

PUSHING BACK ON OUTMODED BELIEFS

By Kim Marshall

In recent decades, research has guided some major shifts in how we think about teaching, leadership and learning. But old thinking persists, sowing doubt and undermining effective work with children. Let's examine and refute eight of these beliefs:

Intelligence and talent are fixed at birth. Deep in American culture is the “innate ability paradigm”—the idea that people’s proficiency at doing math, creating a work of art or dancing is in our DNA. This belief plays out when a parent or teacher says, “She’s just not a science person.”

Carol Dweck’s amazing book, *Mindsets*, has helped countless Americans shift from a “fixed” to a “growth” mindset, embracing the idea that people can upgrade their intellectual, athletic and artistic performance with a combination of hard work, strategy and coaching. Psychologists and brain researchers have shown that although people are born with certain levels of ability, we can improve in any area with effective effort and support. This is an incredibly hopeful and important message.

Poverty is destiny. There’s no question that growing up poor has an impact on children, and intergenerational poverty is especially damaging. Sadly, schools can augment the disadvantages with which some children enter kindergarten, creating the Matthew Effect—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. How does this happen? When teachers call only on students who raise their hands, assign homework that requires broadband access and are unable to control student misbehavior, to cite a few examples. “Another way to maximize student achievement differences,” says Thomas Guskey, “is to teach poorly. It works every time.”¹

The good news is that some schools beat the odds, producing consistently high student achievement and downstream success with economically disadvantaged students. Careful research has revealed the “secret sauce” in these schools—the specific practices that can be used by others. The Education Trust’s website continuously updates its list of these highly effective schools.²

Of course, educators can’t solve poverty, unemployment, neighborhood violence, racism and other deep-seated problems, but schools can have a major impact on their children’s futures. Let’s join with politicians, activists and fellow citizens in a full-court press and level the playing field for all children.

Great teachers are born, not made. Hollywood has fed the myth of the heroic “natural”—characters like Mr. Chips, Jaime Escalante (*Stand and Deliver*), Mr. Keating (*Dead Poets Society*) and Erin Gruwell (*Freedom Writers*). But the full story of Jaime Escalante’s real-life extraordinary success teaching AP Calculus in a tough Los Angeles high school is instructive. Before his students aced that mathematics exam, there were seven years of hard work with colleagues in building-block courses, and the principal of Garfield High School was an indispensable part of what Escalante was able to accomplish. Yes, a few teachers have extraordinary talent from day one, but the vast majority grow and develop over time, supported by colleagues,





master teachers, professional development, curriculum materials, school leaders and a burgeoning knowledgebase about what works in classrooms.

Principals are first and foremost managers. The idea that school leaders should be instructional leaders has been around for decades—always met with skepticism. Discipline referrals, cafeteria duty, buses, paperwork, meetings, email and unexpected crises create H.S.P.S.—Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome. Most principals fight a losing battle trying to prioritize instruction.

But the research is clear: teachers and students thrive in schools where principals have figured out how to deal quickly with lower-level duties (or delegate them), create a school culture imbued with trust, purpose and possibility, and make time for classroom visits, coaching teachers and orchestrating teacher teamwork around curriculum unit planning and analysis of student work. As with teaching, it's not about superhuman heroism; it's the hard, daily work of implementing proven leadership and time management strategies. Superintendents and heads of school play a crucial role, ensuring that principals have enough staff, buffering them from unnecessary meetings and demands, and coaching them on the core elements of their jobs. One simple step: not expecting principals to respond to emails during the school day.

Teacher evaluation doesn't add value. It's easy to see why the traditional approach to appraising instruction—pre-observation conference, full-lesson observation, writing up the evidence and post-observation conference—has never shown up in the research as a factor in improving teaching and learning. Using this time-consuming process, principals evaluate teachers only once or twice a year and see only a tiny fraction of their work (often a “glamorized” lesson that's not representative of daily practice). If a supervisor does a thorough job, the teacher is swamped with feedback and

will be unlikely to follow up. This system, often implemented with a bureaucratic, compliance-driven mentality, has led many educators to become cynical about teacher evaluation.

The good news is that a growing number of schools have shifted to a much more effective system: two or three short (10-minute), unannounced classroom visits a day, followed promptly by face-to-face coaching conversations focusing on one “leverage point,” then a brief narrative write-up. A detailed rubric is used for teacher self-assessment and goal setting up front and then, at the end of the year, to sum up classroom visits, coaching conversations, other points of contact and teacher input. Using this approach, school leaders spend about the same number of hours as they did on the traditional approach, but they:

- Know what's really going on in classrooms
- Intervene early when there are problems
- Get daily insights on students' learning
- Develop greater empathy for what teachers are dealing with every day
- Provide teachers with ongoing coaching
- Get coached by teachers on areas in which leaders don't have expertise
- Motivate teachers to reflect on practice and bring their “A” game every day
- Compare the lesson execution with the bigger picture of curriculum and assessment
- Crosspollinate good ideas spotted in classrooms
- Walk the talk, demonstrating genuine interest in teaching and learning
- Provide accurate and insightful evaluations at the end of the year

- Keep and attract quality staff
- Build trust and credibility with teachers, parents and other stakeholders

It's not surprising that schools using this approach see marked improvements in teaching, learning and morale.

