

Best Practices

What's the best way to help students learn? The principals of Eagle View Elementary, Francis Scott Key Middle School, and Lake Braddock Secondary School offer insights.

BY HOPE KATZ GIBBS WITH PETER NOONAN



Photo by Steve Barrett, www.stevebarrettphotography.com

"We stand at a unique point in the history of U.S. education — a point which the potential for truly meaningful school reform is greater than it ever has been," write educators Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock in their classic textbook, *A Handbook for Classroom Instruction That Works*.

Their research has been synthesized in the 378-page book, including the nine categories of useful instructional

strategies proven to improve student achievement:

1. Identifying similarities/differences
2. Summarizing and note taking
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
4. Homework and practice
5. Representing knowledge
6. Learning groups
7. Setting objectives, providing feedback
8. Generating, testing hypotheses
9. Cues, questions, advance organizers

"This list is not new," admits Peter Noonan, Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, "but it truly makes a dramatic difference in student learning when they are taught to take good notes, work in groups, and use graphic organizers as a means of keeping their papers—and thoughts—organized."

What also impresses Noonan is that many FCPS principals and teachers have embraced the strategies and are incorporating Marzano's "best practices" into their Professional Learning Communities (PLC) meetings and everyday practice.

"I only wish these ideas were taught in every teacher-training program in the country," he says. "In the Instructional Services Department we are confident that Marzano's strategies are the key to student success. I'm thrilled that our educators are embracing and implementing these cutting-edge ideas."

Following, you'll learn how principals at three FCPS schools are incorporating Marzano's best practices into their programs.

Marzano Mondays at Eagle View Elementary

"Eagle View is a new school so I had the opportunity to handpick a staff that shared the same view when it came to best practices," explains Principal Deborah Tyler, noting that PLC meetings are the most important aspect of their professional development program. "We have designated times on the calendar, and it is mandatory that all of our administrators attend."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



In 2004, educator Deborah Tyler received the Miken National Educator's Award—

an honor that calls attention to the importance of teaching and encourages young people to consider a career in education. A past nominee for the Greater Washington Reading Council's Principal of the Year award, Tyler was selected to represent Title I schools on the FCPS No Child Left Behind School Choice Planning Committee and was the Cluster II representative to the Fairfax Association of Elementary School Principals.

She has also served on numerous research and policy committees for FCPS and the Virginia Department of Education and has contributed to projects for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

In 2006, Tyler became principal of Eagle View Elementary and currently is in the Virginia Tech Educational Leadership and Policy doctoral cohort. In 2008 she received the Virginia Association of Elementary Principals School Bell Award, given to principals who have made significant contributions to their schools, school systems, state or national associations and/or other educational organizations.

Also present are all of the specialists who work in each grade, including the ESOL teachers, Tyler says.

"We take a very kid-centric, instruction-centered approach and have also figured out how to incorporate findings from eCART to help us formulate common assessments so we can determine next steps," she adds. "It has been an incredibly effective way to ensure all of our teachers are working together to help our students master the curriculum."

Then last year she took that idea step further and initiated a new program: Marzano Mondays.

"I have long been a fan of the work of Robert Marzano and his colleagues, so I decided it would be a good way to get all my teachers to master his work by studying one strategy from his theory each Monday," Tyler shares.

With tremendous assistance from AP Kimberly Willison, teachers created posters for the walls of the faculty meeting room that outlines each strategy. Also posted on the walls are key questions from the research conducted by Rick and Becky DuFour and Bob Eaker—nationally respected experts on applying the principles of strategy learning and PLC.

Willison says the mission of Marzano Monday meetings was to:

1. Promote teacher awareness of the research-based strategies that increase student achievement.
2. Encourage implementation of the strategies in daily instruction.
3. Provide teachers with core subject specific strategy models.
4. Support teachers with resources to implement strategies.
5. Establish a forum for planning and sharing application of the strategies to grade-level specific content.

Tyler admits this creative approach was born from necessity. The students at Eagle View didn't make AYP this year, and she believes there are several reasons why.

