

OUTCOMES

Coaching, teaching standards, and feedback mark the teacher's road to mastery

By Jon Saphier



What would happen if we found agreement around the world on what constitutes high-expertise teaching? For one thing, there would be a set of standards universally embraced that clearly defines core agreements about good teaching and learning. It would be obvious that proficiency in the knowledge, skills, and practices that comprise good teaching would be the highest-leverage path to increasing student achievement. Teacher preparation and subsequent professional development for all teachers everywhere would be based on the standards. Every effort would be made to assure that expert practices show up consistently in every classroom — from widely available classroom coaching on these practices to policies that reflect our public will to focus on expertise. Consider this: That

TEACHER

scenario is not a distant fantasy; it is fast approaching if we look around the globe.

THE UNIVERSALS OF SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

True professions are grounded in a common knowledge base that all practitioners must study and in which they must show a certain level of proficiency to be licensed. This is true in architecture, law, and engineering. Visit the university libraries of schools for these professions, and you will see common organization of topics; common courses populate the curriculum. In the various state licensing boards are similar assessments. On the other hand, visit teacher preparation programs around the country and professional development academies in large districts and in regional collaboratives, and you will see vast variety and little consistency. It's time for a change, and the coalescing international teaching standards can provide it. There is nothing wrong



Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

with focusing on local needs, but the common ground for professional development should be the universal building blocks — those high-leverage essentials — that we know impact student learning. This is the path to creating a true profession and elevating the instruction children receive.

Feedback, properly understood, is one of these building blocks, its potent impact on student learning well-documented (Hattie, 2009; Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2009). The significance of this standard becomes apparent when one examines the actual teacher behavior associated with effective feedback. In order to give students feedback that meets the careful standards defined by Wiggins (2010) and others, the criteria for success need to be crystal clear to both the teacher and the students. Thus “feedback,” properly done, includes a cluster of other important and necessary teacher skills: formulating clear and rigorous objectives; defining and communicating criteria for success; and providing frequent feedback that is value-neutral, helpful, and useful for students to act upon. Feedback becomes the center of a group of skills that balance and complement one another.

Making students’ thinking visible is another group of skills that produces a high degree of student talk both with the teacher and one’s fellow students, about the content, and at a high level of thinking (Collins, Holum, & Brown, 1991; Perkins, 2006; Saphier et al., 2008). Proceeding from Vygotsky’s insights about the social nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1986), these skills make students active thinkers about the content; the teacher gets a constant reading

on who understands and who doesn’t. In turn, students are required to become good listeners to one another and be active processors of information. In addition, the successful implementation of these skills has a direct positive effect on the climate of risk taking and mutual support among students.

It is no wonder that the last two decades of research of these skills have elevated their status. For example, 21st-century research on successful instruction in mathematics (Lampert, 2001; Chapin, O’Connor, & Anderson, 2003; Fuson, Kaichman, & Bransford, 2005) and in literacy (Allington, 2011) supports the potency of making thinking visible. In the 1990s, New York City’s District 2 became the highest-performing district in the city by emphasizing these skills for all teachers in all subjects.

Making students’ thinking visible and feedback are two examples of high-leverage universals that occur in teaching standards around the world. Like the other building blocks that are emerging as worldwide standards, these skill sets come to life when we share images of what they look and sound like in action. See specific looks and sounds for making students’ thinking visible at www.learningforward.org/news/jsd. Unfortunately, important professional development topics such as these rank low on professional development agenda.

TEACHER STUDENT LEADER

Because the Outcomes standard refers to numerous aspects of performance standards for educators and content standards for students, we explore multiple perspectives in the following pages.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACADEMIES

To realize the promise of a commonly agreed-upon set of standards for successful teaching, professional development must maintain a relentless and ongoing focus on the highest-leverage teaching skills. These skills need to be properly expanded into clear exemplars that educators can understand at the concrete level and tied to performance assessments, just as we do for students in the curriculum standards movement. The foundation of professional development, then, will move away from being reactive to individual teacher evaluation prescriptions or exclusively driven by local needs assessments and move toward a unifying vision of high-expertise practice. This shift is essential to making teaching a true profession.

The knowledge and skills for high-level professional practice in teaching needs to be available for all practitioners throughout their careers with appropriate components offered at timely junctures in one's path. Ideally, this would mean a teaching and learning academy with permanent offerings and in-class follow-up for the essential categories of professional knowledge and skills. See the box at right for potential categories.

Only large districts could hope to create such academies, but regional collaboratives could also do so, especially with federal and state support.

High-leverage essentials of good teaching and learning, however, are professional development topics that should be alive in every district every year, and not just offered periodically or at local initiative. See those essentials at www.learningforward.org/news/jsd.

COACHING AND PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (2002) proved three decades ago that workshop-based professional development, no matter how well designed and delivered, had little effect on classroom practice. They also found that this outcome could be changed dramatically if participants actively practiced new skills in the workshops and then were given feedback and coaching on-site in their classrooms on the application of the skills. My argument for performance assessment of professional development is really a call to translate that powerful finding into the design of all professional development. If we are giving our teachers learning experiences in what are now emerging as universal standards for successful teaching, we must make sure the practices show up in action.

More at www.learningforward.org/news/jsd

- Specific looks and sounds for making students' thinking visible.
- High-leverage essentials of good teaching and learning.

The emerging consensus of teaching standards creates a case too powerful to ignore: We must not only enable all teachers to receive professional development in the building blocks of successful teaching and learning, we must support them with coaching and assess their individual capacity to use the skills properly after the training. The implications for us as professional developers of adults is the same as for teachers of children: Develop performance tasks for teachers on skills we are teaching; identify benchmarks of progress toward final proficiency; and give ongoing feedback to participants on their progress to mastery.

