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Critical Components of Transforming Teaching and Leading: Recognizing Educational Success Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching (RESPECT) COMMENTARY

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Abstract

The purpose of this commentary is to disseminate significant content and to trigger discussion on the seven components of “A Blueprint for R.E.S.P.E.C.T. RECOGNIZING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS, PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE AND COLLABORATIVE TEACHING (2012).” Teacher preparation programs in the United States are moving in the direction of a clinical model. Some reasons for doing so are to facilitate teacher leadership and respect, earn higher professional recognition, acquire higher financial compensation, and embrace more collaborative teaching. This formula should lead to American students receiving an education that meets competitive global standards. Highly effective teachers accelerate student learning, close achievement gaps that have persisted for decades, and build habits of mind that change the trajectories of students’ lives, resulting in lower dropout rates, lower rates of teen pregnancy, and greater lifetime earnings and career satisfaction (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011). Strong school leaders enable effective teachers to grow and thrive (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010). It is therefore important to discuss the Blueprint’s tenets for educational success, professional excellence, and collaborative teaching.

Keywords: critical components, transforming teaching and leading, recognizing educational success, professional excellence, collaborative teaching, RESPECT

Introduction

According to the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an instrument comparing the performance of 15-year-olds in 34 Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries, American students ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math. Twenty years ago, the United States led the world in college completion, but in 2011, as many as 13 countries outpaced us. Within our own borders, a significant number of students are not getting the education they deserve. Only 78 percent of students complete high school in four years and fewer African-Americans (66 percent, and Latinos (71 percent) graduate on time (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Right now, more than 60 percent of U.S. jobs require some form of higher education, yet almost one out of every four young adults cannot begin to compete for these jobs (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). The above points to a need to transform teaching and learning in American classrooms to prepare students who will ultimately be ready for global competition.

A New Vision for Teaching and Leading

After two years of discussion with teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders, President Barack Obama unveiled a Blueprint for RESPECT, a plan to assist educators in their work to transform their profession.

The Blueprint contained “educator-led” proposals and represents a movement within the education profession to elevate and transform teaching and leading so that all of our students are prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century. As the demands of our world continue to expand, our students need educators who are well prepared, well compensated, and professionally treated. The Blueprint was organized under five major headings:

- (I) Education at a Crossroads;
- (II) Developing a new vision for teaching and leading;
- (III) A policy for transforming teaching and leading: seven critical components;
- (IV) Laying the foundation for RESPECT; and
- (V) Next Steps.

This commentary is relevant to (III). Each of the seven components are stated, followed by a short comment.

Seven Critical Components of a Transformed Profession

1. A Culture of Shared Responsibility and Leadership

“In a transformed profession, educators take collective ownership for student learning; structures of shared decision-making and open-door practice provide educators with the collaborative autonomy to do what is best for each student; and the profession takes upon itself the responsibility for ensuring that high standards of practice are met. In this professional culture, teachers and principals together make the primary decisions about educator selection, assignment, evaluation, dismissal, and career advancement—with student learning at the center of all such decisions.”

Teachers and principals should not be expected to transform education alone. The Blueprint is a framework for all stakeholders – parents, students, educators, policymakers, business and community leaders, elected officials, and other partners to collectively rethink teaching and learning in order to strengthen America’s public education system. Education should not be treated as a controlled substance needing regulation and consequences for violation. Teachers should have the power to be creative in packaging child-centered approaches in order to meet individual student needs.

2. Top Talent, Prepared for Success

“Students with effective teachers perform at higher levels; students have higher graduation rates, higher college-going rates, higher levels of civic participation, and higher lifetime earnings. Thus, attracting a high-performing and diverse pool of talented individuals to become teachers and principals is a critical priority – whether these are new graduates or career switchers, and whether they enter the profession through traditional or alternative pathways. We must support the programs that prepare highly effective educators and offer high-quality and substantive curricula and clinical preparation experiences. We should expand the most successful programs, help other programs improve, and close down the lowest-performing programs if they fail to improve after receiving support. Preparation should include significant clinical opportunities that involve highly effective teachers or principals to oversee, mentor, and evaluate aspiring educators (preferably in the school environments in which the candidates will ultimately work). Further, aspiring educators must meet a high bar for entering the profession, demonstrating strong knowledge in the content they teach; have mastered a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use each appropriately; have the dispositions and aptitudes to work effectively with students and with colleagues; and be learners themselves who know how to plan purposefully, analyze student learning outcomes, reflect on their own practice, and adjust as needed.”

The cultural mindset to teaching does not recognize teaching as a prestigious profession. Teachers are not afforded the respect of their counterparts in other parts of the world. Many teachers can be categorized as top-talent practitioners. They know their subject-matter, care for their students, and love their jobs. However, they do not receive the cultural recognition granting them a high status in society.

