

Focusing on the Essentials

A few strategies have a disproportionately large impact on education. Here are six questions you should ask about the work that is ongoing in your school district

Money and time are the resources in greatest demand in shortest supply for school leaders. Despite the potential of short-term federal grants, almost all state and local education budgets are being ravaged by reductions in revenue. Moreover, the agendas of board meetings and the calendars of system-level leaders are overtaxed by a series of never-ending demands.

Now, more than ever, leaders must focus on the essentials, the core strategies that have the greatest impact on student learning and educational equity. Abundant evidence suggests that a few strategies have a disproportionately large impact on education. The “big six” are feedback, efficacy, time, nonfiction writing, formative assessment, and expectations.

Feedback

The most recent evidence on the power of feedback comes from a meta-analysis of more than 800 meta-analyses. That is a “study of study of studies,” including more than 83 million students, conducted by researcher John Hattie and published in the book, *Visible Learning*.

When students receive feedback that is accurate, specific, and timely, the impact on achievement is so great that it is more significant than the socioeconomic status of children. This certainly

isn’t an argument that poverty and other socioeconomic factors are unimportant. Instead, it’s a declaration that the decisions you make about critical instructional matters, such as feedback, can have a greater impact on student achievement than socioeconomic factors.

Moreover, wise leaders focus the greater part of their attention on factors that are within their control—the daily strategies of educators and administrators. The first big question for leaders is, “How good is our feedback?”

The purpose of feedback is to improve performance. It must be accurate, timely, and effective. Ask yourself if your present feedback systems are leading to improved performance by students, teachers, and leaders. If not, why persist in using the same feedback systems in the future?

Efficacy

When teachers and leaders have a bone-deep conviction that their personal professional practices influence student results, then they have efficacy. By contrast, when they attribute the causes of achievement to factors they cannot control, they lack it.

When teachers believe they are the primary causes of student achievement, student gains are three to five times higher than when they assume that the

causes are factors beyond their control. The second question you should ask is, “How do our teachers know that they influence student results?”

Time

It’s a fact that, in almost all districts, some students have fallen behind in reading and other essential skills by middle and high school. The third question is, “If we know that a student is two or three grades behind where he should be, how will his schedule be different from classmates who are on grade level?”

Consider this: If a quarterback needed to improve passing skills, a basketball player needed to work on free throw shooting, or a musician had a difficult time playing a particularly challenging piece, we would not hesitate to prescribe “more practice” as the remedy. Why should changing a student’s schedule to provide “more practice” for reading, writing, and math be more difficult?

Nonfiction writing

There are no “silver bullets” in education, but few activities have a greater and more consistent positive impact on every other discipline than nonfiction writing. The overwhelming evidence is that more nonfiction writing—description, persuasion, and analysis—helps students at every level improve thinking, reasoning, and analytical skills.

Surprisingly, nonfiction writing demands are infrequent at every level. One of the most frequent complaints from postsecondary programs is inadequate writing skills. The fourth question is, “How is nonfiction writing integrated into our curriculum outside of the regu-

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lar Language Arts class?”

Formative assessment

The media and governmental authorities focus on end-of-year test scores, but research is clear that formative assessment—that is, assessments during the school year that are used to “inform” teaching and learning—have a greater impact on improving achievement than any other form of test.

It’s important to remember that assessment is not “formative” merely because of the label, but because teachers and school leaders use the information in a way that leads to better teaching and learning. The fifth question is, “What are teachers and principals doing differently today as a result of the most recent formative assessment data?”

Expectations

The Pygmalion Effect is named for the character in the George Bernard Shaw play on which the Broadway musical “My Fair Lady” was based. When Eliza Doolittle was treated as a person worthy of respect, she was no longer a flower girl, but a lady. Similarly, 40 years of research on the subject demonstrates that, when teachers and administrators expect more, they get more; when they expect less, they get less.

The sixth critical question is, “What is the evidence in publicly available student work samples that our expectations for students meet or exceed grade-level standards?”

In the year ahead, school board members and system leaders will devote many hours—and millions of dollars—to matters of policy and practice. Before launching into your next agenda item, ask if what you are about to devote this time, energy, and money to is as important as the “big six” of educational impact. ■

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