



parents, teachers, and principals
making schools work for kids

insights extra

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KASC posed the following questions to **Robert J. Marzano**, an education author whose books include "What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action," and the new "The Art and Science of Teaching: A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction."

> Your synthesis of years of education research identifies a core list of about a dozen factors that most influence student achievement in schools. What areas on that list seem the hardest for schools to deal with and how is that overcome?

Of the school-level factors I identify, the two that influence achievement the most are a guaranteed and viable curriculum and effective feedback. Although those sound easy, they wind up being about the most difficult because people are not willing to get into that level of detail. The way most schools work is that their curriculum is a textbook. What I try to point out is that textbooks have more content than can possibly be taught, and they are not designed to track student knowledge and skills. The same with state standards — they are very broad and not designed to track student progress. The work is straightforward. It means reconstituting those big lists of content and coming up with a lean and mean list of what's most important and what will be covered for every subject at each grade level.

I say it's straightforward, but it's also detail oriented. There has got to be logic and rigor behind it. That's the area that's the biggest stop or where the logjam occurs. I tell people to define what they're going to cover and develop measurement topics, or what some people call essential learnings. That's got to be limited — no more than 15-20 topics per subject per grade level. Then develop something that looks like a rubric that explains what students should be learning and use that for formative assessment to track student progress right from the beginning of school. That gives teachers a chance to intervene right off the bat and to reward students for knowledge gain instead of status levels.

> When looking at a list of factors like this, how do the people who lead schools streamline their approach to keep the work as simple and focused as possible?

It's really straightforward. You have to identify what's the primary task for schools. Leaders don't typically get to that level. They expect a curriculum specialist or textbook committee to solve it. It's neces-

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sary work that's very detail oriented that no one at the leadership level recognizes as their job. They think there are specialists to do that, but each subject area has its own way of looking at things, and they all want more content than can really be taught. That really has to be looked at and solved at a systems level.

> Your work points schools toward a number of areas where they should be working. Are there some common routines or things schools do that they should stop doing — or seriously question — to make time to focus on those areas that most influence student success?

Most of that is at the classroom level. If you look at what happens in classroom, you find good instruction, but you also find a lot of things that don't need the amount of time they're given. Given limited time and all that needs to be covered, the question that needs to be asked is, "Is all of this really focused on helping students learn?" That's not to say you take the fun out of school or don't have activities to interest students. How we use time is a huge problem. We have teachers teaching more than any other country. The data from TIMSS [the Third International Mathematics and Science Study], people have analyzed the heck out of that, like David Baker and Gerald LeTendre. They've identified interesting patterns, like that our teachers spend more time in the classroom than those countries we want to emulate. Teachers in some other countries are in school the same amount of time, but they're not teaching because there's more time built into their schedule for common planning. They have time to make the detailed preparations it takes to deliver strong instruction. We need to buy some time for classroom teachers.

> After seeing schools follow your advice, what strategies have you seen that work to help teachers, parents, and others be persuaded to really follow the steps meaningfully, instead of perhaps seeing these recommendations as just another to-do list with items that just need to be checked off?

The answer is longevity and continuity. I don't think the problem with motivation is at the teacher level. What they've seen too often is a big change gets started and it doesn't last. Why should they invest their time in something, even if they may believe in it? I get around and talk to a lot of teachers, and I've asked, "Why are you blocking something you might believe in?" The answer I almost inevitably get is that it may be a great idea, but they also know it's the change *du jour*. It's the bandwagon this year, and it's going to be something else next year. They never see continuity. When you sit down with a district and have them list their initiatives, it's almost comical. Motivation is connected to focus and longevity. If you had a school system that really decided what it believed in and really committed to it, I think most teachers would say, 'You've got me.' Right now, they don't think it will last. When it comes to adopting a strategy for school improvement, I think the big thing is pick something and do it well. Get it implemented. Make sure you stay with it.

For me, these are the big three: a guaranteed and viable curriculum; feedback that identifies the items you want to keep track of so you're measuring student progress in a formative system; and institution-

alizing effective teaching by developing models of instruction with a common language that becomes a basis for discussion. Novice and master teachers talk and work together, and this common approach can become a supplemental way of rewarding teachers. I'm also big on developing background knowledge for middle- and low-income students. They come with background knowledge, but it may not be focused on the same things as what my children or your children get from their experiences — or even dinner table conversations — that help them be more ready to succeed in school.

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