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Instructional Leadership

Improving Student and Teacher Achievement

Just before I started as department chair, I had heard through the grapevine that the standardized test scores would never improve because the students weren't capable of higher achievement. Hearing this a few days before I began rattled me. Had I made the correct decision in leaving a comfortable position in another district? Had I bitten off more than I could chew? What if this person was right? Would I be ending my career in a new county before it had even started?

I discovered, however, that although a large portion of the student population had language deficiencies and we were facing many external obstacles (lack of parental involvement, a high rate of students who received free and reduced lunches, gang activity, and so on), our low scores did not necessarily reflect what our students knew or could do. The belief that the students could not handle the work became a self-fulfilling prophecy that teachers were all too willing to buy into. It was easier for them to believe that it was the students' fault or the sum of all the negatives they faced than to rework lesson plans, rethink their philosophies, or grow as professionals. Our low scores also reflected problems in the instructional program.

What I learned, and perhaps always knew, is that student achievement begins and ends with the quality of the teacher, the instructional program, and its leadership. So in trying to improve

achievement, you first need to consider whether your teachers are effective. Are they instructionally solid? How do you determine whether they are or are not? What do you do if they are not? Are your teachers open to new ideas? What do your teachers do if their students are underperforming?

Whether you are a team leader in an elementary or middle school or a department chair in a high school, one of your primary roles as a teacher leader is instructional leadership, so at some point you will need to reflect on and answer these questions. But while you evaluate your teachers, your teachers will be evaluating you: they will be deciding whether they respect your instructional leadership. If your teachers do not respect you instructionally, you will find it difficult to succeed as a leader.

Although your lessons or activities do not always need to be perfect, your lessons should exhibit best practices. You model bell-to-bell instruction, you differentiate instruction, and you provide remediation. Furthermore, your fellow teachers must see you as a specialist in your content area. If you are a history teacher, you can speak knowledgeably about the Magna Carta, the War of 1812, and the New Deal; if you are an English teacher, medieval literature, Puritanism, gothic romance, and so on. Your teachers need to be able to trust your judgment when you make suggestions regarding the department's curriculum or an individual teacher's objectives, lesson plans, and assessments.

Your fellow teachers need to view you as a resource, someone they seek out for equipment, literature, and ancillary materials. You represent a treasure chest of ideas and are eager to share them. At best, you have taught all grade and ability levels, so you are able to relate to every teacher in your department. If you are needed to cover a class, any class in your department or on your grade level, you would be able to step in and teach, not just follow an emergency lesson plan. The students would not suffer for not having their classroom teacher that day.

If you haven't taught all the electives that your department offers, you have studied their aspects, understand their objectives,

and comprehend their nuances. As an instructional leader, you not only are knowledgeable of innovative instructional techniques but also understand how students learn and have demonstrated success in your own classroom. You are a true coach in that you understand all facets of the game and how to bring out the skills of all your players. It is an overwhelming charge.

The Effective Classroom

Discussing what constitutes an effective classroom is certainly a broad topic. I don't attempt to cover every aspect of the subject; rather I stress its characteristics and importance. As an instructional leader, your focus should be on ensuring solid instruction and serving your students with a curriculum that meets their needs: the two most direct ways to influence student achievement.

Observe and Coach Your Teachers.

Administrators are so bogged down by their numerous responsibilities that they often don't have the chance to visit classrooms as much as they would like. Few educators enter administration because they are eager to deal with discipline and irate parents; administration is appealing to them because they enjoy seeing good teaching and helping teachers grow. But this is not always possible.

Your role as instructional leader can be to act as a surrogate for your administrator. If you were to volunteer to visit classrooms—not to evaluate but to observe—and give your administrator feedback on what is occurring on your team or in your department, he would surely appreciate your assistance. Moreover, you have a vested interest in seeing your teachers succeed because you are the person most responsible for your department's instructional program—so anything you can do to enhance their chances for success is to your advantage.

However, your teachers might not be as open to this idea as you are. First and foremost, you need to stress to your teachers that your observing their classes is not to catch them doing something wrong but instead doing something right. Your role is to reinforce

the positive things you see and provide feedback when it is asked for. If you still face some concerns, then avoid drop-ins and have your teachers pick a particular class for you to observe. Meet with these teachers ahead of time so they can walk you through the lesson if that will put them more at ease.

Now, even if you take these steps, you still might observe things that need to be corrected; that is not your main function for entering the classroom, though. If you witness questionable practices, then the prudent thing to do is to turn this information over to your administrator. In many ways, observing your teachers is similar to hosting a practicum student: when you work with a practicum student, you try to find ways to support her and help her grow. If severe problems arise, you function as a conduit to the supervising professor who will, based on your input, address these issues.

But it needn't always get that far. When you meet with your teachers after the observation, make it clear that you would rather handle issues between the two of you before they have a chance to escalate to the main office. As I tell my teachers, I have an interest in seeing them do well and in rectifying problems. If I don't, our supervisor will become involved, and I'm sure everyone would rather not have that happen. When phrased this way, most teachers who are nervous about having you come into their classrooms, or those who are concerned that you are overstepping your boundaries, might be grateful that you are trying to take care of problems in-house.

After your observation, you should address what went well during the class. Let that be the question you lead with: "What do you think went well with the lesson I observed?" As an instructional leader and effective classroom teacher, you are already familiar with the ingredients for a successful class. Yet sometimes we are so closely involved with our own classes that we take these elements for granted.

Present yourself as a partner, someone who has an equal stake in things going well.

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Present yourself as a partner, someone who has an equal stake in things going well.

First of all, your more effective teachers have a set routine in their classes. Students are aware of and familiar with the established routine. They know how and where to find assignments and make-up work, they are ready for a warm-up at the beginning of the class that will reinforce the previous lesson or introduce a new one, and the environment is one that supports and promotes learning either through the display of student work or examples of model work. The atmosphere is one of inquiry, and classroom management minimizes disruptions rather than escalating them.

