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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.



What Matters Most Using Power Standards to Create an Operational Definition for What is Essential

A familiar conversation transpired between a teacher and her principal. The teacher was expressing her fear that she would not be able to cover all the material. “The list of what I am supposed to cover just seems to grow and grow. More than that, what is important today is different than what was important yesterday! How am I supposed to know where to begin?”

Despite near universal agreement that there is too much to teach, one of the biggest fears of teachers is that they won't cover everything. However, embracing this fear encourages teaching a curriculum that is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” The principal in this conversation would do well to encourage the teacher to prioritize—not eliminate—and to identify the standards that are most important for her students to learn.

Heidi Hayes Jacobs encourages teachers to look critically at what matters most, “Given the limited time you [teachers] have with your students, curriculum design has become more and more an issue of deciding what you won't teach as well as what you will teach. You cannot do it all. As a designer, you must choose the essential.”

Teachers need to ask themselves which standards are important enough to spend time teaching, assessing, and intervening. The premise is students will learn more if the expectations for learning are clearly defined, if students know in advance the criteria for meeting those expectations, and if instruction and assessment support those expectations.

The Process of Powering Standards

According to Jeanne Spiller, Staff Development Coordinator in Kildeer Countryside CCSD 96, when teachers in traditional schools begin the process of deciding what is essential, they are often asked one or more of the following:

- “What do you teach?”
- “What do you spend the most time teaching?”

- “What do you like to teach?”

Sometimes teachers describe their essential learning targets in terms of the topics they cover or questions they must prepare their students for on state tests.

But these are the wrong answers—or maybe the right answers to the wrong question. Instead of asking teachers to describe what they *teach*, principals should ask teachers to describe what their students should *learn*. The process of identifying what is essential—what all students must learn and be able to do as a result of a class, course or grade level—should reflect a focus on learning, not teaching.

When Spiller works with teachers she starts with a few guiding questions for identifying power standards. Teachers are asked to identify which standards are critical for their students to know and understand. Which standards—*according to state and local assessment data*—do teachers need to emphasize? Which standards represent concepts and skills that endure, have leverage, and represent a level of readiness? Spiller continues prioritizing what is essential by using the following simple six-step process to power the standards for a class, course or grade level.

Step 1: You Decide

- Take five minutes and, on your own, quickly mark each standard you consider *Absolutely Essential* for student success in your class, course or grade level.

Step 2: Table Talk

- Talk to your colleagues and note where you agree, disagree or are not sure.
- Use endurance, leverage and readiness criteria to help reach consensus.
- Reach initial consensus of what the power standards should be.

Step 3: Consult Testing Guides and Data

- Consult summative testing data such as item analysis and testing guides.
- Look for concepts and skills that are weak areas and/or emphasized on the test(s). Identify how many questions and what types of questions were asked for each potential power standard.
- Revise your selections for power standards based on your review of the testing information.

Step 4: Chart Selections as a Team

- Record the identifying numbers and/or letters and full text of the selected power standards on pieces of chart paper.

Step 5: Share Team Selections and Seek Consensus

- Post each team’s selections (on chart paper) next to one another.
- Reach initial consensus on what power standards should be.

Step 6: Check Vertical Alignment, Gaps, Overlaps and Omissions

- Post each team’s charts on the wall.
- Look for the vertical flow within and between the class, course and/or grade levels.
- Look for and identify any gaps, overlaps and/or omissions.

Benefits of Power Standards

The most important benefit of creating an agreed-upon set of power standards is that it shifts the conversation of a teacher’s school, department or team from teaching to learning. Agreement on what is essential helps teachers focus their time and expertise very specifically in the areas that will be most beneficial for student learning.

With agreement in place on what matters most, teachers can be assured that they are applying their energies and professional expertise to what is absolutely essential to student success in the classroom and beyond. As Doug Reeves says, “Teaching the power standards for depth of understanding will do more to prepare students for success, not only on the state test, but in school and life, as well.”

Once agreement on what is essential has been reached, teachers become more comfortable with the idea that students are not missing something. Larry Ainsworth argues that a carefully articulated set of power standards will address 88 percent of what is typically covered on most state tests and “represents the ‘safety net’ of standards that each teacher needs to make sure every student learns prior to leaving the current grade.”

Identifying what is essential also helps eliminate the fear that a standards-based curriculum will somehow standardize teaching. Power standards identify the “what” of the curriculum, but it is up to teachers to determine how to present the essential material most effectively. Nothing in the process of identifying power standards dictates pedagogy or limits a teacher’s academic freedom. According to Reeves, the process of powering standards “does not limit teachers’ ability to draw upon their own individual talents, insights, expertise, and creativity to help their students deeply grasp the knowledge and skills they need to know.”

In its simplest terms, powering standards create an operational definition for what is essential, but there are many other benefits to powering standards. Students *and* teachers benefit from a focused, cohesive and well-articulated curriculum. By collaboratively powering the standards and agreeing on what is essential, principals and teachers take a significant and fundamental first step toward equipping their students to learn. ■

During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.

References

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