
Preface

Creating High Performing Schools: It Isn't Just About the Curriculum!

There is no mystery to developing high-performing schools. The major problem is how educators, schooling critics, and many within the public think about them. The term *low-performing schools* typically conjures up images of poor teaching; lazy or unmotivated faculty; incompetent administrators; overcrowded classrooms; outdated textbooks; or tragically stupid, hostile, or unmotivated students. A low-performing school is considered “bad,” and the traditional remedies run the gamut from doing more work (“better” planning, staff development, class size reduction, technology, curriculum change, some new off-the-shelf remedy) to doing something different (extending the school day, parent tutors, community involvement, uniforms, block scheduling, peer collaboration) to doing away with them (academic bankruptcy, probation, intervention, takeover, privatization, vouchers, etc.).

None of these approaches address the true nature of the problem. Instead of jumping to a solution designed to solve the problem of low student performance (low-performing schools), the strategies recommended in these pages begin at the end and work back. The end is how low-performing schools are identified through an evaluation instrument of some sort—usually by one or more tests. Thus, the solution to the problem begins by separating out the evaluation instrument and trying to determine the following:

- How the instruments in use define learning and teaching, both implicitly and explicitly
- How the assessment selects exactly which learnings will be measured
- How measured learnings and sublearnings can be tracked back to specific materials provided to teachers to teach (normally called a *curriculum*)
- Which learnings and sublearnings that are included in the curriculum are also included on the test, and which of those learnings are not on the test

- Which learnings and sublearnings not included in the curriculum are on the test, at least to the point of test mastery (developing a supplementary curriculum)

In short, *it is the test or assessment instrument that defines what performances are to be expected*. It is the testing norms that define acceptable levels of performance. These are not established by the curriculum. Curriculum standards are independent of test specifications. In many cases, the curriculum framework is so nebulous that a test actually represents a further delineation of the curriculum instead of a congruent measurement of it. That is why working from an inadequate curriculum framework will not improve test scores unless one is unusually lucky.

The educator who understands the problem must begin by understanding that a low-performing school has been identified by a test of student learning and that assessment is but a sample of all the learning going on in any school. Understanding the nature of sampling, knowing what and where school learning will be sampled, and ensuring that that tested learning will be adequately taught to students represents the means to remove a school from the category of low-performing, and that's all it means. It doesn't necessarily mean that the school suddenly becomes "good." All it means is that the performance that the test is sampling looks better within the boundaries of the test. There are a lot of good schools whose test scores are low.

In short, performance is always defined by the instrument measuring and defining it, not by the curriculum that included it or the teacher who taught it. The test is the final arbiter of performance. And we all know that tests aren't perfect. That is why it is even more critical to know something about the dynamics of raising student test scores by starting with the test instead of ending with its administration.

The bottom line is pretty simple: *Don't surprise the kids!* Tests that surprise children translate into a measurement of that which they were not taught and did not learn. A second corollary is *don't surprise the teachers!* Chances are that if teachers are surprised, students will also be surprised. We advocate in this publication the doctrine of *no surprises for teachers and children*.

Tests of accountability are not primarily diagnostic. They are designed to establish, or result in the establishment of, a foundation for legal and often-punitive actions on the part of state agencies and authorities against administrators, teachers, students, and certain school communities. These communities are often those most in need of help: children of the poor and of color. The well-documented correlation among socioeconomic status, gender, and race has run through the testing literature for at least 3 decades, and that's no accident. Avoiding serious interrogation of the tests at the end of the sequence simply perpetuates the status quo. In fact, for schools serving the poor, there is no way off the bottom of an imposed bell curve without paying strict attention to the parameters, content, and testing protocols embodied on the instrument that identifies low-performing schools.

This book is about how to unmask the variables and practices that account for low-performing schools and turn them into high-performing schools. It is about how to put an end to the self-fulfilling and false prophecies that poverty or certain gender and race automatically translate into low test performance. It is about opportunity. It is about equity. It is about fairness. It begins with knowing where to start. Whatever defines performance and the norms regarding low, middle, and high performance, *it isn't just the curriculum!*