UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

"Home of the Golden Knights and Damsels"

354 Baker Street
Suite 1

Mr. Mark Schlosser - *Principal*
Rimersburg, PA 16248-9211

Phone: 814-473-3121 x 8
email: schlossermd@unionsd.net

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Teachers:

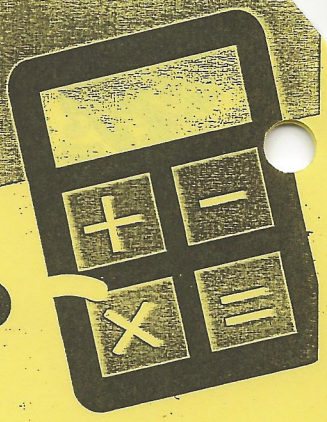
The attached article will be the subject of our PLC for Thursday, February 25. We will meet in the library. Come prepared to discuss the article. Specifically, consider these questions:

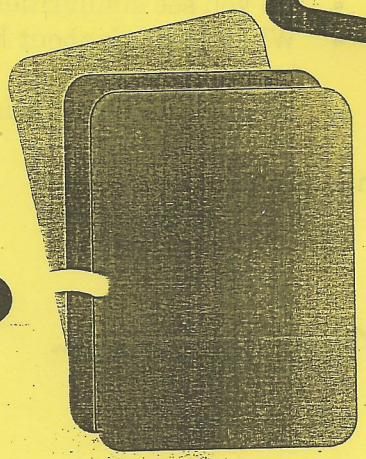
- What is your first impression of the title: "Stop the Data Insanity"?
- What is good teaching?
- Do you begin each lesson with intent?
- Do you see similarities between CHS and UHS regarding instruction and learning?
- What do think about Fisher's comment "It is not the poem itself that is important."? (p 53, last paragraph)
- What is your concluding impression of the title: "Stop the Data Insanity?"

Thank you,

Mark Schlosser

STOP THE DATA INSANITY





Why principals should focus on instructional practices, not data results

BY JEFFREY FISHER AND DUSTIN WEAVER

Student growth and achievement data is important, but it should not represent the prime focus of professional dialogue in education. As a veteran educator, I cannot state this any clearer: Stop the data insanity!

The most important discussion American educators should be having is not a data-centric one; rather, discussions should focus on the instructional practices that have resulted in said data.

What Is Good Teaching?

If administrative leaders cannot define what good teaching is, how can they expect to improve educational quality for students and staff? Admittedly, this takes time, as principals need not only to have a strong belief in what good teaching is, but also to collect data through teacher observations to support their beliefs and convince educators why change may be necessary.

Educators often resist change because they are comfortable teaching as they were taught. As school leaders, principals must be willing to take a stand, require change that may make professionals uncomfortable, provide a rationale for the change, and then hold others accountable to make necessary modifications.

Four years ago at Chillicothe High School (CHS) in Chillicothe, OH, classroom management issues were rampant. More than 80 percent of disciplinary infractions occurred in the first 11 minutes of class. While observing teachers, we witnessed a notable lack of organization, minimal instructional intent, and a focus on remedial tasks—such as taking classroom attendance and passing back papers—that dominated the beginning of class. This dictated the first change in CHS' instructional practices.

Instructional Practice #1: Bell Ringers

Journal entry prompts (called "bell ringers") are a tool that prepares CHS students for the start of every class—regardless of teacher or subject matter. These journal prompts possess instructional intent—they either review previously learned material or they aim to preview the day's lesson by employing wording that mimics high-stakes assessments.

The bell-ringer prompt is always tied to the unit's learning targets, and students begin this activity the minute the tardy bell rings. At that moment, the teacher cues the activity, illustrating its connection to the learning target and explaining precisely how students must respond to the prompt. Every bell ringer basically constitutes an individualized formative assessment, as teachers can take this time to analyze student work production, effort, and focus.

