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# What Money Can't Buy

## POWERFUL, OVERLOOKED OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

Simple fundamental changes in instruction are less about cash than courage and could make gargantuan differences in student learning.

BY MIKE SCHMOKER

*“Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.”*

— George Orwell

Schools are in a fiscal funk. This means, as we are told in *Education Week*, that “ambitious education initiatives” are being scuttled (Jacobson 2008).

Sounds grim, but there may be an opportunity here. The current downturn could force us to see how much can be accomplished by attending to some long overlooked, incontrovertibly effective actions and initiatives. Best of all, these are largely *free*. It's not that funding is irrelevant or that money couldn't help us institute these changes. But the simple, fundamental actions I recommend could all be done with existing resources. In combination, they would have more impact on learning, on the achievement gap, and on civic, college, and career preparedness than anything we've ever done.

This might sound far-fetched. So before you weigh their merits, know that each of the following suggestions has been tested on hundreds of educators, including members of state and national education organizations. Overwhelming majorities of these audiences have strongly agreed with these proposals, as well as the problems — the brutal realities — which they address.

**Stop wasting time by using worksheets, movies, and the like as if they were important instructional tools.** Virtually every audience I have spoken to will admit to the inexcusable proliferation and abuse of worksheets, movies, and other time-consuming activ-

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ities that only masquerade as instruction. Even teachers and administrators in high-scoring or award-winning schools openly acknowledge this. Most of them agree that, with exceptions, low-quality worksheets consume as much as 25% or more of class time in most schools. Replacing these with worthy learning experiences (which I describe below) would be like adding two months to the school year — enough to have a breathtaking impact on learning.

And then there are . . . the movies. When I walk the halls of schools, from high-scoring to low, I routinely hear the blare of movies emanating from too many darkened classrooms — in science, history, and English. For most of these (often recent release) films, we hear the same flimsy justifications, year after year. Most of these movies consume about three entire class periods.

Then, there is the ubiquitous coloring, cutting, and poster making, the collages and arts projects — in subjects like history and English, from kindergarten to senior year. In a rank perversion of “active learning,” “differentiated instruction,” and “multiple intelligences,” collages and mobiles have emerged as unit assessments for gauging student understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the *Great Gatsby* — even in honors classes. Something is amiss when high school students spend weeks building a medieval castle for World History, a course in which time is so clearly precious.

All this starts in the early grades, when many children's academic futures and their college prospects are made or broken. That's when many students discover that “reading” class means lots of coloring, cutting, and pasting — about two-thirds of classtime, according to Ford and Opitz (2002).

Add it up. These various diversions translate to several months per year of precious instructional time. As bizarre as these practices might sound to the average person, educators admit that they are oh-so-com-

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mon in every kind of school, even as they diminish kid's futures.

Fixing this is not a matter of money. Like all of the following, these problems will be solved only with candid, courageous dialogue. It's time to break the silence on these insidious, indefensible practices.

But what will replace these activities? Simple, powerful lessons and activities that are affordable within most school's budgets.

**Dramatically increase the amount of *purposeful* reading, writing, and discussion — in as many subjects as possible.** If we replaced the most egregious and time-wasting activities with vastly more reading, writing, and discussion, something marvelous would happen for students. There is a revealing story in *Cross X*, the bestseller about the meteoric rise of an all-black debate team at an inner-city high school in Kansas City. Their adventure began with a simple practice: Give students an interesting text and the chance to argue about the characters and issues within it, and they will do the rest (Wiliam 2007).

I have led countless discussions with students from 2nd grade through university. If you give them a fair chance to read a good text closely and then to form and express an opinion about it, they will respond. This is especially true if they have adequate *in-class time* to do the reading, under a teacher's supervision, followed by a chance to pair up to share opinions and impressions before whole-class debate or discussion.

This year, I've been working with a teacher who does this with students continually. With middle schoolers, we've had great discussions, analyzing and comparing readily available texts. We make sure that every student participates. We've discussed *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Disney's use or abuse of history in the movie *Pocahontas*, and we've closely compared primary source documents describing the lives of a slave and a New England mill worker. Of course, we extensively model such analytical reading and thinking for every assignment and give students plenty of op-



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opportunities to engage in these activities *in class*, with teacher guidance. We explicitly and repeatedly teach them *how to underline and annotate a text* as they read (I can't overemphasize the importance of this).

Once you get the hang of these simple activities, they won't fail you, even if you vary and repeat them hundreds of times per year in almost any subject. Moreover, students do their best, most impassioned writing after they have carefully read and discussed one or more texts — in the argumentative mode. A legion of thinkers and researchers have found these simple activities to be the best way to prepare students not only for college, but for the intellectual demands of 21st-century work and citizenship (Conley 2005; Allington 2001; Schmoker 2006, pp. 61-74).

The impact of this one simple change — replacing poor teaching and pseudo literacy practices (described above) with large daily doses of purposeful reading, writing, and discussion — would be seismic. But keep reading: There are other, equally rich opportunities for improvement.

**Ensure that a high-quality, coherent curriculum actually gets taught.** On the one hand, Marzano and others found that a coherent, agreed-on curriculum (which includes higher-order literacy and problem solving) has more impact on achievement than any other factor (Marzano 2003). But only if we actually teach that curriculum.