"When we opened the school we had 590 students; today we have 850," she says. "One-third of those kids are new to Virginia and have never experienced the rigor of the SOLs. I understand parents have to move throughout the year, but some are registering their students for school on the day we give the SOL exam—and by law every student in the building has to take the test. It's a challenge for everyone to keep up with the influx."

Eagle View fourth grade teacher Michelle Small says Marzano Mondays have helped.

"Marzano's research on instructional strategies helped me restructure how I plan my lessons and promote learning in the classroom," she explains. "Identifying similarities and differences and cooperative learning are two strategies that have impacted my students' growth and learning the most—such as in how our class constitution was drafted versus the U.S. Constitution, which provided a great connection for students. I find myself incorporating other techniques we discuss at our meetings throughout the day, and my students respond incredibly positively to them. This approach has definitely promoted individual and group accountability."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

A Note from Peter Noonan



At the beginning of my tenure as the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services in 2007, I talked about taking a “three-legged stool approach” to our curriculum and instructional strategy, which would be used by all of our principals and teachers to help students go from good to great in terms of academic achievement.

The first leg represents our Professional Learning Communities, and as we discussed in the summer issue of *inside*, principals across the division have been working diligently to enable teachers to communicate with each other on a regular basis so they can coordinate teaching practices and maximize their effectiveness and efficiency for students. The second leg is eCART, and as we reported in the fall issue of *inside*, it has been an effective formative assessment tool.

The last leg of the stool is the topic we tackle in this issue: best instructional practices.

I have always believed it is incumbent upon us as a division to identify, train, and support our teachers in research-based best practices.

Undoubtedly, some of the best research into high-yield strategies comes from Robert Marzano. We point to his work throughout this issue because I feel confident that his ideas will have the greatest impact on student achievement and especially will help us close the achievement gap for our minority students.

I'll admit that it frustrates me that every teacher-training program in the country doesn't incorporate his theories—and I hope that changes in

the near future. In the Instructional Services Department, we eagerly incorporate Marzano strategies—along with other cutting-edge educational research—into our programs.

For instance, we believe that students don't learn unless they are thoroughly engaged in the learning process (Kagan, Schlechty). The same goes for our faculty members. As a result, I believe it is our responsibility to create and support an inter-dependence so that principals, teachers, students, and parents are all working together to ensure that students achieve their full potential.

We all know that best practices in isolation don't work. The goal is to work in collaborative cultures, be creative, and think differently about how we work with our students. This idea is central to the whole notion of best practices and PLC.

Obviously, we want principals to mentor our teachers so that those who are well-versed and practiced in best practices can work with other teachers who may bring experience or a different skill set to the table. Building capacity is the key!

It goes without saying that our principals need to have a high level of understanding of different strategies so they can do classroom walk-throughs to identify and model best practices—then have courageous conversations with teachers who are not engaging in those practices so they'll understand the value of this approach.

I look forward to continuing this conversation and to ensuring all of our schools attain the highest level of achievement for all of our kids.

Peter Noonan, Assistant Superintendent
Instructional Services Department

Turning Point at Francis Scott Key MS

"If students aren't engaged in the curriculum, there isn't much chance we'll get them to do well on tests," believes Penny Myers, principal of Francis Scott Key Middle School.

That's why her focus is on engagement rather than compliance, and to get students excited about learning she uses an educational product called Turning Point (www.turningtechnologies.com).

Here's how it works: When the instructor presents an interactive polling slide via a PowerPoint presentation, the participant presses the number on the Response Card that corresponds to the answer of his or her choice. The Response Card sends an infrared signal to the wireless receiver attached to the computer running the PowerPoint presentation. Turning Point software running with PowerPoint records and/or displays the response per the presenter's preference.

Interactive questions can be used for participation points, grading tests, as well as tracking student performance. Teachers can also create and run reports for virtually all of their classroom needs; from individual student participation scores to entire classroom results.

