

# Preface

## *Lessons Learned From Experience*

Everyone seems to agree—from popular media commentators to government policy makers and academic researchers, including Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) and Darling-Hammond and Haselkorn (2009)—that the quality of teaching in classrooms is the single most important factor in advancing student achievement and in sustaining school improvement. Everyone seems to agree that we have to have consistently high-quality teachers in schools. At the same time, we see a jumbled competition of approaches to ensuring that all classrooms have high-quality teachers. Backing each approach is a distinct vision of the function and operation of schools and a distinct understanding of the organization of schools and the psychology of teachers and learners. In *Teaching Matters Most: A School Leader's Guide to Improving Classroom Instruction*, we make the case that the quality of teachers that we place and sustain in classrooms is the single most important factor in continuous school improvement and in any attempt to reform schools. Furthermore, we suggest a path for advancing this goal. This path is not a simple mechanism, but involves a complex of responsibilities and proficiencies from the leadership in schools.

### **A “NEW” TAKE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

The actions that we describe in this book might seem to some readers to be fundamental and common to almost all schools. However, we advocate an apparently uncommon practice: that school leaders need to embrace the idea that *teaching matters most* and must act on this principle by leading the school community in a concerted effort that requires the tight alignment among fundamental actions. This includes recruiting, hiring, inducting, mentoring, supporting and delivering

meaningful professional development, and evaluating teachers in a manner that recognizes their need for a sense of efficacy, autonomy, and community.

We recognize that procedures and programs for induction, mentoring, professional development, and teacher evaluation should be common to schools, although the quality of the programs might be uneven and unaligned. This book can help school leaders to define the common commitment that could bind these separate elements together, and our advice for action steps could help school leaders to improve any one of the individual components.

Part of our concern is that too often the leaders in schools, while acknowledging the importance of teachers, look to streamlined mechanisms and sometimes to peripheral activities instead of addressing the admittedly messy work of improving the quality of teaching in a school. In this book, we offer an alternative to popular options. Simply put, the alternative requires three key elements:

1. Envisioning what good teaching looks like and sounds like
2. Measuring the quality of current instruction against this standard
3. Working relentlessly in concert with a community of professionals to move the quality of instruction closer and closer to the ideal

Of course, each one of these elements embeds layers of complexity and assumes substantial knowledge and skills on the part of the leaders in any school. And we understand that a myriad of distractions move school leaders away from primary attention to the quality of teaching. Throughout the book, and especially in the last two chapters, we suggest ways to remain focused and to develop the leadership proficiencies necessary to be a strong and steady instructional leader.

When we examined the school improvement plans from a set of randomly selected schools (McCann, Jones, & Aronoff, 2010), we were curious to see the trends among the targets that schools had set for improvement. By and large, the plans in this set focused most attention on propping up areas of deficiency and too often the expressed goals seemed only peripherally connected to the work that teachers do in classrooms. We trust that a committee or an individual administrator conscientiously wrote the school improvement goals, judging that they were significant statements within the particular school contexts. However, we have to ask in each instance, if the goal is aggressively pursued, will it substantively improve the quality of teaching and thereby significantly advance the learning for all students? Too often, our answer is *no*.

