

# HIGH-FIDELITY, *creative teaching*

**Teachers may feel they are doomed to an instructional prison sentence after attending curriculum training.**

**Here are strategies to help teachers deliver the standards-based instructional program creatively and with fidelity.**

“**T**hey’ve taken away all my creativity!” How often do leaders at every level hear this discouraged pronouncement? The teacher grieving this perceived loss is usually leveling her complaint at the requirement that teachers fully implement their standards-based adopted curriculum, with fidelity to program design. Teachers voice this lament most often in reading/language arts or mathematics, but it may also arise in the other core areas of science and social science.

Meanwhile, however, there is every likelihood that at a nearby school or even down the hall, another teacher is delivering the same curriculum being decried by her colleague with both fidelity and creative flair, and student outcomes are improving with every month of instruction. How can a leader support the teacher experiencing the feelings of being devalued and rendered ineffective by indifferent, negative external forces, perhaps using the other’s success and example?

The issue is widespread. When Califor-

nia schools or districts fall into Program Improvement, the central requirement of their sanctions is to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students, which comprehensively addresses the California Content Standards in mathematics and reading/language arts. Under PI, this is Essential Program Component No. 1, the overarching component of the nine in the Academic Program Survey.

## **A guaranteed and viable curriculum**

More than 30 years of research support this, as GVC (guaranteed and viable curriculum) is the factor found to have the highest impact on student achievement of the 11 high-impact factors described in Robert Marzano’s “What Works in Schools” (2003). Some wise districts, such as the Menifee Union School District, are taking this step as a preventive measure to ensure that achievement does not plateau or fall, and thus avoid PI sanctions.

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*By Terry Wilhelm*

Unfortunately, when teachers attend the required training for their state-board-approved curriculum, mandated and funded by Senate Bill 472, they sometimes come away with the notion that they are doomed to an instructional prison sentence.

This may be an unintended consequence of the prescribed training structure, which consists of five days of delving into the research underpinnings, an exploration of every core and ancillary item in the program, and the detail of short- and long-range lesson planning.

Most trainers emphasize that to adequately address all daily lesson components, teachers need to put aside past favorite materials, which may also raise objections. But less-than-positive reactions may also be a result of the mindset the participants bring with them – a possible mixture of resentment (in a few cases) at the requirement to attend, and pre-conceived beliefs about the materials themselves and their use.

### **Mastery experiences in teaching**

A leader can influence the thinking of teachers who hold this belief about their disallowed, diminished creativity, and support their success in improving student learning in their classrooms. One strategy is to create conditions where teachers can have “mastery experiences” in successfully and creatively delivering the program with fidelity. This long-range strategy will be discussed later.

In the short term, leaders can arrange vicarious experiences – field trips, in this case, mediated by a coach or mentor who can support visiting teachers by helping them to interpret what they are seeing when they visit a truly creative teacher who is fully implementing the program with fidelity.

However, as the mandate of GVC unfolds, a leader must begin the work by answering a foundational question: Do I, the leader, personally believe in this change effort that I must lead? If the answer is no, it will be extremely difficult to convince staff that their creativity can indeed survive and thrive, and that this program will work, yielding far better learning than allowing each teacher to individually pick and choose the curriculum that will be offered from classroom to classroom from a smorgasbord of hoarded

past pet materials, or a homegrown hybrid of new ones.

Data is a prime convincer that the status quo needs to change, whether to convince oneself or others. W. Edwards Deming said, “Without data, all anyone has is an opinion.” Does your school or district data demonstrate an inexorable climb in student



learning from month to month, year to year, for all students? If not, it’s time to examine the 35 years of research data underpinning “What Works in Schools,” and for research specific to each of the EPCs, download “Research Summary Supporting the Nine Essential Program Components” from the California Comprehensive Assistance Center Web site, or “Show Me the Research” from the Web site of the Riverside County Office of Education.

### **A turnaround story**

Hilma Griffin-Watson, former principal at Myra Linn Elementary in the Alvord Unified School District, had a consistent response whenever a teacher approached her with a statement such as, “I’ve always done it this way, and it works for me,” in hopes of resisting high-fidelity core implementation. She would simply say, “Let’s take a look at your data.” Before long, teacher requests to stay in their comfort zones diminished and stopped as the whole staff got on board.

Myra Linn Elementary’s data tells the turnaround story of this very high-poverty

school, where the API increased from 535 in 1999 to 794 in 2007. Momentum has been sustained under the school’s new administration, and the estimated 2008 API is 819.

