

1

Reframing Instructional Practice for the New Challenges in Education

Maryellen's Story

Maryellen had always considered herself a master teacher. She had worked hard to get her graduate degree in elementary education after a brief stint as a high school American literature teacher. (She had gone back to graduate school once she realized that she couldn't teach literature if the students didn't know how to read. She figured if she started teaching reading to younger students, they could appreciate literature in high school.)

Maryellen thoroughly understood the requirements of the curriculum; in fact, she had chaired her school's curriculum committee for the past three years. With fourteen years of experience under her belt, she felt that she had a sound understanding of the developmental needs of students and a solid command of classroom management skills. Due to her success with students and parents, it seemed that each year her principal was giving her more challenging students, a challenge she enjoyed until this year. This year, her principal had moved her

(Continued)

(Continued)

from second grade to third grade because the principal knew that every child had to leave third grade able to read. The principal knew that Maryellen was just the teacher to accomplish this.

Maryellen's class is now 30 third graders, a few more than the recommended board policy on class size. Seven of her students are on individual education plans. Five students receive Section 504 accommodations. Six students are speakers of other languages.

Due to the diversity of student needs, Maryellen receives the assistance of a special educator on a daily basis during reading block, two Title One tutors three times a week for math, and an ESOL instructor as determined by the students' plans. The scheduling of these supplementary services had been problematic, but Maryellen worked out the kinks so as to not disrupt the flow of instruction. If nothing else, she prided herself on her resilience and determination.

At the beginning of the year, Maryellen's district introduced quarterly standardized testing to determine the students' progress. This new testing was prompted by the fact that last year her state had implemented grade-level performance standards for all students. These performance standards are the determinants of whether or not her school makes adequate yearly progress. This quarterly testing supplements the state's annual testing. In Maryellen's opinion, all this testing takes time away from instruction.

Now more than ever, Maryellen feels the weight of responsibility on her shoulders. There are so many grade-level performance standards and in every subject area: reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies—even the specials of music, art, and health! She doesn't even have the time to count them all. Maryellen truly doubts whether she can cover all of them, never mind have the students master them.

In addition, while she had always received one or two notes of concern from parents during each year of her teaching, the letters now are filled with complaints and there are more of them. Mostly the complaints are coming from parents of students who are average and above. These parents are angry at the intensity of services for the students in need. The parents feel that their children are being shortchanged. They keep asking Maryellen where are the enrichment activities for their students? How is she challenging these bright students? Why doesn't she have more projects involving technology and science? When is she giving these students additional time? One parent even keeps threatening to pull her child from the class and enroll him in a private school.

For the first time in her career, Maryellen feels inadequate to the demands of teaching. She realizes that things have to change. Presently, she cannot afford going back to school; after all, she has two kids of her own to support. She can buy a book. But which one should she buy? How many theories and models does she have to wade through? Where does she start?

The public is airing their opinions of the state of public education, in a *very* loud voice. Some days, the criticism of the system is so prevalent, it is hard to remember the nobility of our profession. We have heard teachers state that they do not know why they are subjecting themselves to such demeaning commentary. After all, they would like to see their critics stand up before a class of 27 sixth graders and still maintain their sanity at the end of the day! Despite how the criticism sometimes feels, we believe that it has brought about dramatic research to help us improve. Much like doctors on grand rounds, by collectively examining how and what we teach, we can produce positive results for students.

In order to understand some of the research we will present to you in this book, we believe it is important for you to understand the historical underpinnings of its development. Those underpinnings include the standards movement, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

THE IMPETUS: THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT ■

The standards movement has been gaining momentum since the 1980s, when a flurry of damaging studies regarding the state of the nation's public education system were released. The 1983 study titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, prepared by the U.S. Secretary of Education and others, painted a pretty bleak view of American education. It detailed a lack of consistency among curricula, a lack of emphasis on higher order thinking skills, and a pervasive mediocrity among teachers.

The standards movement was further bolstered with the passage of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, enacted in 1994. The act itself was the result of an Education Summit initiated by President George H. W. Bush and attended by all 50 governors. The summit underscored the nation's anxiety about the readiness of children to come to school to learn, the state of our students' performance versus other students in the world, and the lack of equitable access for *all* students to a quality education.

