

# *Teacher Quality: The Principal's Role*

## *by Bambi Betts*

Although we dedicate deep resources to many other aspects of our schools, teacher quality is the single biggest factor influencing student achievement. Recent studies (Ferguson) have confirmed that teacher quality accounts for about 44 percent of the influence on student achievement. Family and community account for 24 percent, and school structures (time devoted to essential learning standards, class size, resource allocation, etc.) about 26 percent.

This is good news for international schools. It means we can have a serious impact on student learning by paying attention to the quality of the teaching in our schools.

Knowing that teacher quality is such a significant factor in student achievement sets the stage for principals in international schools to develop simple yet comprehensive programs designed to contribute to the "quality" of teaching in their schools. Among the many roles of the principal, ensuring that there is the best quality teacher in every classroom clearly ranks way up on the list.

### **Getting started**

What tools and strategies are available to us in international schools? While most schools lack access to the rich resources many of the teachers may be accustomed to, we actually do have some excellent and effective options. Be prepared to summon up some new thinking and persuasive negotiating skills to get some of them in place.

### **Know quality teaching when you see it**

First, be aware of what is meant by quality teaching. There are many sources to help you create your school's vision of quality teaching, some of which may already be embedded in your teacher evaluation or appraisal tool. A few countries have now defined standards of excellence for teachers, just as we have them for students (e.g., National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org), in the US). Also bear in mind that in surveys of students old enough to answer the questions, the quality they stated as most important is that their teachers know their subject (NSCD statistic).

The most essential advice we can offer is this: In your definition of quality, make student achievement the centerpiece. Definitions of quality which refer primarily to the "inputs" of teaching (e.g., professional behaviors, lesson delivery, assessment design) will lead to teacher improvement programs have limited impact on student learning.

Lesson: Ensure quality teaching in your school means improved student achievement. Don't get trapped by the refrain that it is unfair to make professional development decisions on the basis of student results. IT is really the ONLY legitimate basis.

### **Learn what really works in improving quality**

Second, be conscious of what we have learned about what is effective in developing quality in teaching. There is a huge body of research out there, much of it from teachers, which can guide your professional development planning. Here's a short synopsis.

Teacher development programs which improve the learning of all students:

- Acknowledge that adults learn in much the same way that children do: through plenty of opportunity to practice their new learning in a real setting, often in collaboration with colleagues.
- Are most effective when focused on very specific learning (e.g. learning new strategies for improving student vocabulary)
- Ensure that school structures "match" the underlying beliefs. This means that the school day needs to be structured in such a way that teachers can actually try out new strategies, and have the opportunity to study the results.
- Include both follow up and accountability (Joyce and Showers 1995) and sustained opportunity to practice, modify and refine new strategies.
- Are driven by real learning data.

Hold increased student achievement as their PRIMARY goal

- Address the notion that there are key instructional strategies which optimize learning for all students.
- All teachers should be skilled in these (an example: Teaching Strategies That Work, ASCD, 2000)
- Apply knowledge about teachers and change

### **What might this look like in my school?**

As a principal, the real test comes, of course, in creating day to day structures which translate all these learnings into a program in the context of YOUR school.

There are essentially two broad categories you can consider: job-embedded and external learning opportunities.

**Job-embedded learning opportunities** represent structures which rely on the day to day teaching experience as the central focus of the learning. Among the effective practices here are:

- Learning partners: teachers select or are assigned a partner to work with on their teaching practice. This is a collaborative relationship where both partner are learners; it can range from informal to very structured.
- Critical friends: very similar to learning partners, but where the learning is focused on only one.
- Learning Circles: the learning partner idea expanded to 3 or 4.
- Action research: conducting classroom-based research to reveal data for an individual teacher.
- On-going learning modules taught by experts from within and occasionally outside experts, developed from student learning data.
- Structured time spent on looking at learning data and student work in teams or departments. Set aside some hours a week ONLY for staff development or dump other less important things like traditional faculty meetings.
- Model lessons: Make model lesson demonstrations a core activity at your school. Conduct model lessons yourself and/or encourage (or gently mandate) expert teachers to do the same.
- Learning Logs: Have all teachers keep a “learning log” of their progress toward improved quality. The log can be used in conjunction with many of the activities listed above.

### **The “timeless” excuse**

There are a number of effective (and often controversial!) ways of capturing time for these activities. All of them require a real and concrete commitment to the belief that teacher quality is an essential ingredient for increased student achievement. If you believe it, your practices need to reflect it. Don't fall into the 'belief-practice' gap!

- Drop faculty meetings and replace with time foray of the above
- Rearrange instructional time to open up 2 or more contiguous hours a week when the whole school can be working on teacher quality activities. (Yes, some international schools have done this!)
- Dedicate all or most of your team/department time to teacher quality.
- Open school 2 days earlier and stay open a day or two later to build in 'reflection on quality' sessions (told you some would be controversial!)
- Build 'teacher quality' days into your yearly schedule (staff development days). This has been a popular idea, however it often proves to be the least effective in terms of actually improving practice, due to lack of follow-up and accountability. It can only be counted as a 'job-embedded' strategy if the days are spent using student results, reflecting on specific lessons taught; or learning a new strategy which will be tried out immediately, with feedback sessions built in.

### **External Opportunities**

This list is already quite familiar to you. It includes virtually any type of teacher development activity which happens outside your school or within you school, but without any involvement in

day-to-day teaching practice: summer courses, regional conferences, subject, grade or topic-specific training and workshops, online courses, working with other nearby schools, etc. These development programs have been popular amongst international schools for a variety of reasons

- Expertise in English, in or around the school, is limited.
- Such opportunities are 'events' which involve the excitement of travel, meeting new people, seeing teaching with 'fresh' eyes.
- Programs are often well conceived, based in good research and take the guesswork out.
- These are opportunities to 'network', a key skill in our international schools.
- And I would add that teachers attending external learning opportunities 'let go' more easily of the baggage they often bring to a similar in-house activity and therefore open themselves to increased learning.

How can you make this popular set of teacher development activities as effective as possible?

Some ideas:

- Base the decision about what training program should be attended on real student data, not just personal interests or perceptions.
- Together with the teacher, work out a set of 'essential questions' that the teacher should be focusing on while at the training.
- Create a generic 'log' to be used by any teacher who does an outside training, which focuses learning and helps them translate to potential practice on the spot.
- Build your supervision time with that teacher around analyzing the results of that new methodology.
- Build a set of follow-up procedures such as agreeing that the teacher will:
  - Teach a model lesson or two upon return
  - Critique a lesson you teach based on his new knowledge
  - Describe her plan for implementing new learning and agreeing that this will become a monitoring tool upon return.
  - Share in some way with other teachers (however beware the misconception connection: when we learn something new and right away teach it to others, before we practice it, we can often lead them to a 'misconception' about good teaching.)
  - Dedicate time in your leadership team meetings to the results of any new learning on student achievement.

Teacher quality is the best contribution you can make to your students. It behooves all of us to sit up and take notice of how to improve our own practices in this critical area.

***(For more information on these ideas and any other assistance in teacher or principal development, contact PTC, Bambi Betts, director [theptc@aol.com](mailto:theptc@aol.com), tel: 1 508 362-6550, fax: 1 508 362-0285)***