



Common Core Standards For Courageous Equity Instructional Leaders



As the CEO of EDEquity for over 10 years, I have had the opportunity to work with county offices, districts and school leaders in the areas of Equity and Courageous Instructional Leadership. The purposes of the article are to provide districts and principals the key skills and actions necessary to transform their district/school's culture, as well as to identify the instructional practices that improve teacher–performance—which shows promise to moving students—from “Basic” to “Proficient and Advanced” on state and federal assessments.

An intended reflection of the article is for the reader to have an insatiable appetite to rid their school(s) of what I call “mediocre instruction”. Unfortunately, we as educational leaders have been “hoping” (hope is not a strategy in schools) student achievement will improve with mediocre instruction. The data continues to reveal that we will get *statistically insignificant* increases to close the achievement gap with our current mind-set.

We have a solid game plan in place to address our students needing intervention, and we have clear instructional approaches to increase State achievement scores; focus on lowest performing students and provide them with direct instruction and monitor their progress more frequently and quickly act on the data. Unfortunately, we serve two masters in education (State and Federal-AYP). All too often, most schools do not understand that you cannot use intervention strategies (moving the bottom) to fulfill AYP requirements (moving all students to Proficient and Advanced). Intervention instructional approaches are not rigorous enough to move students performing at the Basic level to Proficient and Advanced. When EDEquity Inc. conducted a three year trend analysis of the state wide data in several states, there was a preverbal “grid-lock” (35%-40%) of students was at the Basic level of performance. Our findings were triangulated with observational classroom data collection and the review of lesson designs in different districts to provide a clear indication that *rigorous* planning and instruction delivery were the missing elements, when moving students to proficiency and advance.

This discovery has tremendous impact on the knowledge, skills and actions needed for current and future district and school leaders. What follows in this article will provide concrete steps leaders may choose to take to prepare and move school(s) to increase both State and Federal performance targets. The most impactful way to close the racial achievement gap in American schools is plain and simple. Improve the quality of instruction. Yes, it is that simple! Districts and school that have not focused on instructional improvement have lost their edge. Everything a district/school site does must have a direct and clear goal of improving instructional outcomes. I'm a firm believer; we have been focusing on the wrong target. American schools have shifted





their focus and attention to educational outcomes; essentially student achievements i.e. test scores! Student achievement is an effect of “something”: That is, instructional efficacy!

We continue to “report on the gap” of how certain subgroups lag behind other groups. However, when we walk the classrooms and witness below-average delivery of instruction, we have somehow convinced ourselves that the current system of doing business will change the academic outcomes of our students.

The current and future district and school leaders have to be committed (not interested) in refining their skills in order to identify and take action on instructional mediocrity. Before we engage our teachers and “upset the apple cart,” we must have a clear understanding of what mastery delivery of instruction looks like. The classrooms we have visited that have beaten the odds of mediocrity demonstrate the following;

- 1) The instructional leader is a teacher who believes *they are the difference* for student learning to exceed grade level standards.

- 2) There is *evidence of clear planning*; formal teacher collaboration session(s) are held where instructional actions are determined by data and focused, detailed lesson plans are outcomes of the collaboration.

- 3) The teacher *understands the learning profile of the students* and deploys instructional strategies within the lesson that align with the needs of the student(s). The expectation is not for the student to align to the instructional strategy (Tomlinson, 2010).

- 4) *Instructional pacing* allows the teacher to address the skills and language needed to engage the standard. Educators must have permission to delve deeply into a concept, instead of rushing through pacing guides. Student understanding is the goal; not curriculum coverage. We must “go deep” not “wide.”

- 5) *Teacher modeling* is purposeful, intentional and deliberate and provides effective scaffolding for students so that the students are able to work in productive, collaborative groups, or independently (Fisher, 2008).

- 6) Lastly, the *classroom environment is safe* (linguistically, racially and culturally) for students to take intellectual risk. Classroom rigor cannot be attained if there is not a safe learning environment. It is imperative for the teacher to find the Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) of





the class and every student. I'm sure there are other elements that contribute to improving instructional efficacy, but we have identified the key elements mentioned above when moving "Basic" instruction to "Proficient and Advanced".

Transforming mediocrity takes an instructional leader who has key skills in understanding and can "coach-up" instruction. The target of instruction should not just meet the standards for the teaching profession. I'm becoming more convinced that when teachers simply meet the indicated Standards for the Teaching Profession they are shooting for the "floor" and that exceeding the standards is the ceiling. Unfortunately there are no clear indicators for teachers or principals regarding what it looks like when the standards are exceeded. So the only target we have is the floor! All too often we shoot for "meeting the standard" and do not plan systematic strategies for exceeding the standard of instruction.

EDEquity supports teachers by asking a key reflective question; "What would it look like if the student(s) exceeded your expectations in the lesson?" If the teacher cannot believe that all of the student(s) are capable of exceeding their expectation, they are typically planning and teaching to the floor and not the ceiling. Student(s) exceeding the teacher's expectation should not be a surprise to the teacher. Instructional leaders must create the mind-set with teachers that they have the skills to enable student(s) to exceed their expectations. Another critical skill of instructional leaders is that they have an un-canny knack of creating a learning environment where the staff is comfortable being uncomfortable. This type of disequilibrium prompts staff to critically examine instructional practices and *strategically abandon* the practices that do not yield academic dividends.

Several of our districts have used our Level V Leadership Rubric to re-define and evaluate what skills and actions are needed to transform their leaders. Please feel free to download the rubric and begin to calibrate the quality indicators for yourself and the instructional leaders within your district; www.edequity.com/leadershiprubric.

The current standards for evaluating principals are good. However, we need to skillfully analyze the actions of educational leaders to assist in preparing them to rid their schools and system of mediocrity. As John Collins indicated in his book, *Good to Great*; "The nemesis of being great is thinking that you are good!" The intention of this article is to provoke a change in the conversation and actions; to not just focus on poor instruction, but create a relentless pursuit to improve "average teaching."

I welcome your feedback or reflection. Please feel free to e-mail me at javius@edequity.com or visit our web site: www.edequity.com





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