The teacher does not barricade himself behind the lectern or desk for 90 minutes but breaks up the period by guiding at least two different activities related to a common objective. Students are engaged and are given the opportunity to create meaning rather than have it forced upon them. Both student and teacher investigate answers instead of relying on rote answers. An observable rapport exists between student and teacher that sparks inquiry, that makes the class a learning community, that assists in classroom management. And lessons include some kind of closure in the form of reviewing material, filling out exit slips, or beginning homework.

Perhaps all these features are not observable in every class period, but you should be able to see traces of them. More than likely your teacher will be able to identify them as well, so when you meet with her after the observation, simply reinforce the lesson's strengths by providing specific comments and let her do most of the talking. When addressing areas of growth, ask her, "Is there anything that you wish would have gone a little better?" Most teachers, like students when they complete self-assessments, are harder on themselves than we would be. In fact, you'll discover that many teachers would rather begin the post-observation meeting by immediately commenting on what they believe went wrong. Either they are so cognizant of what went poorly or are so concerned with clearing things up that they jump to this first.

Your purpose in observing the class is not to point out what the teacher did poorly, but don't ignore the opportunity to help him grow. Discuss what he perceives the lesson's shortcomings to be.

Offer assistance and resources, but try to have him take ownership of any missteps by identifying the causes and brainstorming solutions. If he claims there were no missteps, then don't push it. You're not likely to convince him then and there of what you think, so if you try, you run the risk of escalating the situation. To document your observation, although it won't be official and can't be placed in his file, you might want to follow up with a memo (Resource 22).

Map the Curriculum.

How familiar is the following scenario: you were hired right out of college, obtained a job a few weeks before the school year started, and were told that you would be teaching 9th and 11th grade. You were given copies of the state and local objectives, teacher editions, and maybe even paired with a mentor. But when all was said and done, you needed to develop lesson plans, activities, and assessments for a curriculum that was largely unfamiliar to you. Sure, you were comfortable with the content, but in terms of what exactly needed to be taught, or how it could be successfully taught, that was a little cloudy. As a good teacher is apt to do, you found your footing—maybe not immediately, but you eventually discovered how long a unit would take and strategies for teaching it.

Imagine if instead you had been handed a curriculum map when you began your first job. This guide would have outlined the essential knowledge for a particular grade level, suggested various activities and learning extensions, and offered a plan on how to organize your year. You would have been better set up for success, and, as a result, so would have your students.

Some educators bristle at the notion of a curriculum map because they fear that they will lose their autonomy and creativity. This is not the case. The basic definition of a map is that it shows the various routes to a destination: how you choose to get there is up to you. Therefore, you need to demonstrate to your teachers that having such a guide still allows them freedom. An introductory page to the map or an explanatory section might be helpful and allay their concerns.

A curriculum map should be a resource for your teachers—a manageable resource at that, not something cumbersome and difficult to access and digest, which will cause it to lie untouched in filing cabinets. Nor should it be a way to micromanage what occurs in classrooms; instead, it should give a teacher an idea of how long a certain unit will take to cover and help him pace out his year. A curriculum map does not state what should be occurring every week but rather charts curriculum over the course of a quarter or a semester, leaving the teacher the flexibility to explore other areas and to extend learning. One of the advantages of a curriculum map is that it tightens the curriculum and better aligns your program horizontally and vertically, a benefit to both students and teachers. It does not mandate what material should be taught, but offers suggestions based on what has sparked student interest in the past, what teachers have found to be effective, and what best matches with prescribed objectives.

To ensure that the map is not perceived as a top-down directive, invite your teachers to participate in creating it. Ask them to bring successful lessons, assessments, and other resources to a team or department meeting and consider the following:

What are the big-ticket items for this unit? Meaning, what should every student know or be able to do at the end of the unit/marking period/semester?

What are the essential questions that will guide our focus and enhance student interest and inquiry?

Are there other topics we might want to cover along the way to our destination? Are there areas that will complement the key ideas and issues of a unit?

What are the pertinent objectives?

How will we know we achieved our objectives? How will we measure student success or assess learning?

What materials could we use to get students to that point?

How much time do we estimate needing to cover this area of study?

How will we organize the curriculum? Thematically, chronologically, or some other way?

Your curriculum map shouldn't be so specific that teachers feel they have no choice or control over what they do in their classrooms, but it should be explicit in that it illustrates the team's expectations. This is important because when one class or grade level deviates, it creates a ripple effect throughout the instructional program that could take years to undo.

Make curriculum mapping an ongoing process by revisiting, reevaluating, and revising maps regularly throughout the school year, while successes and failures are still fresh in the mind, rather than at isolated moments. Analyzing data from the end of a unit or a semester test or after a high-stakes test might be one way for teachers to determine if changes in the previous unit, and future ones, are necessary. Moreover, this is an opportune time for teachers to grow together as professionals. During your summer inservice week, give your new teachers a chance to offer input and make suggestions on the map. As newcomers or outsiders, they might have a more objective perspective and be able to make recommendations that eluded you and your team. Including them in this process will also facilitate making them feel as though they are a part of the team. (See Resource 23.)

A curriculum map should be a living document.

Remediation

Even in the most effective classroom, there are those students who do not achieve. With the advent of No Child Left Behind, gone are the days of saying, "Well, I taught the material—he just didn't get it." Gone are the days of proclaiming that students have a right to fail. Gone are the days of hiding behind the statement that a student did not bother to come after school for help. Gone are the days of saying it is not our fault (whether or not it is true). This new

era of accountability is forcing teachers to examine their classroom practices, to scrutinize their students' and their own behavior.

