Reaching Educational Equity: It *Is* Possible

Responsive Classroom® Plays a Role

During the last twenty years, educators have made considerable strides in improving the quality of education for our nation's students. Overall student achievement and graduation rates have risen. Yet the unfortunate reality is that certain populations of students, particularly those living in poverty, students of color, and English language learners, continue to lag behind.

Educators are increasingly aware and in agreement that this "achievement gap" is really an equity gap. These students are lagging in achievement because they are lagging in access to educational opportunities.

Our challenge and responsibility as a nation is to correct this inequity—to provide all children who walk through our school doors with the same high-quality education, regardless of who they are or where they come from; regardless of their socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, or language backgrounds; and regardless of their learning abilities and styles. Providing every child with a high-quality education means providing the same positive school experience to all students and ensuring that they have the support and services they need so that they can learn and achieve at the highest level.

There is no quick fix to the current inequity in U.S. education. The causes are many and complex, and the solution must be multi-layered, involving various sectors of society. An immediate and critical step that educational leaders can take, however, is to raise the quality of teaching in their schools and districts by providing teachers with well-designed, research-based, time-proven professional development. Investing in teachers in this way is practical and powerful because it is teachers who have the most direct impact on improving student learning outcomes.

Effective Teaching a Crucial Ingredient

Mounting evidence proves what we know intuitively: Effective teaching is an important in-school vehicle for lifting disadvantaged students to high levels of content and skill mastery. For years The Education Trust, a leading national organization working to close the educational equity gap, has been calling attention to predominantly minority, high-poverty schools around the country where students are earning high achievement scores, and has identified strong teaching as a factor in these students' success (The Education Trust, June 2012).

Additionally, in 2013 the U.S. Department of Education added evidence of the power of effective teaching when it published research showing that high-performing elementary teachers in low-achieving schools helped students raise their reading and math achievement scores by 4 to 10 percentile points relative to all students in their state (U.S. Department of Education, November 2013, p. xxv).

Clearly, even though effective teaching isn't the complete answer to the problem of educational inequity, it is a crucial piece of the solution. In schools throughout the country, teachers committed to the profession are poised to bring forth great learning in their students. When we give these teachers the professional development they need to deliver quality instruction, the potent combination of their commitment *and* their skill will light fires of learning and achievement in the young people they touch.

Responsive Classroom Key to Teacher Effectiveness

Since 1981, educational leaders nationwide have been using the *Responsive Classroom* approach to raise teacher effectiveness in their schools and districts.

Responsive Classroom is built on the foundational belief that all children want to and can learn. It further rests on the beliefs that to teach students well, teachers must know them individually, culturally, and developmentally, and they must create an inclusive environment where all children feel known and celebrated. From these beliefs grow a set of highly practical tools and strategies for teachers to use to improve their practice.

There can be no doubt that what teachers believe, know, and can do powerfully influences student learning. *Responsive Classroom* works because it addresses this belief-knowledge-action triad. It shifts teachers' beliefs about children and learning, equips them with new knowledge and skills, and encourages them to transform their teaching by putting their new beliefs and knowledge into action.

Research on the Responsive Classroom Approach

Studies by the University of Virginia Curry School of Education have found that teachers' use of the *Responsive Classroom* approach is associated with:

* Greater student achievement in math and reading, regardless of socioeconomic background
* Greater gains for low-achieving students
* Higher quality standards-based instruction
* Improved social skills in children
* Improved teacher-student interactions
* Students feeling more positive toward school
* Teachers feeling more effective and positive about teaching

For more information, visit www.responsiveclassroom.org/research.

Four Domains of Teaching

The *Responsive Classroom* approach centers on four interrelated domains of teaching:

* **Engaging academics:** Teachers have a strong command of the curriculum content and skillfully deploy strategies and practices to create an engaging learning environment that accounts for learner variability.

* **Positive community:** Teachers model caring, kindness, inclusiveness, and respect for all students and use learning structures and teacher language to teach students to develop and demonstrate the same.

* **Effective management:** Teachers create a classroom that is safe and predictable and proactively teach routines and expectations that ensure the classroom operates smoothly and efficiently.

* **Developmental awareness:** Teachers use knowledge of child development, along with regular observations of students, to inform all decisions in the classroom.

Responsive Classroom Practices That Support Equity

Engaging Academics

Academic Choice: Giving students meaningful choices in their learning

Teaching the Language of Learning: Intentionally teaching speaking and listening competencies necessary for college and career readiness

Interactive Modeling: Teaching new skills in a way that includes demonstration and guided practice

Positive Community

Positive Teacher Language: Speaking in ways that lead each student to envision success, think deeply, set goals, and work hard to achieve them

Morning Meeting: A daily whole-class gathering that builds community, sets the tone for the day, and allows students, including ELLs, to practice essential language, social, and academic skills

Parents as Partners: Strategies for involving families of diverse cultures and backgrounds

Effective Management

Creating Meaningful Rules: Involving students in creating classroom rules that grow out of learning goals

Responding to Behavior Mistakes Fairly and Nonpunitively: Quickly and respectfully restoring positive behavior so students retain their dignity and continue learning

Establishing Clear Routines and Expectations: Managing classroom time and space in ways that allow students to focus on learning and build autonomy

Developmental Awareness

Knowing All Students: A collection of practices for learning about each student individually, culturally, and developmentally

Responding to Developmental Needs and Strengths: Structuring appropriately challenging lessons and connecting learning to students' strengths and interests

Classroom Organization: Creating an organized physical environment that matches developmental needs

References

The Education Trust. (June 2012). *Building and sustaining talent: Creating conditions in high-poverty schools that support effective teaching and learning.* Retrieved from edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Building_and_Sustaining_Talent.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (November 2013). *Transfer incentives for high-performing teachers: Final results from a multisite randomized experiment.* Retrieved from ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144003/pdf/20144003.pdf

To learn about *Responsive Classroom* professional development workshops, books, and other resources:

Responsive Classroom®

This white paper is available on the *Responsive Classroom* website at http://bit.ly/educational_equity