Six Standards for High Performing Schools

Creating and Implementing Constancy of Purpose

Perhaps the best overall guide for discussing the six standards for high-performing schools is W. Edward Deming’s concept of constancy of purpose (1986). These three words embody the essence of how to create a high-performing school.

Implicit in Deming’s idea is that a successful organization requires a purpose, that is, a clear sense of direction, a unified and strategic focus. In schools, this purpose must relate to goals and objectives regarding student learning. Such objectives must be valid, clear, and compelling. They must embody significant national and international standards. They must be understood by everyone involved in teaching children and by those monitoring the delivery of the instructional program. In curriculum auditing, the notion of purpose is embedded in the idea of curriculum design (English/Poston, 1999).²

The second part of quality is contained in the word constancy. Constancy means staying power under duress. It pertains to consistency in orientation when examining related problems in schools even if that institutional capacity has undergone change. Implicit in the idea of institutional capacity building is installing quality control as a part of the infrastructure in which the written, taught, and tested curricula are connected, integrated, and interactive. It means when one of these three elements changes or is changed, the others will and should also change. Constancy involves undergirding the day-to-day operations of schools in teaching, administering, assessment, motivating, linking, modifying and working for improved gains. While it is largely concerned with curriculum delivery, constancy, this “hanging in there” attitude, is established through curriculum design.

Let’s examine these six critical standards for high-performing schools one by one.

STANDARD ONE: Establish a Well-Crafted, Focused, Valid, and Clear Curriculum to Direct Teaching

Curriculum is the fundamental work plan for what goes on in schools. It not only embodies organizational philosophy, but it also incorporates the legal and operational requirements within which schools function. In the past, curriculum has meant just about anything that could be conceived within schools. It represented not only aspirations and

lofty social goals, but it also embodied challenging the social order with objectives that were radically opposed to the existing class structure.

While curriculum may be regarded as incorporating revolutionary content and the intellectual agenda of either the political left or right, in the model of high-performing schools it is primarily focused on attaining the goals and objectives explicit and implicit in the program of testing and assessment. This is not a politically naive decision on the part of curriculum workers. Rather, if schools do not demonstrate their capacity to attain even a modest range of general mainstream purposes, the trend is already unmistakably clear. Such low-performing schools are dealt with harshly and punitively, perhaps even put out of business by a kind of fiduciary slow death, or even abolished in the name of academic bankruptcy.

In addition to valid and clear curriculum content, the curriculum of the high-performing school has to be modest and not grandiose. Achieving constancy of purpose requires that teachers and administrators have a reasonable number of goals and objectives to attain. Such goals and objectives should be capable of being achieved and not overwhelming. The easiest way to accomplish this is to limit the goals and objectives to be pursued, at least initially, to those tested.

This tenet usually brings howls and protests not only from teachers who fear a loss of control over curriculum content, but also from curriculum developers who understand that tests are just samples of the whole curriculum, as well as from assessment directors who also understand the limitations of the types of learning their tests embody. We find these arguments ill-conceived, even illogical. If it is performance as defined by any test that results in the imposition of sanctions or rewards, then the content embodied in the measuring tool should trigger those same positive and/or negative responses. Informing teachers and administrators that they should not be too concerned, or that they should dump other things in the curriculum to spend time solely or exclusively on the tested curriculum is to confess that:

- The test is not all that important and may not be assessing the most important learning that could be taught (why then is it attached to rewards and/or sanctions?); and/or
- The attainment of high-performance by any group on any test requires a concentration of resources and less attention to that which will not result in success. Failing to emphasize actions that lead to a concentration of resources on priority targets undermines organizational effectiveness and detracts from the capacity of the school to improve student achievement.

Finally we note that the current popular notion of assessment driven instruction is a clear message that teaching should be and must be connected to tests in use. Reformers see tests being used as the device to ratchet up learning.
It should be clear that at least for curriculum development the concept of high performance is reductionistic; that is, since performance is defined and bordered, it both promotes concentration of resources and discourages resources from being expended on content not included within the boundaries of performance. Teachers and administrators who fail to grasp the clear implication of becoming a high-performance school usually do not understand the meaning of constancy. Not everything has the same priority in a high-performance school. Some things are much more important than others. The final arbiter of the matter of importance is the tested curriculum.

Another aspect of constancy within this standard is that curriculum should be easy to use, or “user-friendly.” High-performing schools have teachers and administrators who are not afraid to try different formats for curriculum materials. They understand that connecting the written, taught, and tested curricula can take a variety of forms as long as the essential connectivity and clarity are not compromised. They are also not fooled into thinking that superficial uniformity or standardization is not an important matter and will not promote constancy if it is not functional. There are differences in the ways various curricular content are conceptualized and set into a work plan. Essential skills tend to require a different shaping than essential content. There will be differences between elementary and secondary curriculum guides.

STANDARD TWO: Provide Assessments Aligned to the Curriculum

Curriculum provides focus and connectivity from the work of classroom teachers and how that effort fits into an overall structure of defined performance. All of this can take place in the absence of specific assessment strategies or tools. But with the advent of high-stakes testing that essentially defines the nature of performance itself, curriculum development must include alignment to the tests in use. This ensures that the energy of teachers and administrators will result in improved student performance on the instrument that has defined the nature of improvement and that will also become the triggering device for rewards and sanctions.

