



Mapping a pathway to schoolwide highly effective teaching



Raising achievement is the by-product of a comprehensive plan linking strong principal leadership, higher teacher expectations, and a focus on literacy — all held together by trusting relationships.

By Regie Routman

Research on raising achievement consistently points to an effective teacher as the most crucial element in a student's success. My 40-plus years of teaching and coaching in schools across the country confirm that the most effective teachers are laser-focused on high achievement and more. Highly effective teachers challenge and engage *all* students and adapt required curriculum, resources, and standards to meet student needs and interests; they also counteract the effects of poverty.



Since 1997, I've been conducting residencies in diverse elementary schools to advance and sustain more effective teaching, learning, and leadership practices (Routman, 2008, 2009). Based on the school's greatest need — according to an examina-

er'ship, whole school achievement is rarely possible or sustainable. I used to think that if a school had a strong teacher leadership team, that would be enough to propel achievement forward. But, during a decade of residencies, I observed that while a number of teachers would move forward and raise student achievement, others would languish and even resist the changes.



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Now, I spend the entire afternoon with the principal, and most of that time involves instructional walks — demonstrating what to look for, what to say, and what to teach when visiting a classroom, and coaching the principal to take on that key leadership role in classrooms for at least an hour every day. While much has been written on the importance of learning walks, walk-throughs, and instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), I choose “instructional walks” to denote that the principal is not just quietly observing during these classroom visitations or checking off “look fors.” The principal is actively engaged, interacting with the teacher and students. The principal:

tion of their data and teacher and principal feedback — we focus on the reading or writing connection across the curriculum. The weeklong residency includes daily demonstration teaching and coaching in one primary grade classroom and in one intermediate grade classroom with other teachers at corresponding grade levels released to observe the lessons. Throughout the week and following the residency, the teachers and principal participate in whole-school and small-group professional conversations in vertical and grade-level teams. Several principles, practices, and ideals have proven to be most critical for highly effective teaching and high achievement to take hold and be sustained schoolwide in the schools where we have worked.

1. Rely on strong principal leadership.

The effective teacher depends foremost on an effective principal. Without strong principal lead-

- Notices what's going well in the classroom — environment, management, engagement, level of student independence, lesson content, grouping arrangements, quality of student work;
- Takes brief, nonjudgmental notes on what's going well and what needs attention;
- Comments verbally on what's going well, making at least several positive comments to the teacher and/or students;
- Suggests a strategy or idea on the spot, if appropriate;
- Does not leave the classroom without letting the teacher know what he/she has observed;
- Revisits notes for whole-school patterns of strengths and needs;
- Uses those observations to determine and share schoolwide strengths and weaknesses; and
- Leads the staff to determine next steps and actions.



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When the principal has built a solid foundation of trust and is highly knowledgeable, teachers welcome principals into their classrooms as an extra pair of eyes and hands to strengthen their teaching, not to

mention having a principal who can and does serve as a co-teacher and coach.

2. Raise expectations for what's possible.

No matter where I teach, I'm confronted with a poverty of low expectations. Even when adults in the school say they hold high expectations, their actions often show that they don't really believe that their students are capable of higher achievement, especially at low-performing schools. The teachers and principal may also believe that because of "outside" factors, they're powerless to instigate significant change. Raising expectations and shaping teachers' and leaders' self-efficacy is a gradual shift but, once it occurs, that change can jumpstart the journey to higher achievement.

One quick and easy way to tell if expectations are high enough in a school is to examine the hallways. I look for original writing for authentic audiences and purposes with correct conventions and legibility along with grade-level appropriateness. I look for writing posted at students' eye level, an explanation to readers of what is posted and why, and pride in work carefully done. The posted work is interesting and relevant, connected to curriculum and standards, carefully crafted and free from error, and genuinely posted for students and visitors to read for pleasure and information.

Partnered with higher expectations is teaching with a sense of urgency. Effective teachers make every minute of instructional time count and teach with the commitment that there's not a moment to lose. Among other factors, they teach, practice, and expect students to self-monitor and manage their behaviors, as opposed to taking charge of managing those. They give relevant assignments where the directions are short and easy to grasp, and they know to end a lesson while interest is still high. Effective teachers also embrace a whole-to-part teaching philosophy using whole, meaningful texts and tasks while embedding explicit skills in their teaching, rather than teaching those skills in isolation. Without a positive and ongoing sense of urgency, underserved students will never move at the steady, rapid pace that's required for higher achievement.

