**Mike Schmoker: The Power of Focus**

In this article in *Principal Leadership (2017)*, consultant/author Mike Schmoker says the key to schools succeeding with all students is *prioritizing* – isolating and focusing on “only the most vital, game-changing actions that ensure significant improvement in teaching and learning” and then sustaining a disciplined, laser-like focus for a significant amount of time. “Time and energy are precious, *limited* resources,” he says, “and if we squander them on too many initiatives or on the wrong ones, we will fail… Less is more.”

            Where should the focus be? Schmoker believes three areas have the strongest track record of success, are easy to understand when presented in professional development, and lend themselves to being continuously refined as they are implemented by teacher teams:

• ***Consistent, schoolwide implementation of a coherent, content-rich curriculum*** – Teachers should have clear, specific direction on which skills and concepts to teach – the *what* and *when* – with discretion on the *how to* and some room each week for teachable moments and personal passions. Curriculum focus “may be the single largest factor that affects both student achievement and reading proficiency,” says Schmoker.

            • ***Mastery by every teacher of the components of effective, explicit instruction*** – Of paramount importance is ongoing checking for student understanding (minute by minute, day by day, week by week) and adjusting instruction based on assessment insights (i.e. formative assessment). This is especially important for project- and problem-based learning. *If the word "focus" means anything, it means we must direct all professional- development time and personnel, and teacher collaboration, to a severely reduced number of powerful and proven practices*. And then we must learn the hardest lesson of all. We must, in the words of the management expert Jim Collins, "ignore the rest."

            • ***An intensive, curriculum-wide emphasis on fairly traditional literacy*** – “We have overcomplicated instruction in reading, speaking, and writing,” says Schmoker. “To succeed, students simply need vastly more time to purposefully read, discuss, and write about worthy, substantive literature and nonfiction across the curriculum (as often as possible, in the interpretive and argumentative mode).”

Only a small fraction of schools are implementing these practices, but those that are (like Brockton High School in Massachusetts see link below) are making dramatic gains. The common factor in Brockton and other successful schools is a *leadership team working with colleagues in a way that is highly focused and relentless and provides plenty of opportunity for review and practice*. “To the greatest extent possible,” says Schmoker (who is critical of the way teacher-evaluation rubrics are being implemented in many districts), “this should occur in a climate that emphasizes helpfulness and growth, rather than evaluation.” For teachers to master new practices, every available minute must be devoted to frequent and immediate review, reinforcement, teacher collaboration, and ongoing, actual *practice*, with peer feedback (Learning Walks or "scrub ins"), video, during team meetings and PD sessions themselves. Mastery born of repeated practice and ongoing guidance must become the new goal of professional development. And that, in turn, will require monitoring, keeping track of who has—and has not—mastered the most essential practices, so that time can be allotted for certain teachers to receive additional assistance from peers, trainers and coaches *until they achieve mastery*. That is what we should mean by focus.

* To read more about Brockton High School, and 13 other High Schools who have accomplished similar focused improvements in teaching/learning see the Harvard Achievement Gap Project report:

<http://www.agi.harvard.edu/events/2009Conference/2009AGIConferenceReport6-30-2010web.pdf>

*This is very consistent with the improved learning outcomes documented by tens of schools across widely varied demographics I’ve had the pleasure to support in our Academic Literacy Projects. The combination of a clear unambiguous focus on “big dogs” or what Schmoker calls “fundamental priorities”, coupled with smart PD that prizes multiple forms of instructional feedback (video, coaching, peer observations, learning walks, PLC data analysis, modeling, admin walk throughs, etc) is not only effective but potentially transformational at the building level.* *The key challenge is however, Leadership willing to "stay the course" and resist the temptation to jump to the next "new thing" or innovation de jour... KF*

“The Power of Focus” by Mike Schmoker in *Principal Leadership*, January 2017 (Vol. 17, #3, p. 42-45), e-link for NASSP members; Schmoker can be reached at [schmoker@futureone.com](mailto:schmoker@futureone.com).