

the leading learning

Here are the essential variables school leaders need to address in order to promote teacher growth and student learning in the 21st century.

As Bob Dylan sings, “The Times They Are a Changin’.” And the Terms ... They Are a Changin’ too! Now, all over this land, we speak of highly qualified teachers and principals, public accountability, AYP, essential understandings, data-driven decisions, and research-based practices. Technology plays an increasingly dominant role in our professional and personal lives in both positive and potentially negative ways. While there are certainly constants, these changes create different responsibilities for educational leaders. Are the answers blowin’ in the wind?

The most significant change is the absolute necessity that we be strong instructional leaders; that is, leaders of learning. Our primary learners are the members of the administrative staff and the teaching faculty followed closely by students, parents, and community members.

In the 21st century, moving into an

administrative position does not mean that we stop teaching. Our class rosters simply change. Standard 2 in the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL) states that we are to establish and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff development.

If we are teaching and modeling we need to use the standards-based planning process to design our interactions with staff. That is, we have to identify outcomes and assessment criteria up front, plan our interactions and communications so that they are aligned with the desired outcomes and the identified assessment criteria, implement our plans, and then use data/results to plan our next steps.

While there are dozens of factors to consider when we think about how leading the learning in the 21st century

by Paula Rutherford

is different from past practice, those addressed here are among the essential variables we have to address if we want to promote teacher growth and student learning. Resources are recommended for each variable discussed.

1 Recognizing Standard-Referenced vs. Standards-Based Planning, Instruction and Assessment.

What a challenge! All our teachers would like to believe that they are standards-based. The reality is that most teachers are at best, standards-referenced. That is, as I wrote in *The 21st Century Mentor's Handbook*, many teachers refer to the standards to see if they can justify what they had planned to teach based on teachers' manuals, on programs purchased by the district, or on what they have always done.

School administrators and mentors have an important responsibility to clear about what it means to be standards-based as opposed to standards-referenced.

The stages of moving toward being standards-based are as follows:

- Knowing that the standards exist
- Knowing where to find a copy
- Reading the standards
- Posting the standards (hopefully in kid friendly language)
- Occasionally referring to the standards during planning and with students
- Checking to see if what is being taught can be found in the standards
- Beginning to understand the power and focus the standards provide and working to identify the essential understandings that are embedded in and that transcend the standards
- Using the standards to design assessments and instruction
- Using student work to judge whether or not the instruction was well designed for this content with these learners
- Using the data to decide what to re-teach to whom.

Since we have been engaged in standards work for several years, it is a challenge for leaders of the learning to convince staff that there is a need for even more change. We have found it most effective to call this work "Standards-Based Education: Taking It to the Next Level." This title acknowledges all the hard work teachers have already done while clearly communicating that there is more to do.

Lynn Erickson's book *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction*, specifically pages 50-62, is a helpful resource for helping staff move beyond fact-based teaching to focusing on the key concepts and essential understandings.

2 Being Knowledgeable About the Key Concepts and Big Ideas in All Disciplines

As leaders of learning in the 21st century we need to know the big ideas on which each discipline is based, be able to recognize those big ideas we see them being used in classrooms, know what questions to ask if we do not see them, and know where to find appropriate resources for ourselves and the teaching staff. That means, for example, that we have to know and recognize the big ideas of foreign language learning as the five Cs: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities (www.actfl.org), know and recognize a preK-12 focus in mathematical learning on number and operations, algebra, geometry, measurement, data analysis and probability, problem solving, reasoning and proof, communication, connections, and representation (www.standards.nctm.org/).

Thank goodness we do not have to design lessons in each of these disciplines. Knowing and recognizing the big ideas and supporting teaching staff in their design and implementation of appropriate lessons is enough of a challenge.

The websites of the national

organizations for each discipline area provide big picture information about the current best thinking in each area. These can be a valuable resource when we need to work with teachers who are bemoaning the vast number of indicators that they have to address. Helping them chunk the indicators under the key concepts can make the daunting task seem more doable.

3 Being Masterful in Modeling, Recognizing, and Leading Discussions about the Use of the Best Instructional Practices in the Interest of Student Learning

CPSEL Standard 2 also refers to our responsibility for facilitating the use of appropriate and engaging learning materials and Standard 6 refers to the need to facilitate constructive conversations about how to improve student learning. Powerful tools for facilitating such discussions include the *Continuum of Teacher Development* developed by the New Teachers Center at Santa Cruz and *Leading the Learning: A Field Guide for Supervisors and Evaluators*.

We have to be able to recognize and applaud lessons and assessments that are aligned with the content standards and that ask students to learn at the same level of understanding required by the standards. Also, we have to be clear about whether or not these assignments and assessments have the appropriate level of rigor and relevance.

In addition, we have to be comfortable enough with strategies that represent best practice in instruction and assessment to model them in the meetings we lead or appropriately delegate to expert practitioners the task of modeling those strategies. See *Instruction for All Students* and Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering's book *Classroom Instruction That Works* for explicit guidance on practical and research-based instructional strategies.

4 Helping Staff Members Get Over Being Defensive About Data

Data surrounds us 24/7. And, the public has it as soon as we do, if not before. This reality makes a huge difference as we try to figure out not only how to use the data in ways that promote teacher growth and student learning but how to “spin it” so that the public understands just how committed we are to high levels of student achievement for all students and how much we are actually accomplishing.

We are being held to higher levels of accountability than we could have ever have believed possible and that is a good thing. We are being asked to share data and support staff as they get over being defensive about data and begin instead to see data as their new best friend.

As a caption of a Family Circus cartoon in which the young boy observed a line of ants marching one by one stated, “That first ant better know where he is going!” As administrative leaders of learning we are the “lead ants” and we need to be knowledgeable and skillful at using multiple methods of data collection, at determining what data is most relevant, and at identifying patterns, themes, and trends.

