

Three foundational elements are key to improving student achievement: a coherent curriculum, intensive literacy practices, and well-structured lessons.

# Time to **FOCUS**

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**M**ost of us know, with a moment's reflection, those few factors that are most essential to quality education and school improvement. We have known them for decades—that is, that a coherent, content-rich curriculum; unprecedented amounts of purposeful reading and writing; and soundly structured lessons will enable any school to succeed or improve significantly and immediately. Virtually every informed educator knows that.

But knowing isn't enough. We have yet to realize that the only way to ensure that the elements are actually implemented is for leaders to:

- Emphatically and repeatedly clarify, monitor, and reinforce those elements at every opportunity until they are thoroughly understood and established
  - Organize teachers in teams to ensure that they reinforce and help one another master and refine their implementation throughout their careers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).
- Make no mistake: any school that does those things even reasonably well will improve immediately and significantly not only in raising test scores but also in preparing students for college, careers, and citizenship.

But there's a catch. To finally master those powerful elements, we must devote our limited resources to them and them alone for a time—that is, until we have implemented them with reasonable consistency. This will be a dramatic, even wrenching shift and a significant undertaking. It will require us to focus virtually all of our



time and attention on those elements in faculty meetings, professional development sessions, and—of current importance—teaching evaluation. The fact that so few schools have truly implemented a content-rich curriculum, purposeful reading and writing, and soundly structured lessons only proves that they cannot be put into practice without our intensive, near-exclusive attention.

What has prevented us from doing so? The eminently distractible, unfocused culture of school improvement. In the last 30 years of so-called reform, we have generated and perennially pursued a legion of pedagogic fads and programs, none of which have lived up to their promises (Schmoker, 2010). The addiction to “what’s new” has kept most educators from mastering those elements and then actually implementing them. And it has prevented us from stopping long enough to evaluate the compelling evidence that they are not just “effective practices,” but are far more than that. Those elements are more effective than all other factors combined.

### The Evidence

There is stunning—in my view, indisputable—evidence for and agreement on the unrivaled power of sound curricula, authentic literacy, and effectively structured lessons. For schools to inherit the wealth of benefits they provide, we need to ensure that every school leader becomes deeply acquainted with those elements as well as the evidence of the life-changing impact they will have on students. It is just as important not to overcomplicate the elements; they are fairly simple, familiar concepts.

### CURRICULUM

Let’s begin with curriculum. In his meta-analytic studies, Marzano (2003) found that a coherent, “guaranteed” curriculum (i.e., one that is actually taught by all teachers of the same course) may be the single largest school factor that determines how many students will be successful. It is the foundation for successful professional learning communities, and without it such communities will fail. No innovation, however attractive or research-based, can overcome the havoc wrought by what exists in most schools: the alarming inconsistencies between teachers of the same course, the hodgepodge of self-selected topics, and the disturbing proliferation of worksheets. This is the result of our failure to provide teachers with a (roughly) common schedule of content topics, readings, and writing assignments that is organized by week or month or unit. According to Hirsch (2009), we have not had such curriculum coherence in the majority of our schools for about 60 years.

Such a curriculum need not be perfect or airtight. But it should aim to ensure that students learn approximately the same content, engage in similar amounts of reading and writing, and enjoy the benefits of periodic common assessments, regardless of which teacher they happen to get (Conley, 2005; DuFour et al., 2006).

Doesn’t good sense demand the recognition that nothing could be more fundamental, more consequential for students—and teachers—than having a coherent schedule of content and intellectual skills to work from? Shouldn’t we want such a curriculum to be fully implemented before we pursue any other initiative whatso-

ever? Had we built and implemented such a curriculum 30 years ago, the history of reform would have been written quite differently.

Moreover, as Conley (2005) has discovered, “common curriculum” means very little unless it includes parameters that ensure that students engage in far more reading, writing, and speaking than now occurs in the great majority of schools.

### LITERACY

This brings us to literacy itself, which is integral to and almost inseparable from good curricula. Language is the primary medium through which people learn and acquire the ability to think and reason (Willingham, 2009). Curricula and literacy are linked inextricably; together, they are the keys to academic and career success and to informed, effective citizenship.

But for all the lip service we give to literacy and despite the billions we’ve spent on reading and literacy programs, much is amiss. Purposeful reading and writing have been directly supplanted by scripted, test-driven programs and by worksheet and activity-driven curricula.

This is precisely what prevents students from reading, writing, and talking about increasingly complex texts for sustained periods of time. Very few schools ensure that students read for even one hour in the course of a six-period school day. They write even less. Young intellects simply can’t develop without large, daily helpings of content-rich reading, writing, and discussion about what they read. Our failure here stunts students’ progress, with particularly calamitous consequences for the poor and underachieving. The net effect is perfectly cap-

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tured in the title of Kelly Gallagher's landmark book: *Readicide* (2009, Stenhouse Publishers). We need to at least triple the amount of reading, writing, and text-based discussion that is currently found in most schools. If we do, the effect will be breathtaking.

## LESSONS

Finally, and in a virtual dead heat with curricula and literacy, is the astonishing impact of soundly structured lessons. There is no mystery here. The rough structure of an effective lesson is exceedingly well-known but inexcusably rare (Marzano, 2007). Let's not overcomplicate: a good lesson starts with a clear learning target that is derived from the curriculum and is often accompanied by an effort to stimulate student's curiosity or existing knowledge about what is to be learned. This is followed by multiple segments taught in short cycles of instruction, guided practice, student-to-student interaction, and some form of checking for understanding (e.g., reviewing student work by circulating around the classroom) followed by adjustments to instruction. The goal at every step of the lesson is for all students to be on task and learning each segment of a lesson before the teacher moves on to the next segment.

When will we—through our norms and actions—finally acknowledge that such teaching multiplies the number of students who will learn

that day's lesson? As Wiliam (2007) found, such methods actually accelerate the speed of learning by as much as 400%—with especially large benefits for struggling students. I know teachers whose crude, first-year attempts to implement such lessons resulted in enormous one-year gains, not only on test scores but also in the most essential college-readiness skills (Schmoker, 2006; 2011).

## Conclusion

A clear focus on those elements could change the course of education history. But as most of us know and as research makes quite clear, very few schools implement them consistently. Very few actually devote serious effort to routinely clarifying, reinforcing, and monitoring—and thus ensuring—the implementation of those elements, though it would cost nothing to do so (Marzano, 2007). Why haven't we? Because we are so easily diverted that we are not used to focusing unwaveringly for sustained periods of time on the essential practices until they are actually implemented.

We won't enjoy the benefits of those elements until we learn, as Collins (2005) urged, to say "no, thank you" to anything—any program, professional development, or initiative whatsoever—that diverts us from fully implementing them. At this propitious moment in public education, the old truism that less is more has never been truer. We must ferociously and relentlessly clarify and focus on the few, hugely potent elements as well as the unassailable evidence that they would elevate levels of learning more swiftly and substantively than anything yet undertaken. **PL**

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