Teachers can also use this time to talk to students to further build relationships, but most importantly, teachers check mastery on the bell-ringer topics and use them to assess learning gaps in student understanding. Following individual work time, the teacher allows a student who answered the bell-ringer prompt correctly to explain her understanding of the topic to build on strengths, and then the teacher reviews the correct answer with a specific focus on whatever learning gaps were identified.

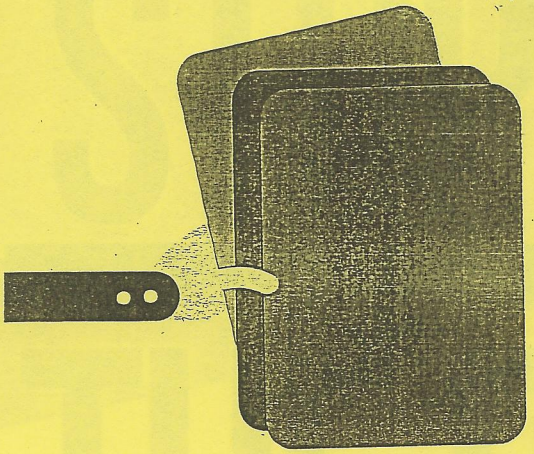
Consequently, the first 10–15 minutes of each class at CHS now offer an intentional focus for learning, aid students in preparation for state and national assessments, and provide clear classroom management expectations that have resulted in a substantial reduction in classroom disciplinary actions.

Instructional Practice #2: Learning Targets

Another problem issue we identified was teachers' instruction that lacked intent. This necessitated a second change to CHS' instructional practices.

Every CHS course has a syllabus containing learning targets—Big Ideas (skills students must obtain) and Essential Questions (daily questions that help students to obtain skills associated with the Big Idea)—that are defined by the course, not by the individual teacher. This means that for any given course, learning targets are identical, regardless of who is teaching the subject matter.

Each department's teachers collectively create course syllabi based on state standards to ensure that expectations are satisfied. Course syllabi serve as curriculum guides. Each unit's defined learning targets dictate



Students who did not know answers or understand material simply would not even try when challenged, as it was easier to fail and not try than to try, fail, and appear incompetent. In short, students possessed a crisis of confidence over competence that required remediation.

teachers' lesson plans. With that in mind, CHS' educators are encouraged to teach content any way they desire. They are simply tasked with identifying the optimal way to aid students in achieving defined learning targets.

Following the bell-ringer journal prompts for each class period, teachers smoothly transition into a discussion of all learning targets in a road map fashion, reviewing previously learned concepts as well as explicitly referencing those to come. This allows students to see the long- and short-term goals for their learning.

Teachers clearly establish a learning focus for students by visually representing and verbally reviewing all learning targets. The review of all learning targets takes place daily. Repeated exposure to concepts solidifies previously learned knowledge, offers students opportunities to see concepts from deeper or varied perspectives, and further reiterates connections between concepts within the same Big Idea.

A teacher's ability to clearly explain learning expectations to students greatly impacts academic success. In fact, it is imperative that students understand the relationship among Big Ideas, Essential Questions, and the content provided in order for meaningful learning to take place. Students demonstrate they have obtained the skill associated with the Big Idea and are able to apply it regardless of context by answering all of the Essential Questions within that Big Idea.

After reviewing all learning targets, teachers establish an Essential Question of focus for the lesson. It is expected that every aspect of a lesson be geared toward increasing student understanding of the specified learning target. If the information presented does not help to answer the Essential Question of focus, it does not belong in the lesson. As an evaluator, this criterion determines if a lesson is well-planned.

Setting clear learning goals not only improves the transition segment from bell-ringer prompts to the content of the day, but it also helps sharpen the focus of teachers' instructional planning and teaching.

