A Tool for Selecting the "Right Work" in Your School
by
Robert J. Marzano

Each year, every school in the country formally or informally identifies what it will work on to maintain or (ideally) improve student achievement. Much of these deliberations result in the design of school improvement plans. Harvard scholar, Richard Elmore contends that the selection a school makes in its improvement plan is a critical factor in the school's ability to improve student achievement. Specifically, in a study commissioned by the National Governors Association (NGA), Elmore (2003) concluded that:

> Knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement. Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in the schools with the knowledge, skill, and judgment to make the improvements that will increase student performance. (p.9)

Elmore points out that school reform in the United States is plagued by the misperception that schools fail because teachers and administrators don't work hard enough. He contends that the downfall of low performing schools is not their lack of effort and motivation; rather it is poor decisions regarding what to work on. Stated differently, the problem in low performing schools is not getting people to work hard, it is getting people to do the "right work."

How does a school go about selecting the right work? It begins by using a model that

identifies those areas on which a school might focus to improve the achievement of

students. Over the decades many models have been proposed (See Edmonds, 1979,

Levine and Lezotte, 1990, Sammons, 1999). Here I use the model proposed in the book

What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action (Marzano, 2003).

The "What Works in Schools" Model

 That major components of the What Works in Schools model are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: What Works in Schools Model

School	• Guaranteed and viable curriculum • Challenging goals and effective feedback • Parent and community involvement • Safe and orderly environment • Collegiality and professionalism
Teacher	• Instructional strategies • Classroom management • Classroom curriculum design
Student	• Home environment • Learned intelligence and background knowledge • Motivation

As depicted in Figure 1, the model includes 11 factors organized into three broad

categories: school-level factors, teacher-level factors, and student-level factors.

The school-level factors include those that must be addressed by school policy since these factors affect teachers and administrators in a fairly uniform way. *A guaranteed and viable curriculum* addresses the extent to which a school can "guarantee" that no matter who teaches a given course or a given grade level, certain content will be taught. In addition, the curriculum is "viable" in that teachers can adequately address the guaranteed content in the instructional time available to them. A school that has *challenging goals and effective feedback* is one that employs an assessment system that provides feedback on specific standards or areas of knowledge and skill for each student at least every nine weeks. Additionally, the school uses the data provided by this system to set specific achievement goals for the school as a whole as well as specific learning goals for each student. These school-wide and individual student goals are used as the criteria by which the school determines how effective it is at enhancing students' academic achievement. *Parent and community involvement* refers to structures that are in place to involve parents and community members in important policy decisions regarding the school as well as the day-to-day running of the school. *A safe and orderly environment* addresses school-wide rules and procedures that create order and a sense of safety for students and teachers alike. *Staff collegiality and professionalism* involves a comprehensive professional development program that encourages teachers to try new instructional strategies in an action research mode. It also involves governance structures that allow teachers input into important policy decisions.

Where the school-level factors address policies and practices that are school-wide, the three teacher level factors address issues that are in the direct control of classroom teachers. *Instructional strategies* refer to the use of teaching techniques that have a strong research base supporting their effectiveness. The effective classroom teacher not only has a large array of such strategies at her disposal but is also skilled at determining which strategies to use with specific students and content. *Classroom management* refers to teachers' use of behavioral management strategies that have strong research supporting their effectiveness. Again, the effective teacher knows when and how to best use these strategies. *Classroom curriculum design* involves teachers sequencing and pacing academic content to build on students' prior knowledge.

Finally, there are three student-level factors in the What Works in Schools model. They address student background characteristics that are important to academic success and can be influenced by the school. *Home atmosphere* refers to those actions families can take to provide support for their children's academic success. *Learned intelligence and background knowledge* addresses the experiential base students have that provides incidental knowledge regarding the content addressed in school. Such knowledge, in effect is a type of academic intelligence that all students can learn if a school systematically addresses the issue. Student *motivation* refers to how much students are interested in learning the content presented in school and their sense of efficacy in terms of learning that content. Again, a school-wide effort to address this issue can enhance the general motivational level of students.

