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# Preface

## *Lessons Learned From Experience*

Everyone seems to agree—from popular media commentators to government policy makers and academic researchers, including Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) and Darling-Hammond and Haselkorn (2009)—that the quality of teaching in classrooms is the single most important factor in advancing student achievement and in sustaining school improvement. Everyone seems to agree that we have to have consistently high-quality teachers in schools. At the same time, we see a jumbled competition of approaches to ensuring that all classrooms have high-quality teachers. Backing each approach is a distinct vision of the function and operation of schools and a distinct understanding of the organization of schools and the psychology of teachers and learners. In *Teaching Matters Most: A School Leader's Guide to Improving Classroom Instruction*, we make the case that the quality of teachers that we place and sustain in classrooms is the single most important factor in continuous school improvement and in any attempt to reform schools. Furthermore, we suggest a path for advancing this goal. This path is not a simple mechanism, but involves a complex of responsibilities and proficiencies from the leadership in schools.

### **A “NEW” TAKE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

The actions that we describe in this book might seem to some readers to be fundamental and common to almost all schools. However, we advocate an apparently uncommon practice: that school leaders need to embrace the idea that *teaching matters most* and must act on this principle by leading the school community in a concerted effort that requires the tight alignment among fundamental actions. This includes recruiting, hiring, inducting, mentoring, supporting and delivering

## CENTRAL THEME

We have worked in public schools for more than a combined one hundred years. We continue to observe in schools as researchers, university supervisors, and consultants. Our thousands of hours of classroom observations have convinced us that schools will not make significant progress in advancing the learning and achievement of all students unless they make significant strides in improving the quality of instruction in all classrooms. With *Teaching Matters Most: A School Leader's Guide to Improving Classroom Instruction*, we argue for renewed and sustained attention to improving the quality of instruction in schools. Furthermore, we insist that schools work against this effort when school leaders focus too much attention on the peripheral matters of schooling that often distract from the core effort to advance learning and improve the quality of students' experiences in classrooms. We understand that students are going to be intellectually engaged and learn at high levels of achievement when they experience consistently high-quality instruction. We propose an approach to school improvement that does not single out struggling subgroups as the focus for correctives. Instead, we offer that schools leaders need to conceive firmly and in substantial detail what good teaching looks like, sounds like, and feels like. They must take the measure of the quality of instruction against this yardstick, and they must work relentlessly to move the quality of instruction closer and closer to the ideal in every classroom.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book begins by making the case for the importance of teaching and for improving the quality of teaching. The chapters that follow report current trends in instruction in schools. The report shows that while teachers are working hard, instruction is often uninspired and rarely challenging or intellectually engaging. We note the current debate about whether or not there are “best practices” in teaching, and make the case that we can say with confidence that some practices are clearly better than others. While we acknowledge that other authorities, for example Danielson (2007) and Stronge (2007), have described quality teaching according to elaborate rubrics, these descriptions make it difficult to sort out the pedagogical priorities. One chapter offers a description of distinctive practices that separate exceptional teachers from mediocre teachers.

Subsequent chapters detail the actions that are necessary to promote and sustain consistently high-quality teaching, including the

communication steps needed to initiate the plan. The actions include attention to hiring, recruiting, and induction practices. We suggest the elements that should be part of any mentoring program. We envision what a meaningful staff development program would look like. We propose the necessary steps in a teacher evaluation process that promotes professional growth. We share how attention to what students tell us can inform us about the quality of instruction and the experience in every classroom.

We acknowledge the realistic challenges in following the course that we propose. However, we note that the recognition of challenges does not invite despair. As school administrators, we have taken the stance that recognized challenges are specific problems to be solved, not insurmountable roadblocks. We do not deny that what we propose will be difficult at times and will be quite different from more popular and easily marketable approaches to reform and improvement. At the same time, experience tells us that principals in most schools have a great deal of autonomy to be creative and to translate various mandates into actions that are appropriate for the specific instructional context of their schools. For example, if principals must evaluate and rate all teachers, there are ways of doing this that support the teachers' development and foster reflection.

## WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DISTINCTIVE

It should come as no surprise to you that *teaching matters most* in the sense that the quality of the teaching in a school is the key factor that advances learning, achievement, and student satisfaction. Of course school administrators, board members, and policy makers act on this fact in various and sometimes contradictory ways. Here is what is distinctive about our approach:

- We recognize that school leaders have no control over the *input*, the teacher training that prepares candidates to deliver high-quality instruction and to function well as a member of an instructional team. We see the task before leaders as working with the current reality of the staff and the community where they are situated.
- We see hope in an intense focus on continually working toward the improvement in the quality of teaching across all grades and across all disciplines.
- We insist that the criteria for defining quality teaching cannot be captured in static checklists but must be authored repeatedly

through a collaborative and recursive process with the instructional staff of a school.

- We propose a plan for the alignment of key elements that promote continual improvement of the quality of teaching, all connected by the communitywide understanding of what quality teaching should look like, sound like, and feel like.
- With this book we offer the recommendations and provide the tools that will help school leaders to improve the quality of instruction in schools, leading to more learning, higher achievement, and increased satisfaction for learners and for teachers. We recommend steps for individual components of the instructional program in individual chapters and link the steps into one comprehensive plan represented by a recurring graphic at the end of each chapter.