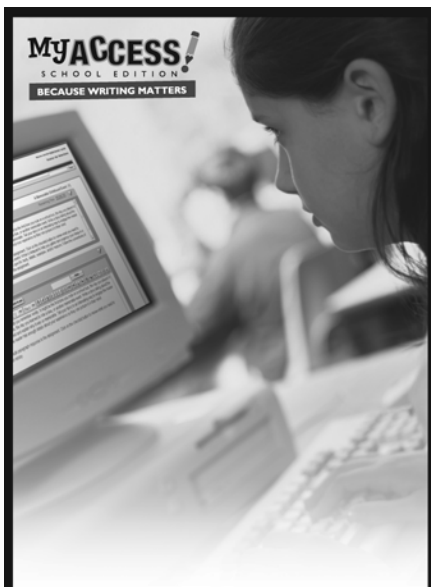
The power of data notwithstanding, the authors of “Influencer” make the case that verbal persuasion is often the weakest form of influence. Their work has found persua-

sion to be effective only when the persuader is respected as having genuine expertise in the area under question, and listeners’ values are congruent with the change. If either condition is absent, listeners tend to suspect that the persuader is trying to manipulate them, or that s/he does not have their best interests at heart.

### **Changing beliefs**

“Influencer” cites the work of Albert Bandura as a powerful example of changing beliefs through mastery experiences. Bandura’s position was that humans are highly complex beings, and attempts to change their behavior through stimulus-response/reward-punishment systems used on animals (which, unfortunately, remain popular in schools and workplaces today) was crude and lacking in efficacy.

His seminal work showed that phobics – in this case, individuals with a paralyzing fear of snakes – could be cured by changing their beliefs, accomplished through mastery experiences. The mastery experience was for the phobic to sit comfortably with a boa con-



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structor draped across his/her lap. Some subjects initially could barely bring themselves to view the caged snake from the doorway of the room, so the lasting (lifetime) success of the experiment for those who participated, especially given its short (three-hour) duration, is truly remarkable.

The experiment first provided vicarious experiences through watching a staff member handle and hold the snake, then baby steps of closer approximations to the goal behavior. Each step was accompanied by careful, intentional, verbal coaching by Bandura and his staff to simultaneously challenge the subject's phobic beliefs about snakes and create new, healthy ones.

### Success breeds success

It is important to note that a key characteristic of those who participated was a desperate desire to be cured. Unfortunately, not everyone we hope to influence in the sea change of instructional practice is similarly motivated, making the probability of our being able to create a mastery experience for most of them in such a short period relatively slight. However, mastery experiences remain the Cadillac influence strategy, and academic coaches are the lynchpin of our current endeavor. Once an individual experiences success in a once-difficult area, it has a snowball effect – thus the old saw, "Success breeds success."

So, as we begin providing academic coaching for teachers in their individual classroom practice toward those mastery experiences, a parallel short-term influence strategy can have a very positive impact: visits to creative colleagues' classrooms.

### Using data to identify creative teachers

The first step is to use student achievement data to locate and identify those teachers who are both teaching the program with fidelity, and doing so with their own creative instructional flair. For leaders who have not yet been trained themselves in the adopted program (Assembly Bill 430 mandates and funds administrator training, with Module I providing staff development in each of the state-board approved mathematics and reading/language arts programs), the assistance of a site, district or county office coach

or consultant who knows the math or RLA adoption is invaluable for the identification process.

A second step is to identify a coach or mentor who can accompany the teacher on the visit. This is important, because the all-too-human tendency is to focus on the wrong aspects – such as differences in the makeup of the student body, resources the visited classroom or site may have that the visitors' do not, but which are external to the focus of the instruction – instead of specific teacher/student behaviors that result in learning. Misunderstandings and misinformation, such as "We've been told we can't do that," can also be addressed on the spot, or noted for later clarification if the mentor is unable to do so.

Key resources that are desirable for the visitors' professional growth in implementing the program can also be identified. For example, a middle school math teacher visits a successful school with similar demographics in another district, and observes a lesson using Algebra Tiles. She and her accompanying mentor – in this case, a district math coach – agree that these are not allowed in their district, because they did not come with the adopted program.

### An explanation from the principal

Fortunately, the principal joins them after the classroom visits and explains the difference between manipulatives that support core program instruction, and non-adopted materials that prevent teachers from implementing all the daily core components. In her school's case, math packets from a district in a neighboring county (long since abandoned by the district that developed them) had once been a staple in the math program, devouring valuable minutes of each period, and precluding teachers' ability to instruct the full daily lesson.

These were finally discarded – albeit not without lengthy discussions about where the core program provided what the teachers felt the packets offered – with the funds formerly used to duplicate them reallocated toward Algebra Tiles. When the visitors return to their own district, they are able to clarify that Algebra Tiles are indeed an allowed and desirable resource for middle school math

classes, and begin steps to obtain them for their own schools.

A coach/mentor can also assist visiting teachers in focusing on student behaviors that demonstrate learning, as well as teacher behaviors that elicit them. Perceptions, based on observers' personal filters (i.e. "He was just doing a dog and pony show for us") can be addressed or prevented through shared observation and debriefing about what students were doing. The importance of this component of the differences between effective and ineffective instruction is almost impossible to overstate. Student engagement is the sine qua non of "creative" teaching.