3. Participate in literacy-based, professional learning communities.

Ongoing professional learning communities (PLCs) are the bedrock of the work that creates a whole school of effective teachers. While PLCs are the core of professional development in many schools, focus on effective teaching and improving literacy practices is not a given (DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Too often, PLCs are overly focused on examining data and achievement gains (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

But PLCs greatly influence teacher effectiveness — when teachers “rally around a higher purpose” (Fullan, 2008); when teachers continually study and ask questions about theory, research, and practice; when teachers know what effective teaching looks like and sounds like at and across grade levels; when teachers examine student work with the goal of improving teaching, assessing, and learning; and when teachers build leadership and instructional capacity.

The best PLCs “are living communities and lively cultures dedicated to improving the lifelong learning of students and adults” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Further, successful PLCs are often literacy-based, where participants view, discuss, study, and reflect upon effective reading and writing practices from diverse classrooms. They collaboratively plan, apply, and analyze those literacy practices in their own classrooms (Routman, 2008, 2009). While the residency is a catalyst for change, the shared weekly learning in the PLCs after the residency helps teachers translate their changing beliefs and practices into more effective teaching.

In order for professional development to be successful and positively affect student learning, the professional learning must be job embedded, ongoing, coherent, and intense; and it needs to include 30 to 100 hours of time over six months to a year (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). This does not preclude the value of having an outside expert coming into the school, but relying on such professional development is insufficient for significant and lasting change. There is no shortcut, magic program, or quick fix.

4. Develop shared beliefs.

Working on developing common beliefs is a first step in creating a unified vision for the school (Routman, 2008). Also, without coherence in beliefs — and in the practices that support those beliefs — there can be no consistent academic rigor.

Reaching agreement on shared beliefs is hard work. A common problem is that multiple belief systems and practices coexist without alignment at the school and district level. Often, an assigned program or resource may be a mismatch with a school's, or even a district's, stated beliefs about teaching and learning. The selected program or resource determines the teaching focus rather than giving first priority to school or district beliefs and desired practices. Teachers' awareness of how their beliefs drive their practices is absolutely crucial for highly effective teaching. “When old beliefs are gone, there's an open space for new possibilities and new results to pour in. While thinking outside the box is a first step, *acting* outside the box becomes a daring act of courage” (Reiss, 2007).

FIG. 1

AN OPTIMAL LEARNING MODEL

TO LEARNERS	WITH LEARNERS		BY LEARNERS	
I DO IT	WE DO IT	▼ Handover of Responsibility ▼	WE DO IT	YOU DO IT
Demonstration	Shared Demonstration		Guided Practice	Independent Practice
TEACHER shows how to do it	TEACHER leads, negotiates, suggests		STUDENT takes charge, approximates, practices	STUDENT initiates, self-directs, self-evaluates
STUDENT listens, observes, minimally participates	STUDENT questions, collaborates, responds reading/writing		TEACHER encourages, clarifies, confirms	TEACHER affirms, coaches
INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT explanation, reading/writing aloud	INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT shared reading/writing		INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT guided reading/writing	INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT independent reading/writing

5. Apply an optimal learning model.

Perhaps the greatest change teachers make on their journey to becoming more effective is to slow down their teaching so they can hurry up the learning for their students. For all teaching across the curriculum, I advocate applying an Optimal Learning Model (Routman, 2008), a gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson, Gallagher, & Gallagher, 1983) with the goal of students becoming independent, self-determining learners. One of the biggest teaching shifts for becoming more effective involves placing much more time and emphasis on shared learning experiences, the “we do it.” (See Figure 1 for the OLM.)

As students go through the grades, my experience has been that doing activities with students before we expect them to take on the task themselves becomes more rare. Even when the teacher shows students how to do something or clearly explains a task, too often students are expected to get right to work on their own without sufficient scaffolding, hand holding, or guided practice. What many students often need is much more time “doing it together” before working independently. Such shared and guided experiences might include but are not limited to:

- Constructing a chart together of what was observed — to be applied and used by students as a reference;
- A teacher-student demonstration for the whole class, following a teacher demonstration;

- Holding scaffolded conversations with students (Routman, 2008) before they write, especially critical for English language learners who need to speak the language before they write it;
- Two students practicing an expected task — perhaps in view of the whole class with teacher guidance;
- The teacher doing a task with a small group; and
- A small group working on a task together, such as writing a report.