Some teachers are uncomfortable with this. Others welcome the opportunity for someone to analyze what goes on in their classrooms. It frustrates both groups that, because of high-stakes testing, there seems to be precious little time to go back and reteach material to ensure that every student has mastered the essential skills. Even if students are new to our country, are working several grade levels below average, have horrific home situations, or simply do not care, the current reality is that we are expected to find ways to remediate them.

A good instructional leader helps his teachers understand the need to analyze and reflect on their practices, and offers support and resources when his teachers face obstacles to student success. He is also proactive. He talks informally throughout the quarter with his teachers to see how their students are doing, what problems they are facing, and what help or support they need. But the effective instructional leader does more than that. Although it can be extremely time-consuming, he meets with his teachers to determine why students are not succeeding and brainstorms solutions and strategies with them.

Discussions with my teachers produced the following general reasons for why students do not achieve: lack of regular school attendance, lack of completed homework or class work, lack of parental involvement, lack of student motivation, and lack of skills. There are probably other reasons, but we were able to develop a checklist of strategies to address these areas and help remediate students (Resource 24). When we were asked by administrators what we had done for our failing students, we could point to the multitude of strategies we had used. Although each school has unique obstacles, below are general strategies that can be adapted.

Acknowledge Ability Levels.

A few years ago, a colleague expressed frustration that her department chair required all freshmen to read *A Tale of Two Cities*. She wanted her students to be exposed to the classics, but

she had discovered through a reading pre-test she had administered during the initial weeks of school that nearly all the students were reading sharply below grade level. She had chosen to teach in this underperforming, inner-city school because she wanted to help students the system had forgotten. Her charge was challenging enough due to apathy, an absent school infrastructure, scant supplies, and many other marks of impoverished, failing schools, but then she also had to contend with a department chair who was obsessed with creating a rigorous curriculum at the expense of the students. Hard as she tried, regardless of how talented an educator she was, her students could not comprehend the prescribed text and failed miserably.

Instead of building up her students' skills, which is what her instincts told her to do, she was forced to plow ahead with the curriculum her chair had imposed on the department. Exasperated, she left at the end of the year; unfortunately, her students were left behind as well. Wanting all students to read Charles Dickens is admirable, but this leader ignored the needs of the students in his department. Work should pose an intellectual challenge, not an intellectual obstacle. If he had focused on giving the students a solid foundation and scaffolding the curriculum, they would have had a better chance at success. Give your students what they need. If they are starving, you must first feed them before you can teach them how to cook for themselves.

Differentiate Instruction.

Even before high-stakes testing began to move into the educational spotlight, differentiation was gaining attention because many schools were dissolving homogenous classes in favor of heterogeneous grouping, and teachers were struggling to reach all these learners in one class. Many teachers interpret differentiation to mean using a variety of instructional strategies and assessments, but it encompasses more than that. It is flexibly grouping students—both homogeneously and heterogeneously—when necessary and designing lessons appropriate for each group. This can be a challenging task because you are in essence creating several different

lesson plans under the umbrella of one lesson. However, the past practice of just shuffling along the 5 students in a class of 28 who did not achieve mastery during a unit does not serve all students.

As an instructional leader, you should be able to provide presentations, literature, materials, or some kind of resource system for your teachers. Although most teachers are familiar with teaching to the different multiple intelligences, some might feel uncomfortable with this type of planning and delivery and will need your assistance and support for when they decide to step outside of their comfort zone. Tap someone who has successfully taught a lesson that incorporated flexible ability grouping to present it to your team. Encourage team members to welcome colleagues into their classrooms and encourage teachers to observe their colleagues: peer observation can be a powerful form of staff development and a way to help us better reach students.

Reteach and Retest.

When students do not fare well, frequently a teacher's response is one of two scenarios. She announces to the class that she will offer a retake and gives the same test. Students try to memorize the correct answers to the questions they missed and then regurgitate the material a couple of days later. Or she announces that she will give another test, and she does. But that is all she does. She does nothing to address the areas where students did not succeed, so how could they pass the test the second time around?

You need to help your teachers see that when a large percentage of students are not demonstrating mastery during a unit of study, then the material needs to be retaught. That does not mean simply *covering* the material again. Instead, it involves finding other ways for students to access the material, analyzing practices, reconfiguring lesson plans, trying new ideas, and seeking help or suggestions from colleagues who had success during the same unit.

Use Assessments as Teaching Tools.

Too often teachers merely return graded work, doing nothing else with it. Even if a teacher's students achieved a proficient level

of competency, he still should use returned work as an opportunity for students to learn and as a tool for further assessment. Students can be paired together and talk about how they arrived at an answer; students can write out responses to incorrect, and even correct, answers; and students can participate in a general class discussion about the assessment. The point is that assessments should not be isolated events. They need to be discussed, used as teaching tools, and referenced in the future.

Establish Tutoring Programs.

Sometimes it is just not possible to remediate all students within the classroom. Students might have such low skills that they need more individualized attention or extended practice to build these skills. Although tutoring was available in my building through the National Honor Society and other such groups, my department created a more structured after-school program so that we could target certain areas of need. We created a 12-week program that focused on different objectives, strands, and skills each week (Resource 25). We were unable to be paid for our time, but nearly all saw the benefits of such a program and agreed to donate 90 minutes once during the year to teach a session.

The teacher responsible for any given week's tutoring session needed very little preparation because a leadership position that came to be known as the SOL review coordinator evolved out of our efforts. The coordinator asked colleagues to bring successful lessons and ideas to a department meeting and then organized the material into a resource book. Between that and various skill-building workbooks, we had ample resources each week to help reach our students. The lessons and materials were housed in a giant loose-leaf binder, and with only minor modifications, we were able to duplicate the program each year.