The act had some lofty goals, eight in all, including this one, which is most applicable to our model presented here:

(A) By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8 and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, art, history and geography and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

(B) The objectives for this goal are that—

(i) the academic performance of all students at the elementary and secondary level will increase significantly in every quartile and the distribution of minority students in each quartile will more closely reflect the student population as a whole

(ii) the percentage of all students who demonstrate the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge and write and communicate effectively will increase substantially

(iii) all students will be involved in activities that promote and demonstrate good citizenship, good health, community service and personal responsibility

(iv) all students will have access to physical education and health education to ensure they are healthy and fit

(v) all students will be knowledgeable about the diverse cultural heritage of this Nation and about the world community (H.R. 1804, Goals 2000: Educate America Act)

Seeing this in writing concerned many a teacher and administrator. The goals seemed too overwhelming and too costly to accomplish. Not only were new curriculum and proficiency standards required, but also data collection and analysis, and preparation for, and administration of, standardized assessments.

As soon as this act was ratified, educators, administrators, school boards, and state education agencies began developing state and local curriculum frameworks that would standardize the content and assessment of what students were learning. Since the federal government reemphasized the states' control over public education with this act, we now have more than 15,000 state and local curricula governing our public schools today.

Rather than try to itemize each state's standards in this book, we believe it is important to note the findings of Strong, Silver, and Perini (2001), who analyzed the standards of 300 school districts. These researchers found that schools' standards fell into four broad categories. Those broad categories are the following:

1. **Rigor**—all students need to be able to read and understand powerful and challenging texts and the ideas that animate them.
2. **Thought**—all students need to acquire the disciplines of learning; they need to be able to collect and organize information; to speak and write effectively; to master the arts of inquiry and problem solving; and to reflect on, and learn from, their own activity as learners.
3. **Diversity**—all students need to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, their unique styles, intelligences, and cultural heritages and be able to use that knowledge to understand and work with people different from themselves.
4. **Authenticity**—all students need to be able to apply what they learn to settings beyond the school doors—especially those settings governed by the goals of citizenship and future careers.

In addition, during our own research for this book, we discovered that most of the national standards relied heavily on vocabulary contained in or similar to Bloom's taxonomy. If you examine the International Reading Association's English language arts standards, the standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics or the National Science

standards, they all use performance-oriented verbs such as *demonstrate*, *represent*, *problem solve*, *apply*, *evaluate*, and *analyze*. To us, this represents the major switch in emphasis from the 1980s' and 1990s' focus on self-esteem to the twenty-first-century focus on achievement.

PARADIGM SHIFT: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

January 8, 2002, will be remembered as one of the most significant days in education. On that day, President George W. Bush signed the bipartisan legislation known as No Child Left Behind. This legislation mandated new requirements for highly qualified teachers, the use of scientifically based research, stronger assessment requirements, and strict accountability rules for school districts. Those requirements forced us to reexamine the educational system as a whole. Why did this occur?

The federal government intervened for a variety of reasons:

- Studies showed that our educational system was not able to live up to all of the eight goals under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Most notable were the failures to improve reading scores for students in Grades 4, 8, and 12 and to improve the percentage of teachers holding a degree in their main teaching assignment.
- Extensive research gleaned from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that, as of the 2000 administration of the test, only 28 percent of the nation's fourth graders were performing at or above proficient levels in reading and only 22 percent were performing at or above proficient levels in math.
- The Third International Mathematics and Science Study, which was administered in 1999, showed that of 38 participating countries, 18 scored higher in mathematics achievement than the United States. This caused a major embarrassment for a country that prides itself on research, development, and technology.
- Gaps in achievement between children of African American and Hispanic descent and their Caucasian peers have continued despite significant interventions such as Head Start, the nation's federally funded preschool program.
- Gaps in access to the general curriculum and achievement for English language learners and students with disabilities have remained.

Consequently, the federal government intervened with a carrot and stick approach. The carrots included flexibility in the use of federal funds, relief from teacher educational loans (up to \$5,000!) for those who teach in schools serving low-income families, tax breaks for nonreimbursed purchases of classroom supplies, partnerships to improve math and science education, and funds allocated to help teachers and paraprofessionals reach highly qualified status. No one would argue that these are welcome and positive benefits for teachers.

