



## INTRODUCTION

# Knowing What to Do

The power to question is the basis of all human progress.

—Indira Gandhi

We frequently read and hear that we are making no headway in solving education’s greatest dilemmas; that the reason student achievement is not where our society wants and needs it to be is because teachers and administrators refuse to accept new ideas, programs, practices, and strategies. We would propose an alternative explanation. We believe that the reason we in education continue to grapple with the same problems is not because we have done nothing, but rather because—as we are often not exactly sure what we should do—we have tried everything.

Consider the succession of trends just since the late 1990s. We have embraced building leaders as managers and administrators. We have embraced school administrators as instructional leaders. We have embraced homogeneous grouping. We have embraced heterogeneous grouping. We have embraced schools-within-schools, in which every student is known personally and well. We have embraced distance learning. We have embraced teacher-designed curriculum, eschewing textbooks. We have embraced direct instruction, in which teachers precisely follow scripted lessons. We have embraced schools that are open and welcoming to the public. We have embraced schools in which doors are locked at the morning bell and police patrol the hallways. We have embraced efforts to increase graduation rates by keeping more kids in school. We have embraced zero-tolerance policies that force kids out of school.

Still, we can see that these practices have not resulted in the overall gains in student achievement that we had hoped for. When we look at disaggregated student performance data, we can see, in black and brown and white, which of our children are not coming close to learning what they need to, what we want for them. So we conclude that strategy “A” is not working. We hear from a school nearby about a great new program that is working for them. We try it. It doesn’t give us the results we had hoped for, or it works well only for the same, or perhaps a different, 70% of our students. So we look around for a new program or strategy or practice that might help us reach all of our students. We hear at a conference about a great new program that is working for schools that sound a lot like ours. We try it. It doesn’t give us the results we had hoped for, or it works well only for the same, or perhaps a different, 70% of our students. This cycle is repeated all too often in schools across the country, leading teachers to intone the eight words administrators most dread when they propose new ideas: “We already tried that, and it didn’t work.”

Schools are becoming much better consumers of data, and, by and large, they know the academic areas in which they need to improve. What they don't know is what to *do* about it. Richard Elmore (2003, p. 9) calls this the "central problem of school improvement." He has found that while schools have clearly heard the message from policymakers and others that they must increase student achievement, no one is telling them what they need to know to act on that message. He explains:

Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in schools with the knowledge, skill, and judgment to make the improvements that will increase student performance. . . . These improvements are often not obvious even to people who are committed and knowledgeable themselves. . . . In the absence of careful analysis of the kind of practice that would lead to success, . . . they continue to do what they regarded as good teaching—and what many would tell them was good teaching—without recognizing that it was precisely that kind of teaching that was producing the disappointing performance. (pp. 9–10)

This book is about *knowing* and *doing*. In order to *know* what to do to improve achievement, educators must have a clear picture of the key characteristics of effective schools and be able to determine whether those characteristics are present in their schools. Then they need to know what to *do*, what next steps to take, to instill those characteristics in their schools.

Today, we have entered the greatest moment in educational history. We are beginning to see the fruits of high-quality research into what works in education and why. New insights are emerging from the marriage of educational research and medical research—helping us understand both what needs to be in place in order for all children to reach high learning goals and how the brain works to take in, store, and use information. These exciting developments prompted us to ask, As research converges, what does it tell us about practices, taken together, that work and those that don't? That was the genesis of this book.

That same convergence of research is helping us understand why practices work in some instances and with some children but don't in other instances or with other groups of children, and what to *do* to reach all children. This knowledge promises to relieve us of the wearying parade of new ideas, practices, programs, and strategies that are embraced, tried out, discarded as ineffective—or not as effective as we had hoped—and replaced with new ideas that are tried out, discarded as ineffective, and replaced with yet newer ideas.

Today we have a much clearer picture of what must be in place in order for students to attain high levels of learning while thriving and growing in a system that supports them. We also know what needs to be in place for the adults surrounding those students—teachers, staff members, school administrators, parents, and community members—to partner in that success. In short, we have the necessary knowledge to create high-performing schools.

## The Essential Elements of Effective Schools

Ten themes have emerged from studies of schools in which all groups of students are performing at high levels. These themes can be used to create a detailed picture of what an effective school looks like.

## *Written Curriculum Aligned to Standards, Assessments, and Instructional Materials*

Not surprisingly, the first theme is the central role of a written curriculum aligned to standards, assessments, and instructional materials. Because state standards provide continuity in education across each state, they provide an important and necessary baseline for curriculum alignment. In our mobile society, it is important to ensure that children transferring from one school or district to another encounter the same educational expectations and instructional progression. According to Census Bureau data on national mobility from 2000 to 2005, 42.4% of children between the ages of 5 and 19—nearly 26 million—moved *at least once* during that 5-year period. Of these mobile children, 14.5 million moved within the same county, 5.4 million moved outside of the county but within the same state, and 4.5 million moved to a different state (United States Census Bureau, 2008a). Had written curriculum aligned to state standards existed in every school district, it would have provided a degree of continuity for those 19.9 million children who moved within their state. Had national standards existed, that continuity would have extended to an additional 4.5 million students.

While there is widespread agreement that the quality of state standards is improving (Achieve, Inc., 2009), in many states standards (1) are still too numerous and broad in scope, (2) do not focus on the most important areas, and (3) lack the necessary degree of coherence, specificity, and academic rigor.

In curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the big idea is coherence. In a coherent instructional program, all parts are aligned and working together toward the same goal: meeting the standards. The written curriculum lays out the specifics of the instructional program. It describes the assessments to be used and the program of intervention and enrichment opportunities that are keyed to the results of those assessments. This coherence ensures that every student is both challenged to do his or her best and supported in that effort should progress falter. Instructional materials support (but cannot replace) the written curriculum. Teachers rely on the written curriculum to help them know exactly what parts of books or other materials are to be used and in what context.

## *Instructional Practices That Challenge and Support All Students*

In effective schools, a well-designed written curriculum is paired with a strong instructional program. To maintain coherence, leaders and peers work together to ensure that the written curriculum is the one that is taught in every classroom. Teacher teams develop pacing charts to guide instructional organization and delivery so that important concepts and content are not skipped. School administrators conduct frequent classroom observations to confirm that instruction is moving along as laid out in the pacing chart.

Effective schools acknowledge student learning as their highest priority. In such a context, teachers have high expectations of all of their students, and they have the instructional supports in place to ensure that all children have the real opportunity to meet those expectations. Students are simultaneously encouraged and supported to stretch their knowledge and skills in an instructional program that engages their interest.

## *Assessments That Improve Student Learning*

To assess student progress through the instructional program and toward the standards, three types of assessments are necessary:

for student learning than any other single factor.” Teachers must master both the content knowledge of their subjects and the pedagogical skills to transmit that particular knowledge to students, who often have widely diverse knowledge and skills, learning styles, and experiences. Teachers who are strong in only one or the other lack some of the essential tools to meet this challenge.

Weiss and Miller (2006) found that teachers with shallower content knowledge tend to spend more time telling students about the subject. Teachers with deeper knowledge “pose more questions, and are more likely to have students consider alternative explanations, propose more investigations, and pursue unanticipated inquiries” (p. 10).

It seems astounding that arguments still swirl around the importance of teacher content knowledge in instruction. Teachers’ abilities “to pose questions, select tasks, evaluate their pupils’ understanding, and to make curriculum decisions all depend on how they themselves understand the subject matter” (McDiarmid, Ball, & Anderson, 1989, p. 13). Ball and McDiarmid (1990) point out that

what teachers need to know about the subject matter they teach extends beyond the specific topics of their curriculum. Teachers must not only be capable of defining for students the accepted truths in a subject but they must also be able to explain why a particular proposition is deemed warranted, why it is worth knowing, and how it relates to other propositions. For example, while English teachers need to know about particular authors and their works, about literary genres and styles, they also need to know about interpretation and criticism. A history teacher needs detailed knowledge about events and people of the past but must also understand what history is: the nature of historical knowledge and what it means to find out or know something about the past. (p. 3)

Those teachers whose students are most successful have a deep understanding of appropriate instructional methods (National Staff Development Council, 2001a). Research-validated strategies in the area of pedagogy include:

- Us[ing] techniques such as advance organizers, study questions, prediction, concept mapping and computer simulations to prepare students for learning activities
- Provid[ing] clear and focused instruction
- Routinely provid[ing] students feedback and reinforcement regarding their learning progress
- Review[ing] and reteach[ing] as necessary to help all students master learning material
- Develop[ing] students’ critical and creative thinking skills
- Us[ing] effective questioning techniques to build basic and higher-level skills
- Foster[ing] the development of self-directed learning skills (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005, section 3.1)

## Check-In

When the team first arrives at the school, each member needs to check in with the school office and follow any procedures in place for visitors. These usually include signing in and wearing a visitor badge. Some schools want the teams to check in and out every day. Some schools will give the team visitor badges to use for the duration of the visit and may not require daily sign-in and -out. If possible, the second option is preferable, as the team often arrives and departs before and after the office staff.

When to ask team members to arrive depends on the distance they will be traveling, the number of days in the visit, and how much training is needed. Table 14.2 summarizes some of the considerations involved in setting the start time.

**Table 14.2: Determining Team Arrival Times for On-Site Review**

Circumstance	Arrival Time: Team Members	Arrival Time: Team Leader	Notes
The team members all live nearby.	Meet at the team work-room at 8:00 a.m. on the first day of the visit.	Team leader should be at the school by 2:00 p.m. the day <i>before</i> the visit.	This schedule gives the team leader a little while to meet and greet and still have time to set up the team room for the next day. Training in the school review process and planning for the visit can be completed before the staff kick-off meeting.
The team members are arriving from a driving distance of 1–3 hours away.	Meet at the team work-room on the first day of the visit at a time set between 9:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.	Team leader should be at the school by 8:00 a.m. on the first day of the visit.	The starting time depends on how long it takes the driver coming the longest distance to arrive at the school. Lunch should be brought in. Beginning later may require the team to meet after the staff kick-off meeting.
Some team members have already been fully trained in the on-site school review process.	New team members arrive for training early in the day. Experienced members arrive after the training for a 2-hour planning meeting or for the kick-off meeting if that occurs first.	Team leader should be at the school by 2:00 p.m. the day <i>before</i> the visit.	Previously trained members may want a refresher in the procedures. For others, joining the team later works best and will save the district money in contract and per diem expenses.