And there's the rub. Numerous studies, including Marzano's, confirm what most educators know all too well: "curricular chaos" — not coherence — still prevails in most schools, a result of our no-oversight, high-autonomy culture (Schmoker and Marzano 1999). Fortunately, many successful schools have seen achievement levels soar after developing coherent, high-quality curricula — but only when they instituted monitoring mechanisms for ensuring that it is taught.

There is a simple way to ensure a common, high-quality curriculum: Teachers, by school or district, must create maps, by grading period, designating clearly which standards and objectives students will learn, with ample inclusion of higher-order, critical-thinking, reading, and writing standards. Then, for each grading period, common assessments must be built and administered (not *bought* from a test-prep vendor). Building these maps and assessments is an essential and ongoing professional learning experience (summer is an excellent time for such work). Finally, teacher leaders or administrators must meet with teacher teams to constructively discuss the results of these assessments for continuous improvement purposes. These simple practices have had a stunning impact on schools like Adlai Stevenson

High School in suburban Chicago and many schools that have faithfully implemented Stevenson's model.

For what it's worth, even in the small school district where I once worked, it cost us less than \$30,000 in the late 1990s to create the curriculum maps and

## Professionals don't let professionals abuse worksheets and movies.

common assessments — *about 5% of our federal funding allotment for a single year*. Monitoring such a simple system is cost-free. And remember: These simple mechanisms address the #1 factor that affects student learning, that is, *what we teach* (Marzano 2003).

Which brings us to *how we teach*. Huge rewards await those who, at no additional cost, will actually implement what we've known for decades about effective instruction.

**Ensure reasonably sound lessons in every subject and classroom.** The work of several eminent educators, over several decades, points to one of the most simple, powerful sets of practices we know. They form the general structure of an effective lesson. This simple, well-known pattern is supported by the work of Dylan Wiliam, Robert Marzano, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, Madeline Hunter, James Popham, Richard Stiggins, Marilyn Burns, Grant Wiggins, and Jay McTighe. Together, they have a monumental impact on learning for every kind of student. But alas, these practices are seldom consistently implemented in the preponderance of our schools and classrooms. Indeed, we don't insist on them or even monitor to ensure that they are implemented.

Effective lessons (most of them, anyway) start with teaching only those skills or standards that teachers fully understand and which come directly from the agreed-on curriculum. Then, start the lesson by being scrupulously clear in conveying both the purpose of the lesson and *how it will be assessed, with a careful description of the criteria necessary to succeed on the assessment*. The lesson must be taught in manageable steps or "chunks." Between each step, the teacher must "check for understanding" or "formatively" assess (e.g., by circulating, scanning, observing) to ensure that students understand the "chunk" that was just taught. Between chunks, students engage in "guided practice" replete with teacher modeling (or "thinking aloud"), with frequent use of student and adult models and exemplars, where helpful, to help students understand

the work. Throughout the lesson, the teacher makes ongoing adjustments and clarifies difficult concepts or processes when students are struggling. These general elements are as important for learning three-digit multiplication as for learning how to take notes for content mastery or to effectively select and explain supporting quotes and references in an argumentative paragraph. In sum, these should be “routine components of every lesson” (Marzano 2007, p. 180).

We know these elements. But we greatly underestimate the impact they would have if they were even reasonably well implemented. Dylan Wiliam (who all but coined the term “formative assessment”) found that such practices can account for “400% speed of learning differences” (2007, p. 185). Students whose teachers largely observe such practices can learn, in a single grading period, what those in less effective classrooms will require an entire school year to learn. For all this, my audiences concede that these simple, universally known practices are conspicuously absent in most lessons.

This is painfully apparent with respect to perhaps the most pivotal component — the “check for understanding” or “formative assessment.” Teachers in America almost universally continue to call on students who raise their hands, then move on — while the rest tune out or fall behind because no one took a moment to see if they understood the material. As Richard Elmore notes, effective instruction is voluntary — and therefore rare (2000, p. 6).

To change this, these elements of good instruction need to be reinforced and clarified regularly and redundantly. Someone in the system should make regular, brief classroom visits to ensure they are being implemented — and then provide feedback to faculties primarily (and to individual teachers only as a last resort). We need to require all teachers to observe effective teaching as a routine matter of professional practice. This, too, could be accomplished in already-existing faculty meetings and with existing professional development funds.

**Ensure that teachers work in teams, as all true professionals do.** Stop honoring “teamwork” and “professional learning communities” mostly in the breach. Be redundantly, obsessively clear about this: True “PLC” teams meet regularly to ensure fidelity to good curriculum that is replete with higher-order skills and habits of mind. Remind each other that professionals don’t let professionals abuse worksheets and movies. Authentic teams build effective curriculum-based lessons and units together — which they routinely refine together on the basis of common assessment data.

Adlai Stevenson High School is, deservedly, the poster child for the power of professional learning communities. As one teacher there noted recently, such disciplined teams made all the difference — and *didn’t cost anything in additional expenditures*.

The impact of these simple changes, in combination, would be gargantuan. To be sure, there are legitimate needs for additional funding to address structural needs in many of our schools. But the actions advocated here are less about cash than courage — and clarity. In these tough budget times, we could do no better than to turn our attention, at the national, state, and local level, to the historic opportunity these changes represent. **K**

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