



There Is Only One Way To Improve Student Achievement

Harry K. Wong

All You Want to Know About Student Achievement

- A. Two hundred studies have shown that the only factor that can create student achievement is a knowledgeable, skillful teacher.¹
- B. A large scale study found that every additional dollar spent on raising teacher quality netted greater student achievement gains than did any other use of school resources.²
- C. Researchers in the Dallas School District have shown that having a less effective teacher can significantly lower a student's performance over time, even if the student gets more competent teachers later on.³
- D. A study comparing low and high achieving elementary school students in New York City found that teacher qualifications accounted for 90 percent of the variation between the best and the worst students.⁴
- E. Schools with more experienced and more highly educated mathematics teachers tended to have higher achieving students. Even in very poor schools, students achieved if they had a well-prepared teacher.⁵
- F. The most important factor, bar none, is the teacher. An ineffective teacher can affect student learning for years, but having two ineffective teachers in subsequent years can damage a student's academic career.⁶
- G. As teacher effectiveness increases, lower achieving students are the first to benefit.⁷

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There is only one way to obtain student achievement and the research is very specific. It is the teacher and what the teacher knows and can do that is the determining factor with student achievement.

The students will learn based on whether the teacher is effective or ineffective.

District variables do not matter. School variables do not matter. Program variables do not matter. It is the teacher that matters.

The ineffective teachers get poor results.
 The effective teachers get good results, and
 It makes no difference to the good teacher
 What students you give them.
 What programs they teach.
 Who are the administrators.

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Why Some Schools Are Successful

At a fraction of the cost and time, money spent on staff development is a much better investment than the pouring of untold millions of dollars into one continuing faddish program after another. **Programs do not produce achievement; teachers produce student achievement.**

The major difference between successful and unsuccessful schools is that

- **Unsuccessful schools stress programs.** They spend millions of dollars adopting programs, fads-of-the-year, in constant pursuit of the quick fix on the white horse.
- **Successful schools stress practices.** They wisely invest in their teachers and the effectiveness of their teachers. They don't teach programs; they teach basic, traditional academic content—and they work at improving the pedagogical practices of their teachers.

People who adopt programs are more interested in the success of the program.

People who are effective teachers are more interested in the success of the students.

Forget programs unless you have effective teachers. **Educational leaders know that what matters is whether schools can offer their neediest students good teachers trained in effective strategies to teach strong academic knowledge and skills.**

Student Achievement Is A Result of Good Classroom Management

In a study three researchers rank-ordered 28 factors that govern student learning. This was based on a review of 50 years of research on student learning, encompassing 11,000 statistical findings.⁸ **The Number 1 factor governing student learning is Classroom Management.**

It is practices, teacher practices, that govern student learning. What the teacher does in the classroom to structure and organize a learning environment is the most important factor that will increase student achievement.

It is time to organize our schools based on what we want students to achieve, not on what fad is currently in vogue. The classroom must be organized for learning if student achievement is to increase. Unfortunately, what typically happens in a classroom is the teacher does activities and then disciplines when problems occur. No time is spent organizing or managing the classroom. **Then, of course, the administrator has to contend with this problem, which typically has nothing to do with discipline.**

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The Teacher Shortage: Wrong Diagnosis, Phony Cures

John Merrow, who does the PBS series on education, argues that **"we're misdiagnosing the problem as 'recruitment' when it's really 'retention.'** Simply put, we train teachers poorly and then treat them badly—and so they leave in droves." He suggests that "where shortages exist, these are often what should be labeled 'self-inflicted wounds'. They fall into three categories: Schools underpay and mistreat teachers and eventually drive them from the profession; inept school districts cannot find the qualified teachers living under their noses; and substandard training ill prepares educators for the realities of classroom life."

He likens the problem to a swimming pool with a serious leak. "You wouldn't expect that pouring more and more water into the pool would in time fix the leak, but that's precisely the approach we are taking toward the so-called teacher shortage. The response has been to recruit more people into teaching, using a variety of strategies including public-service-announcement campaigns, \$100 million in federal money, hiring bonuses, help with mortgages, and recruitment trips to Spain and other distant lands. **Yet the pool keeps leaking water because no one is paying attention to the leak.**"

"The fact remains," says Merrow, "that **our nation's 1,300 schools and colleges of education already produce more than enough teachers.** But about 30 percent of those newly minted teachers don't go into classrooms. Many who become teachers don't stay long. An estimated **30 percent leave the field within five years; in cities, the exit rate is an astonishing 50 percent.**"

"Of every 100 new graduates with licenses to teach, 30 do not. Of the remaining 70, at least 21 will have left teaching within five years. At the very least, that is an inefficient use of human and material resources."

So how do we fix the leak? It's really quite simple. We fix the leak by providing adequate training and support for beginning teachers (known as induction), thereby increasing the retention of more competent, qualified, and satisfied professionals for America's classrooms.

