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Feature Article

Planning Backwards: The Quickest Way to "Full Steam Ahead"

Planning is paradoxical.

So, is classroom planning. Some folks think of the school year as a journey, meandering in the general direction of where student learning should go...enjoying side trips and day excursions, then making a mad-dash sprint to the finish line on high-stakes test day...then a stroll, hobble, crawl, slide to make it to the end of the school year.

But this is wandering, not planning, and the capacity for getting lost, wasting time, encountering fog, dead ends, box canyons and washed out bridges to new learning increases as the vagueness of the goal keeps everyone guessing. On the "walk-about," questions about what to do abound like berries on a bush. "What shall we do today? What should we have done yesterday? Why aren't the students learning what I taught them?"

All of this is backward to the strategy that you need to reach instructional goals and student outcome targets.

The "Thinking Backwards" Strategy

The questions that you need to ask in thinking backwards are few and easy to ask. It may be challenging to come up with answers, but the answers that you do decide upon streamline your planning.

Here are the questions: What is our goal, target, objective?

What step has to happen just before we reach that goal, target, objective?

What step has to happen just before reaching that previous step? We continue with this iterative process until we arrive where we are now (Our present situation).

This path (sequence of steps) becomes our road map, blueprint, flow chart, process map for project success. All we have to do is put the steps in reverse order, i.e., from now to final accomplishment.

Thinking Clarified: Extraneous Activities Filtered Out

First, write the goal down on paper, real paper. A computer screen will do, but paper is better. Writing a goal performs a "ritual magic" that brings wishes, hopes and dreams to reality, somehow.

The benefit of "Planning with the End in Mind" strategy is that you identify a path to the goal. This path becomes evident when you "march your thinking backwards" from the goal line.

Estimates of how long each step will take to achieve can be attached to the plan.

You Can't Get There From Here

Equally important, your roadmap can highlight goals that are not possible to achieve within a certain time period, for example a school year.

This is one reason that teachers take the "cop out road" of "covering material."

Covering material is an easy goal, all the teacher has to do is talk faster to claim that the objective was satisfied.

Helping each student to pass the high-stakes test is only slightly less vague. Of course, many of these tests are "minimal skills" tests, so teachers from ordinary schools shouldn't have to break a sweat.

What becomes a challenge (although doable) is something like, "90% of my sixth grade students who are reading three to six years below grade level will be reading on grade level by the end of the school year."

One thing though: Doing what you always did won't deliver on newer, better, brighter, successful outcomes that you want to achieve.

To Do Better: Think Differently & Do Different Strategic Things

Different has to mean better targeting and measuring along the path to your goal that your roadmap identifies.

Thinking differently means that you have to believe... That the goal is possible

That the goal is worth achieving

In your abilities, knowledge and skills to achieve that goal

In your students abilities, knowledge and skills in achieving that goal Staying on the "Straight and Narrow"

Success in achieving your goals means following the road map, blueprint, path to goal achievement. This means choosing activities that are on the next step, and avoiding activities that seem inviting but are not on that path. Either the activities are not on the path at all (in which case you never do them), or the activities are on a later step (in which case you defer them to a later time when you reach that step).

The Written Form for Your Roadmap

The written format that your roadmap will take is a personal choice. However, the components will look something like this...

Step #1: Desired Outcomes for Step #1:

Outcome Measures for Step #1: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #2: Step #2: Desired Outcomes for Step #2:

Outcome Measures for Step #2: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #3: Step #3: Desired Outcomes for Step #3:

Outcome Measures for Step #3: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #4:Step #x:Desired Outcomes for Step #x:

Outcome Measures for Step #x: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #x+1:Step #Final:Desired Outcomes for Final Step :

Final Outcome Measures for Final Step: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)Note: Listing Steps without identifying appropriate measures to (know, determine, prove) that you have reached that Step (and are ready to move to the next step) are self-defeating.

It is difficult to set specific measures because (until you become used to this kind of management thinking, you can think of yourself as a failure.

But, once you begin setting goals in this way, and measuring progress toward these goals as you go; you will actually become successful.

This move to a professional style of instructional management will make the difference in transforming "what you do to cover material" to "what you do to teach, guide and transform student learning."

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