Professional preparation programs that include significant clinical opportunities as well as highly effective teachers or principals who oversee, mentor, and evaluate aspiring educators (preferably in the school environments in which the candidates will ultimately work) are already in place. However, the student-teacher ratio should be reasonable so that teachers have the time to provide necessary child-centered attention. Exigencies that can occur when a child is being taught could be more complex than those occurring between a doctor and patient. Many aspiring educators have no difficulty meeting a high bar for entering the profession, demonstrating strong knowledge in the content they teach, mastering a repertoire of instructional strategies, and knowing when to use each appropriately. However, developing dispositions and aptitudes to work effectively with students and with colleagues could be a work in progress. They are being prepared to be learners themselves who know how to plan purposefully, analyze student learning outcomes, reflect on their own practice, and make necessary adjustments.

3. Continuous Growth and Professional Development

“Effective teachers and principals are career-long learners. Effective schools and districts are learning communities where teachers and principals individually and collaboratively continuously reflect on and improve practice. Such communities of practice thrive when there is structured time for collaborative work informed by a rich array of data and access to internal and external expertise. We must take seriously the need to evaluate the efficacy of professional development so that we can more methodically improve it, channeling our investments into activities and supports that make a difference. From induction for novice teachers designed to accelerate their growth and development, to replicating the practices of the most accomplished teachers, professional development is a critical lever of improvement. As a profession, we must develop greater competency in using it.”

Professional development must be ongoing. However, it should not be equated with accumulating credit hours and merit points for promotion. Professional development needs adequate funding and a new paradigm. It should not be a one-size-fits-all encounter. Educators should be provided opportunities to choose the types of professional development that suits their needs.

4. Effective Teachers and Principals

“Effective educators have high standards of professional practice and demonstrate their ability to improve student learning. Thus, effectiveness must be evaluated based on measures of student academic growth, evidence from classroom and school practice, and contributions to colleagues and the school community. The results of the evaluations should guide professional support and development, and inform personnel decisions such as teacher and principal assignments, the granting of professional status (e.g., tenure), promotion to leadership roles, and dismissal for those who, despite receiving support, are ineffective. Good evaluation systems should provide feedback to educators from both colleagues and supervisors that is meaningful, credible, timely, and actionable, and should use evidence-based processes that are fair, accurate, and transparent.”

There does not seem to be anything innovative in the above suggestions. Evaluations should contain subjective and objective procedures, and include self-evaluations. Teacher efficacy should be based on the results of student learning. Procedures for tenure must be clear, continuous, and non-intimidating. There should be opportunities for mutual agreement between the party being evaluated and those doing the evaluation.

5. A Professional Career Continuum with Competitive Compensation

“Educators are one of our nation's most valuable resources. We must create a profession that attracts great people into our schools and classrooms—and keeps them in the profession. To do this, we need to offer educators career pathways that provide opportunities for increasingly responsible roles, whether they choose to stay in the classroom, become instructional leaders or move into administration. And these roles must be coupled with compensation that is high enough to attract and retain a highly skilled workforce; reflects the effectiveness, expertise, and contributions of each educator; and is consistent with the societal regard accorded to comparable professions. Compensation should be commensurate with the job responsibilities, qualifications, and innovativeness (different and new ways to achieve professional and pedagogical effectiveness).”

There is a need to do all of the above. One question embedded in this component is whether society considers teaching a viable profession worthy of the elevation it deserves status-wise. If the answer is yes, how should the society develop attitudes towards teachers that reflect this?

6. Conditions for Successful Teaching and Learning

“High-functioning systems can amplify the accomplishments of their educators, but a dysfunctional school or district can undermine the impact of even the best teachers. We need schools and districts whose climates and cultures, use of time, approaches to staffing, use of technology, deployment of support services, and engagement of families and communities are optimized to continuously improve outcomes for the students they serve. Further, we must be prepared to get the best teachers and principals to the highest-need students (including low-income students, minority students, English learners, and students with disabilities), and to ensure that all students have access to the other resources (such as technology, instructional materials, and social, health, and nutritional services) necessary to support their academic success.”

School climate and culture should be conducive to respect, esteem, empathy, and equity at the teacher-administrator, teacher-student, and student-student levels. Teaching and learning should be conducted in a comfortable and non-threatening environment.

7. Engaged Communities

“Finally, no community can flourish unless its children are safe, healthy, well-nourished, and well-educated; and no school can be a strong pillar of a thriving community without deep community responsibility for and ownership of the school's academic success. Thus, recognizing that the fate of communities and their schools are inextricably linked, we must make schools stronger by educators embracing community resources, expertise, and activities; and we must make communities stronger by anchoring them around highly effective schools.”

A school is a microcosm of the community in which it is located. Therefore, there should be a symbiotic relationship between school and community. More effective learning takes place in schools that integrate community resources with teaching and learning. Schools should create conditions that do not intimidate or alienate parents and community members who want to be engaged in the process.

The seven critical components are interconnected, and relevant to the development of effective teaching and learning. However, the public should not give teachers the respect it gives

to other professionals based solely on the integration of the above components. It is necessary to begin a conversation about developing a mindset that respects teachers, and recognizes their leadership and professionalism.

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