"It is cutting-edge student response technology that enables our teachers to evaluate the entire class, and quickly find out what they understood from the lesson," Myers adds. "It also helps us conduct formative assessments and track individual student learning. Since incorporating this tool into our program, scores have gone up and everyone is excited to learn."

Indeed. Power Math 7 Teacher Jenni Skeen says she's seen a dramatic improvement in student participation since she began using Turning Point.

"Students are anxious to see their success, and since I started using Turning Point students actually cheer when the whole class responds correctly," Skeen says. "I like that positive feedback is given to the students who are most accurate, and students who struggle remain anonymous to all but the teacher."

English 7 teacher Laura Migdal says she appreciates that she can quickly—and painlessly—use Turning Point to collect formative data. "Students enjoy the anonymity and the game show-like presentation, and I love being able to collect data without spending hours grading tests. Plus, it helps me collect formative information about kids who might not be comfortable sharing their answers in front of the class. All I do is take a quick break in the lesson to check the data and I know immediately whether I should move on or need to dig back in and work on the skill a little longer."

Myers also instituted *Lunch & Crunch*. "Teachers were frustrated kids weren't doing their homework at night, and while I believe we must have a 'no excuses' attitude when it comes to raising student achievement, I feel strongly that kids need daily practice with math. On January 5 we started a program at lunch where students who are chronically tardy with homework have the chance to get it done with the help of a math teacher. We started with 80 students—and by January 28 we were down to 17."

Francis Scott Key principal Penny Myers started her teaching career with Teach for America

(www.teachforamerica.org), and after completing her student teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School system, she taught 1st grade bilingual students in Houston, Texas.

After returning to the east coast, she was hired to teach at the DC public school Paul Junior High. She spent nine years in the classroom—finishing those years teaching in Fairfax County as a middle school Spanish teacher—before taking a job at the Teach For America national office in New York City.

"It was an incredible experience, but I really missed seeing kids every day and realized that I was happiest in a school setting, being able to directly impact students on a daily basis," Myers says, noting that year



away fueled her desire to become a school leader so she could broaden her impact on students.

Myers returned to the classroom while working on her Masters in Educational Policy & Leadership Studies at Virginia Tech. She then began her administrative career as a full-time intern after being selected to participate in LEAD Fairfax, a leadership program in Fairfax County funded by a grant through the Wallace Foundation to develop aspiring leaders.

For the next three years she worked as an assistant principal at the high school and middle school levels and then was appointed principal of Francis Scott Key Middle School in Springfield. "Being a principal is definitely the most challenging and rewarding job I have had, and I absolutely love it."

SHARE! encourages Lake Braddock's Dave Thomas

The importance of sharing isn't lost on Lake Braddock Secondary School principal Dave Thomas.

He's a big believer in the power of the PLC to help teachers improve student achievement. This winter, though, he took that approach to a new level when, on the recommendation of teachers, he hosted a "Best Practices Share Fair" for Lake Braddock middle and high school teachers.

Among the 20 middle school presentations, civics teachers showed the group how they use interactive notebooks, history teachers told the others about their "Guess Who?" board game and lessons using Jenga blocks, and reading teachers presented information on their content brainstorming graphic organizer.

Another impressive presentation came from the middle school physical education department, where teachers landed a grant to help them buy heart rate monitors, spinning bikes and digital cardio machines.

"Not only does this help our students see how they can improve their physical fitness, these monitors also reinforce what they are learning in math class," Thomas adds.

In fact, more than two dozen high school presentations were equally creative, he says—including training videos from the art team, blogging as a classroom tool from the business teachers, and vocabulary tic-tac-toe games from Math 7 and Lake Braddock's high school chemistry teachers.

Thomas notes that he was especially impressed with the auto tech teachers—two professional auto mechanics who teach at Lake Braddock—who showed how they have students repair cars along side them so they can see first hand how to master the trade.

"We had a luncheon in the cafeteria for all the teachers so they could be relaxed and fed while they shared their incredible ideas," Thomas says. "It was fantastic."

