Learning for All

by
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Setting a New Mission

A bold new mission for public education is well within our reach, if we are willing to work hard to achieve it: Learning for All—Whatever it Takes!

Under this vision, compulsory schooling is transformed into compulsory learning. The system in place is changed to reflect the new mission. A strong commitment is made to extensive staff development. Targeted high-yield improvements are identified and implemented by a school leadership team, resulting in major gains in student achievement.

Does it sound like an impossible dream, years away from reality? On the contrary, it is not only achievable, it is already available to us! The knowledge base is there. Now we must use it wisely to guide the change process.

In order to embrace the new mission, we must believe in the following assumptions:

• All children can learn and come to school motivated to do so. This belief does not imply that all children can learn at the same rate, nor do they enter the system with the same levels of readiness. Maybe the teacher needs to change the what, the when, or the how. Once the new mission is accepted, then any and all such changes are possible.

• A single school, as a system, can control enough of the variables to assure that virtually all students do learn. The distinguished educational researcher Robert Gagne said that the essential task of the teacher is to arrange the conditions of the learner’s environment so that the process of learning will be activated, supported, enhanced, and maintained.

• The internal and external stakeholders to the individual school are the most qualified and capable people to plan and implement the changes
necessary for the school to make progress toward the Learning for All—Whatever it Takes mission

• Teachers and administrators are already doing the best they can, given the conditions. To change the outputs of the system in place, new knowledge must be embraced, along with the conditions in which you find yourself.

• School-by-school change is the best hope for reforming the schools. However, changes at the school level, if they are going to be sustained, require that district-level administrators and staff from agencies beyond the school district also be committed to the new mission and dedicated to doing whatever they can to support the schools. If we want schools to be more dedicated to the new mission as judged by student performance, we are going to have to allow processes to vary from classroom to classroom and school to school in order to get the desired results.

The lessons from successful restructuring in the private and public sectors are clear. There must be broad-based commitment to the training and re-training of the workforce.

Crafting a New System

In The New Economics For Industry, Government, Education, W. Edward Deming defined and described a system as “a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system.” He noted that, if the system is not managed effectively, the individual components become selfish, competitive, and independent. He also cautioned that the aim of a system must never be defined in terms of activities, methods, or programs. Finally, he stated that, regardless of where it starts, if a system is going to be effective, a pervasive sense of mission must come to characterize the organization and must extend throughout the organization.

While most schools and districts have mission statements, few can be described as having a pervasive sense of mission. Today’s schools are caught in a constant tension between competing goals, and that makes it very difficult to make sure that all the components of the system, and the individuals who work in the system, keep their eye on the primary aim of the system. Local schools are expected to serve as institutions of custodial care; they are supposed to sort and select students; and, finally, they are designed to be institutions of teaching and learning.

All these different and even competing missions can be metaphorically riding the bus to continuous school improvement. But only one of the missions can drive the bus! The Learning For All—Whatever it Takes mission must be the primary aim of the system.

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Once the new system is in place, the possibilities are limitless! With computers and other communication technologies currently available, there is no reason why school superintendents shouldn’t be able to manage the learning mission with the same level of precision with which they currently manage the money. If the system is doing what is needed, it should be possible for a superintendent to use a computer to track an up-to-date student performance record, and tell the student’s parents how well their student is doing, relative to the mastery of the district’s intended curriculum.

If the superintendent can do this, for any student at any time, she would be able to do the same thing for any aggregation of students, large or small. Likewise, anyone between the superintendent and the student, with a legitimate reason to do so, could also access the learning system. The school principal could monitor learning for individual or groups of students in the school. The teacher could constantly monitor his students. The school-to-work coordinator or the director of the science curriculum for the district could also monitor the mission for the affected students or curricular areas.

**Using High-Yield Strategies**

While technology can help manage the new mission, schools will need to use high-yield strategies to support it. A high-yield strategy is defined as a research-based concept or principle, supported by case literature, that will, when successfully applied in a real school setting, result in significant improvement in assessed student achievement. High-yield improvement strategies tend to be those that impact the classroom and school in such a way that they produce changes in the transactions and interactions between the teacher and students or among students. *Focusing on just two or three high-yield strategies will result in significant increases in student achievement.*

**Curriculum Alignment**

The first and, in some ways, the most significant high-yield strategy is that of curriculum alignment. First, the school must be part of a larger educational system with clear curricular goals. These goals are then translated into a coherent set of leveled and sequenced programs, courses, and instructional units.