The sticks however, were quite a surprise. The new requirements of No Child Left Behind have been translated into requirements for all

teachers to be “highly qualified”; annual testing of all children in Grades 3–8 in reading and math, including new English speakers and children with disabilities; determinations of adequate yearly progress (AYP); district report cards to communities indicating if AYP has been made by their schools; and serious sanctions for those schools that have not made AYP.

Dr. George Cushing, Superintendent of Schools for four districts in New Hampshire, states,

Top-level administrators are feeling tremendous pressure as a result of No Child Left Behind. Too many superintendents are looking to canned programs or easy fixes to improve their schools. However, that is not enough. The challenge is to bring experienced teachers around to look at the needed balance between the art and science of teaching. No Child Left Behind forces us to embrace the science of teaching by examining data. Data analysis does make a difference by showing us which students we need to target with intervention strategies. (personal communication, 2005)

Additionally, even though many teachers have years of experience, they may not meet the highly qualified status set forth in No Child Left Behind. For example, many, if not most, teachers in middle schools have elementary licensure. Depending on their teaching schedules, if they teach a particular course such as math exclusively, they are not considered highly qualified under this new law unless they hold additional licensure in mathematics. One of the hidden costs of the new law for both teachers and districts is the time and money spent to obtain “highly qualified” status.

Diane is a caring and exemplary fourth grade teacher who has been helping children learn for more than 24 years. Her home state recently issued a directive that all elementary school teachers must demonstrate competence in English, mathematics, social studies, and science by taking the PRAXIS II.

One day during her preparation period, she sadly lamented that suddenly she is not “highly qualified.” She felt repudiated by the requirement. “Can you believe it? After all these years?” she said, shaking her head. The loss of her self-confidence was quite evident.

“What am I going to do? I haven’t taken a standardized test since my GREs. I really am worried. I don’t have the time or money to take a preparatory course for this.”

We can see already that the public scrutiny of public education is intensifying as children’s academic achievements are connected to high-stake consequences. As of 2004, approximately 20 states, including Alaska, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Oregon, mandate that if students cannot pass the state assessment test, they will be denied their high school

diploma. Seventeen other states are considering the addition of similar requirements to promotion from one grade to the next.

Parents in particular have become quite concerned about their school districts' performances on these high-stakes tests. Several parents have already started class action litigation against their states and school districts, claiming that their children have been wrongly denied their high school diploma. Parents of children with disabilities are weighing in on the debate as well, as their children must take the test, albeit with accommodations. For students with learning disabilities, even under the best of circumstances, standardized testing can be daunting and quite upsetting. Ironically, these students do not often qualify for the alternate assessment and therefore must perform well on the regular tests.

SUCCESS FOR EVERY CHILD: THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT

Legislators, in reauthorizing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004, aligned it with the No Child Left Behind Act. Denoting the emphasis on achievement, legislators renamed the act the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.

Among the new emphases of this renewed legislation are requirements for special education teachers to be highly qualified, using up to 15 percent of entitlement funds to help struggling students *before* they are referred to special education, and requirements to consider a student's response to scientifically based programs as a factor in determining if the student has a learning disability.

In addition, children with special needs are expected to adhere to the same high standards as other children, and that means they must participate in state and local standardized tests. If a child cannot participate in a standardized test, an alternate test, with standards, must be developed to document what the child had learned.

These new requirements have necessitated a paradigm shift. Foremost, the *art* of teaching is being blended with the *science* of teaching. In our opinion, this change is a positive outcome. We must supplement our talent, educated opinions, and hard-earned experience with solid evidence of student progress, analysis of a student's skill deficiencies, and a plan to remediate and enhance skill development. While it may appear a daunting task, we can chunk the requirements into manageable pieces just as we would for our students. We can organize our strategies and design plans to achieve this. How can we do this?

In the next several chapters of this book, we can show you how to make readjustments. *We recognize that the changes we are suggesting cannot be undertaken in one semester or even a year.* We advise a carefully thought out plan to try these methods with a trusted colleague. We bet you will be surprised by the energy you will derive from learning something new. We also wager that the discovery of discussing truly important educational topics with a trusted friend will be rejuvenating. We are counting on the fact that knowing where you are heading and knowing how to get there will be a huge relief.