

Slaying the Dragon: NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 charges ALL teachers, special educators and general educators alike, to make certain NO child is left behind educationally. It is an honorable goal worth striving for. The future of our society depends upon the capability of our children. Most do not dispute that, in some cases, the American public education system could be more efficient and effective. What weighs heavily upon the shoulders of educators however, is the impossibility of actually ensuring that EVERY child becomes proficient in literacy, mathematics, and science. There are so many things that contribute to a child's ability and/or opportunity to learn that are completely out of a teacher's control. Is it reasonable to expect the educational system to provide the antidote for all of society's ills and guarantee learning will occur?

Attitude is Everything.

While many of the mandates of NCLB 2001 seem impossible, we can choose our attitude as we deal with them. We can view NCLB as a dragon, impossible to slay and therefore give up the fight—or we can set about finding ways to slay the beast. I choose the latter.

Good instruction is good instruction, regardless of the political climate. This article is the first in a series of articles dedicated to assisting teachers to hone their craft. Every teacher in every classroom must be “at the top of his/her game” when it comes to instructional design and delivery. Hence, our focus on sharing information on proven teaching practices derived from 35 years of research. This ongoing series will be included in each issue of the 2003-2004 Utah Special Educator. Topics to be covered follow a continuum beginning with core standards driven instruction, then effective instructional design and delivery techniques, differentiated instruction, and inclusive practices. Our last issue will celebrate exemplary teachers doing what they do best—teaching! We welcome any ideas or suggestions you would like to share with us on any of these topics.

Let the Slaying Begin...

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the linchpin of NCLB. In Utah, AYP will be measured using Criterion Reference Tests (CRTs). These

CRT's are intended to measure skills defined by core curriculum standards. In effect, this means that it is the skills and knowledge defined by the core curriculum standards that students will be tested on. Therefore, the core standards must drive what we teach.

Traditionally, educators have depended upon published textbooks to dictate the scope and sequence of what was taught. The predominant theory was that if we could get through our textbooks, surely we would have hit all the skills mentioned in the core standards. Certainly our school districts would not have given us textbooks that didn't match up with the core curriculum—right? Well—times are a changin! We must leave this comfort zone of tradition and leap into a new reality. That reality is core standards drive instruction, not textbooks. Textbooks are wonderful resources to help us teach the core curriculum, but they are only a resource, as are guest speakers, computers, the internet, reference materials, etc.

Core Confusion

I visited with a wonderful teacher a couple of weeks ago who shared his frustration about having to remove a fabulous old gas engine from his 5th grade classroom. He told me that he was very discouraged because he had used this gas engine to teach many concepts to his students over the years. He expressed the dismay he felt when his administrator told him the gas engine had to go because it didn't have anything to do with the core standards. I felt his pain, I understood his anguish—and I recognized the confusion. At this point I offered another idea that he might want to discuss with his administrator. It is possible that, in fact, he did not need to remove his beloved gas engine from his classroom. There are many ways that he could include his gas engine in teaching the knowledge and skills articulated in the core standards. Students could write about the gas engine. If lessons were carefully designed, writing activi-



Diane Johnson • Utah Personnel Development Center



ties about the gas engine could be used to teach several of the writing standards and objectives. Students could read about gas engines and fulfill requirements of many of the reading, listening and speaking standards. Math and science standards are also obvious ways to use the gas engine. I suggested that perhaps what was needed was not the removal of the gas engine, but a more thorough knowledge of the core standards for which this teacher was responsible. The most important thing would be to articulate to his administrator how the gas engine could be used to teach those core standards. Perhaps a reconsideration of retaining the gas engine as a teaching tool would occur.

Using the core standards to drive our instruction does not mean abandoning the extra things we love to teach. It does mean that we must make sure we clearly know and understand what we are required to teach—the core standards for our grade or subject. It also means that we must make sure we can link the activities we love directly to the knowledge and skills delineated by our core standards.

Destination Frustration

Let me illustrate with an analogy. I am planning a trip to St. George from Salt Lake City for a very important meeting. I have some friends who live in Spanish Fork and some family members who live in Panguitch. Is it okay for me to stop in Spanish Fork to see my friends, or stop in Panguitch to visit family? If teaching the Core Standards is represented by the meeting in St. George, and favorite lessons or activities are represented by Spanish Fork and



Panguitch, it is easy to see that as long as our visits to Spanish Fork and Panguitch help us reach St. George, it is completely appropriate to stop there. Conversely, if stopping to see friends and family in Spanish Fork and Panguitch keep us from reaching St. George on time, or at all, it would not be appropriate.

Catching the Core

Updated core curriculum standards for K-6 can be found on the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) website (usoe.k12.ut.us) with a link to the Utah Education Network (UEN) website. The current secondary core curriculum standards can also be found there. Your district administrators should also have copies of both the elementary and secondary core standards. Keep your eyes open for information on the Utah Core Academies sponsored by the USOE, UPDC, and USU. Send ideas and suggestions to me at dianejo@updc.org or call 801-272-3431. Best wishes for a wonderful school year!