Merrow, John. "The Teacher Shortage: Wrong Diagnosis, Phony Cures." *Education Week*, October 6, 1999.

This paper was a handout at ASCD, Urban and Title I Conferences, and others. Additional copies are available free of charge while supplies last. Call 650-965-7896 to request the "Student Achievement" document.

There Is Only One Way to Improve Student Achievement

The teacher is the only factor that can improve student achievement.

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The major problem in our schools is not discipline. It is the lack of procedures and routines.⁹ Good administrators, principals, assistant principals, and staff developers can easily teach their teachers good classroom management skills. (See "Rappahannock High School" on the back page.)

Gordon Cawelti's research on the practices and programs schools use has revealed that classroom management skills can substantially improve student achievement.¹⁰

1. Practices resulting in substantially improved student achievement (.4-.6 range)
 - Classroom Management Techniques
 - Time on Task
 - Behavioral Classroom Techniques
 - Tutoring
 - Early Childhood Program
 - Parental Involvement
2. Practices producing modestly improved student achievement (.3-.4 range)
 - Success for All
 - Accelerated Reader Program
 - Reading Recovery
 - Staff Development
 - Longer School Year
 - Computer-Assisted Instruction
3. Practices with mixed or controversial results
 - Bilingual Education
 - Detracking
 - Class Size
 - School Size
4. Changes rarely or never showing improved student achievement
 - Site Based Management
 - State or District Policies
 - Pupil Retention
 - Changes in Schedules or Organization

How Schools Produce Student Achievement

Gordon Cawelti looked at six very successful but diverse schools, all structured differently.¹¹ Yet, they all had five factors in common.

Prominent Features of Schools That Produce Student Achievement

1. Clear and High Standards
2. Multiple Changes
3. Strong Leadership
4. Collaborative Teams
5. Committed Teachers

The article headlined, "Principals Can't Wait to Spend the Money." This appeared in a large urban newspaper after the annual Title I funds had been made available. Then it went on to say that the principals were going to form teams of teachers to figure out how to spend the money. The teams would then be disbanded

Education is a profession currently marked by an absence of goals. We must become goal-oriented and results-driven. Just implementing promising practices like site-based management, cooperative learning, or interdisciplinary teaching is not enough. We need to implement and obtain solid, purposeful, enduring goals.¹²

Carl Glickman

until the next annual allotment of funds was announced when another team would have to figure out how to spend the money.

The creation of a quality school is a continuous process guided by its goals. Effective schools don't need to figure out how to spend money. They know what are their needs.

And, their needs are student achievement.

Quality schools have a workable team and should money be made available they know how to spend money to achieve their enduring goals.

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- ⁹ Wong, Harry and Rosemary. (1998). *The First Days of School*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, p. 167.
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- ¹¹ Cawelti, Gordon. (1999). *Portraits of Six Benchmark Schools: Diverse Approaches to Improving Student Achievement*. Educational Research Service.
- ¹² Glickman, Carl. (1993). *Renewing America's Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ¹³ "Recipe for Success." *Education Week*, May 5, 1999, p. 29. and "The Nature of Effective First-Grade Literacy Instruction." (<http://cela.albany.edu/1stgradelit/literacy.html>)
- ¹⁴ Schmoker, Mike. (1999). *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Learning Achievement Has Nothing to Do With Literacy

In a study on the nature of first-grade literacy instruction,¹³ findings revealed that student achievement had nothing to do with what literacy program or approach was used. The factors that created effective literacy instruction (and all other instruction of any subject at any grade level) were

1. **Excellent classroom management**
2. **High academic engagement**
3. **Positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment**
4. **Encouragement of self-regulation**

Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement

In the best-selling ASCD book, Mike Schomker's research¹⁴ gives the most effective way to create a good school:

1. The staff must work as a productive family or team.
2. The team must set clear and measurable goals.
3. The team must regularly collect and analyze the data to see if the goals are being reached.

You improve schools with a staff that collects and analyzes data from measurable goals, not from faddish programs.

The Only Way to Improve Student Achievement

- A review looked at 40 years of educational innovations and did not find a single innovation that increased student achievement. **The only factor that increased student achievement was the significance of a teacher.**
- Studies have shown that teacher **preparation** is one of the strongest predictors of student achievement.
- Studies have shown that teacher **expertise** is the single most important factor in determining student achievement.
- **The bottom line is that there is no way to create good schools without good teachers.** It is the administrator who creates a good school. And it is the teacher who creates a good classroom.

Therefore, this is how to create a world-class school:

1. **Teach classroom management skills and have school-wide procedures.**
2. **Create a school culture or family.**
3. **Have school goals and religiously collect and analyze the data.**
4. **Have an induction program for new teachers.**