Probably the best way to meet this standard is through the process of backward-mapping the curriculum. The process suggests that we begin with the end in mind, like an architect’s rendering of a finished home, and then design down. In the end, the scope and sequence should make sense to teachers, and should stand independent of the particular textbooks or other instructional materials currently in use in the school.

The next major step on the journey to curriculum alignment assumes that the teachers in a school can answer this question: “What evidence will the system use to judge whether the students have mastered the essential student learning for that grade or subject?” If teachers are able to answer this question, we are now in a position to address the alignment between the intended
curriculum and the assessed curriculum—the one that is used to judge progress on the curricular goals and objectives. The learning system we are developing is predicated on the belief that assessments should be curricular-based and criterion-referenced.

When these assumptions have been met, educators can move forward to meet the following standard: As a teacher, you should be convinced in your head, heart, and gut that, if you teach the intended curriculum and the students learn it, they will perform well on the assessment measures. One of the best kept secrets in American public education is students do tend to learn those things they are taught!

**Student Time on Task**

Teachers must make critical decisions many times every day on how best to allocate one of their most precious and finite educational resources—student time on task. In the best of all worlds, the teacher wants to allocate the right amount of time to the right tasks for each student. Perhaps as important as the actual time allocated by the teacher is the teacher’s willingness to monitor and adjust the allocated time on task, as indicated by feedback on student learning and student performance.

Most teachers recognize that they are expected to teach far more content than is feasible given the limited time that is available to them. Teachers need the guidance that comes from the various curriculum alignment strategies. If it takes more time for some students to succeed, then we must find more flexible time structures.

Teachers may have made reasonable allocations of time, but if the nature of the tasks is such that students are not focused, then they tend to be easily distracted by any number of things that may be going on in the classroom or school. The genius of good teachers is to develop instructional tasks and student activities that motivate the students, and hold their interest throughout the instruction.

**Effective Restructuring**

If schools are going to be responsible and accountable for the successful learning of all students, they are going to have to restructure the way they do business. The new systems, structures, and strategies must be based on principles and concepts of learning that have been proven to be effective by research and implemented successfully in real-world classrooms and schools.

There are two principles of effective instruction:

1) Place students at an appropriate level of difficulty, so that they will be appropriately challenged and can succeed. We don’t tend to do this because most schools place students on the basis of chronological age. This makes no sense from a student learning point of view, and makes the teacher’s job more difficult.
2) Keep students at that appropriate level long enough so that they will succeed. We don’t tend to do this either because we place students in age-based groups for the entire school year.

These principles beg for the ungraded, continuous progress, flexibly scheduled instructional system. Such a system would include fluid cross-age achievement groupings that are continuously being changed to provide every student with the opportunity to learn to mastery.

Many elementary and middle schools have successfully begun the journey of systemic reform by restructuring available time, so that teachers have larger blocks of uninterrupted instructional time with a smaller group of students. Other schools have found success through changing the school calendar and, in some cases, even beginning school at a younger age. Some schools, especially working with concentrated populations of economically disadvantaged students, are offering preschool programs in an attempt to solve learning problems before they occur.

At the high school level, the shift to a student-performance-based, results-oriented system allows educators to free up the instructional process and, ultimately, abandon the fixed seat time Carnegie Unit. The Carnegie Unit model may have served us well when high schools were judged and accredited based on the courses available and the time spent in different classes. Now, with the new order of things calling for evidence of results and student performance, the process-oriented measures will no longer be sufficient.

**Meaningful Connections**

Developing and implementing changes in instructional strategies based on recent brain research and the cognitive sciences represent a particularly promising high-yield strategy. First, the brain research suggests that, for learning and retention to occur, it must be meaningful to the learner in his or her own terms. This means teachers must know the curriculum and their students well enough to know how to present the curriculum so meaningful connections can be made.