Student feedback can't be taken seriously. Although college administrators put a lot of stock in students' ratings of instructors, there's been push-back among K-12 educators at making students' opinions part of teacher evaluation. After all, what do kids know about pedagogy and curriculum? Also, they might feel empowered in an anonymous survey to unfairly ding teachers who are strict and demanding and give high ratings to easygoing teachers who show lots of movies.

But according to research by Harvard professor Ron Ferguson and his colleagues in the Tripod Project, K-12 students are more accurate about their teachers than principals using traditional evaluations, which is not surprising when we consider that students are sitting in the classrooms every day. When students are asked well-constructed questions, they are “serious and remarkably consistent,” said Ferguson. Students' perceptions have great potential in providing insights on what's working (and what isn't) in classrooms—professional development from frontline customers.³

But the devil is in the details. Schools can get maximum benefit from student surveys by using a small set of well-con-



structured questions (Tripod and Panorama have released their best questions) twice a year (perhaps November and June), generating results within 24 hours, and having teachers look at the results with a trusted colleague or administrator who poses three questions: (a) What about your teaching do students appreciate? (b) Are there any questions you think students might have misunderstood or rated you unfairly on? and (c) What are a couple of valid suggestions to improve your teaching?

Tests don't enhance learning.

High-stakes standardized examinations have come under fierce attack in recent years, with lots of concern about stress, test prep, cheating and wasted instructional time. But used well, assessments can play a vital role in improving teaching and learning—especially assessments that are close to classroom action.

As British assessment expert Dylan Wiliam says, “When a teacher teaches, no matter how well he or she might design a lesson, what a child learns is unpredictable. Children do not always learn what we teach. That is why the most important assessment does not happen at the end of learning—it happens during the learning, when there is still time to do something with the information.”⁴

Research has captured what the best teachers do: check for understanding during lessons and fix learning problems in real time; help students move key information from working memory to long-term memory with retrieval practice (i.e., testing themselves); leverage peer instruction as students grapple with assessments; choose their words carefully when praising and

correcting students about test results; teach students to monitor their own learning and adopt a growth mindset about difficulties and failures; work with colleagues to get instructional insights from assessments; and strategically use standardized test data to improve daily instruction.

Teachers can't be held accountable for student learning. The recent push to use student test scores as part of teacher evaluation has hit a brick wall. It turns out that scientific-looking value-added formulae are inaccurate and unreliable at the individual teacher level, leading to 15 lawsuits from teachers who were done wrong by the data. Pushing teachers and principals to raise test scores has also been a factor in cheating scandals in Atlanta, Washington D.C. and other districts. And “softer” accountability approaches like student learning objectives have been widely gamed.

But advocates of accountability did have a point when they said that for teaching to be considered effective, there needs to be evidence of student learning. High-stakes use of test scores is obviously problematic, but there are five medium-stakes ways that student learning can be a productive part of the day-to-day conversation among principals, instructional coaches and teachers:

- (a) during classroom visits, observers looking over students' shoulders and asking them, “What are you learning to-day?” and sharing insights with teachers afterward;
- (b) observers talking with teachers about exit tickets and students' daily work;
- (c) administrators and coaches visiting teacher team meetings and discussing data on classroom assessments;
- (d) educators looking at student survey results for insights on effective classroom practices; and

(e) teacher teams presenting before-and-after assessment results at the end of each school year to document their collective value-add.

All of these approaches help teachers use student learning results to make real-time improvements in teaching and learning, which results in marked improvements in summative test scores and students' preparation for college and career success.

To wrap up, I hope I've convinced you (and given you arguments to convince skeptical colleagues and parents) that intelligence and talent can be grown; that schools play a pivotal role in helping their students overcoming the burdens of poverty; that effective teaching isn't just about talent—under the right conditions, almost all teachers continuously improve; that principals can and should be instructional leaders; that teacher evaluation is a key lever for improving instruction; that student feedback provides teachers with valuable insights; that assessments are at the core of good teaching; and that teachers and school leaders should continuously look at evidence of student learning to make their work with children more and more effective. If schools push on all of these fronts, joined by others who work to improve social and economic conditions for all children, our achievement gaps can be closed!

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¹Guskey, T. “Defining Student Achievement.” *International Guide to Student Achievement*. Eds. J. Hattie and E.M. Anderman, 2011.

²The Education Trust. *Dispelling the Myth*. Retrieved from https://edtrust.org/dispelling_the_myth, March 28, 2019.

³MET Project. *Asking Students About Teaching: Student Perception Surveys and Their Implementation*, 2012.

⁴William, D. *How do we prepare students for a world we cannot imagine?* 2011.