In the past, CHS teachers often lectured and assessed rather than actually teaching. They spoke *at* students and then assessed their ability to digest information and regurgitate it on tests. There was little interaction and active learning occurring. Furthermore, students who did not know answers or understand material simply would not even try when challenged, as it was easier to fail and not try than to try, fail, and appear incompetent. In short, students possessed a crisis of confidence over competence that required remediation, leading to the institution of a third instructional practice.

Instructional Practice #3: Use of the Gradual Release Model to Deliver Content

Teachers must design lessons that engage students in ways that allow them to feel comfortable and confident enough to try. When students are motivated to try, educators can better identify and rectify learning gaps. The gradual release model creates this opportunity. The gradual release model looks like this: I do. We do. You do.

Direct Instruction (I do): Model learning expectations for students in ways that entertain and engage them. Recently, a teacher at CHS taught a poem about sumo wrestling. The lesson was great, but students lacked engagement. What if, prior to starting the reading of that poem, the teacher played a YouTube clip of sumo wrestling or muted it and let it play while the teacher or students read the poem aloud? This leads to increased engagement and understanding, and allows students to visualize what the poem depicts. It is not the poem itself that is important. The lesson's objective is to improve

TWITTER TALK

"Understanding current world issues is key to the education of students regardless of subject matter, school, state, or country."
— Jeffrey Fisher (@JeffreyRFisher)

Decide what data matters, determine what you and your teachers believe quality teaching is, and build curriculum and assessments that will satisfy state standards around those practices.

understanding of poetic elements. In particular, students should possess an improved understanding of imagery from seeing what the poem describes. Never underestimate the need to engage and entertain students during direct instruction.

Guided Practice (We do): After modeling, teachers must design nonthreatening activities to provide students practice with new information so they can understand and apply the material. This is where students get their hands dirty, whether through cooperative learning groups, stations, or working individually. Students need the opportunity to try, fail, and succeed in a safe environment prior to taking high-stakes assessments.

Independent Practice (You do): Eventually, teachers must assess (formatively and/or summatively) what students know prior to moving on with the next Essential Question. Student evaluations at the end of the course can pinpoint what individuals do and do not know in addition to guiding subsequent instruction. A teacher's plan for differentiating instruction effectively is based on knowing all students' present performance.

Improving Teaching and Learning

Decide what data matters, determine what you and your teachers believe quality teaching is, and build curriculum and assessments that will satisfy state standards around those practices. Then, give teachers time to discuss teaching and learning based on the data produced.

Six years ago when I took over as principal, CHS' instructional practices, assessment practices, curriculum, and focus were highly variable. This resulted in an abundance of failure, discipline issues, professional unrest, and problems for the school at the local and state levels.

Over the last five years, we have created a common curriculum so courses—not teachers—define learning targets. Common assessments ensure data is comparable; further, teachers value the data, since assessments have been self-created. Weekly departmental professional learning time allows teachers to discuss data and instructional practices. Most importantly, we identified and addressed schoolwide weaknesses in instructional practices to better ensure a high-quality education for all students.

Since restructuring, CHS has achieved improved ratings from the Ohio Department of Education and the designation as one of *Newsweek* magazine's Best High Schools; we've increased standardized test scores at all levels; we've elevated our graduation rate; and we've increased the amount of collective scholarship money earned by graduating classes each year. Plus, we've improved school morale.

Professional Collaboration and Accountability

In professional learning community (PLC) meetings at CHS these days, educators analyze data from common assessments; however, only a fraction of meeting time is spent discussing data. Instead, teachers discuss how they delivered content within CHS' instructional practices. Teachers with the best student growth scores share best practices to assist colleagues in improving students' scores.

Data simply constitutes a beginning point for discussion. It does not help students achieve or grow. School leaders must first define good teaching, and then institute common instructional practices.

Jeffrey Fisher *is principal of Chillicothe High School in Chillicothe, OH, and the 2015 Ohio Principal of the Year.*

Dustin Weaver *is an English teacher at Chillicothe High School.*