rural, affluent or poor. Let me delineate these qualities, and as you read them, ask yourself to what degree the reforms currently being proposed—from national standards to increased data collection to plans to turn around failing schools—would advance or impede their realization. Just as the representation of teaching is diminished in current education policy, so is the representation of learning. I have yet to see in policy initiatives a depiction of classroom life anywhere close to the one I just shared.

□ Safety. The classrooms I visited created a sense of safety. There was physical safety, which for children in some locations is a serious consideration. But there was also safety from insult and diminishment. And there was safety to take risks, to push beyond what you can comfortably do at present—»coaxing our thinking along,» as one student put it.

□ Respect. Intimately related to safety is respect, a word I heard frequently during my travels. It means many things and operates on many levels: fair treatment, decency, an absence of intimidation, and beyond the realm of individual civility, a respect for the history, language, and culture of the people represented in the classroom. Respect also has an intellectual dimension. As one principal put it, «It's not just about being polite—even the curriculum has to convey respect. [It] has to be challenging enough that it's respectful.»

□ Student responsibility for learning. Even in classrooms that were run in a relatively traditional manner, students contributed to the flow of events, shaped the direction of discussion, and became authorities on their own experience and on the work they were doing. Think of Stephanie's students observing closely, recording what they saw, forming hypotheses, and reporting publically on their thinking. These classrooms were places of expectation and responsibility.

□ Intellectual rigor. Teachers took students seriously as intellectual and social beings. Young people had to work hard, think things through, come to terms with one another—and there were times when such effort took students to their limits. «They looked at us in disbelief,» said one New York principal, «when we told them they were intellectuals.»

□ Ongoing support. It is important to note that teachers realized such assumptions through a range of supports, guides, and structures: from the way they organized curriculum and invited and answered questions, to the means of assistance they and their aides provided (tutoring, conferences, written and oral feedback), to the various ways they encouraged peer support and assistance, to the atmosphere they created in the classroom—which takes us back to considerations of safety and respect.

□ Concern for students' welfare. The students I talked to, from primary-grade children to graduating seniors, had the sense that these classrooms were salutary places—places that felt good to be in and that honored their best interests. They experienced this concern in various ways—as nurturance, social cohesion, the fostering of competence, recognition of growth, and a feeling of opportunity.

The foregoing characteristics made the rooms I visited feel alive. People were learning things, both cognitive and social; they were doing things, individually and collectively—making contributions, connecting ideas, and generating knowledge. To be sure, not everyone was engaged. And everyone, students and teachers, had bad days. But overall, these classrooms were exciting places to be—places of reflection and challenge, of deliberation and expression, of quiet work and public presentation. People were encouraged to be smart.

How directly do current reforms contribute to promoting such qualities?

The Most Important Question

In an important 18th-century essay on education, journalist Samuel Harrison Smith wrote that the free play of intelligence was central to a democracy and that individual intellectual growth was intimately connected to broad-scale intellectual development, to the «general diffusion of knowledge» across the republic.

As we consider what an altered school structure, increased technology, national standards, or other new reform initiatives might achieve, we should also ask the old, defining question, What is the purpose of education in a democracy? The formation of intellectually safe and respectful spaces, the distribution of authority and responsibility, the maintenance of high expectations and the means to attain them—all this is fundamentally democratic and prepares one for civic life. Teachers should regard students as capable and participatory beings, rich in both individual and social potential. The realization of that vision of the student is what finally should drive school reform in the United States.

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No More Valentines

Morgaen L. Donaldson

What will it take to make teacher evaluation a useful tool for improving teaching and learning? In 2001, when Patricia Hopkins became superintendent of the Five Town CSD and Maine School Administrative District #28 in Camden and Rockport, one of her first tasks was to review summative evaluations of all the teachers in the two districts. What she discovered troubled but did not surprise her. As she read through the evaluations, she found that many were full of «valentines»—her word for vague, meaningless praise—and largely devoid of constructive criticism or concrete feedback. Hopkins believed that teacher evaluation held great potential to improve instruction, so she set out to «eliminate the valentines» by strengthening the culture and structures supporting teacher evaluation in district schools.

