



HOW PRINCIPALS CAN RESHAPE THE TEACHING BELL CURVE

By Kim Marshall

In my work in schools over the last few decades, three hard truths have gradually come into focus. First, within every school there is a bell-shaped curve of teaching quality. Some teachers are using highly effective practices almost all the time, a larger group is solidly effective, others are working at a mediocre level, and a few are mostly un-

successful with their students. Although the curve may tilt left or right from year to year and place to place, teaching variability is a reality everywhere, from struggling inner-city schools to expensive prep schools.

The second hard truth is that teaching practices at the lower end of the spectrum have a disproportionately negative impact on some students. Children who are fortunate enough to enter school with family and community advantages can survive mediocre and even ineffective teaching



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(although their parents may squawk and get their children moved out of certain classrooms). But for children with disadvantages — poverty, no books in the home, special needs, language difficulties, abuse and neglect — mediocre and ineffective teaching are like a stuck parking brake on normal progress. Several years of poor teaching in a row can have a devastating lifelong impact. These children desperately need effective and highly effective teaching. The less of it they have, the wider the achievement gap and the more the American dream becomes a false promise.

The third truth: It's really difficult for a school to increase the amount of solid and superb teaching and reduce or eliminate less-than-effective practices. Why? It's not that some teachers get up in the morning stubbornly determined to be mediocre. The reason is that, over the last few decades, the strategies we've been using to improve teaching have been largely ineffective. Some examples:

Hire good teachers and leave them alone. Given inevitable hiring mistakes and regression to the mean, this always produces some weak instruction.

Mandate scripted, "teacher-proof" curriculum materials. This is a weak strategy that's likely to drive away the talented, dedicated people we need in our classrooms.

Require teachers to turn in lesson plans a week ahead

and inspect them all. This level of micromanagement (the average faculty produces about 25,000 lesson plans a year) is impractical and has little impact on actual teaching since a great lesson plan can be poorly executed and a mediocre lesson plan can be salvaged during instruction.

Schedule a once-or-twice-a-year preobservation conference, full-lesson observation, detailed write-up, and post-conference. It's laughable to think that evaluating one or two classes, often atypical lessons put on for the administrator's benefit, can significantly improve a teacher's performance. This approach is best described by three adjectives: inaccurate, ineffective, and dishonest. How many parents are aware that this is the way we evaluate teachers?

In the last few years, policymakers have come up with some new ideas that purport to do a better job improving teaching and learning. I have concerns about each of them.

Hire more administrators and conduct weekly classroom visits. Too expensive for almost all districts.

Bring in outside evaluators to second-guess principals. The theory is that school leaders get too cozy with their staff and shy away from difficult conversations, but this model is costly and avoids the essential work of improving the way principals supervise and evaluate — or replacing them.

Rate teachers using electronic checklists during classroom visits and elaborate rubrics afterward. This provides a false sense of precision about teaching, prevents supervisors from being thoughtful observers in classrooms (including asking one or two students, “What are you working on today?”), and short-circuits thoughtful coaching conversations.

Conduct once-a-year surprise videotaping to capture what’s really happening day to day. The idea is to see past the dog-and-pony show, but an annual video inspection is likely to throw teachers and students off and is a totally inadequate sampling of daily reality.

Install cameras in all classrooms to monitor instruction continuously. This NSA-style supervision freaks teachers out and misses the nuances of actually visiting classrooms.

Have teachers submit videos of their best lessons. Will they be representative of daily ups and downs?

Have teachers submit voluminous binders of “evidence” of their work. One Connecticut teacher whose principal asked for this kind of documentation said, “I’ve never worked so hard and taught so little.”

Use value-added analysis of test scores to rate teachers, rewarding the best with merit pay and firing the worst. This idea sounds logical, but data are available for only about 20% of teachers, and researchers have cautioned that value-added analysis has serious shortcomings and shouldn’t be used for consequential personnel decisions.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

What all these approaches have in common is that they are high-stakes and seem to spring from the assumption that teachers are doing bad things that need to be caught and punished. They are judgmental rather than constructive.

If we picture a fork in the road, many schools are taking the left fork leading to evidence gathering, rating, and compliance rather than the right fork — working to improve teaching and learning. As I’ve worked with numerous principals and faculties over the last few years, I’m disheartened to see administrators spending most of their contact time with teachers on cumbersome bureaucratic processes. The result? Teachers shift to a defensive mode, worry constantly about their status, and look for ways to game the system.

My sense is that the new methods aren’t improving teaching and learning — and may even be making things worse. In all too many schools, a similar amount of mediocre and ineffective teaching continues day after day, week after week, year after year. Good principals and teachers get discouraged and cynical, and some are driven out of the profession or flee to charter or private schools.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

So how *do* we improve subpar teaching and motivate solid teachers to take their work to a higher level? How can school

leaders be more successful at their core mission — getting more effective teaching in more classrooms more of the time? For the answer, we need only look at the research and commentary on our most successful schools. Their “secret sauce” is a mix of five key elements, conducted mostly in a medium-stakes environment:

Professional working conditions: Effective principals create a sense of purpose and possibility, a positive student and parent culture, and the support, materials, and guidance so teachers can teach an appropriate curriculum well. A key aspect of support is creating a schedule that gives teacher teams the time to collaborate every week and providing skillful facilitation to keep them on track. Professional conditions are far more important than cash bonuses for retaining and attracting good teachers.

