

# Hanlon's Razor

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Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity

*What works is work!*

## Teachers Seen as Making the Difference in Top Schools

In a recent study reported in Education Week, teachers were seen as making the difference in top performing schools. The study suggests placing high quality teaching at the heart of school improvement. High performing school systems place a great emphasis on improving instruction because that has such a high impact on student achievement. That just doesn't sound like rocket science to me.

Research strongly suggests that turning organizations into great ones and maintaining that greatness does not start with the big splash of introducing another new program, it comes from working hard, working quietly to make the needed changes to move forward. What we too often see from central administrators is the pronouncement of some new program or initiative, a lot of fanfare, posturing, and bragging only to see little or no return and clearly no sustainability.

I was personally happy to see how schools performed when they had teachers trained in the RPDP Middle School Math Certificate Program. Schools such as Mack, Woodbury, and Orr made significant gains in student achievement last year. They should be congratulated and recognized for their hard work and dedication. These schools have at least three teachers trained in the certificate program.

RPDP programs aren't sexy, they focus on what teachers teach, how they teach it, identifying areas students traditionally encounter difficulty along with strategies and resources to overcome those difficulties, and embeds strategies for working with differing student populations. As we have seen increases in school scores from past years, we see again this year that these teachers can impact their schools' achievement levels.

But the fact is, while making gains is clearly a good thing, having only 40 to 50% of the students meeting or exceeding standards is not something to brag to loudly about. There should be great concern for the 50-60% of the students not meeting standards. We have seen from our own study that school performance increases when at least three teachers have received training at a school. Having three teachers trained seems to have enough impetus to change some teaching behaviors at the school. But, to maintain that momentum, not only do behaviors have to be changed, but new customs have to be established that result in a new culture. A culture that places student achievement as the top priority.

My belief is that if the teachers trained in the certificate program do not receive continued support, coaching, and reinforcement from their building administrators, the impact on the school's achievement will not be maximized and may falter over time.

My staff or I have been told by more than one building principal this year that they have a strong math staff and don't need professional development based on the content they teach and the strategies used to teach it. What is really troublesome is some of these schools, while making achievement gains, have approximately half their students not meeting standards and they think everything is just fine they don't need further assistance or follow-up training.

If schools are experiencing high failure rates or significant numbers of students not meeting standards, maybe a more bold option might be in order. It is almost unheard of to have majority of teachers in a department receive training in the content they teach at a school by taking a week of training while their students are taught by substitutes. In order to change the behaviors, customs, and culture at a school, it would seem the information exchanged during such training would clearly benefit students. It's too difficult to expect just one person to affect that kind of change over a short period of time, more teachers need to be involved.

We all got in this profession to help students learn. It would be nice if we concentrated on increasing student achievement by improving the quality of instruction by increasing classroom teachers' professional knowledge. To concentrate on teacher preparedness would seem to be a lot more constructive and cheaper in the long run than adopting new programs, initiatives and services every few years, then training the teachers on those programs rather than their knowledge on content, strategies, and assessment that might just make them more knowledgeable in the fields they teach resulting in students being more enthusiastic and interested in what they are learning.

For that to happen, building administrators must concentrate on what happens in the classroom. They must visit classrooms early and often, they must provide immediate feedback, feedback with specific suggestions and recommendations that result in improved instructional practices. They should not only observe instruction, they should also examine student note books, homework assignments, test preparation materials, and tests to determine if they are aligned and support student learning that leads to increased student achievement.

Classroom teachers should be required to videotape themselves, not for formal evaluation purposes, but so they can see firsthand how they conduct their own classrooms. Teachers might be surprised when they observe their own instruction, listen to their own explanations or how effectively they use their instructional time.

As studies suggest, focusing on improving instruction because of its direct impact upon student achievement is the way to attaining top performing schools.