

education *update*

Volume 51 • Number 4 • April 2009

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Supporting Struggling Teachers

When it's the teachers who are failing, what happens next? Should struggling teachers get the boot, or can they be retrained? Some education experts and administrators say professional development, coaching, and mentoring can give underperforming teachers the tools they need to come out on top.

We've heard plenty about the "achievement gap" between low- and high-achieving students, but what about the chasm between low- and high-performing teachers? What happens when it's the teachers who are struggling in the classroom? What can administrators do to support ineffective teachers? Should underperforming teachers be let go, reassigned, or retrained?

Some schools have tapped into professional development practices, built professional learning communities, and brought coaches and mentors on staff to support struggling teachers. Robyn Jackson, a former National

Board-certified teacher and middle school administrator, believes underperforming teachers can get better with the appropriate professional development and training. "Teachers don't have the option of getting rid of 'bad' kids, so why is our only solution to get rid of 'bad' teachers?" says Jackson.

In her new book, *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching*, Jackson outlines a model for teacher improvement and explains the specific and intentional practices that can turn educators into master teachers. Jackson says that the principles she covers are taught in schools of education, but master teachers know how to use them more effectively.

Of course, no one becomes an excellent teacher overnight. In fact, Jackson explains in her book, *all* teachers need help to improve their skills. "I am going to say something scandalous," states Jackson. "Just because we went to school for teaching doesn't mean that we come out of school as master teachers. Even if you were a good student in school, it does not mean that you will be a good teacher," she says.

Jackson argues that having the master teacher mind-set makes teachers think and

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A New Day for Education

In thinking about some of the major issues facing today's educators, Mariotti notes how the public education landscape has changed over the years. Now, so many more stakeholders—from businesses to community organizations to government agencies—want to have a say in how public education is run, Mariotti says. To make important improvements to the system that will benefit kids, disparate voices need to learn how to communicate and collaborate, says Mariotti. Also, to meet 21st century demands and to keep up with the changing education landscape, Mariotti says, teaching needs to look very different than it did in the past. “Good teaching shouldn't look like it looked in the '50s, '60s, and '70s,” she says.

Mariotti explains there are many questions for 21st century educators to consider. “Do we have our priorities right? Are we really focusing on what we value or not?” asks Mariotti. “How do we, in these environments of accountability, punitive consequences, and budget cuts, educate the whole child?” Mariotti notes that these challenges really present exciting opportunities for educators.


Taking the Reins

A longtime ASCD member, Mariotti joined the association years ago as a classroom teacher because she needed help and support. “Every day my kids needed different things. I needed to be fresh; I needed to learn how other people were doing this thing that we do. ASCD had those resources that I needed,” she says.

Mariotti joined the Utah affiliate and served as the Utah ASCD president, chair of the Utah Teaching and Learning Coalition, and state conference chair. She joined ASCD's Board of

Directors in 2003 as an elected representative from the Leadership Council and served for two of her four years on both the Finance and Legislative committees. She has also cochaired the ASCD Position Action Team and served on the Board Nominations Committee.

Mariotti looks forward to her new position as ASCD President, and she is excited about the opportunity to set policy and to help craft the vision for the association. She anticipates expanding ASCD's international reach.

Being a worldwide organization is a necessity, she notes. Why? “Because we live in the world,” says Mariotti. “The world is small. I travel a lot. I've lived abroad. I have always enjoyed the richness of other cultures,” she says. “I do not believe that best practice is nation-specific. Given the way the world interacts, integrates, why would we not be a worldwide association and build on the strengths of more and more members and experiences, points of view, and research. It's a no-brainer!” 

—WILLONA M. SLOAN

Mining the Research

A new online feature of *Education Update*, “Mining the Research,” offers links to educational research to keep you informed about new studies and the latest education topics. To check out this month's list, go to www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/april09/vol51/num04/toc.aspx.



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teach differently. “The master teacher mind-set is really a disposition toward teaching. It is a way of thinking about instruction, about students, about learning, and about teaching in general that makes teaching fluid, efficient, and effective,”

says Jackson. “The master teacher mind-set also means knowing how to ask students the right questions, the kind of questions that lead to deeper thinking, increased motivation, and more student ownership over their own work. Master teachers spend more time refining their inquiry skills and their own curiosity than they do collecting strategies and skills.”

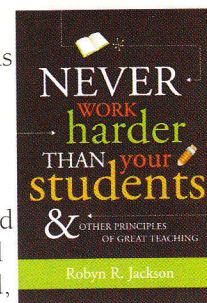
Jackson says many of the current models for dealing with poor teachers are inefficient and ineffective. “Principals are trained to spot bad or mediocre teaching, document it, and give feedback. They name the problem but don't resolve it, so there's no improvement.” She believes that the best way to reform underperforming teachers is to pull them out of the classroom, provide them the appropriate professional development, and pair them with master teachers.

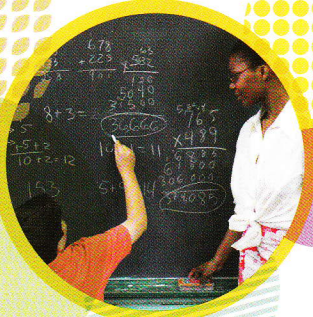
“Most teachers are trying to do what's right,” she says. “They might not know how, or they don't have the resources they need to improve.”

Pushing for Professional Development

For the last decade, Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools (MCPS) has used embedded professional development to help educators learn fresh techniques and instructional strategies that can lead to increased student performance. “We have a very clear professional growth system for teachers,” says Associate Superintendent James J. Virga.