Thomas notes that he feels fortunate as principal to have a bird's eye view of everything happening in the school, for he regularly gets to walk into every classroom and see the interesting, cutting-edge approach they take to help students learn.

"This event gave all the teachers the chance to have that same opportunity," Thomas concludes. "It was the first time we did this, but it was such a hit that I'm sure it will be an annual event."

Dave Thomas has been the principal of Lake Braddock Secondary School since 2007.

"My goal is to work with my talented staff to provide a learning environment where students are able to achieve their potential, think critically, and mature socially," he says. "Preparing students for the challenges of life is an overall goal of this school."



Lake Braddock Share Fair 2009

Middle School Best Practices

Civics, Economics: Handout of World

US History: Zip-Around Cards

Counseling: Bullying and Sexual Harassment Survey Data Report

English 7: "Where's Waldo?"

English 8: Nonfiction text analysis

Reading: Content Brainstorming Graphic Organizer

MS ESOL: Techniques for ESOL Learners in the General Ed Classroom

FACS: Competency Assessment for Foods / Nutrition Curriculum

Math 7: Kagan Strategies

Math 8: eCART Activities

Science 8: Kwik Chek Handheld Dry Erase Boards

MS Special Education: VGLA and SeaStars Presentation

Library: The Plagiarism Project

High School Best Practices

Art: Training Videos

English: Create a Newspaper (or newsletter, brochure, magazine)

Algebra II: Factoring Review Via the Internet and Olympic Regression

Math: Implementing Techniques for Blackboard

AP Environmental Science: Blackboard Formative Quizzes

Biology: Compare 5 Related Ideas

Social Studies: Teaching World War I for Visual Learners

World History 1: Discussion Board on Current Events

Government: Service Learning

AP US History: Review & Reteach Subject in a Large Setting

Music: Using Blackboard

Marketing: Set Up a Role Play

Physics: Motion Detection Lab

Special Ed: Accommodations Benefit All Students in the Classroom

AVID: Cornell Notes

RECOMMENDED READING FROM PETER NOONAN

Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement by Robert J. Marzano

In *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*, Robert Marzano shows how a carefully structured combination of two approaches—sustained silent reading and instruction in subject-specific vocabulary terms—can help overcome the deficiencies in background knowledge that hamper the achievement of many children.

Marzano writes: “According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), every day from September to June some 53.5 million students in the United States walk into classes that teach English, mathematics, history, and geography and face the sometimes daunting task of learning new content... Although it is true that the extent to which students will learn this new content is dependent on factors such as skill of the teacher, interest of the student, and complexity of the content, research literature supports one compelling fact: what students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to that content.”

“This book is a must read for all educators,” insists Peter Noonan, FCPS Assistant Superin-

tendent of the Instructional Services Department, noting that the 2004 book published by ASCD offers:

Principles that underlie an effective sustained silent reading program

A five-step process for using sustained silent reading to enhance knowledge

The defining characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction

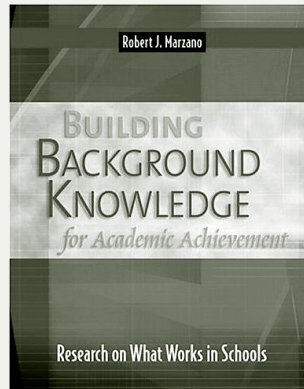
A six-step process for direct instruction in vocabulary in each discipline

The vocabulary terms critical to students’ success in every academic subject

Vignettes suggest how the recommended reading and vocabulary instruction programs

might be implemented in elementary schools, middle and high schools.

It also includes a list of 7,923 vocabulary terms culled from the national standards documents and other publications, organized into 11 subject areas and four grade-level categories. The research-based recommendations and step-by-step approach equips educators with the tools they need to help close the achievement gap and enable all students to succeed in school.



HOMEWORK: As a prerequisite to what we’ll be discussing in our Spring issue, please read Robert Marzano’s 2007 book, “The Art & Science of Teaching.”



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