

Quick Fixes Don't Work

Allen R. Warner, James M. Cooper, and W. Robert Houston

In 1968, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare John Gardner warned the graduating class of Cornell University that American education was increasingly being caught between uncritical lovers and unloving critics. Today it is sharply evident that the latter outnumber the former. Contemporary media are eager to headline any charge that Johnny and Mary not only can't read, but can't write or compute, either. As a result beleaguered boards of education and school administrators too often look for oversimplified formulas to improve teaching and classroom performance—the educational equivalent of the quick fix.

Paper-and-pencil tests have a long tradition in education and have of late been offered as a panacea for determining teacher competence. Newspapers reported that mathematics test scores for beginning teachers in Dallas and Houston were below the national average for high school juniors.

In such a situation the logical question of test validity gets lost in the desperate search for evidence that someone is not doing his/her job. Few people ask whether test scores can predict the ability to foster learning in children, or whether beginning physicians, lawyers, or ministers score any better on a mathematics achievement test than the average high school junior. For most entrants to any profession there has been a considerable time—and skill—lag since they took a math achievement test while concurrently enrolled in Algebra II.

Such approaches ignore a host of pressing realities that involve how teachers themselves are taught, the quality of improvement efforts they encounter on the job, and the way superiors judge their performance in the classroom. In our view, any plan that fails to consider and come to terms with these important factors is not likely to make any lasting contribution to the overall improvement of instruction.

The Realities of Life: College to Classroom

Teacher education programs have traditionally been short-changed by colleges and universities. Their funding rate is often the lowest on campus, despite the fact that good clinical, experience-oriented programs are far more expensive to deliver than the lecture-discussion mode of other disciplines. It is not uncommon for someone to be certified to teach in

secondary schools with the equivalent of just one semester's professional training, including student teaching. The situation for elementary teachers is not much better.

This lack of attention and adequate preparation is likely to continue once a teacher is employed. Ongoing, focused staff development efforts are virtually nonexistent at most schools. The amount of money formally devoted to staff development in most school district budgets is usually quite small. What's more, those miniscule funds are usually among the first to go at budget-cutting time.

Even where regular staff development programs do exist, those employed in them too often end up shuffling papers instead of helping teachers. Two years ago we conducted a task analysis of staff development specialists in elementary and secondary schools as part of the School Based Teacher Educator program. The people we inter-

(Continued on page 443)



James M. Cooper (left) is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction; W. Robert Houston (center) is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Associate Dean, School of Education; Allen R. Warner is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of Clinical Experiences. All are at the University of Houston, Texas.

The Way I See It ... (Continued from page 424)

viewed were a highly motivated, dedicated, task-oriented lot who expressed genuine interest in helping teachers improve their performance. Out of frustration, however, they had relegated themselves to coordinating occasional sessions of inservice to compensate for their inability to overcome roadblocks preventing them from working with teachers as they really would have liked. Most said they occasionally visited the classroom of a beginning teacher—especially if a problem had been identified in that person's performance. But virtually without exception they expressed great apprehension about visiting the domain of an experienced teacher. Cut off from the instructional mainstream, they felt unable to earn the respect of either teachers or principals.

While the literature on instructional supervision is replete with approaches for improving instruction, especially clinical supervision, the fact is that most instructional supervisors in elementary and secondary schools perform only as administrative evaluators. Even that function is generally performed in a perfunctory, goalless, and unsystematic manner. At best, one of the teacher's superiors shows up in the classroom with a rating scale developed by some faceless committee and sits in the back of the class checking off items. At worst, the supervisor shows up unannounced halfway through class, hurriedly scribbles a series of highly subjective notes on a legal pad, and leaves for another "observation" five minutes before class ends. In either case there is little or no follow-up, and the supervisor-evaluator gets little or no notion of what the teacher is attempting to accomplish, how

the lesson is related to what was done the day before, or what is planned for the following day.

Systematic Planning Necessary

Positive change efforts rarely succeed by accident or luck alone. Someone once said that luck is the result of preparation meeting opportunity, and preparation involves systematic planning and purposeful action. If we are really serious about improving teaching, several assumptions must be accepted:

1. No one changes another person's behavior. Each of us has the power to change his or her own behavior, and we usually make significant changes only when we are convinced that such changes are in our own self-interest. As teachers we often alter habits based on judgments of whether we are reaching our students—that is, being effective in our role. We may change our behavior in response to an external threat, such as administrative evaluation, but such changes are usually transitory rather than enduring and are often exhibited only when the source of the threat is present. A more compelling motive is our deep-seated need for the esteem—both self-esteem and respect from others—that comes from being competent at what we do. We suggest that promoting efforts toward personal professional growth for teachers is psychologically healthier and more enduring than pretending that external threats can make teachers more effective.

2. Improving instruction is a complex, time-consuming, and costly process. Too often educators either propose bandaid solutions to problems requiring major surgery,

or damage the whole profession by attempting to lay the blame on another group of educators. This sort of backbiting detracts from the real issue, which is that if the quality of instruction in public schools is to be improved, taxpayers must be willing to foot the bill—and the bill will be large. A cadre of trained assisting professionals, trained in clinical supervision techniques and philosophy, must be developed in each school system to work with teachers as colleagues in a nonevaluative, supportive role. To gain the teachers' confidence and lend credibility to their efforts, they should themselves be experienced teachers with their own instructional responsibilities. Finally, they should be well-versed in research findings concerning adult learning. The growing body of knowledge on adult learning suggests that adults bring to a learning task a far different mixture of motivational aspects and learning modes than do children and adolescents.

Logistically, this might be accomplished by funding new positions or, in schools where enrollment is declining, by reassigning duties to provide peer supervision. Of utmost importance is that these assisting professionals be given the training and time to do the job, and that they be free from having to perform the function of administrative evaluation.

This proposal is expensive, likely very expensive, but it can be no more costly to the teaching profession and the society we serve than the crisis of public confidence which presently faces us. We must stop pretending that there are cheap, fast-order solutions to improving the quality of instruction in our schools. *EJ*

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.