In recent years, the spotlight on teacher evaluation has intensified. Given teachers' effect on student learning and achievement, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers have all called for boosting the rigor and quality of teacher evaluation. The track record for evaluation, however, flies in the face of the increasing consensus that teacher evaluation could play an important part in improving teaching and learning. My 2009 review of research on teacher evaluation showed that, on the whole, teacher evaluation has not substantially improved instruction.

During the last wave of efforts to strengthen teacher evaluation, in the 1980s, most initiatives died on the vine. This time around, however, there may be cause for more optimism. Key changes in the education world may make it easier for broad-scale improvement efforts to take hold. Moreover, some schools and districts, like those Hopkins leads, have already taken steps to more

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tightly link teacher evaluation with instructional improvement and increased student learning and to implement real consequences for those who perform superbly—and for other teachers who perform poorly.

All Above Average

Time and again, analyses of summative evaluation ratings of teachers show that the vast majority of teachers in any school, district, or state are rated above—sometimes well above—average (for a summary of the research, see Donaldson, 2009). Although it is possible that all teachers are above average in some schools, there is generally more variation in teacher effectiveness within schools than between them. Thus, any school—low performing or high performing, wealthy suburban or underresourced urban—is likely to employ more underperforming teachers than its evaluation ratings suggest (see, for example, Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005). In fact, both principals and teachers believe that teachers are less effective than ratings indicate.

Inflated ratings of teachers reflect the following problems that seriously limit the extent to which evaluation could improve instruction and achievement:

- Poor evaluation instruments. Systems have tended to emphasize what can be measured, not necessarily what matters. Thus, evaluation instruments have traditionally required evaluators to look for things that they can easily check off (such as the neatness of bulletin boards) but that may not indicate high-quality instruction.
- Limited district guidance. Districts typically give little direction regarding what evaluators should look for. Instead of providing guidelines and rubrics about the substance of evaluations, districts are more likely to set out time lines and explain processes (Koppich & Showalter, 2008).
- Lack of evaluator time. Evaluators, usually school administrators, report having insufficient time to conduct thorough and accurate evaluations. As the reporting requirements for schools have increased, evaluators' time has become even scarcer.
- Lack of evaluator skill. Evaluators often lack specific knowledge about the content areas in which they evaluate teachers, especially at the secondary level. Moreover, professional development for evaluators is not frequent or comprehensive.
- Lack of evaluator will. Principals are not always held accountable for conducting rigorous evaluations. A «culture of nice» pervades schools, suppressing critical feedback and encouraging principals to rate all teachers above average.¹
- Absence of high-quality feedback for teachers. Even though teachers express a strong desire for more concrete, detailed feedback, evaluators generally do not provide it after their observations (New Teacher Project, 2009).
- Few consequences attached to evaluation. Because there is little variation in teachers' summative evaluation ratings, teachers who teach exceptionally well cannot be identified or rewarded. At the same time, it's difficult to identify and remediate or, if needed, dismiss those who struggle (New Teacher Project, 2009).

Overcoming the Challenges

Despite the deep, longstanding roots of these problems, the challenges might be easier to surmount than they appear. Currently, we know more about the links between teaching and learning than at any time in the past (Donovan & Pellegrino, 2003). We know, for example, that explicit instruction in the alphabetic principle is a key component of effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This knowledge enables evaluators

to determine whether such instruction is occurring.

In addition, the teacher workforce is undergoing a massive transition as baby boomers retire and individuals in their 20s and 30s enter teaching. There is some indication that new teachers today differ from the retiring generation (Johnson & Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). Surveys suggest that they are more open to differential recognition and rewards than are their retiring counterparts. Finally, teachers unions, long perceived as a major barrier to the improvement of teacher evaluation, have shown an increasing openness to collaborating with districts to improve the appraisal of teachers (Johnson, Donaldson, Munger, Papay, & Qazilbash, 2009; Weingarten, 2010).

