

Three Simple Steps to Improving Student Achievement

By John O'Connor

O'Connor is the author of the AASA book Turning Average Instruction into Great Instruction^[1].

Our charge as school leaders is to radically increase student achievement. The good news is that how we reach that goal is simple. If we are going to increase student performance, we must diligently focus our schools on the one critical factor that has the greatest impact on student achievement -- classroom instruction. In fact, decades of research clearly shows that what happens between teachers and students in our nation's classrooms has the greatest impact on how well those students learn.

In the educational arena, we have tried virtually every initiative and silver bullet available. We have adopted new programs, restructured schools, realigned organizational charts and spent millions of dollars on quick fixes. In many cases, we have made the solution much more complicated than it needs to be.

At the end of the day, the element that must change in order to consistently increase student achievement is instruction. Our goal will not be met if we provide average instruction in some classrooms and even good instruction in others. We must provide GREAT instruction.

Fortunately, there are three simple steps that we can take as school leaders to radically impact student achievement:

1. Build a Common Understanding of GREAT Instruction

If great instruction is the answer, then what are the components of great instruction? If you asked that question of every teacher in your school, how many answers would you get? If you got a different answer from every person, isn't that an extremely inefficient

way to move toward great instruction?

What would happen if you asked the same question of every leader in your building? Would the principal, assistant principals, department chairs, lead teachers and instructional coaches all have the same answer? Unfortunately, our teachers often have different interpretations of effective instruction because our leaders are providing mixed messages.

Truth be told, GREAT instruction includes specific elements. GREAT instruction is:

- Guided by the Curriculum
- Rigorous with research-based strategies
- Engaging and exciting
- Assessed continuously to guide instruction, and
- Tailored through flexible groups

If we are going to radically improve student achievement, then we must acknowledge that GREAT instruction has non-negotiable elements that must be seen in every classroom. We must develop a common consensus of each element of GREAT instruction across our leaders initially so that we can send clear and consistent messages to our teachers.

2. Change Teacher Practices

The knowledge of GREAT instruction, unfortunately, is only the first step toward increasing student achievement. Our teachers must actually *provide* great instruction.

It may sound like the responsibility for increasing student achievement rests solely on the shoulders of our teachers. They certainly play a part, a big part. But the greater responsibility lies with school leaders: the central office staff, school principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders and other personnel who are charged with leading the school.

Once we accept that improving student achievement relies on the instruction that occurs in classrooms, then we must realize that school improvement is completely reliant on our ability, as leaders, to improve the practices of our teachers. If we are successful at enhancing teachers' instructional practices, then we will be successful at improving student achievement. If we are unable to improve teacher practices, then we

will be unsuccessful.

In order to improve student achievement, we must have a deep and enduring knowledge of the components of GREAT instruction and then we, as school leaders, must develop the support, coaching, feedback, momentum and direction needed for teachers to consistently improve their practices toward GREAT instruction.

3. Quit Doing Stuff that Doesn't Help

Unfortunately, we are often distracted. Our calendars are brimming with activities. Many times, those activities are placed on us from the state department of education or the central office. But, truth be told, we often create activities for ourselves and our personnel that not only don't improve teacher practices, but actually distract us from that mission. We often find comfort in completing administrative tasks rather than focusing on teaching and learning.

We must challenge ourselves to toss out those activities that are having little to no impact on student learning. We must be diligent in abandoning those activities that clog our professional lives that are ultimately wasting our time. We must courageously stop doing what doesn't work. We must focus our attention, almost to a fault, on enabling our teachers to provide GREAT instruction in every classroom.

Our three steps to improving student achievement are straight forward and simple. Unfortunately, that does not make them easy.

John O'Connor is the executive director for special services with the DeKalb County School System in Atlanta, Ga. His book Turning Average Instruction into Great Instruction^[2] provides a road map for radically improving student achievement through effective leadership and GREAT instruction

1. <http://www.rowmaneducation.com/ISBN/157886948X>
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