

Friday, October 31, 2008

## **Teacher Survival Strategies**

The "90% Solution"

Teachers complain that they want a 100% solution because they can't leave any child behind (bad pun intended).

They also note that administrators frown on leaving any child (or group of children) in the lurch, and focusing upon only the students that are close to passing the high-stakes test offers a disservice to every other student. But the "90% Solution" is not about students at all. The "90% Solution" is about perfecting your abilities and becoming a Master Teacher.

And, the "90% Solution" is not more of the "You have to give 110% to your job, to accomplish more" motivational "trash-talk."

Implementing the "90% Solution" in your teaching actually streamlines your workload and focuses your efforts; giving you more time for your family and other quality endeavors.

What is the "90% Solution?"

The "90% Solution" is a strategy of perfecting one important teaching skill at a time. The "90% Solution" is learning to implement one technique very well&hellip;practicing until you are an expert at it.

Of course, you maintain your level of quality performance in everything else that you do. You just single out one strategic area and do what it takes to improve in that one area. Sounds Easier than it Is The idea here is to concentrate, focus&hellip;easy for teachers, right?

But, other inviting strategies (distractions) must be ignored. New "magic bullet" solutions, even those high-prices speakers and acclaimed authors&hellip;concepts and innovations with promises that fire you up with enthusiasm. You must ignore them. Maybe you can implement these later, if you need to.

And, the professional development training that you are ordered to attend, if you cannot incorporate parts of the course into the professional skills that you are targeting for self-improvement; you must be abandon these&hellip;at least for now.

The "90% Solution" is about doing what it takes to become good, "expert-level good," at one teaching skill.

And, some skills may take a long time, maybe a couple of years to perfect.

But, you will never become a Master Teacher by following your current path of "trying everything" and repeating only the "stuff that works."

Distractions and diffused talents leave you standing in the "dunce corner as a master of nothing," instead of in the Master Teacher Winner's Circle. Antidote for Activity-Driven Teaching Activity-driven teaching is the teaching "strategy" that 80% of your colleagues employ.

Activity-based teaching means following the textbook as a lesson planning framework, and finding worksheets, projects and lesson plans that fit in&hellip;so there is enough work to keep students busy.

Activity-driven lesson planning maximizes the amount of work that teachers must do. Activity-driven instruction is the polarity-opposite to the strategic and streamlined systems that Classroom Toolkit advocates.

Sidebar Links to previous Classroom Toolkit Newsletter articles on teacher planning&hellip;

Application and Performance: The "Flip Side" of Planning

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

The Twelve Worst Planning Practices

Create a Master To-Do Log/ List System

How to do More in Less Time: Why do More when Doing Less gets Better Results?

Over worked and ineffective teachers invest time in scattered activities, like bees flitting from flower to flower in a garden. But even bees know better than to sample rose juice here, daffodil nectar there, tulip pollen over yonder&hellip;because this conglomeration of ingredients produces substandard honey.

Instructional results from an activity-based strategy tend to be of low quality.

The problem is that in doing so many things, time isn't available to examine the nuances, details and intricacies needed to perfect the requisite skills.

In other words, teachers need to become "geniuses" at one thing. In this case, "genius" means the ability to know everything there is about a specific strategy. What to Choose to "Get Right" There is "doing" and there is "doing it right." What the "90% Solution" focuses upon is "doing it right" (i.e., executing perfectly, taking action at the highest skill level) so that 90% of the time, execution is very right.

The biggest obstacles to the "90% Solution" include: Impatience - teachers want every student to learn everything by whatever method the teacher decides to adopt

Frustration - teachers see that a technique didn't work and blame the technique or the students

Acting First, Thinking Later - Focusing on getting through the day instead of doing things in a better way each day

Clumsy Execution - "Getting it right" was more difficult than imagined

Taking the Road of Least Resistance - teaching the easy stuff first, but maybe never getting to the challenging, long-lasting, important stuff

Using the Incorrect Benchmark - targeting student outcomes instead of looking to see how your own strengths can be made more effective

Wrong Goal - targeting the goal of keeping students busy instead of targeting how to perform better as a teacher

Measuring Outcomes based upon Colleagues Performance - colleagues are perfecting different skills of their own.

