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# Introduction

This *Study Guide* is a tool to accompany the second edition of *What Great Teachers Do Differently: Seventeen Things That Matter Most* by Todd Whitaker. A practical resource for educators examining what great teachers do that sets them apart from others, this book focuses on the beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and commitments that positively impact teaching and learning in our classrooms and our schools.

**Note to Facilitators:** If you are conducting a book study group, seminar, or professional development event, this *Study Guide* also serves as a road map to help you organize your sessions and work with your group. It provides assistance to staff developers, principals, team leaders, college professors, and other educational leaders who are working with teachers as they develop their professional skills.

*What Great Teachers Do Differently: Seventeen Things That Matter Most* is a slender, but powerful book. It is not a book comprised of hard scientific data, detailed assessment rubrics, or esoteric theories. Instead, it is a book that clearly, concisely, and accurately informs teachers what our most effective teachers do on a daily basis. Put simply, this text is a book that teachers can put to use—immediately. This guide, therefore, is written in a way that allows the participant not only to read and understand essential concepts, but also to take these back into their classrooms and schools and put them to immediate use.

Each part of this book corresponds to one or two chapters of *What Great Teachers Do Differently*. To help you plan and organize your study sessions, each part is divided into the following five sections:

- ◆ **Key Concepts:** These summaries of the key points of each chapter in the book will help you review and focus your thoughts.
- ◆ **Discussion Questions:** These questions and ideas help you learn more about yourself and your colleagues and will aid constructive conversation in the study group, workshop, or classroom setting.
- ◆ **Journal Prompt:** Based on the specific contents of each chapter, the journal prompts help you reflect, work through essential issues, and record what you have learned in writing.
- ◆ **Group Activities:** These activities allow you to explore concepts and ideas further by interacting with others in your study group, workshop, or classroom.
- ◆ **Application:** This section provides strategies for applying what you have learned in your school.

The authors would like to thank Jeff Zoul for his assistance in the preparation of these materials.

## ***Part One***

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# **Chapter 1: Why Look at Great?**

## **Chapter 2: It's People, Not Programs**

### **Key Concepts**

- ◆ Great teachers do not use sarcasm, yell at kids, or argue with students in front of their peers.
- ◆ Educators can always learn from observing what great teachers do. Eliminating inappropriate choices does not help as much as identifying good ideas used by successful educators.
- ◆ All that is truly needed to improve education is for *all* teachers to be like our very *best* teachers.
- ◆ *Who we are* as teachers and *what we do* as teachers are more important than what we know. Teachers must self-reflect on who they are and what they must do in order to improve their practice.
- ◆ There are really only two ways to improve any school: get better teachers and improve the teachers already there.
- ◆ No program inherently leads to school improvement. It is the people who implement sound programs who determine the success of the school. Programs are never the solution and they are never the problem.
- ◆ What matters most is not *what* teachers do (including “programs” such as whole language, assertive discipline, or open classrooms), but *how* appropriately and effectively they do it.

## ? Discussion Questions

1. What is the most important idea communicated in these two chapters? How would you implement this idea in your classroom?
2. Why should we look at what great teachers do?
3. In what ways is looking at ineffective teachers pointless? On the other hand, why must we also study less effective teachers and schools when determining what constitutes great teachers and schools?
4. What is it that determines—in the eyes of parents and students—whether or not a school is great?
5. Are open classrooms, back to basics, whole language, and assertive discipline programs inherently good or bad? Explain.
6. When considering whether or not to adopt a school program change, what should stand as the primary criterion?
7. In the phrase “poor lecturer’s classroom,” which of these three words captures the problem? How is this single example illustrative of the “people versus programs” concept?



## Journal Prompt

Think of a program that has been implemented in recent years at your school or a school with which you are familiar. Which teachers adapted to the change of programs, embracing the new idea and making it work? Did any teachers resist the change? Was the program ultimately deemed a success? What determined whether or not it was successful?

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## Group Activities

### 38 Years of Teaching Fifth Grade ...

In small groups of three to five, ask participants to consider the following two points: (1) Some teachers have twenty years of teaching experience; others who have taught for twenty years have one year of experience that they have repeated twenty times. (2) Students want to know how much you care before they care how much you know. On page 5 of the text, there is a description of a teacher who taught the same grade effectively for thirty-eight years. Have participants use the scenarios above and discuss how they apply to this particular teacher. Have groups create a list with three categories: *what she knew* as a teacher, *who she was* as a teacher, and *what she did* as a teacher. Based on the description of this effective veteran teacher, ask participants to brainstorm possible outcomes within each category that would likely have applied to her and her knowledge, passion, and practices as an educator. Participants should be prepared to share these lists with the entire group.

### It's Not What You Do, It's How You Do It

Beginning on page 8 of the text, three “programs” are described that are deemed neither a problem nor a solution: open classrooms, assertive discipline, and lecturing. Participants should be divided into three groups. Ask each group to review one section of the text (“How Open Classrooms Got Started,” “Assertive Discipline—the Problem or the Solution,” and “The Poor Lecturer’s Classroom”). Each group should then create and present a skit to the entire group showing how the program in question can be both an effective and an ineffective strategy in teaching.

### Notes



## Application

In his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, Jim Collins<sup>1</sup> maintains that good is actually the enemy of great. That is, the reason there are so few *great* companies is that so many people are willing to settle for *good* companies. He extends the examples to schools, indicating that the reason we have so few great schools is primarily that we have good schools. Whitaker's text, too, speaks to the shade of difference between good and great teachers, stating that most teachers do about as well as they know how. Maintaining anonymity, identify two teachers who are settling for good and two teachers who always strive for greatness. What is the obvious difference between the two pairs? Write your insights and reflect on what the great teachers are doing differently from those classified as merely "good." Share these observations at the next session.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap ... and others don't*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.