Another sign of hope is in the districts that are making progress in tightening the link between teacher evaluation and improved instruction and—potentially—achievement. The three districts I describe here have taken significant steps toward mitigating some of the current problems in teacher evaluation. They represent a new direction in evaluation that, if it spreads, can transform teaching and learning.

Cincinnati

In Ohio, Cincinnati's Teacher Evaluation System (TES) exerts an influence on instruction and, it appears, student achievement (Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2010). The evaluation system grew out of the 1997 collective bargaining agreement between the Cincinnati Board of Education and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers. With careful study and advice from experts in research and practice, Cincinnati developed a program for its 58 schools and approximately 2,200 teachers that has clear evaluation criteria and a structure that mitigates some of the common problems with teacher evaluation.

Using Charlotte Danielson's (2007) framework as a guide, Cincinnati has built its evaluation criteria on 16 standards that are arrayed within four domains: (1) Planning and Preparing for Student Learning, (2) Creating an Environment for Student Learning, (3) Teaching for Student Learning, and (4) Professionalism. The system devotes considerable time and resources to providing professional development on these standards.

Teachers in the district can apply for a three-year term as an evaluator or a consulting teacher. Teacher evaluators conduct three and administrators conduct one of the tenured teachers' four formal observations during the comprehensive evaluation cycle, which tenured teachers undergo every five years. Two of the observations are announced, and at least two are followed by post-observation conferences with evaluators.

New teachers and struggling veterans are evaluated under a different, but related, system. The district's Peer Assistance and Evaluation Program assigns consulting teachers to these teachers; these consulting teachers usually also serve as evaluators for other teachers, but they evaluate new or struggling teachers more frequently.

This system reduces the time problem many evaluators face by dividing evaluation responsibilities between administrators and teachers. Each full-time evaluator typically has a caseload of 18–25 teachers. Because they are focused on evaluating and assisting their peers, these individuals have the time to conduct high-quality evaluations and provide useful feedback to teachers. New consulting teachers and teacher evaluators receive 10–11 days of training before starting their work. Continuing evaluators receive five days of training each summer. Before their first term, all evaluators and consulting teachers must pass an evaluator certification test that requires them to assess instruction using the system's rubrics and demonstrate their reliability as raters. Over the course of the school year, consulting teachers and evaluators receive two hours of training every

other week to review evaluation standards and calibrate scoring. After three years in their role, consulting teachers and teacher evaluators return to full-time teaching positions, which keeps their knowledge of teaching and learning current.

Northern U.S. Charter Management Organization

Some charter schools have also attempted to make teacher evaluation a more powerful tool for instructional improvement. One charter management organization in the northern United States, a successful network of 15 urban schools serving high percentages of low-income and minority children, has done so by deemphasizing formal summative evaluations and focusing instead on ongoing informal evaluation and feedback (Donaldson & Peske, 2010).

In this organization, teachers receive one-on-one and small-group coaching from administrators weekly or biweekly, as well as a midyear summative evaluation. The coaching is differentiated according to the teachers' needs and aimed at developing teachers' skills over time.

For the summative appraisal, evaluators and teachers complete the same six-page document. This appraisal form focuses on the organization's Aspects of Instruction, which covers such approaches as differentiation and checking for understanding.

Comments on the appraisal do not simply reflect a short period of formal observation, as those of some evaluation systems do. Instead, the document prompts both the teacher and evaluator to reflect on all the work the teacher has done so far that year. Thus, evaluators may draw on all their observations of the teacher—inside or outside the classroom, brief or sustained. This includes not only classroom instruction but also noninstructional contributions to teams and committees and to the school as a whole. Teachers reported spending three to five hours preparing the document and another 90–180 minutes debriefing with their evaluator.