The formula above has been difficult to implement in traditional professional development of the past. Two 21st-century approaches, however, now make it feasible to ask participants learning new skills to practice them and get feedback: embedded coaching structures and technology.

In districts such as Montgomery County, Md., my consulting group Research for Better Teaching works through building-based instructional coaches. These carefully chosen professionals teach frequent building-based modules and study group sessions on core teaching skills. They are then available to give in-class feedback to teachers. Having a common agreement across the county for what their teaching standards look like and sound like in action has enabled them to give objective feedback in building-based settings. The county's Center for Skillful Teaching functions like an in-house academy that offers professional development every year in these core standards and provides continuity of focus (continuously since 2000) on the building blocks in their standards. The payoffs in student achievement have been significant, as documented by Childress, Doyle, & Thomas (2009).

Video technology, ever more portable and accessible, makes it possible for teachers to video their experiments with new instructional strategies without another person in the room. This technology is applied in a number of districts for self-analysis and self-reflection. It also can enhance face-to-face professional development sessions when professional developers or coaches review classroom video and provide feedback to teachers online. With central district video servers, this feedback can be provided remotely and securely.

None of these changes is without its challenges. Principals and coaches must develop solid partnerships to strengthen the

At the teaching and learning academy

Here are potential categories of knowledge and skills for a comprehensive teaching and learning academy:

- Content
- Content analysis
- Content specific pedagogy
- Classroom management
- Cultural proficiency.
- Motivation
- Instruction
- Planning and curriculum
- Data analysis
- Relations with parents and community

adult professional culture of nondefensive examination of practice (Saphier & West, 2009). School boards must be convinced to support coaching positions with long-term commitments. Districts have to invest in equipment and professional development for their principals, professional developers, and coaches, so they become expert analysts of instruction in addition to learning coaching skills. But this we can do now, especially if we can surmount the final and most significant obstacle: the political will.

THE REST OF THE JOB

On the whole, American policymakers do not understand that the knowledge and skills required for successful teaching, especially for children of poverty, is as large and complex as that for high-level practice in law, architecture or engineering. Our populace, our voters, our legislators, and even our most influential policymakers believe anyone can teach successfully if they are smart, literate, and know content. And if they are idealistic and motivated, then they will be more than competent; they will be stars. By all means, let's get smart, motivated people

who know their content into teaching. But let's finish the job as our competitors do so thoroughly in Singapore, Finland, and South Korea by giving them the expertise they need to use their intelligence and actualize their commitment.

Recently, policymakers' attention has been focused on teacher evaluation as a result of several recent reports, such as *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern,

& Keeling, 2009, which show that school district evaluation systems, with notable exceptions, are woefully inadequate. Missing from the table, however, is the understanding that teacher evaluation alone does not develop high-expertise teachers. Such development comes from embedding the standards in the other processes that impact teaching expertise: preparation and licensing; hiring; induction for new teachers; contact with peers during properly structured collaborative work; adult professional culture in the workplace; and access to high-quality sustained professional development, including coaching, in the highest-leverage teaching skills.

This country is committed to student learning standards. We are committed to assessing student progress in relation to those standards. We are committed to accountability. But until we become committed to developing high-expertise teaching and are fully mindful of its complexity, we will continue to fall short of the promise of democracy. That is the promise to provide all children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, with a fair chance at a good life.

Generating that commitment requires organizations such as Learning Forward to educate the public and legislators about the complexity of good teaching. High-expertise teaching is not easily won.

Missing from the table is the understanding that teacher evaluation alone does not develop high-expertise teachers.

REFERENCES

- Allington, R. (2011). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (3rd ed.). New York: Pearson.
- Chapin, S., O'Connor, C., & Anderson, N. (2003). *Classroom discussions: Using math talk to help students learn, grades 1-6*. Sausalito, CA: Math Solutions Publications.
- Childress, S., Doyle, D.P., & Thomas, D.A. (2009). *Leading for equity: The pursuit of excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collins, A., Holum, A., Brown, J.S. (1991). *Cognitive apprenticeship: Making thinking visible*. Available at www.21learn.org/site/archive/cognitive-apprenticeship-making-thinking-visible.
- Fuson, K.C., Kaichman, M., & Bransford, J. (2005). Mathematical understanding: An introduction. In S.M. Donovan & J.D. Bransford (Eds.), *How students learn*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Joyce, B.R. & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Lampert, M. (2001). *Teaching problems and the problems of teaching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Perkins, D. (2003). *Making thinking visible*. Baltimore, MD: New Horizons for Learning Online Journal. Available at <http://home.avvanta.com/-building/strategies/thinking/perkins.htm>.
- Saphier, J., Haley-Speca, M., & Gower, R. (2008). *The skillful teacher*. Acton, MA: Research for Better Teaching.
- Saphier, J. & West, L. (2009, December). How coaches can maximize student learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(4), 46-50.
- Stiggins, R.J., Arter, J.A., Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S.J. (2009). *Classroom assessment for student learning: Doing it right, using it well*. New York: Pearson.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1986). *Thought and language* (revised). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The widget effect*. New York: The New Teacher Project.
- Wiggins, G. (2010, May 22). Feedback: How learning occurs. *Big Ideas*. Available at www.authenticeducation.org/ae_bigideas/article.lasso?artId=61.
-
- Jon Saphier (jonsaphier@comcast.net) is founder and president of Research for Better Teaching Inc., an educational consulting organization in Acton, Mass., dedicated to the professionalization of teaching and leadership. Saphier has authored and contributed to eight books, including *The Skillful Teacher*, now in its sixth edition. ■