Using the Model to Identify the Right Work

One distinguishing feature of the What Works in Schools model is that it provides schools with the opportunity to use an on-line survey regarding teacher and administrator perceptions of the school's performance on the 11 factors. The survey contains multiple items for each factor; 66 items in all. To date over 2,000 K-12 schools have completed the survey. While it is important to remember that the survey involves teacher and administrator perceptions regarding the strengths and weakness of the school, the aggregated findings provide an interesting perspective. For each item in the survey faculty and staff within a school are asked three questions:

1. To what extent do we engage in this behavior or address this issue?
2. How much will a change in our practices on this item increase the academic achievement of our students?
3. How much effort will it take to significantly change our practices regarding this issue?

It is the pattern of responses to these items that provides a school with guidance as to the right work. Figure 2 depicts the responses of the 25 items on the survey whose average ratings, across a sample of 1,039 schools, were the lowest on the first question for each item.

Figure 2: Data from Sample Schools

Item	Factor	Item #	How well we address this issue	Effect on achievement	How difficult this change will be
			Rank	Rank	Rank
Students are provided with training regarding the dynamics of motivation and how those dynamics affect them.	11	29	66	3	65
A system for early detection of students who are prone to violence and extreme behavior has been implemented.	4	18	65	2	62
Training and support is provided to parents to enhance their communication with their children, their supervision of their children, and their parenting style.	9	22	64	1	66
Teachers systematically ask students to keep track of their own performance on the learning goals.	6	33	63	17	57
Teachers end their units by asking students to assess themselves relative to the learning goals.	6	40	62	32	49
Teachers begin their instructional units by asking students to identify personal learning goals that fit within the learning goals presented by the teacher.	6	31	61	23	50
Teachers prescribe in-class and homework assignments that require students to construct metaphors and analogies.	6	52	60	37	52
Teachers prescribe in-class activities and homework assignments that require students to generate and test hypotheses regarding content.	6	53	59	28	55
Students are provided with opportunities to construct and work on long-term projects of their own design.	11	28	58	12	61
A program that teaches and reinforces student self-discipline and responsibility has been implemented.	4	17	57	5	58
Teachers ask students to revise and correct errors in their nonlinguistic representations as a way of reviewing and revising content.	6	50	56	49	35
Students are involved in school-wide programs that directly increase the number and quality of life experiences they have.	10	23	55	4	59
The amount of essential content that has been identified can be addressed in the instructional time available to teachers.	1	02	54	6	63
Students are involved in simulation games and activities that are inherently engaging.	11	27	53	10	54
When planning units of instruction, teachers ensure that students will be involved in complex projects that require them to address content in unique ways.	8	66	52	8	60
Teachers ask students to revise and correct errors in their notes as a way of reviewing and revising content.	6	49	51	38	27
Teachers end their units by recognizing and celebrating progress on the learning goals.	6	41	50	45	29
The instructional time available to teacher is protected by minimizing interruptions and scheduled non-instructional activities.	1	05	49	21	31

Item	Factor	Item #	How well we address this issue	Effect on achievement	How difficult this change will be
			Rank	Rank	Rank
Teachers ask students t o construct verbal or written summaries of new content.	6	45	48	20	30
Governance structures that allow for teacher involvement in school-wide decisions and policies have been established.	5	20	47	58	38
When planning units of instruction, teachers make a clear distinction between skills and processes that are to be mastered versus skills and processes that are to be experienced but not mastered.	8	64	46	31	47
Teachers ask students to take notes on new content.	6	46	45	55	15
Specific achievement goals are set for individual students by the school.	2	08	44	15	64
Teachers prescribe in-class and homework assignments that require students to compare and classify content.	6	51	43	43	25
The essential content is organized and sequenced in a way that students have ample opportunity to learn it.	1	03	42	13	56

Note that the information in Figure 2 is based on a sample of 1,039 schools out of the

total sample of 2,000 schools.

