The Power of Focus

It’s all about prioritizing to achieve simple, inexorable school improvement.

By Michael Schmoker

Perhaps the most important facts for educators to acknowledge today are these: that we know, right now, how to significantly improve schooling in almost any setting, and that we know how to do this for students at every point in the achievement spectrum, from low to high.

So, why haven’t schools improved more markedly, even after decades of “reform”? Because we have never learned to prioritize—to isolate and then focus on only the most vital, game-changing actions that ensure significant improvement in teaching and learning. The culture of schooling, and of school reform itself, has avoided a reckoning with what successful organizations have always known: Time and energy are precious, limited resources, and if we squander them on too many initiatives or on the wrong ones, we will fail.

If we focus our time and energy on the right things—the very best, most effective practices, for a sustained period of time—success is all but guaranteed.

We haven’t learned these lessons yet in schools. We need to. As Michael Fullan has written, “There is too much overload and baggage on the current change journey. The skinny is about finding the smallest number of high-leverage, easy-to-understand actions that unleash stunningly powerful consequences.”

Notice that he doesn’t refer to mere “consequences” or positive consequences. No, Fullan assures us that honoring these criteria would unleash “stunningly powerful consequences.”

Do we honor those criteria now? When I visit schools and classrooms, nothing could be clearer than the fact that schools almost uniformly violate each of them. We typically embrace a large number of low-leverage, difficult-to-understand actions. These don’t “unleash” anything—except frustration and academic stagnation.

Is “More” Really More?

For decades, we have embraced an ethos of “more is more”—that an abundance of initiatives, instituted simultaneously, will result in a better education for our students. And we have embraced this ethos while largely ignoring evidence as the basis for selecting these initiatives. According to the 2015 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Education Policy Outlook, only 10 percent of education policy initiatives were ever even evaluated, much less proven to be effective. Indeed, in the landmark study “The District Role in Instructional Improvement,” Susan Fuhrman, Thomas B. Corcoran, and Catherine Belcher found that professional development is characteristically driven not by proof or evidence, but by “whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology.”

Consider our current national experiment with the new breed of elaborate, complex teacher evaluation templates. These instruments abound in dozens of arcane, ambiguous categories and criteria, with no indication of which ones should be mastered first and no hint of which actions would have the largest impact on learning. These frameworks consist of a grab bag of “research-based” practices that aren’t research-based at all. For instance, in most of these
templates, “differentiated instruction”—for which there is no research base whatsoever—figures prominently. The language of these evaluation templates belies their legitimacy. Most educators admit, as I do, that they simply don’t understand the edu-speak they are written in, i.e., that good lessons must contain “simultaneous multisensory representations.” No wonder so many teachers and evaluators loathe these instruments and the professional development time they consume.

A Change in Methods
So, if we truly want record numbers of students who receive a rich, life-changing education, which methods should we turn our limited time and attention to? Let me suggest three key areas, for which I believe there is unrivaled evidence of effectiveness. Each of them passes the test of being easy to understand and implement, especially with sustained focus and opportunities for teachers to practice and refine them in professional development and in team-based professional learning communities. They are:

1 Consistent, schoolwide implementation of a coherent, easily understood, content-rich curriculum that tells a teacher approximately which skills and concepts to teach—and when. Such a common curriculum should constitute the majority of the curriculum, but not all of it. It should focus on what is taught—not how. This may be the single largest factor that affects both student achievement and reading proficiency.

2 Mastery, by every teacher, of the fundamental moves and components of effective, explicit instruction—which hinges, more than anything, on the continuous (sometimes minute-to-minute) effort by the teacher to adjust the pace and nature of their instruction on the basis of frequent formative data. This basic structure applies to the majority of instruction; it is integral to, and the prerequisite for, effective project- and problem-based learning.

3 An intensive, curriculum-wide emphasis on fairly traditional literacy. We have overcomplicated instruction in reading, speaking, and writing. To succeed, students simply need vastly more time to purposefully read, discuss, and write about worthy, substantive literature and nonfiction across the curriculum (as often as possible, in the interpretive and argumentative mode).

The evidence base for these three areas is prodigious. Their power and primacy are endorsed by a legion of our most eminent researchers. Ironically, only a small fraction of schools currently implement them consistently. Those schools that do implement them consistently have seen huge gains.

Maximizing Focus
Begin your own process for maximizing focused, effective effort in your school or district. It has to begin with an honest search to determine priorities on the basis of the best available evidence. These must be more than “research-based.” If we value time and logic, we owe it to students to seek out and implement only that which the evidence points to as the most effective actions and initiatives we can find.

These critical determinations must be followed by a campaign of highly focused, unabashed repetition; review; and practice. Mastery and consistent implementation—not mere exposure or training—must become our new goal. Active leadership is critical; we must sensibly monitor and adjust our leadership efforts based on evidence of implementation. To the greatest possible extent, this should occur in a climate that emphasizes helpfulness and growth, rather than evaluation.

Less is more. Simplicity and priority are jealous taskmasters. But if we exercise the discipline to stay focused on what is indisputably effective, students will benefit enormously—and soon.

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