Besides, they cannot be trusted to share the challenges they overcame when they brag about how successful they are  
Lack of Confidence - forming, "Since results were mediocre, the problem must be with me" options about your performance

Avoiding the Hard Thinking of Planning - taking the easiest path instead of analyzing what will produce the best results

Believing in "Working Smarter" or believing in "Working Harder" - neither approach delivers. Working more creatively, artistically, and skillfully are the correct targets  
Choosing what to Become Good At  
Teachers focus on improving the wrong skills because their professional training teaches them to look for errors to remediate. This is the wrong approach for improving personal performance!

Choosing start with our weakest areas for teaching success is fallacy. Instead, start with strengths and perfect talents based upon those strengths. Compensate using strengths and bypass weaknesses. Use what we have with passion.

Sidebar See the Classroom Toolkit Book Review, *Teach with your Strengths: How Great Teachers Inspire their Students*  
Not Back to Basics but Back to Fundamentals  
A few years ago (before the high-stakes testing craze), there was a "Back to Basics" fad; the purported solution to low student achievement.

But, teaching the basics targeted a "left-handed, sinister" approach; a distraction.

The correct approach: Perfecting teaching fundamentals.

The "Back to Basics" approach was sinister because it distracted from the real question, the question that no one dared ask, "Which teachers are skilled and which teachers are not?" Or, "What do the teachers of students that excel do differently that teachers whose students stagnate?"

Besides being an "off-limit" topic for investigation (especially in teacher union dominated states), the question was never asked because discovering the answer would be too costly (or too embarrassing) to find out.

On the face of it, to the untrained, casual, or twice-a-year formal (district administrator) observer; the Master Teacher and the seasoned, but ineffective teacher are doing "almost" the same thing.

Sidebar The observer would have to be more skillful than the Master Teacher (unlikely), and the teacher would have to brief the observer before the observation concerning what to look for (also unlikely since the teacher would not want to clue the observer about what might need to be improved during the lesson delivery).

The benefit of most teacher observation exercises is to weed out those teachers who lack basic teaching competencies.

These systems are not designed to assist teachers in perfecting unique and personal talents. Myth of the "Magic Bullet;" Teachers look for the "Magic Bullet" Method that will "really work." But this is a "wishful thinking myth."

The reality: "What you Choose to do Doesn't Matter" (that much).

The real issue is "How you do it."

Master Teachers, if ordered to teach using specific materials or administrator-pushed methods, will "tweak and alter" those methods so that students excel. Teachers of lesser caliber will struggle (and students' performance will be mediocre), no matter how many high-quality materials and support resources they can use.

If teachers have a smorgasbord of materials, the approach of the successful teacher is instructive.

The Master Teacher chooses a few materials from the stockpile, and uses them skillfully. The less effective teacher continues to swap materials, always looking for the one "special solution" to those "low-learning outcome ills."

The difference is in execution, not quality resources.

The Master Teacher can teach, no matter what what the challenge. Summary The "90% Solution" is about doing the right teaching strategies "super well." This means perfecting individual skills in one area at a time, adding to the repertoire only when the first skill area reaches the 90% level of effectiveness.

Hopping from one strategy to another distracts less-skilled teachers from focusing on a single area of improvement.

Instead, these teachers languish in a "sea of luke warm" mediocrity.

But, don't look for someone else's "Magic Method." Look at your strengths, and ask students how those strengths could help them learn.

Pay attention, then execute, observe and assess, execute, observe and assess again.

It is the "Execute-Observe-Assess" Cycle, repeated with the intention of improving instructional management and instructional delivery that enables teachers to perfect their skills.

Attention to the littlest detail, that is the mark of "genius." It is the mark of a Master Teacher, too.