Even though we had the materials and teacher support necessary for such a program, we still needed to create ways to entice students to attend. We presented our idea to the PTSA and were able to secure money for this cause, which was critical. Snacks and soda attracted the students, and using donations from local

businesses and gift certificates, we would raffle off prizes at the end of the session or create friendly competitions. We publicized the program by mailing home a letter and posting flyers around the building, and teachers offered their students extra credit for attending. Each teacher and tutor personally invited students, and parents were also called to help ensure that we were attracting the students who would most benefit from the program.

This program did not replace one-on-one tutoring before and after school because that too was a valuable method for remediating students. Although such a program is not a cure-all for problems that students and teachers face, it is another important support system to help students succeed in class and on high-stakes tests.

Consider Creative Scheduling.

Tutoring does not always need to take place after school. In the early fall of 2002, the school plan committee suggested we implement a mentoring program in our building. When the Instructional Council began discussing this idea, it became obvious that we would need to restructure the school day to accommodate such a program. As we discussed different scheduling options and examined what neighboring schools did, we discovered that changing the schedule could maximize student learning because it could allow us additional time to remediate or work with students.

By the end of the year, we had settled on a schedule that reduced passing time and shaved a few minutes off each period to give us a 35-minute, rotating period that we called PAWS, Performance Activities with Students—a play on the word “pause,” because the school day would in essence pause midway through, as well as on our mascot, the jaguar. Over the course of seven days, a student would report once to each of his classes to make up quizzes, seek extra help, or even tutor other students. This helped us reduce the number of students who were failing for not completing make-up work, and it alleviated the amount of time a teacher would spend working with students after school (additionally, it benefited those students who were unable to stay after

school because of transportation issues or because they had jobs or other obligations).

Teach Study Skills.

We often take for granted that our students know and understand concepts and skills that we view as elementary, so it might surprise you how many students do not know how to survey and skim a chapter, how to use subject headings, or even what a dictionary can tell them about a word other than the definition. Perhaps no one taught us how to take notes when we were students, but we found a way to create a system for note taking that helped us succeed. Maybe that is why we assume that our students have effective note-taking skills or will be able to figure them out on their own.

Unfortunately, most do not, so it is a good idea to teach and review outlining, clustering, brainstorming, or another system of note taking that will help students access and digest material in order to become better learners. Moreover, few students have been taught listening skills—cues such as emphasis and repetition and key words—so they are lost not only when a teacher presents material but also when they work in cooperative groups or when peers present material. Teaching students how to organize a notebook and use a planner helps them learn organizational and time management skills, a basic component of remediation. Only when a student is equipped with the skills essential to success can she feel comfortable and confident that she will achieve success.

Make Work Meaningful.

Students need to see a connection between the subject material and their lives. You can effectively forge this link through essential questions. At the beginning of a unit, pose a thought-provoking question or questions that will inspire student interest. To say that we will study U.S. history because it meets a state objective is not likely to create much interest for students, nor for teachers. But teachers who begin the year by asking questions that will guide instruction and inquiry—“What does it mean to be an American?”

“What is the American dream and how do you relate to it?” “How has the United States changed throughout the past two hundred years?”—have a better chance of increasing student interest and tapping into a variety of student backgrounds.

Teachers who are able to show students the real-world significance or applicability of what they are learning are able to increase student motivation. For example, science teachers in my building held a science fair where student-guided experiments were displayed for parents and the community; math students created portfolios where they demonstrated how geometrical rules affected their lives; English teachers and their students wrote letters to the school paper and posted online reviews of books. On the whole, students were more active and enthused by these projects; they better related to them because they saw how the work was applicable beyond the school walls. Even with high-stakes testing hanging over students’ heads, it is no longer possible to say that they will study something simply because they have to or are told to; encourage your teachers to engage students in meaningful ways that also satisfy local and state requirements.

Begin Homework in Class.

When discussing student achievement with my teachers, I discovered that one of the main reasons students were failing was that they were not completing any homework. In talking with many students, I found that it wasn’t about understanding homework or being able to find the time to complete it. As one student confided, homework “just wasn’t fun.”

I am confident that this is the case in schools across the nation. Some districts have now chosen homework as their next target for elimination on the educational landscape because they believe that homework—not student or parent attitudes toward it (or even toward education in general)—is an obstacle to success. These knee-jerk pedagogical reactions in an attempt to improve student performance actually do a disservice to students. Homework is an essential part of learning, so engaging in meaningful—the key word

being meaningful—homework should enhance a student’s chances at success.

But when even meaningful homework becomes an impediment, you need to reach a compromise rather than totally leveling the practice. First, develop a departmental or team statement regarding homework that both students and parents are aware of. For example, teachers can include it on their syllabi. At Falls Church High School, we also posted the following on our Web site:

Homework is an integral part of the learning process, and as such, the English department believes in assigning regular, meaningful homework to reinforce skills and material from class as well as to prepare for future classes. Homework generally takes the form of the following:

- Active reading
- Practice with vocabulary and literary skills
- Long-term essays and projects

Students and parents should be familiar with the policies of the county and their teachers concerning late work.

By outlining to parents what homework consists of, you will be alleviating their concerns and informing them of what they should expect their children to do at home. (And think about how often you’ve heard parents say, “Johnny always says that he doesn’t have any homework—what can or should he be doing at home?”)

Making your expectations clear from the beginning of school, announcing deadlines well in advance in a variety of ways, and teaching students how to pace themselves and how to organize their time is an essential strategy for improving achievement. To help students manage their homework and workload, consider creating a Web site where they can download assignments. Or investigate the possibility of your school purchasing software such as Blackboard (a forum where students can keep up with work, submit assignments, participate in online discussions, and use calendar and task tools to get organized), and lead a session for your team or tap one of your teachers to lead a session on its use.