The charter organization enables administrators to spend considerable time observing, evaluating, and coaching teachers by keeping the teacher to evaluator ratio quite low—approximately six teachers to one administrator. The organization has also strategically aligned personnel to handle certain administrative tasks so that principals can focus on instruction. An operations team handles facilities management, budgeting, certification, and ordering; a dean of students manages student behavior challenges; an intervention coordinator organizes schoolwide data and testing; and in some cases, an executive assistant coordinates activities with teachers and students and fills in where extra help is needed.

The organization lives by the principle that, as one teacher noted, «feedback is a gift.» A key part of professional development focuses on training teachers and leaders to have difficult conversations, which sometimes occur during evaluation debriefs. One principal explained that her school has adopted explicit norms such as «staying on your side of the net and not stepping over and making claims on the other person» that help to depersonalize disagreements. Another principal said that in the process of hiring teachers, he deliberately gives them critical feedback on their demonstration lesson to see how they handle constructive criticism.

Evaluators receive training in how to deliver feedback in such a way that their suggestions will be implemented. They learn to give concrete and specific feedback that teachers can immediately respond to. Evaluation and coaching sessions deliberately focus on one or two major issues a teacher needs to work on and are anchored in student data, often the organization's benchmark assessments. This narrow focus helps teachers make changes.

Camden and Rockport

The Five Town CSD and Maine School Administrative District #28, under Patricia Hopkins' guidance, have also strengthened their evaluation systems. Hopkins notes, «I have seen a shift.

People aren't just saying «you're doing great.» They're posing questions and making recommendations to help inform teachers' efforts to improve instruction.»

This shift has come about in large part as a result of the district's efforts to solve one typical problem of evaluation systems—lack of evaluator will. Early on, Hopkins decided to increase evaluators' accountability for completing high-quality assessments. First, she posted a calendar in her office showing the names and due dates of all teacher evaluations throughout the district. This calendar enabled her to keep track of and follow up with evaluators during the school year. Administrators must conduct at least two observations each year for first- and second-year teachers and one every third year for teachers on a continuing contract. The evaluations themselves are based on both these observations and such factors as «promptness and accuracy of reports» and «evidence of professional growth.» Administrators meet with teachers before and after the observations and evaluations.

Second, Hopkins and the assistant superintendent began to informally observe all first- and second-year teachers in the district. This practice of providing another set of eyes helped school-based administrators be more critical. In some cases, Hopkins said, the informal observation led to additional observations of teachers and more in-depth conversations with administrators.

Last, Hopkins has required principals to share their draft evaluation reports with assistant principals and vice versa before the postobservation conference with the teacher. This sharing has enabled administrators to clarify their expectations, maintain consistency with one another, and ensure that their commendations and recommendations for improvement are appropriate.

On the Road to Improvement

A key feature of all of these organizations is their commitment to improvement. Leaders in these schools acknowledge that their evaluation systems have room to grow. All the leaders noted that consistency of ratings, for example, could be improved. Overall, however, these schools have made progress on problems that have consistently plagued efforts to link evaluation and instructional improvement.

To varying degrees, they have also taken steps to integrate strengthened teacher evaluation systems with other key human capital efforts at the school and district level. Integrating evaluation with professional development or hiring, for example, helps ensure that the system as a whole functions more effectively; as a result, instruction improves substantially. It also make it more likely that improvements in teacher evaluation will endure. In fact, improving teacher evaluation without attending to other ways in which schools or districts affect teacher quality will likely have limited influence.

With shifts in the teaching force, the technology used in teaching, and the political and educational climate, a window of opportunity for improving teacher evaluation has opened. Some districts are already starting to move forward. The question is whether other districts will follow.

Endnote

1 Peter Cummings, principal of West Woods Upper Elementary School in Farmington, Connecticut, suggested the term culture of nice.

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