We see great hope for school improvement through an intense effort to improve the quality of teaching across grades and across subjects. We offer a vision of key characteristics that would distinguish teaching that is engaging, compassionate, coherent, and rigorous. We suggest how to take the measure of the current status of teaching within a school and to check for growth in the quality of teaching over time. The tools that appear in the resources section of the book should help in this effort. We set out a blueprint for how to advance the quality of teaching through an aligned plan that attends to teaching standards and professional growth needs, from recruitment to induction and mentoring to evaluation to ongoing professional development. The hope for significant school improvement and meaningful reform lies with the teachers. The hope for leaders is that they can follow a focused and aligned effort to improve the quality of teaching to impact all learners.

schools—respond to student passivity and oppositional behaviors by implementing organizational configurations and accountability systems that pay a lot of attention to the forms of schooling and little attention to the substance of classroom instruction. Instead of a school organization designed to optimize the qualities of high-quality teaching, school administrators become managers of rules designed to hold students accountable for responding *normally* to satisfactory or disjointed teaching.

Entrapped in a school system where individualities of students are disregarded, where subject matter remains in catalogue formats, and where valued ends of schooling are remote or meaningless, teachers are left with the technique of the day or the program of the year to bring some semblance of learning to their classrooms. As teachers testified to us in interviews, techniques last until November and programs disappear at the end of the school year. The comings and goings of techniques and programs mask a simple truth hidden in plain view—*quality teaching matters most*.

**Table 2.1** Satisfactory Teaching, High-Quality Teaching, Disjointed Teaching

<b>TEACHING QUALITIES</b>	<b>Satisfactory Teaching</b>	<b>High-Quality Teaching</b>	<b>Disjointed Teaching</b>
Goals→Outcome	Tightly-coupled	Coupled	Loosely-coupled
Valued Outcomes	Mastery	Proficiency	Creativity
Decision Making	Rule-bound	Experience	Eclectic
Knowledge	Standardized	Interpreted	Constructed
Intelligences Valued	Intellectual	Social→emotional →intellectual	Emotional
Risks	Minimize	Calculate	Maximize
Valued Materials	Textbooks	Problems	Technique of the day; current events
Tasks-Assigned	Low variety	Reasonable variety	High variety/low variety
Tasks Outcomes	Predictable	Developmental	Unpredictable
Teaching	Routine	Reflective	Intuitive
School Outcomes	Credential/grade	Responsible citizen and productive worker	Meeting student needs



out. The discourse patterns in caring classrooms evidence that students are provided opportunities to express their needs, feelings, and concerns. Caring classrooms create environments where differing abilities, talents, dispositions, and experiences enrich the learning experiences of all students in the classroom.

We spoke recently to a former colleague and classroom teacher who expressed with regret that she often fell short of the high standards of teaching that she had set for herself. We know her to be an exceptional teacher and reassured her that she was a distinguished instructor. Reflecting on our observations of scores of teachers in several schools, we noted that we would be satisfied, as an initial step, if most teachers lived up to a “good enough” standard. In the fields of psychology, counseling, and social work, therapists work with a definition of a “good enough parent”—that is, one who provides for the basic needs of a child and performs the rudimentary responsibilities for childcare. In a similar way, those who work with teachers to help them to advance their pedagogical skills can insist on some essential characteristics. As a framework for assessing the teaching of the three teachers featured in this chapter and as a summary of the discussion above, we offer this limited list of key factors in teaching that will advance learning and foster positive learning environments:

- The teacher knows students well, and the teacher’s planning of learning experiences takes advantage of knowledge of the learners so that the teacher can construct the appropriate instructional scaffolding.
- The teacher protects the safety and dignity of all learners so that they feel comfortable and eager to participate in learning activities.
- The teacher explicitly identifies target outcomes and situates learning by noting how the previous learning activities have progressed to the current lesson and by projecting how the current learning experiences connect and prepare learners for subsequent learning, projects, and performances.
- The teacher’s ability to situate learning implies that the teacher works with a coherent curriculum and that he or she can see the connections among various activities and materials and understands the principles that unify the curriculum around essential questions or broad concepts.
- Classroom discourse advances beyond dominant teacher talk. Learners engage with each other in purposeful conversations that support inquiry and involve them in practicing the procedures

## BASIC COMPONENTS OF A TEACHER MENTOR PROGRAM

We base the suggestions below on our work with mentor programs at high school districts and at a consolidated pre-K–12 district. We have learned from the results of mentor program evaluations that invited both the mentors and the protégés to evaluate their experience. These survey results revealed ways to improve mentor efforts to support the needs of teachers new to a school district. Each component reviewed below has a level of complexity that we cannot expand upon here. Book-length works by Pitton (2006) and Villani (2009), for example, provide detailed guidance for mentors. Instead, we briefly describe the critical components to honor in order to promote teacher retention and to *accelerate a move to teaching excellence*. We appreciate the efforts of mentors who serve as the welcome committee for the school, but we understand that mentoring has to be much more than leaving cut flowers on the new teacher’s desk on Day 1 and helping the newcomers to find the mailboxes and faculty restroom. We focus on features of mentoring that tie to retention and professional growth.

If a school district already has a program for induction and mentoring, it is probably directed from a district office. The suggestions that follow invite you to evaluate the existing program and work with the current program directors to fine-tune what you already have. If there is no formal mentor program, the following outline provides a blueprint for establishing a meaningful program that can serve all schools in your district. We understand that this is a collaborative venture that will involve school principals, district leadership, and teacher leaders.

*Recruiting and Selecting Mentors.* School districts with effective mentor programs actively seek accomplished veteran staff members to serve as mentors. Several stakeholders should discuss and contribute to the construction of a profile of the kind of person who would serve as a mentor. Several sources (Lipton & Wellman, 2002; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Rowley, 1999; Villani, 2009) suggest the kind of qualities to look for in a mentor. The mentor selection should result from deliberation among school leaders who know the applicants well. The following list of qualifications offers a sample profile of the typical mentor:

- demonstrated record as an exemplary teacher
- strong communication skills
- trustworthy and sensitive to obligations about confidentiality
- experienced with a similar teaching assignment
- easily accessible
- responsible