Opponents of homework are eager to dismiss the practice in schools that have a high rate of students who receive free and

reduced lunches, which many interpret to mean an inability or an indifference of a parent to assist with homework. Parents being unable to assist with homework should not pose a problem because the homework should not be new material, but rather something that has already been covered in class. True, it would be ideal if all parents could structure a conducive learning environment for their children at home, but this doesn't always occur even in affluent areas.

To purge the practice of homework denies students the opportunity to improve their study skills, to be more disciplined learners, and to work with important material (not to mention it is a method of teaching responsibility to a generation that is constantly being absolved of it). If educators are truly intent on increasing enrollment in advanced classes and by extension matriculating more students into college, then we are harming these students by removing homework from our programs, because homework and independent study are core elements of higher education. You might not be able to dissuade these challengers, so giving students time in class to begin their work can show that your department understands external obstacles while maintaining its integrity and commitment to excellence. And allowing students 10 minutes at the end of class to begin their homework is an effective way of monitoring student progress and providing closure to a lesson.

Create Incentives.

Teachers often do things in their classes that they and their students take for granted. Maybe we allow students to have food in class, we do without a seating chart, or something else along those lines. Rather than freely handing out such privileges in class, use them as incentives with your students. We already do this for classroom management purposes, so it seems natural to do so for academic reasons. Granted, we want students to see the value of learning and education, and some literature cautions against using external motivation with students. But if we refuse to recognize that this generation of students is primarily motivated by external factors rather than internal ones, we will continue to ignore a means

of helping students achieve. Those who argue that this reduces learning to simple reward and punishment conveniently ignore that many students are already motivated by grades, whether it is striving toward an *A* or just doing enough to earn a *D*.

Using incentives and privileges as a form of motivation can help a student experience success; once she experiences success, she becomes more receptive to learning. One of my colleagues teaches a class of students with low interest, low reading abilities that failed at least two of their previous year's SOL tests. She promised them a pizza party if everyone passed the next test. To her amazement, the lowest score was an 85. These students bragged to their friends and other teachers that they were going to have a pizza party because they had done so well. Even though she didn't make such a promise for the next test, and some students did not fare as well, all students learned a valuable lesson: that they were capable of success.

Not all incentives have to feel similar to bribery, however. Create a review game based on the game show "Jeopardy," and, if you want, assign homework passes or points to the winning team that translate into extra credit. Using a talk show format or adapting games such as Pictionary, Taboo, and Bingo can be a fun way to review material prior to a test. Learning is a right, but having fun while learning is not, so this can be a powerful way to motivate students.

Cultivate Community in the Classroom.

Sometimes students underperform because they lack motivation. Even when the material is relevant to their lives and lessons are engaging and interesting, they still feel disconnected from a class. One way to combat feelings of apathy is to create trust- and team-building activities for the first few days of school. Another way is to give students a greater voice in your class. This can be done on the very first day of school by inviting students to help construct classroom rules. In addition, setting aside a period once a quarter for a class meeting—a time to encourage general (yet orderly) discussions, to address concerns, or just to let students

express themselves—helps create a caring, supportive environment where students can feel a sense of belonging. This can be a powerful tool for enhancing motivation and, by extension, achievement.

Administer a survey to your classes, similar to ones we completed in college at the end of a course, where students can respond anonymously to the pacing, style of instruction, and general atmosphere of the class (Resource 26). After pulling together the data, hold a class meeting to share the results and use them as a springboard for students to talk honestly about their perceptions and feelings—and for you to talk about yours. One colleague shares the results of her surveys and suggestions with the next year's class. Receiving a handout entitled "Tips from the Trenches," her students feel as if they have been given a kind of cheat sheet, which increases their motivation and their belief that they can succeed.

A feeling of community and motivation can also be created when you display student work, celebrate student achievement, and demonstrate personal interest in students' lives. Invite administrators to watch student presentations or show them student work. Projects displayed in the classroom and hallway are evidence of positive activity and growth (as well as good PR, given the various people and groups who use the building). Take an interest in your students' lives and accomplishments outside the classroom. As a colleague once told me, students don't care what we know until they know that we care. Attend games and other extra-curricular events or greet students and say good-bye to them at the door on a daily basis. Such actions are powerful means of demonstrating your interest and increasing student motivation. Many students ultimately want to please their teachers, and once they see that we care more about them than about grades and test scores, they will respect us more and be more willing to achieve.

Inform Students of Their Progress.

Too often, students only know what their grades are when interim grades, progress reports, or report cards are mailed home.

Students should receive grade sheets once a week or every other week so that they are aware of their progress. Although it might sound obvious, students need to have their grades explained to them. For example, we may understand that a student's grades of a "100" and a "0" for the marking period will give him an average of a "50," but a student might not realize this or understand why his average is so low after "just one missing assignment."

Create a self-guiding activity for your class to allow yourself time to meet with your students individually. Explain the grade they earned and help them identify causes of failure, areas for improvement, and what motivates them. Use codenames or pin numbers to protect your students' privacy and post their averages in your classroom on a weekly basis. Require students who are underperforming to have a grade sheet or assignment signed by a parental figure. Be sure to follow up with someone at home if a signature is not returned so that students know you are not making empty threats.

Communicate Frequently with Parents.

Keeping only students informed of their grades is like bringing only half of the team to the game: the coaches need to be involved as well, because no matter how good the players are, their coaches are an essential part of success. Keeping track of which parents we need to call (and which phone numbers are working), playing phone tag, and documenting calls can drain us more than our classroom obligations do. But as frustrating as this part of our job can be, parental communication is integral in helping a student succeed. Because parents are capable of turning a student around by exerting pressure (usually in the form of incentives or reward and punishment), they sometimes need to be invited to the game and cajoled through our persistence and insistence into joining.