Teacher teamwork: An essential task for the leadership team is structuring, supporting, and monitoring teacher teams as they backward-design curriculum units, analyze interim assessments and student work, and push themselves to confront what’s not working, experiment with new ideas, and continuously improve teaching and learning.

Guiding teacher collaboration is not a simple matter, but we have excellent models to follow, including Japanese lesson study and the professional learning community work in a number of American schools. The best teams create a dynamic where top-notch teachers open their classroom doors and share wisdom and expertise and everyone listens to good ideas and tunes in to research and effective practices in other schools. The best principals shift the conversation to results and constantly monitor how teacher teams are doing on the endlessly complex task of getting all students to proficiency.

Rather than waiting for state test results, effective teams use good local measures — Fountas & Pinnell reading assessments, the Six-Trait Writing Rubric, diagnostic math inventories, and others — to get detailed information on their students four or five times a year and constantly tweak their classroom practices.

Coaching teachers: The best way to accomplish this is for principals to flip the traditional process. Instead of making announced, infrequent, full-length classroom observations followed by lengthy write-ups (often several weeks later), make unannounced, frequent, short visits followed promptly by face-to-face conversations focused on one or two affirmations and a key leverage point for improvement.

The ideal place for these conversations is in the teacher’s classroom when students aren’t there. By keeping classroom observations and conversations to 10-15 minutes each (it’s amazing how much happens in a classroom in a few minutes and how much can be accomplished in a brief, focused conversation) and following up with a short written narrative, principals can visit two or three classrooms each day so that each teacher is observed about 10 times a year — and still have time to do the rest of their incredibly demanding job.

By avoiding checklists and refraining from rubric-scoring teachers after each visit, principals are much more likely to have authentic conversations with teachers, understand the world they live in, and help them improve. Teachers also have the opportunity to coach their principals on the finer points of their lessons.

When principals interact with teachers in this way throughout the school year, they can put together accurate end-of-year evaluations and fulfill the essential mandates of the supervision/evaluation process: quality assurance, wise personnel decisions, affirmation and improvement, and motivating teachers to continuously reflect and bring their A-game every day.

Student surveys: Many teachers ask their students to fill out short questionnaires at the end of the year and learn a lot from the feedback. Kids are remarkably astute and usually take the process very seriously. The problem with this scattershot approach is that the educators who most need improvement are the least likely to ask for students' opinions.

The idea of giving all students the opportunity to comment anonymously on their teachers' performance got a major boost from the 2013 Measures of Effective Teaching study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and, since then, the idea has swept the nation. However, making student survey data a high-stakes part of teachers' evaluation is fraught with problems and has produced strong pushback in some districts. There's fear that surveys will become popularity contests, that teachers will pressure students to give them good reviews or dial back on rigor and expectations, that students may give low ratings to teachers who demand a lot of them (even though the students may appreciate them years later) and give high ratings to "nice" teachers who have lower expectations, skewing the data.

Fortunately, some schools and districts have hit upon a medium-stakes approach: Give brief, well-crafted surveys to all students twice a year (perhaps November and June) and have each teacher look over the results with an administrator or trusted colleague, focusing on three questions: *Which student responses are cause for celebration? What's surprising? And what are one or two things in the classroom that could be improved based on the feedback?* Getting surveys and thinking about the results with a critical friend is potentially one of the most powerful ways to affirm good teaching and improve classroom dynamics and pedagogy.

Hiring and firing well: Every teaching vacancy is a golden opportunity to strengthen the faculty, and recruiting effective teachers is a major part of every school leader's legacy. Principals and their leadership teams need to be able to screen a wide range of well-qualified candidates early in the spring, watch them teach demonstration lessons, and have them interact with potential colleagues to see if there's a good match. My biggest regret from my years as a principal was when I rushed to make a last-minute hiring decision rather than persisting until we found the right person — and when I cut corners on calling references or didn't push previous employers to give the full story.

Firing persistently ineffective teachers is hard, essential

work. Before principals get to this point, there need to be frequent classroom visits with immediate feedback, lots of support to improve, help from instructional coaches and teacher colleagues with subject-area expertise, tough-love feedback, and an attempt to counsel the teacher out. Dismissal is an area where principals need better support from superintendents and boards (and possibly changes in state laws) so that there's a fair, streamlined process to expedite the departure of teachers who aren't getting better and are harming children's life chances every day.

STRUCTURES AND SUPPORTS

I believe that principals who do these five things well — create professional working conditions, foster teacher teamwork, coach teachers, use student surveys, and hire and fire well — will bend the teaching quality curve in the right direction. But is this work too hard? Are the principals who use these approaches gifted superheroes with powers that few mortals possess? Are these practices too challenging to take to scale? If that's the case, we need to focus on "principal-proofing" the teacher improvement process, perhaps by mandating checklists and clever iPad apps.

But I don't buy the premise. In fact, I believe it's an insult to almost all school leaders. The failure of most principals to bend the teaching quality curve is not a lack of innate ability but the result of ineffective policies they've been required to follow. I believe that with the right structures and support, principals can bring about major improvements in teaching quality.

Bending the curve is a matter of great urgency, especially for our neediest students. To make this happen, we need to dial back to medium stakes, get principals out from behind their computers and clipboards and into classrooms for frequent, authentic observations followed by thoughtful coaching conversations with all teachers, listen to what students have to say about their teaching, build trust and collegiality, and allow teacher teamwork to become the engine of improvement.

When difficult employment decisions have to be made, principals need to have the courage and backup to make them stick, but most of the work of improving teaching is changing workplace dynamics so that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Our children deserve no less.

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