Empowering Teacher Effectiveness: Five Key Factors for Success

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At the heart of teacher effectiveness is the teacher's ability to understand the individual profiles—the strengths and weaknesses—of every student in the classroom. Although data-driven instruction has long been a focus of districts across the country, the complex challenge of connecting student data to the appropriate instructional strategies and resources remains one of the greatest obstacles to teacher effectiveness. Curriculum-focused professional development helps provide teachers the "what" they need to provide in terms of classroom instruction. However, the questions of "why" specific students require certain instructional resources and "when" those resources are needed are the key questions that will unlock schools' ability to empower teachers to obtain a level of effectiveness that will improve student outcomes.

1. Do teachers understand the pedagogy and how to effectively use the instructional materials?

Teacher effectiveness begins with each teacher's ability to apply the instructional strategies and cover the appropriate material as outlined in the scope and sequence of the selected curriculum. Schools spend a significant amount of time in pedagogy-specific professional development, and with good reason. Consistent, high-quality instruction is directly affected by the teachers' level of pedagogical expertise, as well as their level of mastery using the instructional materials. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality 2013 Teacher Prep Review, teachers' level of expertise can vary significantly, depending on the quality of their university teacher preparation program. Therefore, this important, foundational aspect of teacher effectiveness should not be overlooked. Still, far too many schools stop their teacher-effectiveness efforts with product-focused professional development. This familiarizes teachers with "what" resources teachers use for instruction, but the questions remain in terms of "why" certain resources are needed for certain student profiles and "when" those resources should be integrated into instruction.

2. Which assessments will clearly define the profile of student ability and trajectory?

In order to be effective, teachers need to make the connection between the underlying story behind student data and how the data must inform their instructional strategies. This requires teachers to be knowledgeable about the various kinds of assessments and what conclusions about student performance can and should be drawn from the data. Ultimately, this level of understanding gives teachers better clarity of purpose and anticipated outcome—understanding not only what instructional resources are available, but also why specific strategies and resources are necessary for each individual in the classroom.

However, we present teachers with a rather daunting task: giving them massive amounts of data and expecting them to determine "how does this data affect my instructional plan for tomorrow?" Unraveling that challenge begins with a solid understanding of how to use assessment data to clearly define a profile of each student's strengths and weaknesses. According to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDE), an accurate profile of student learning in a Response to Intervention model includes several factors:

- **Level of performance**: What is the grade level of material on which the student is working?

- **Rate of learning**: How quickly is the student making progress towards grade-level standards? Is the student trending in the right direction and quickly enough to meet expectations?

- **Academic goals:** Educators need to establish goals and expectations for each student's learning and then manage to those goals.

Based on these factors, teachers can then adjust the instructional intensity necessary to meet the academic goals. For those students working at or above grade-level, the teacher can extend the academic goals to encourage students to reach higher levels of achievement. Most importantly, the teacher can set his or her instructional priorities and manage available time and resources to help the students who are in the greatest need.

What are the types of measures that teachers can use to help plan their instruction and what educational decisions can be made from these data?

- **Universal screening** is typically given at the beginning of the year and is used as a quick indicator of which students are on track and which students require closer monitoring throughout the year. Students who are identified at some level of risk are often progress monitored; monthly, weekly, or even daily.

- **Progress Monitoring** is a powerful assessment tool in helping teachers determine student profiles and help guide and inform their instruction. The overarching purpose of progress monitoring tools is to provide teachers with information regarding student progress in relation to the instruction/intervention they are currently receiving. Progress monitoring tools given less frequently (i.e., monthly or three times a year) are often administered to assess a student's general reading performance in relation to grade level benchmarks/standards and whether students are able to generalize their learning beyond the curriculum- specific material. Results from these kinds of general progress monitoring tools, often norm-referenced measures, are compared to prior results to determine whether the student is making progress. If the data show that the student is not making progress, then additional progress monitoring tools, usually associated with a specific curriculum and criterion-based measures, are used for the purpose of determining how to adjust the instruction/intervention in order for the student to respond.

There are now assessment tools available that leverage norm-based measures of progress in order to create a student data profile that is predictive of future outcomes on year-end assessments. Predictive data can provide teachers with an early warning for those students on a trajectory of failure. By indicating the probability of each student reaching an end-of-year outcome, teachers can prioritize their time and act immediately to support students' instructional needs, rather than waiting for them to fail.

Some instructional programs provide embedded assessment—incorporated into students' daily learning— that can be used in tandem with the informal measures being done on a daily or weekly basis. Several tech-based curricula offer this kind of real-time data, which can prove to be an efficient and effective component of your assessment strategy. This not only gives a clearer and more complete view of student progress, but it reduces some of the highs and lows associated with testing

day anxiety, and ultimately saves teachers a significant amount of time typically spent administering and scoring traditional formative assessments.

Diagnostic assessments, although not used as frequently, can be extremely helpful in completing a student's profile. When thinking about how diagnostic tests can inform instruction, one main purpose is to provide teachers with additional information that they did not receive from either the screener or progress monitoring tool. They can also be used in scenarios when the progress monitoring tool's validity or reliability may be in question (e.g. if the child was sleepy or hungry the day the progress monitoring assessment was given or was especially anxious during the testing). Diagnostic tests can help fine tune instruction and provide more information to understand why a particular student may be struggling.

3. Data Analysis: What is your assessment data telling you?

The power of collaboration is one of the best ways to empower greater teacher effectiveness. Frequent data meetings to review, analyze and strategize based on the various kinds of data available help to ensure that the proper next steps are taken in order to serve the profiles of all of the students in the classroom.