The most important step, the one we are struggling to answer is what do we do with the information we gather? How do we use that data to adjust instruction on a daily and long term basis to significantly impact student learning?

My colleague, Bruce Oliver, ASK Group Senior Consultant, writes eloquently in his October 2005 Just for the ASKing! newsletter about the power of feedback for students. He challenges all of us to use data from classroom formative and summative assessment as powerful feedback about the effectiveness of instructional decisions. As my wise mother used to tell me, if you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you are going to keep

getting the same results you have always gotten. What a hard lesson this is for all of us.

5 Aligning the Processes

We have to be sure that we have aligned the processes so that we are as Terry Deal says, all headed roughly west. That means that we have to be sure that our work is aligned from recruitment, interviewing, and hiring through professional goal setting, induction programs, school improvement plans, professional development, and supervision and evaluation processes.

We must combine personal practice experience with a review of the most current research and literature as we make decisions about the use of resources such as time, energy, money, and effort. We must look at what is working where and consider how we can use those successful processes in our own settings and learn how to give up on our own unsuccessful practices which are not only unsuccessful in our own setting but in most other settings as well. We must additionally create processes which not only allow all voices in the educational community to be heard, but encourage them to step forward and speak up. Most importantly, we must constantly ask, “How does what we are thinking about doing promote student learning?”

6 Using the Supervision and Evaluation Process as a Primary Tool for Teacher Professional Growth and Student Learning

I believe that an essential component of leading the learning in the 21st century is viewing and using the supervision and evaluation process as an opportunity for one-on-one professional development. With that vision in mind, I led a multiple year process of revising the supervision and evaluation process in St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont, Colorado. We created a standards-based supervision and evaluation system that focused on student learning. The stakeholders interviewed

as part of the initial focus groups were unanimous in saying with strong voices that the supervision and evaluation process used prior to 2002 had absolutely no impact on teacher professional growth and student learning.

As the task force reviewed the literature and begin the revision of the St Vrain supervision and evaluation process, it focused first on student learning. It was only after the task force identified student outcomes that the group determined what knowledge, skills, and dispositions teachers would need to be successful.

We mirrored the data gathering process in the supervision and evaluation model on the process we ask teachers to use in the classroom. That is, we decided to collect a body of evidence about the impact of instructional decisions on student learning.

The dialogue that evolved around the multiple forms of data collected and collaboratively analyzed led to a supervision and evaluation system that an overwhelming majority of participants identified as promoting teacher professional growth.

We hope that in the future we will be able to have strong data about its impact on student learning. You can contact me at paula@justaskpublications.com for more information about the revision process, the new evaluation process, and the teacher performance criteria.

7 Creating a Culture for Learning

We have to create a culture for learning by organizing a schedule which supports collaboration and job-embedded learning. We need to build leadership capacity in those people who want to remain in schools and/or in their classrooms so that they can continue the important work they do with their own students or staff but also want to contribute to the good of the order in larger ways.

There are many opportunities for leadership roles including mentors for

new teachers, team leaders, department chairs, curriculum leaders, and professional development coaches. For those principals who want to stay in schools but at the same time are ready to explore other leadership opportunities, there is an incredible need for mentors to support new administrators.

Extraordinary examples of districts and schools committed to working collaboratively to increase learning and measurable academic achievement are captured in *Principles in Action*, a videotape produced and distributed by McREL.

The videotape which can be ordered at www.McREL.org features two schools and two school districts. One segment focuses on the practices and accomplishments of the staff at Montview Elementary School in Aurora, Colorado. I have seen this video hundreds of times and I continue to be amazed by the culture for learning that exists in that school.

8 Using Technology as a Communication, Organizational, and Instructional Tool

The Internet has so revolutionized the way we access information that it is breath-taking.

The sheer quantity of information available to us is overwhelming in terms of figuring out what information to access and which to value.

Finding the time and creating the organizational systems for keeping up with the current best thinking in instruction, assessment, data analysis, and leadership is a huge 21st century challenge. Highly recommended resources that can provide focus and quick access to important information include, as mentioned earlier, the websites of the national organizations for academic disciplines, *Just for the ASKing!*, a newsletter written by a 16 year middle school principal available free at www.askeducation.com, *Marshall Memo*, a monthly synthesis of current journal articles and other publications written by a 15 year

elementary school principal, available at a yearly subscription fee at www.marshallmemo.com and the ASCD SmartBrief available free at www.smartbrief.com/ascd.

A potential pitfall with the use of technology is that we can drown in piles of paper (Who printed all this stuff?) and can end up hidden behind our emails. Given that we are in a people business, it is essential that we not forget the importance of high visibility.

Steve Walts, Superintendent of Schools in Prince William County, Virginia, knew that the web-based greeting he sent out to all staff via streaming video would not be sufficient for establishing relationships in his first year as superintendent. Nothing could have replaced his “82 Schools in 82 Days” initiative. He used the district website to display a map of his visits and pictures of his interactions with staff and students.

It was, however, his visit to every single classroom in each of the 82 schools that captured the interest and enthusiasm of the entire school community. Technology served him and the students in that district well but leadership from a technological distance would not have been enough.

So, we know the times they are a changin’. However, some things stay constant. An IBM advertisement which aired during a recent Masters Golf tournament said something like this: In golf, everyone takes the same approach, follows the same course, uses the same tools, and plays by the same rules. Therefore, in theory everyone should end up in the same place. The final screen read, “Guess execution is a pretty important part of the game.”

What stays constant in our work is the need for us to keep our eyes on our ball, student learning. That is, after all, why we are in the game. And as always, we have to execute well! ■

Resources

ASCD SmartBrief.
www.smartbrief.com/ascd

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