### Emotionally engaging students in school

The critical need for emotionally engaging students in school, and actively engaging them in the learning process, is well-documented. Research organizations such as Mid-Continent Research in Education and Learning and Gallup, and private researchers such as Ethna Reid (cited in "Influencer"), have distilled thousands of hours of research into key questions (Gallup's Stu-

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dent Engagement 10), strategies (the nine described in "Classroom Instruction That Works"), and a small number of key teacher behaviors (Reid's "increase teacher questioning, decrease teacher talking") to ensure that students are active participants, not passive bystanders in the teaching/learning process.


Contrary to some teachers' perceptions of their materials, no "script" is provided for these instructional behaviors and strategies,

nor are they in any sense disallowed by the programs. Molly McCabe, RCOE administrator and AB 430 Module I trainer says, "You have to add the teaching." Molly developed a four-day workshop for elementary teachers to support, not replace, their SB 472 training. The workshop provides hands-on experiences designing and planning delivery of the Houghton Mifflin curriculum using creative strategies and core and ancillary resources to differentiate for student needs, ranging from learning disabilities to giftedness. Moreover, program fidelity is not compromised in the least!

Creative teaching is as urgently needed in high school as in the lower grades. An AP physics teacher's use of individual white boards, held up toward the teacher to demonstrate student work on every problem, trumps the usual practice of calling students to the front board one by one on any engagement scale, and requires next to no extra effort on the part of the teacher.

The use of field trips can also be a successful tool to influence and support school leaders in the GVC change initiative. For-

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mer principal Griffin-Watson hosted many teams of principals, who came to walk through Myra Linn’s classrooms as the school’s data began to gain the notice of administrators in her own district as well as others. Many were hearing a common litany of grim predictions and concerns from their own teachers about the demand for program fidelity – that all creativity and fun was going to disappear, school would be drudgery, kids would lose interest, and learning would ultimately suffer.

If seeing is believing, the visits – to classroom after classroom of students happily and successfully engaged as creative teachers delivered high-fidelity instruction – created a host of converts who returned to their own sites with a renewed sense of purpose, and a conviction that GVC was indeed the right path. It is not necessary to locate an entire school doing model work. Even a visit to a single teacher or team can have a powerful effect.

Academic coaches provide the optimum vehicle for facilitating the intermediary step

between the field trips and teachers’ personal mastery of new instructional practices. The coach can demonstrate high-fidelity, creative, engaging, effective instruction in the core, with the teacher’s own students. The co-planning, demo teaching and debriefing cycle is the course for developing new understandings and beliefs “that this will work with these kids.” These demos also build a relationship of trust as the cycle reverts to the teacher’s teaching his own class, with the coach supporting him.

Finally, coaching should be provided for all teachers in the standards-based adoptions. Both new and veteran teachers deserve a level of support appropriate to whatever they individually need to reach and maintain the highest possible level of classroom practice using these materials.

### Providing accountability and support

Leaders can and must do everything possible to help teachers develop mastery of creative and effective instruction of their standards-based programs, so that student

mastery continues to rise. Providing mediated visits to successful models is a strategy worth employing. As leaders, we have a moral imperative to provide both accountability and support for our hard-working teachers in the delivery of these programs.

Ensuring a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not simply a research-proven strategy for high achievement. It is aligned with the civil rights of students. It ensures that *all* means *all* across our classrooms, schools and districts! ■

### References and resources

California Comprehensive Assistance Center at WestEd. The research report on the EPCs may can found at [www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/aps\\_research\\_summary.pdf](http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/aps_research_summary.pdf).

California Department of Education resources include the following:

[www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/hsaps.doc](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/hsaps.doc) (High School EPCs)

[www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/mgaps.doc](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/mgaps.doc) (Middle School EPCs)

[www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/egaps.doc](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/documents/egaps.doc) (Elementary School EPCs)

Gallup Education Division: <http://education.gallup.com>. The research report on student engagement is currently in press.

Marzano, Robert J.; Pickering, Debra J. and Pollock, Jane E. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Marzano, Robert J. (2003). *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Patterson, Kerry, and Joseph Grenny, *et al.* (2008). *Influencer*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Books.

Wells, Shannon; Pearson, Danielle and Sousa, Lorie. (2006). *Show Me the Research*. Riverside County Office of Education. This report can be downloaded from the RCOE Web site at <http://204.100.65.49/edServices/rcatPro.html>.

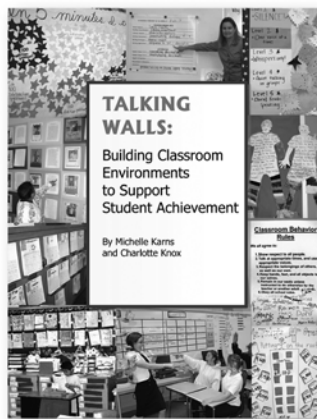
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