The first column of Figure 2 presents a short-hand version of the item as stated in the on-

line survey. The second column identifies which factor of the 11 (see Figure 1) the item

relates to. The third column identifies the item number on the survey. (Those who wish to

view the all 66 items should consult *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into*

Action; Marzano; Marzano, 2003). The fourth column is entitled "How well we address

this issue." This, of course is the first question asked for each item. Underneath this title

is the subtitle "rank." As the sub-title indicates, the numbers in this column represent the

rank order of the items in terms of the average responses from the schools that have taken

the survey. Thus item 29, which is one of the items that addresses factor 11 (motivation),

was ranked 66th or last in terms of the extent to which schools address this issue. Stated

differently, the teachers and administrators in the schools that took the survey said their schools were doing the worst on this particular issue. As mentioned above, Figure 2 contains the 25 items rated lowest of the 66 in the survey—those items from rank 66 to 42 (see column 4 of Figure 2).

The fifth column is entitled "Effect on achievement." This column represents the responses from the 1,039 schools regarding the second question asked about each item: "How much will a change in our practices on this item increase the academic achievement of our students?" Again, the numbers in the column represent the rank order of the items, but this time in a positive direction. For example, item 29 is ranked 3rd relative to this question. It is the item that was perceived to produce the third highest increase in student achievement if schools got better regarding this issue. Finally, column 6 is entitled "How difficult this change will be." It addresses the third question asked for each item: How much effort will it take to significantly change our practices regarding this issue? Again, the numbers in this column indicate the rank order of the items in terms of the perceived ease in making changes. The rank orders represented in this column are in terms of difficulty. For example, item 29 is ranked 65th on this question. It is the second "easiest" change to make as perceived by teachers and administrators in the 1,039 schools.

The patterns of responses reported in columns four, five and six provide a way for schools to identify the right work for their particular situation. To illustrate, the first three items in Figure 2 represent the bottom three items (i.e. ranks 66, 65 and 64) in terms of

how well schools are addressing these issues, but they also represent the top three ranks (i.e. ranks 3,2 and 1) in terms of how much they would improve student achievement if schools bettered their current performance. Finally they represent three of five lowest ranked items (i.e. ranks 65, 62 and 66) in terms of how difficult change would be. That is they are perceived as three of the easiest things to change.

If we take the information in Figure 2 at face value, we might conclude that the "right work" for the schools who took this survey as perceived by teachers and administrators is to:

- provide students with training regarding the dynamics of motivation and how those dynamics affect them.
- design and implement a system for the early detection of students who are prone to violence and extreme behavior.
- provide training and support to parents to enhance their communication with their children, their supervision of their children, and their parenting styles.

If we were to stop our analysis of Figure 2 at this point, we might incorrectly conclude that the teachers and administrators who took this survey do not believe that they have to make changes in their own classroom practices. However, an examination of column 2 in Figure 2 indicates that the next six items all come from factor 6 of the What Works in Schools model which deals with classroom instructional strategies. In fact, of the 25 items listed in Figure 2, 44% (i.e. 11 items) deal with instruction. Again, taking the findings depicted in Figure 2 at face value, we might conclude that the teachers and

administrators who took this survey saw a need to improve their instruction practices in a variety of ways. Of these, asking students to keep track of their own performance on learning goals (item 33), ending units by asking students to assess themselves relative to their progress on learning goals (item 40), and beginning units by asking students to identify personal leaning goals (item31) were on the top of the list.

Schools Conducting Their Own Analyses

While Figure 2 provides some interesting information, it should not be viewed as a representation of the perceptions of teachers and administrators in schools across the country, simply because the schools that have completed the survey thus far come specific parts of the country and have some unique characteristics. However, the process is something that can be used by schools across the country. Specifically, I recommend that schools poll teachers regarding their perceptions about those school-level, teacher-level and student-level factors on which they need to improve. Additionally, they should seek to determine how much student achievement would benefit by school improvement efforts in these areas. Finally, they should seek to determine how easy or difficult it would be to make changes in their school regarding the school effectiveness factors. This tri-part information should provide useful data with which schools can identify the "right work."

References

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