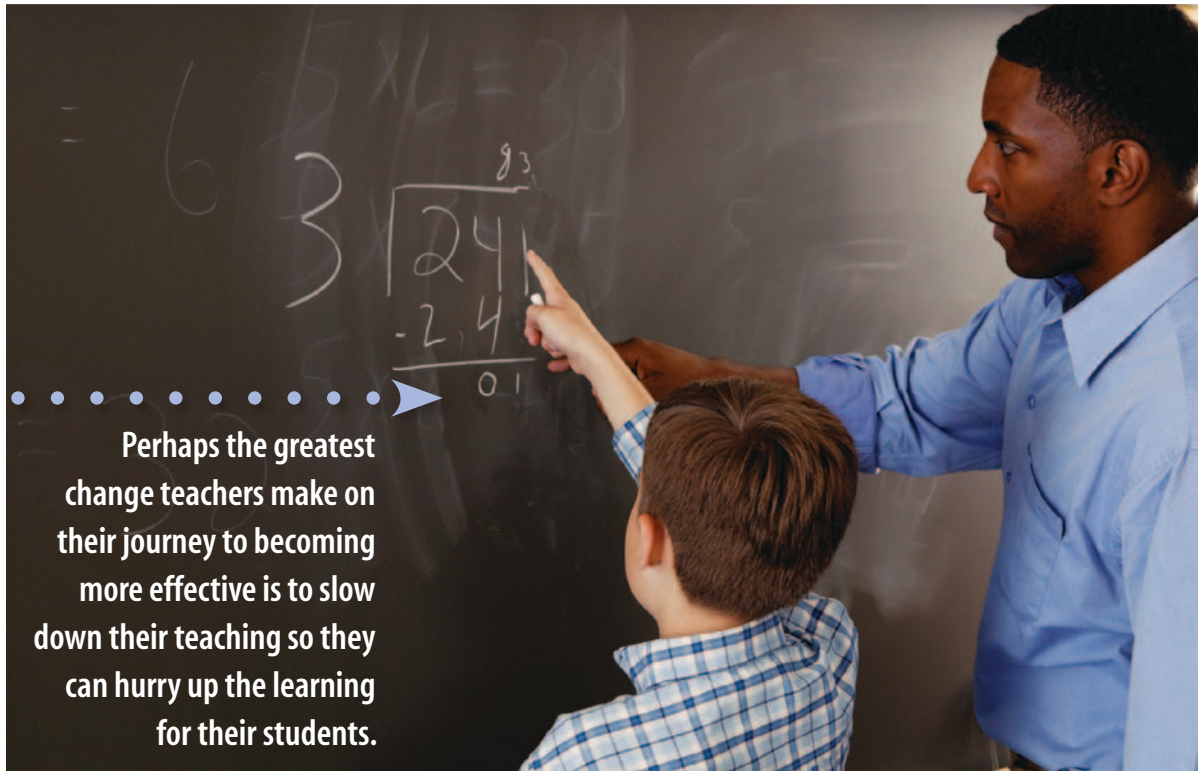
Perhaps, equally as important as accelerating learning, applying the Optimal Learning Model increases enjoyment and success for students and teachers.

6. Participate in effective coaching experiences.

While the national research base on how literacy coaches positively influence student achievement is slim, savvy and knowledgeable coaches can have a profound effect on teacher effectiveness and student learning. Successful coaching requires unique talents and sensitivities by the coach and a willingness and openness by the teacher being coached. The winning combination is only possible where high trust and expert teaching go hand in hand.

A successful literacy coach must possess all three of the following crucial qualities:

- Respectful and trusting relationships with colleagues;
- Ability to work well with adult learners; and
- Deep knowledge of literacy and learning.



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Moreover, the coach must not only be a side-by-side learner and resource, he must be an expert side-by-side teacher who is willing to lead and guide shared teaching experiences following demonstration teaching. That is, before expecting the teacher-learner to independently apply a teaching strategy or observed lesson, the coach teaches *with* the teacher, applying the same Optimal Learning Model we use with students to guide them toward independence.