At my school, we were fortunate that when a parent did not speak English, we could use translators in our school system to facilitate communication. If such a resource is not available, find students who can make an initial phone call informing parents that they will need to bring a translator to a conference because there

is an academic problem. Your team might also look into the possibility of creating a form letter that can be translated into several different languages. And encourage teachers to help one another with phone calls, even if it is only to make parents aware that they need to contact their child's classroom teacher.

Involve the Guidance Department.

Inviting guidance counselors into the fold gives you access to other resources. Not only might a guidance counselor be knowledgeable of extenuating circumstances, but she also might be able to refer students to someone else who can help. Sometimes counselors are capable of talking with parents in ways that we as teachers are unable to because they have a different kind of rapport with the family or simply because they are removed from the situation. A good counselor knows her students well. If you can bring another adult into the picture who cares about a student's success, who can help monitor his progress, and who can exert pressure when he needs it, then you have enlisted the help of a significant support system.

Assess Your Assessments.

What are your teachers testing? Even if your teachers are instructionally sound, are they testing essential knowledge? What do their assessments consist of? For example, English is a unique discipline because the content, in many ways, is irrelevant: there are no state objectives in Virginia that mandate that every student read *Lord of the Flies*. Teachers on every grade level have a certain amount of flexibility in choosing what material they teach, but at the end of a quarter, semester, or year, every student should possess the same set of skills. After my department adopted the idea of having midterms, some exams tested students on isolated, obscure information. Is it necessary for a student to be able to identify four months later a minor piece of information from Chapter 4 of *Lord of the Flies*? Certainly not. Should a student be able to explain William Golding's modes of characterization or how he develops a symbol over the course of the novel? Most definitely.

Sometimes even good teachers don't know what to test, so your job is to ensure that students are being tested on what is important. Assessments should be aligned with state and local standards and should reflect unit objectives. This is true for all disciplines. In social studies, where content is crucial, a teacher's exams might reveal what is really being taught in the class and provide you with an idea if something in the curriculum needs to be corrected or if the teacher needs to be steered away from hobby teaching. One colleague, frustrated by others who gave easier exams and did not always assess students on essential knowledge, initiated the idea of a "challenge check." Each teacher brought a copy of a unit test to a team meeting so that teachers could collaborate and share test questions. It gave people a better idea of what was going on in each classroom and whether others were injecting the same level of rigor into their assessments.

Such an idea has the potential of rubbing some teachers the wrong way, but those who are defensive about this are generally the ones who need the most help in tweaking their assessments. You certainly don't want your teachers to walk away from a meeting feeling bruised, but in this high-stakes era you don't want to ignore problems in favor of preserving feelings and egos. If you still face resistance after trying to help your teachers understand the necessity of accurate assessments, then there is very little else that can be done other than presenting the problem to your supervisor.

A doctor administers blood work in order to diagnose how well her patient is or to determine the cause of an illness, not to blame him for getting sick. She discusses strengths and weaknesses in his lifestyle to help him understand how to be healthier, not to punish him. She does not rely on a single blood test to assess his health; she will run other tests or have him perform activities to determine how physically fit he is. A doctor will never assess her patient on his effort, abilities, or potential, let alone on his behavior in the

Assessments should be used to gauge progress, not to punish students or teachers.

office. Patients in specific age groups should be able to perform certain functions and fall within acceptable ranges, but a good doctor will consider the patient's history and other factors instead of solely comparing him to other patients or a statistic.

The same applies to your teachers. Their assessments should diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses and consequently inform goal setting and future unit and lesson planning. Students should not be graded on their behavior in the classroom, on how "healthy" they could be, or on whether they tried their hardest on a test. It can be unnerving to eliminate these things from the grade book, because it will typically lower a teacher's average GPA. So if a teacher is accurately assessing student performance, don't let anyone judge his effectiveness simply based on his quarter grades, just as one would not evaluate a doctor based on whether his patients were overweight.

Even though promotion is most often linked to standardized test scores, your teachers should use other forms of assessment. In disciplines where facts and information are highly valued, students should also have to apply their knowledge to new scenarios and tasks. They should be made aware of the goals and criteria ahead of time (it should never be taken for granted that they know what a teacher is looking for). Furthermore, a strong instructional leader will help his teachers implement rubrics in their classrooms, rubrics that students have a voice in creating or rubrics that are uniform and consistent across the grade level.

Although students will eventually have to pass a pencil and paper test, alternative forms of assessment can be instrumental in helping them to pass such tests. Of course, one of the main drawbacks with a high-stakes test is that it is a one-shot evaluation of what a student knows, understands, or can do. We have no control over that, but we do have some control over what occurs in our departments or on our teams.

Ensure that your teachers not only assess students in a variety of ways but also assess them frequently. Using unit tests as the sole assessments does a disservice to the student and yields little information about classroom practices. Exit cards, quizzes, conferences,

projects, portfolios, and anecdotal notes can be more useful forms of assessment because they can indicate what a student needs in order to be successful and can enhance the potential for success, whereas a unit test will only corroborate our impressions. Ongoing assessment will give your teachers a better picture of what is going on in their classrooms and will allow them to focus on growth rather than on isolated achievement.

Along these lines, have your teachers pre-assess students at the beginning of the year to determine their strengths and weaknesses. Then at the end of quarters and at midterms they will have baseline data to gauge their students' growth. In addition, your teachers will have a better idea of what their students need and will be able to tailor the pace and focus of future lessons.

Alternative and ongoing assessments should not be seen as "dumbing down" the curriculum, so make it clear to your teachers that they should continue to have high expectations, but they should temper them with leniency and generosity. Just as teachers are not dismissed because of one quarter's worth of poor grades, their students should not be evaluated solely on one test.