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MCPS developed standards detailing how teachers should teach content and how to use data to assess performance. The school district put supports in place to help teachers attain those standards. Teachers “know what standards and competencies they’re expected to meet, they have examples of what it looks like to meet (or not meet) them, and they know who will help them improve, as well as what happens if they don’t [improve],” Virga says.

Every school has a staff development teacher who provides training to anyone working on school-improvement goals. The investment in professional development has been “a huge boost to our efforts to build staff capacity over the last eight or nine years,” says Virga.

Across the state line, Michelle Rhee, chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools, is also adamant about using professional development to help reform educators in her district who have been identified as low-performing.

“People like to frame me as wanting to fire everyone, but that is not the case,” says Rhee. “My plan is to invest significant amounts of time, resources, and dollars into professional development.”

Rhee says teachers often say things like, “I know my students aren’t achiev-

ing at the right level; now what do I do?” She wants to provide the strategies they need to learn the necessary next steps. An advocate

of job-embedded professional development, Rhee plans to place professional development specialists in classes to help teachers analyze student work, share best practices, and collaborate on lesson planning.

Rhee believes there should be a common understanding of what good teaching looks like and how to evaluate it. “One of the most significant challenges is coming to an accepted definition of highly effective teaching. We have to set clear expectations for teachers [and show] what that looks like so they know what it is and how they’ll be judged,” says Rhee.

Adding Coaching and Mentoring to the Mix

The purpose of coaching is to raise the bar of professionalism in teaching, says Lucy West, former deputy superintendent of Region 9 in the New York City Public Schools and coauthor of *Content-Focused Coaching: Transforming Mathematics Lessons*. According to West, coaching shouldn’t be reserved for teachers identified as struggling.

She explains that principals should start a coaching initiative with the strongest staff members—those whose practices are closest to the desired performance level. “It may seem counterintuitive, but you send a message that coaching is for the best people,” says West. Next up should be the teachers who need more help, including newer teachers or veterans whose instructional

practices may have gotten stale. The coach then moves on to the “good enough but can be better” folks, says West.

For a coaching initiative to succeed and really help teachers, especially those who are underperforming, administrators have to be purposeful about hiring a trained coach rather than asking a teacher to fill the role. “The coach must have expertise in pedagogy and the content areas you want to focus on, as well as the ability to communicate with people,” says West.

Starting Off on the Right Foot

Mentoring can affect newbie teachers in similar ways as it does youth. By setting them on the correct path early, mentoring may help teachers perform better in the classroom and stick around longer.

At Watertown (Mass.) Public Schools, to get new teachers started on the right foot, they are immediately paired with mentors, says Assistant Superintendent Ann Koufman-Frederick. “If you support teachers properly from the start, you have a chance at making overall school improvement,” she says. A four-day summer orientation outlines how the district runs, teaching and learning goals, and how to integrate technology into the curriculum. “We talk about classroom management, assessment practices, and communicating with parents. I try to make sure we have a good induction and mentoring program so that new teachers understand the expectations and have the chance to hone their skills,” says Koufman-Frederick.

The mentors help new teachers learn the ropes and focus on effective prac-

tices. “We’ve trained a team of teachers to be skillful mentors. They are not just buddies—they’re colleagues who are master teachers,” says Koufman-Frederick. Mentors provide support through monthly seminars that focus on such topics as instructional practice, student achievement, and parent communication. In addition, mentors continually meet with their teachers to provide support and encouragement for a successful classroom.

Kenneth Salim, interim assistant superintendent in the Office of Professional Development for Boston (Mass.) Public Schools, also uses mentors to provide one-on-one support to new teachers. Salim’s 15 mentors work with 14 teachers each, modeling lessons, providing feedback on instruction, and analyzing student data. They use district standards and other resources to guide reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting to improve the new teachers’ practice.

In addition to meaningful mentoring, teachers need the support of their colleagues and principal to continuously grow. “If a first-year teacher doesn’t feel supported by teacher colleagues and the principal, no matter how good a mentoring program we provide, they may not stay in the profession,” says Salim.

Testing the Teaching

Brock Dubbels, who has been teaching since 1999, is a media specialist at Seward Montessori, a K–8 Minneapolis (Minn.) Public School. Previously, he taught engineering and language arts.

When Dubbels figured out the difference between testing his *students* and testing his *teaching*, he says, he finally understood how to improve his own performance. “It’s a question of whether or not the instruction I’m offering is making a difference in the child’s life,” says Dubbels. “If it’s not, how can I adjust my lessons to reach that child, rather than blaming that child? I might need to create better tools, offer a differ-

ent system, change my language, or restructure my classroom and how I present.”

Dubbels believes all teachers need to see examples of excellence and learn from high-performing teachers through modeling, problem solving, sharing resources, and getting personalized feedback. “The more interaction we have with other teachers, the better. Teaching takes experience. No one person is capable of having all the good ideas,” says Dubbels.

Sending a Clear Message

In the end, what is most clear is that there is no magical method for improving teacher performance. To close the teaching achievement gap, administrators need to give teachers appropriate professional development resources and tools, provide them with strong examples of what is expected, and hold them accountable to that level of performance. By doing this,

Jackson explains, administrators send a message that says, “‘We believe you can get better. You have no excuse.’ And that’s a powerful message for teachers.” **eu**

—ELLEN ULLMAN



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In a rural part of Australia, new and veteran science teachers work together to improve their teaching practices. Read “Supporting Struggling Science Teachers” at www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/april09/vol51/num04/toc.aspx.