To a great extent, teacher effectiveness is impacted by the ability of your data management systems and instructional resources to help make the connections between the data and the appropriate resources and next steps in the instructional process. Some instructional programs make automatic recommendations as to the proper resources based on student data which can provide significant time savings and guidance to teachers. By having resources recommendations based on the data, the teachers begin to learn what certain patterns of data mean and how they can adjust their instruction based on data.

Regardless of whether instructional decisions are ultimately determined by the teachers' data teams, or whether they are guided by recommendations within your instructional or assessment technology, data needs to be presented in a simple format. On data walls or in your online assessment systems, norm-referenced and criterion-based data should clearly define the groups of students who need more intensive instruction and the groups of students who are on or above level. Analysis should group students by skill areas, and should identify the high-priority students based on their progress towards

year-end benchmarks. When data is compiled and condensed in this fashion, teachers can more effectively plan at a class level, they can more effectively manage their instructional time for whole-class and small-group instruction, and administrators can more effectively plan proper resources across grade levels.

How does this look in action?

Based on the universal screening assessment, the teacher may already have certain students who are being closely monitored throughout each lesson. Using curriculum-based progress monitoring, the teacher can administer a type of pre-test by asking questions or having students' complete grade-level activities. Based on students' responses, the teacher can identify students who already understand a concept before the lesson is taught to the entire class. This process is often facilitated by a technology-based curriculum tool. The advanced students can be pulled aside and provided with independent activities, allowing them to stretch beyond grade level. Knowing which students are above level, and where their strengths and weaknesses are, is just as important as for those students who are struggling.

The teacher provides whole-group instruction on the particular concept, and then gives students the opportunity to practice that particular skill or concept through peer discussions, independent center activities, or homework assignments. Graded homework assignments and subsequent curriculum-based tests (such as an end-of-unit quiz) help the teacher understand which students may be struggling and require further instruction.

Data from a progress monitoring tool is used to help determine the priority of which students need support. Those who are behind grade level and whose progress puts them on a trajectory to not achieve end-of-year, grade-level expectations should be placed as a priority for the teacher. Those students whose trajectory puts them near, at, or above grade-level might be considered as a lower priority for additional instruction.

Using data in this fashion, the teacher can identify students who are struggling, pinpoint the skills on which they are struggling, and then prioritize instruction based on their trajectory towards end-of-year benchmarks. This planning of instruction helps the teacher to be targeted and time efficient, prioritizing their investment of time with students in the most urgent need of help first.

4. Have you incorporated the right instructional materials for each student's individual needs?

Once the teacher has used various kinds of assessments to identify the various levels of instructional intensity needed, and then has informed the necessary next steps through analysis of the data and prescriptive strategies from instructional and assessment technology, the final step is delivering small group or individual instruction to the students who are struggling.

In every school, there are skilled teachers who have the hands-on experience necessary to support a wide variety of student profiles. For these educators, the question of how to identify the right materials for the task may not be a concern. However, for a great number of teachers, determining how to support specific student needs may be overwhelming. Therefore, the degree to which principals and administrators can provide a framework of strategies and resources will help set up their teachers for success.

Principals and administrators should insist on resources that are research based, or better yet, research proven. This step in the process—intervening with teacher-led, direct instruction—may be the most critical step in teacher effectiveness. Therefore, principals should be wary of using homegrown instructional methods that are not research based. Fortunately, many comprehensive instructional programs offer materials for Tier II and Tier III instruction, which are aligned with the pacing and scope of the core instruction. If these materials are not part of your instructional program, investing in a research-based supplemental program—or investing time and resources in developing methods that are based on scientific research—would be worth considering.

The instructional materials should follow a structured routine—such as the Gradual Release of Responsibility model. A structured approach allows for the students to understand the routine of the lesson, so that they can focus on the lesson material itself, rather than constantly adapting to an ever-changing instructional process. A structured approach benefits teachers as well, giving them the opportunity to focus on the language and pacing of the lesson, rather than the instructional framework through which the lesson is to be delivered.

The instructional approach should also include adaptations or alternative lessons for students who do not understand the concept the first time. This provides a true way to reteach the lesson from a different approach, rather than just repeating the same lesson over and over. Alternative lesson

strategies also provide a way to check whether students have been able to generalize the lesson material, by articulating the lesson differently and applying the skill in a different context.

Instructional materials for intervention should not only provide the appropriate framework—in terms of pacing and language to use within the lesson—but should also include the appropriate materials. (Depending on the subject area being taught, this could include word lists, equations, reading passages, manipulatives.) Providing these lesson materials, which are linked to the research-based instructional methods, can save teachers a significant amount of time otherwise spent gathering these resources themselves.

5. Establish a consistent process

One of the common obstacles to teacher effectiveness is constant organizational change. Far too often, schools change instructional methodologies/programs every few years. In order to be effective in their role, teachers must have the opportunity to master the instructional process, and this takes time. A school's assessment framework, data team process, and instructional routines all take time to embrace and internalize.

One should not confuse the process for the end goal. Each of the steps covered in this paper support the framework for teacher effectiveness. However, it is only when these processes become second nature for the school community that the teacher can be free to focus on the end goal of student instruction. Therefore, careful consideration should be brought to decisions regarding instructional materials and establishing processes.

Schools can achieve higher levels of teacher effectiveness by empowering teachers through a shared and clear understanding of core instructional materials, leveraging several kinds of assessments to build profiles of student ability, informing instructional priorities through the use of data, leveraging research-based methodology for intervention, and embracing the process with consistency. A commitment to this kind of approach benefits teachers, students, administrators and the entire school community.