Providing advanced organizers for students is another strategy based on the cognitive sciences that is both related to task analysis and tends to assure high-yield increases in student learning and performance. Advanced organizers give the learner a model of what the lesson is all about. When teachers incorporate advanced organizers, student comprehension and retention increases significantly. The inclusion of advanced organizers can take many forms, and will vary from discipline to discipline.

**High-Impact Learning**

Classrooms that use appropriate and well-tested cooperative or team learning strategies are creating win-win opportunities for all students. Parents of the gifted and talented should insist that teachers use this approach
because it helps these youngsters to understand the lesson at a much deeper level. If we believe the wisdom of the adage “you never learn something as well as when you teach it,” we ought to insist on cooperative learning experiences for all students.

Similarly, cross-age tutoring has been found to be a useful high-yield instructional strategy. To make it work effectively, teachers in at least two grade levels have to agree to collaborate and coordinate schedules so that the students can get together.

Using computers as an integrated part of the instructional program will make it possible for teachers to individualize instruction. In addition to providing a much richer information base under the control of the learner, computers can simultaneously simplify classroom management tasks and enhance the learning environment.

This list of high-yield strategies is by no means exhaustive; rather, it is intended to suggest what schools can do if they are willing to dedicate themselves to the new mission and draw upon the existing knowledge base to guide the change process.

Creating Partnerships

The education of a child is much broader than the learning that takes place in the school, even under the best of conditions. Other settings and people, thought of as implicit partners in education, must be made explicit partners, especially for the children of the poor. A critical partnership should exist between the school and parents, but other members of the community can play a valuable role. Grandparents, senior citizens, and other volunteer groups can provide additional help and powerful role models.

School-business partnerships should be broadened. The school should never ask for money; that’s too easy for the business. Instead, focus on asking for commitments of time and human energy that will have more of a lasting payoff.

High schools should recruit adults from the community to take classes during the school day. Many small business owners in the community would gladly release their workers and pay tuition for them to take computer courses during the school day. If one percent of the students in a high school during the regular school day were adults on assignment from their place of work, the school climate would change dramatically. Teachers would come to quickly realize that these nontraditional learners are allies in setting and maintaining a positive, safe, and orderly learning climate.

Another approach to creating a seamlessness between school and community is to have significant learning activities actually occurring in the community. This not only validates what the school is teaching, but also gives the students an opportunity to experience those critical workplace skills that so many of our critics say are missing in the children’s education today. Every
community has some unique ways to get the students to touch their own future, and educators should capitalize on them.

One other partnership strategy receiving a lot of recognition from teachers at all levels of schooling is the student-led parent/teacher conference. This strategy of parent conferences is especially appropriate when the school begins to move toward more authentic assessments and portfolios for monitoring student learning and student achievement. It provides an excellent strategy for teaching presentation skills, goal setting, personal responsibility, and accountability.

**Guiding the Leadership Team**

The concept of bringing new knowledge and skills to the people in the school will require the commitment and cooperation of all the teachers and administrators in the school. A leadership group consisting of school-level and central office representatives will guide the process.

When the members of the leadership team set the improvement goals and develop the action plans for their implementation, they should be sure that each goal and strategy identifies the need for training and technical assistance, as well as provides models of success and networks of support.

The school leadership team should consider what models of success can provide good illustrations of the kinds of changes called for in the improvement goal. Models of good practice help to lower the levels of resistance that are likely to exist for some staff. Models of success can come in many forms—written materials, video materials, presentations by consultants or expert teachers, or visits to other successful schools.

The school leadership team needs to establish a network of support for all staff relative to the innovation. This network ought to represent a safe and trusting setting where teachers would be encouraged to talk about all aspects of the innovation. When such networks are created, several good outcomes are likely. First, the teacher is likely to learn that he or she is not alone and that itself is reassuring. Second, colleagues may be able to provide advice based on their own experience with the innovation. Third, if teachers provide feedback on what is and is not working, the school leadership team will learn about the systemic problems that were created when the change was introduced in the school and classroom system.

Monitoring and documenting the steps and stages in the implementation of an innovation in a system is critical. The leadership group needs regular and useful feedback at every step throughout the implementation process.

The time has come to take what we know and make a renewed commitment to the American dream. **Learning For All** can happen if we are willing to dedicate ourselves to the new mission.
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