A fundamental missing piece in many coaching experiences is demonstrating effective teaching to teachers in their classrooms. The coach needs to include the teacher in planning decisions, the on-the-spot teaching and assessing moves, the specific questioning to check for understanding, the evidence of learning, and how to use that evidence to shift instruction. Following the demonstration and explanations by a knowledgeable coach, the classroom teacher usually benefits from one or more shared coaching experiences, co-teaching with the coach taking the lead and providing feedback before the teacher is ready to successfully apply a lesson without much guidance.

7. Work toward becoming a self-sustaining school.

In the best-case scenario, expert educators rely on each other's talents and knowledge and willingly collaborate, coach, and mentor each other. The school-wide strengths, common purposes, and strong professional learning community enable a school to weather

the inevitable coming and going of teachers and administrators and to thrive when new teachers come on board. More than anything, the high level of trust that undergirds and permeates the professional talk and work of the school makes it possible for a school to become self-sustaining. "High-trust cultures make the extraordinary possible, energizing people and giving them the wherewithal to be successful under enormously demanding conditions — and the confidence that staying the course will pay off" (Fullan, 2005).

In my experience, schools need seven years to become self-sustaining, and they do so with strong principal and teacher leadership when:

- The majority of the staff are effective, responsive teachers who use their deep literacy knowledge and knowledge of their students to make wise curricular decisions for all of their students.
- Respectful relationships built from a strong foundation of trust make whole-school coaching — where teachers routinely visit peers' classrooms, observe each other's teaching, and examine student work samples — integral to the school's daily, professional life.
- The entire staff participates in ongoing, high-level PLCs, most often led by the principal and planned with the school's leadership team. PLCs are focused on student achievement with the goal of developing students as self-determining learners (Pink, 2009).
- Collegial conversations about literacy, teaching, assessing, learning, and advocacy permeate the school culture.

- Teachers readily transfer and apply their knowledge of reading and writing across the curriculum and across grade levels.
- Students can explain what they're doing and why they're doing it.
- Programs, resources, and current research inform and guide instruction without controlling it.
- The staff constantly strives to improve and enhance their practices as well as to nurture caring and trusting relationships with colleagues, students, and their students' families.
- Joy in teaching and learning are evident throughout the school.

Through embracing a schoolwide coaching model (Routman, 2008), both experienced and novice teachers translate a school's shared beliefs to best practices applied across the curriculum. But here is where the trust factor is paramount. One school that became self-sustaining required four years of intentional and honest professional conversations and work centered on trust issues for all teachers to feel safe enough to open their classrooms to peers. Teachers then were able to move beyond "Now everyone will see I'm not that good a teacher" to "I look forward to learning with and from my colleagues."

Concluding thoughts

While creating a self-sustaining school full of highly effective teachers is challenging, partly because it's a long-term, whole-school commitment, we must strive for this if we are to break the cycle of underachievement for underserved populations along with our overreliance on new programs. Only highly knowledgeable teachers and strong principal leadership, using resources as a framework and support, can raise school achievement for *all* students.

Almost all teachers and principals have enormous potential to grow, get better, and teach to students' strengths, needs, and interests. I have worked now for many years with many teachers and administrators, and I remain impressed that with very few exceptions, teachers and principals want to be excellent educators and are willing to work tirelessly to provide the best possible learning environment for every student.

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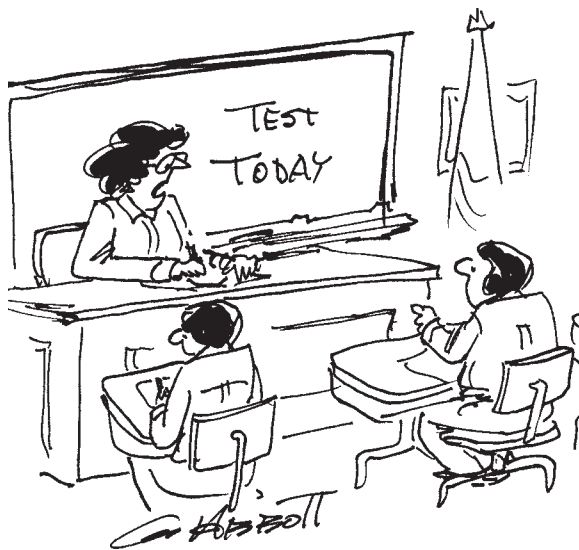
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"Yes, I'm counting off for misspelling. We're having a spelling test."