Implement Sustained Silent Reading.

Too many educators see reading as strictly an area that affects English or language arts. Teachers and administrators are quick to relegate the problem of literacy to English teachers, but if a student is not achieving in his English class, then the odds are that he is not achieving in his biology or history class due to his low reading abilities. In a culture becoming more and more dominated by non-readers, you must help your students succeed by leading the war against illiteracy. Although a math teacher might not necessarily know how to remediate a student so that he can better understand word problems, she can take a step in helping her students by implementing a Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program in her department.

Promote independent reading and model it in your department's classrooms. There will inevitably be some teachers who are opposed to setting aside valuable instructional time for students to

read in class, but the reality is that because students are seduced by new and improved distractions such as video games and the Internet, reading at home occurs less and less (and in many cases, not at all). Because this is the case, it makes sense to give students time during the school day for them to practice reading and build their skills. If a teacher can turn a student on to a book, then perhaps that student will develop or nurture a love for reading, which will ultimately help him over his entire academic career.

One of teachers' main concerns is how to monitor SSR. Experts say that assignments or assessments should not be punitive, meaning that students should not be graded down for not completing their SSR. At the very least, though, you need to establish a system to track what students are doing (Resource 27).

Be Aware of Cheating.

There has been a flurry of articles in recent years about students and cheating. It is easy to think that increased cheating is mainly a result of increased technology, that the more high-tech we become, the easier it is for students to find shortcuts to completing projects and papers. Regardless of whether this is true, students still cheat on tests, class work, and homework, and their attitudes toward cheating need to be addressed. In this day and age of instant gratification, students rarely have to work hard for what they want, so when it comes to completing work for class, they try to find the shortcut—oftentimes not because they do not understand the work nor because their home life is an obstacle to success, but because they have been conditioned to find the easy way out, especially if something does not strike them as “fun.”

Think about how many times you have heard students talking about assignments in the hallways: “Sure, you can copy my homework,” “Did Johnny do the homework? I really need to get it from him,” and the like. Recent phenomenon or not, the reality is that students do not consider sharing or copying homework as cheating: it is simply an easier way to achieve a goal. This is not a problem endemic to honors or advanced classes; it is a problem in all classes. In fact, a colleague explained to me that in his daughter's

1st grade class in a nearby district, students take all tests at study carols because teachers discovered that students were copying answers from their neighbors' answer sheets. First graders!

At least those administrators and teachers recognized that there was a problem. Leaders who don't want to admit that this epidemic exists do not understand why some of their students do not succeed in class or on high-stakes tests. For example, if a student has copied homework all marking period but then fails the unit tests, he is still more than likely to pass for the quarter. But he is also more than likely to fail a barrier test. Talk with your teachers, administrators, and parents about this problem and make your department's stance clear.

Not all students cheat for the same reason: some cheat because of the high competition to get into a good school, whereas others cheat because they do not understand the work that is asked of them. If we turn a blind eye to this practice because we cannot be bothered or we refuse to believe it exists, then our students will be in even greater need for remediation.

High-Stakes Testing

Whether the No Child Left Behind Act remains intact or evolves into something else, accountability and standardized testing will continue to be a driving force in education for years to come. Although I am confident that educators have read and heard enough about standardized testing, related issues—which are sometimes overlooked, ignored, or forgotten—must be addressed because they can affect test results.

Take Tests Seriously.

Although the prospect of earning a diploma should be motivation enough to take a high-stakes test seriously, some students are so myopic that they are unable to see far enough ahead to graduation. All they understand is the here and now. Other students might not plan to finish high school but are still required to take the high-stakes test, and their scores still count toward a school's accreditation. They may be capable of passing the test, but that is

no guarantee that they will take it seriously. And even those who do understand the significance of these tests could benefit from another incentive.

With part of the money that the PTSA donated to my department for tutoring sessions, we purchased prizes ranging from movie passes to gift certificates to DVD players, and we raffled them off after we received the test scores. At a class assembly, we held a drawing to recognize and celebrate those students who had passed, and we created buzz (and friendly competition) among those students who would need to take the test the following year. Offering these incentives can be crucial in helping to get students to take the tests more seriously.

Teach Test Prep.

A colleague once shared his displeasure with me for having to teach test prep to his students in order to ensure their success on a high-stakes test. He was indignant that he was being asked to help his students beat a test rather than learn material. He was right. Education should not be reduced to helping students find shortcuts. But where is the harm in teaching students how to properly take a test? We have been so conditioned to respond negatively to high-stakes testing that we are blind to the fact that we already use such practices when we prep students for AP tests and the SAT. This same teacher taught an advanced placement class, so I already knew that he was teaching his students how to break down and decode questions on the AP exam, how to use process of elimination, and other tips. Why should it be any different when it comes to barrier tests?

Teaching students information and skills necessary for success is not all there is to high-stakes testing; equipping them with as much knowledge as possible about the test itself is just as important. Students need to understand that they can write in the exam booklets, how the tests are scored, and the like. Ensure that your teachers have test prep strategies at their disposal and create a handout that they can refer to or adapt for their students (Resource 28).

Create Review Guides.

Before midterms and final exams, most teachers provide their students with some kind of review sheet or packet to help them study because the test is so crucial and covers so much material. Wouldn't it make sense then to do the same for students before they take a high-stakes test? Teachers who claim that students should be keeping a notebook and use that to study with are right; however, they miss the point. Why penalize students with the risk of not graduating? Why not equip them as best as possible? Creating a review packet should not necessarily fall on your shoulders or on one teacher in particular. When my department created review guides, one teacher was responsible for pulling together the information, but we all met to determine what should be included.

Provide Food.