Alignment not only means matching tested content to curriculum content, it also means engaging in deep parallelism that ensures congruence between the tested and written curriculum. We have learned that since alignment has become popularized, nearly every school or district claims that it is aligned. A close inspection, however, demonstrates that the matching that has occurred is often superficial. “Drill and kill” worksheets have proliferated in schools located in states where high-stakes tests are in use. Such responses will not result in sustained student gains and will also produce classrooms of incredible boredom and mindlessness. Learning in such places has been tragically dumbed down.
Responses to high-stakes testing in the superficial vein amounts to lobotomizing teachers and students. Schools and the curriculum have been debased.

Engaging in deep alignment results in instruction that extends far beyond the test. It means that teachers anticipate the directions in which the test may be moving. It means that teachers focus on the underlying principles and processes involved in truly comprehending and mastering the multiple learnings that are a part of every single test item included on any given test. In short, the practice of deep alignment is teaching to the test that is not yet created, and while it begins with current assessment, it runs far more broadly and deeply than with just the tests in use. It is necessary to understand current test logic, protocols, norms, objectives, format, item construction, content domain sampling, weighting and frequency of questions within the test, and overall content coverage, but even this is clearly not enough. This is where high-performing schools start but it is not where they end. High-performing schools are in an anticipatory mode as it pertains to any test in use. Non-high-performing schools are in a reactionary mode. They’re playing constant catch-up; they’re always behind the curve.

STANDARD THREE: Align Program and Instructional Resources to the Curriculum and Provide Student Equality and Equity

The major resource in schools is teacher quality time (TQT) with students. We define TQT as teaching students to be creatively responsive in a deeply aligned curriculum with plenty of opportunities for pedagogical parallelism from the classroom to beyond the tests in use.

In addition, the resources of the school and district must be prioritized to similarly reflect a commitment to improving tested learning, and they must be adjusted so that more resources are diverted to students and programs with greater educational needs than others. School system formulae that level resources to ratios are not effective. They undermine the concept of constancy by shortchanging some children and overspending on others. The idea of economy of scale is relative to the needs of the children being considered. What is economical is not a simple arithmetic calculation. It is, rather, needs centered. The idea of adjusting resources to identified needs is that of equity.

STANDARD FOUR: Use a Mastery Learning Approach and Effective Teaching Strategies

Mastery learning includes the idea of linking the written and tested curricula with the taught curriculum. It also means that individual learning plans are developed for students who are underachieving. Mastery learning includes instruction at the right level of
difficulty for a student. This means that diagnostic assessments are given regularly to ascertain where a student is in his/her learning.

Moreover, there are many well researched, effective teaching practices that when used increase the likelihood of student achievement. It is our expectation that teachers are cognizant of these techniques and use them routinely.

STANDARD FIVE: Establish Curriculum Expectations, Monitoring, and Accountability

This standard relates to the expression of high curriculum standards by administrators but also includes administrative competence in actually monitoring curriculum design and delivery in school classrooms. It means that the principal feels comfortable in working with teachers to disaggregate test data and then use those data to make classroom decisions. Further, it means that district-level officers recognize that their main mission is higher student achievement and that they must also monitor to see if the curriculum is being implemented. Their role in the supervision of principals is essential.

STANDARD SIX: Institute Effective District and School Planning, Staff Development, Resource Allocation, and Provide a Quality Learning Environment

School planning is essential to establish the means for specifying purpose and relating the structure required to attain constancy. Planning must include multiyear goals and determine the requisite change strategies to be employed. On the other hand, plans must retain flexibility and adaptability so that the planning process doesn’t promote organizational rigor mortis.

Staff development must be related to the goals contained within school plans. Staff development is not an end unto itself, rather it is a means towards enhancing the human element required to attain organizational ends. As staff becomes more proficient, the school becomes increasingly capable of improving its performance levels.

The school budget is configured by how it is related to curricular priorities. It promotes equity and it supports learning priorities that are established based on need.

Personnel in the school are qualified and motivated. Marginal teachers are brought up to satisfactory standards or encouraged to leave. Crime is minimal and fear is not present. School facilities are adequate, clean, and safe and promote a wide variety of learning and teaching variations in shaping and reshaping an instructional program.

Many school staff members across the nation are floundering in trying to achieve high student success based on student achievement measures. Tremendous amounts of money
are spent every year purchasing program after program in an attempt to raise test scores. Many of these efforts prove to be fruitless. Staff members are becoming discouraged and frustrated as they put energy into these programs to no avail. It is time for us to focus our efforts on powerful strategies that research has proven will make a difference.

That is what this book is about. Review the six standards and fifty strategies presented in this book in a diagnostic way, with a view to determining your district’s and/or school’s present status. At the end of each strategy is a space for you to record your analysis, either for private speculation or for use as a collaborative tool with colleagues or other stakeholders. Ultimately, this book is meant to serve as both a yardstick and a game plan to assist schools in achieving the highest level of performance possible.