## CENTRAL THEME

We have worked in public schools for more than a combined one hundred years. We continue to observe in schools as researchers, university supervisors, and consultants. Our thousands of hours of classroom observations have convinced us that schools will not make significant progress in advancing the learning and achievement of all students unless they make significant strides in improving the quality of instruction in all classrooms. With *Teaching Matters Most: A School Leader's Guide to Improving Classroom Instruction*, we argue for renewed and sustained attention to improving the quality of instruction in schools. Furthermore, we insist that schools work against this effort when school leaders focus too much attention on the peripheral matters of schooling that often distract from the core effort to advance learning and improve the quality of students' experiences in classrooms. We understand that students are going to be intellectually engaged and learn at high levels of achievement when they experience consistently high-quality instruction. We propose an approach to school improvement that does not single out struggling subgroups as the focus for correctives. Instead, we offer that schools leaders need to conceive firmly and in substantial detail what good teaching looks like, sounds like, and feels like. They must take the measure of the quality of instruction against this yardstick, and they must work relentlessly to move the quality of instruction closer and closer to the ideal in every classroom.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book begins by making the case for the importance of teaching and for improving the quality of teaching. The chapters that follow report current trends in instruction in schools. The report shows that while teachers are working hard, instruction is often uninspired and rarely challenging or intellectually engaging. We note the current debate about whether or not there are "best practices" in teaching, and make the case that we can say with confidence that some practices are clearly better than others. While we acknowledge that other authorities, for example Danielson (2007) and Stronge (2007), have described quality teaching according to elaborate rubrics, these descriptions make it difficult to sort out the pedagogical priorities. One chapter offers a description of distinctive practices that separate exceptional teachers from mediocre teachers.

Subsequent chapters detail the actions that are necessary to promote and sustain consistently high-quality teaching, including the

communication steps needed to initiate the plan. The actions include attention to hiring, recruiting, and induction practices. We suggest the elements that should be part of any mentoring program. We envision what a meaningful staff development program would look like. We propose the necessary steps in a teacher evaluation process that promotes professional growth. We share how attention to what students tell us can inform us about the quality of instruction and the experience in every classroom.

We acknowledge the realistic challenges in following the course that we propose. However, we note that the recognition of challenges does not invite despair. As school administrators, we have taken the stance that recognized challenges are specific problems to be solved, not insurmountable roadblocks. We do not deny that what we propose will be difficult at times and will be quite different from more popular and easily marketable approaches to reform and improvement. At the same time, experience tells us that principals in most schools have a great deal of autonomy to be creative and to translate various mandates into actions that are appropriate for the specific instructional context of their schools. For example, if principals must evaluate and rate all teachers, there are ways of doing this that support the teachers' development and foster reflection.

## WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DISTINCTIVE

It should come as no surprise to you that *teaching matters most* in the sense that the quality of the teaching in a school is the key factor that advances learning, achievement, and student satisfaction. Of course school administrators, board members, and policy makers act on this fact in various and sometimes contradictory ways. Here is what is distinctive about our approach:

- We recognize that school leaders have no control over the *input*, the teacher training that prepares candidates to deliver high-quality instruction and to function well as a member of an instructional team. We see the task before leaders as working with the current reality of the staff and the community where they are situated.
- We see hope in an intense focus on continually working toward the improvement in the quality of teaching across all grades and across all disciplines.
- We insist that the criteria for defining quality teaching cannot be captured in static checklists but must be authored repeatedly

through a collaborative and recursive process with the instructional staff of a school.

- We propose a plan for the alignment of key elements that promote continual improvement of the quality of teaching, all connected by the communitywide understanding of what quality teaching should look like, sound like, and feel like.
- With this book we offer the recommendations and provide the tools that will help school leaders to improve the quality of instruction in schools, leading to more learning, higher achievement, and increased satisfaction for learners and for teachers. We recommend steps for individual components of the instructional program in individual chapters and link the steps into one comprehensive plan represented by a recurring graphic at the end of each chapter.

We see great hope for school improvement through an intense effort to improve the quality of teaching across grades and across subjects. We offer a vision of key characteristics that would distinguish teaching that is engaging, compassionate, coherent, and rigorous. We suggest how to take the measure of the current status of teaching within a school and to check for growth in the quality of teaching over time. The tools that appear in the resources section of the book should help in this effort. We set out a blueprint for how to advance the quality of teaching through an aligned plan that attends to teaching standards and professional growth needs, from recruitment to induction and mentoring to evaluation to ongoing professional development. The hope for significant school improvement and meaningful reform lies with the teachers. The hope for leaders is that they can follow a focused and aligned effort to improve the quality of teaching to impact all learners.