Food facilitates morale for students too. As the saying goes, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Unfortunately, many students do not get the brain food they need in the morning, either because it is not available at home or because they do not take the time to eat. Try to secure money to provide students with snacks, such as juice and bagels, on the morning of the test to ensure that they are as well armed as they can be. Because high-stakes tests are equally a test of stamina as they are of knowledge, I encourage my students to bring a small candy bar or something else to nibble on during test breaks in the hall. This way, they can get an extra boost if they are beginning to feel fatigued.

Coordinate Testing.

Although most schools have a guidance counselor or administrator solely in charge of setting up the testing schedule, a strong instructional leader will make sure that she is also involved in this process. Because teachers are the ones who proctor standardized tests, they are the ones who have the best insight into what works and what doesn't work regarding the testing process. Ask to help assign proctors and to designate testing areas.

During the actual administration, make yourself available to give your teachers breaks, to answer their questions, and to handle unexpected situations that come up. Observe the overall testing process to see what changes might be needed for the next round. For example, were hallways secure and quiet during testing? Were PA announcements made or did the bells accidentally ring at the end of the regular period thereby disrupting testing? Did the teachers who weren't proctoring a test or covering a class assist in some way? Were there alternates in place in case a proctor was absent? Was someone available to relieve proctors? Should the bell schedule have been adjusted for time lost to testing? Should students have had an extended break after testing before heading to their next period? Did proctors have extra pencils or other supplies for students who arrived unprepared to the testing site? Was there a holding site for students who came to school late? Was there a spillover site for students who needed additional time? Was someone in charge of making sure that students with individualized education programs had their needs met? Was there someone available to escort students to the bathroom or water fountain? Paying attention to these issues will help ensure that the testing process goes smoothly, creating an atmosphere for success.

Data Analysis

With such awesome technological power at our fingertips, the nature of education has changed drastically in the past few years. Specifically, technology allows us to sort and analyze data in a variety of ways that was hitherto cumbersome and often ignored. By knowing how to interpret and use data to improve your instructional program, you can become a stronger instructional leader. Although you should consider creating data-tracking sheets for your department (Resource 29), it is not possible to explain here how data can specifically be analyzed because there are different programs available that disaggregate standardized test scores. The important thing to understand is that test results must be more than entries in a grade book: they must be opportunities for discussion and means to improve instruction and achievement.

This view is shared by Paul Farmer, the principal of Kilmer Middle School in Fairfax County, Virginia. He has worked as an administrator in three different buildings in two school systems over the course of his career and has made numerous presentations about data analysis. He conducts in-house training to help teachers and administrators analyze and interpret test data and become more comfortable with using data. Farmer and I recently discussed the process of using data and what he expects from his teacher leaders. (See Resource 30 for transcript of full interview.)

Team leaders at Kilmer Middle School receive data from their administrators in the form of grade reports and high-stakes test results. They reflect on the data individually and then share with their departments, discussing obstacles, comparing scores and grades, and assessing strengths and weaknesses in the department. They also use the data to measure their class grades and averages against their standardized test scores. For example, teachers with a high number of students earning As should likewise see high-stakes test scores in the advanced range.

If this is not the case, it can indicate that there is a problem and provide essential information about what is and is not working in a classroom and what a teacher is actually teaching. Such discrepancies might indicate that students are getting damaged. "Students see that they are working really hard but aren't achieving by the teacher's measure, although they are by the state's measure," says Farmer. "That can really turn off a student's drive and desire for education."

Although data won't determine how effective a given teacher is, data can pave the way for change. According to Farmer, data allow you to start a dialogue, one based on fact not on opinion or observation. Data help identify goals and measure progress. The objective is data-driven instruction, which Farmer defines as "the use of student data and analysis of these data to make instructional decisions to change or maintain the habit of instruction or the current instructional methods. The data are either going to say that 'yes, this is good,' or that something needs to be addressed." Consequently, teachers shouldn't be married to a particular methodology

because it's fashionable or because they like it; they need to understand and respond to what the data indicate.

Some teachers may react negatively to using data, so you should encourage them to view it as an opportunity for professional growth. After reflecting on the data, don't tell your teachers what needs to be done; rather, ask them what they think the data show and solicit suggestions on ways to improve. If instructional modifications are warranted, offer to help in any way you can. Your focus should not be on what someone did wrong but on assisting your teachers in identifying and helping those students who need it. And be sure to inform your administrator about the process because you'll require his support to effect change. Simply gathering data, or identifying successes and failures, is not enough. You

need to look for patterns and discuss them with your administrator, department, and individual teachers.

The goal is to turn data into meaningful information that will improve or enhance instruction and achievement on your team. For example, have your team conduct an item analysis on a test or a midterm where you determine how many students missed each question

(information that Scantron machines can produce) and discuss the areas in which students succeeded and failed. Is your team surprised that a large number of students answered a certain question incorrectly? After determining which questions were most often missed, assess the validity of the questions. Were they faulty questions, were the answers ambiguous, or did a typo change the meaning? If these problems did not exist, then is the high rate of failure particular to a certain teacher, class, or the entire grade level? Regardless of which one of the three is the answer, what is your GoalAction to remedy the situation?

Encourage your teachers to share their results across the grade level or like subjects. This kind of discussion can be beneficial because perhaps someone's class fared better in areas than

others' classes. Of course, the next logical question is, why is that? Is it solely because of students' ability levels? Or is someone doing something different, or better, than everyone else? Have your teachers use this as an opportunity to collaborate and share strategies that will benefit all teachers and students in the department. Then take this a step further by having all the grade level leaders meet for a vertical discussion based on the results. The 9th grade team leader can share with the 10th grade leader what the general trends are, and so on, to better prepare the receiving teachers on what to expect, and they in turn might be able to offer ideas or strategies that can be used as interventions in the meantime.

Train your teachers to look at data and, as a team, analyze and interpret results.