



HOW TO EMPOWER STUDENT LEARNING WITH TEACHER CLARITY

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SmartBrief

A high-poverty school district in Idaho is seeing gains in student performance and agency and teacher effectiveness. See what it did to create its pathway to success.

E DUCATORS ARE BURIED UNDER AN AVALANCHE of content standards. Knowing what to teach and how to teach it is tricky enough. Add to that the challenge of getting learners at all levels to a prescribed place of mastery, and it's easy to see why teachers feel overwhelmed and frustrated.

To achieve what they want in the classroom, teachers need clarity — a deep understanding about what to teach and why, how to teach it and what success looks like. This goes way beyond simply knowing the day's lesson. It describes a process that enables teachers to communicate those same aspects to their students in simple and plain language.

Teacher clarity is a powerful tool for narrowing and focusing activities, cutting away aspects of instruction that don't help learning. Along the way, teacher clarity reinforces the gradual release of responsibility of learning from the teacher to the students so that students feel ownership of their work.

"Know thy impact" is a practice introduced by education researcher John Hattie in his book, [Visible Learning](#). Visible learning has two legs: First, it promotes the idea that teachers know what effect they have



on student learning. Second, it refers to making learning visible to students, so they can become their own self-directing teachers.

By examining and synthesizing more than 1,000 meta-analyses, comprising more than 50,000 individual studies, Hattie has long researched the factors that affect student learning and achievement. In his book, Hattie ranked 138 effects that influence learning outcomes. (That list has since grown to 195.) While nearly any change in education will have a positive effect, Hattie notes, why not put energy and emphasis on those that have the greatest effect?

Teacher clarity is near the top of that list, with an effect size of 0.75 — far and away more influential on learning than such factors as class size (0.21), type of school (0.24) or the use of digital tools (0.32).

Just as important, teacher clarity turns out to be vital to achieving many other influences at the top rungs of Hattie's list.

Teacher clarity “serves as a catalyst for the other effect sizes to become possible,” says Kara Vandas. Vandas is a certified trainer who works for professional-development provider [Corwin](#) to deliver on-site [Visible Learning professional development](#) at schools in the United States and Canada.

Without teacher clarity, she points out, “clear feedback to students is difficult because you're

not even sure what you're looking for. For feedback to be effective, first, you've got to get clear. The same is true with using formative assessment to change your practices. If you're not sure what you're teaching or what the students have to know and be able to do, it's hard to reflect and say, 'Are they getting there or not?'

Teacher clarity has become an emphasis for Corwin workshops, she adds, because “it's a great starting point for implementing Visible Learning with teachers.”

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BRINGING TEACHER CLARITY INTO FOCUS

CORWIN'S ON-SITE [Teacher Clarity professional development](#) helps remove teacher frustration by training them in the skills needed to identify the most important standards and create a road map for instruction. Step by step, they learn how to align learning standards and instruction, bringing clarity to their own activities while passing it forward to their students.

The Corwin introduction takes educators on a three-stop journey with engaging, hands-on seminars and implementation days, in which they gain an understanding of three basic concepts: learning intentions, success criteria and learning progressions, each of which builds on the others.

LEARNING INTENTIONS

"Learning intentions," declares Hattie, "are what we intend students to learn." Whether it be skills, knowledge, attitudes or values within a given lesson or unit, a learning intention performs three functions:

- It lays out a clear statement to help the learner be aware of what is to be gained from the lesson.
- It provides guidance to the teacher about what should be taught.
- It forms the basis for assessing what the student has learned and what the teacher has taught well.

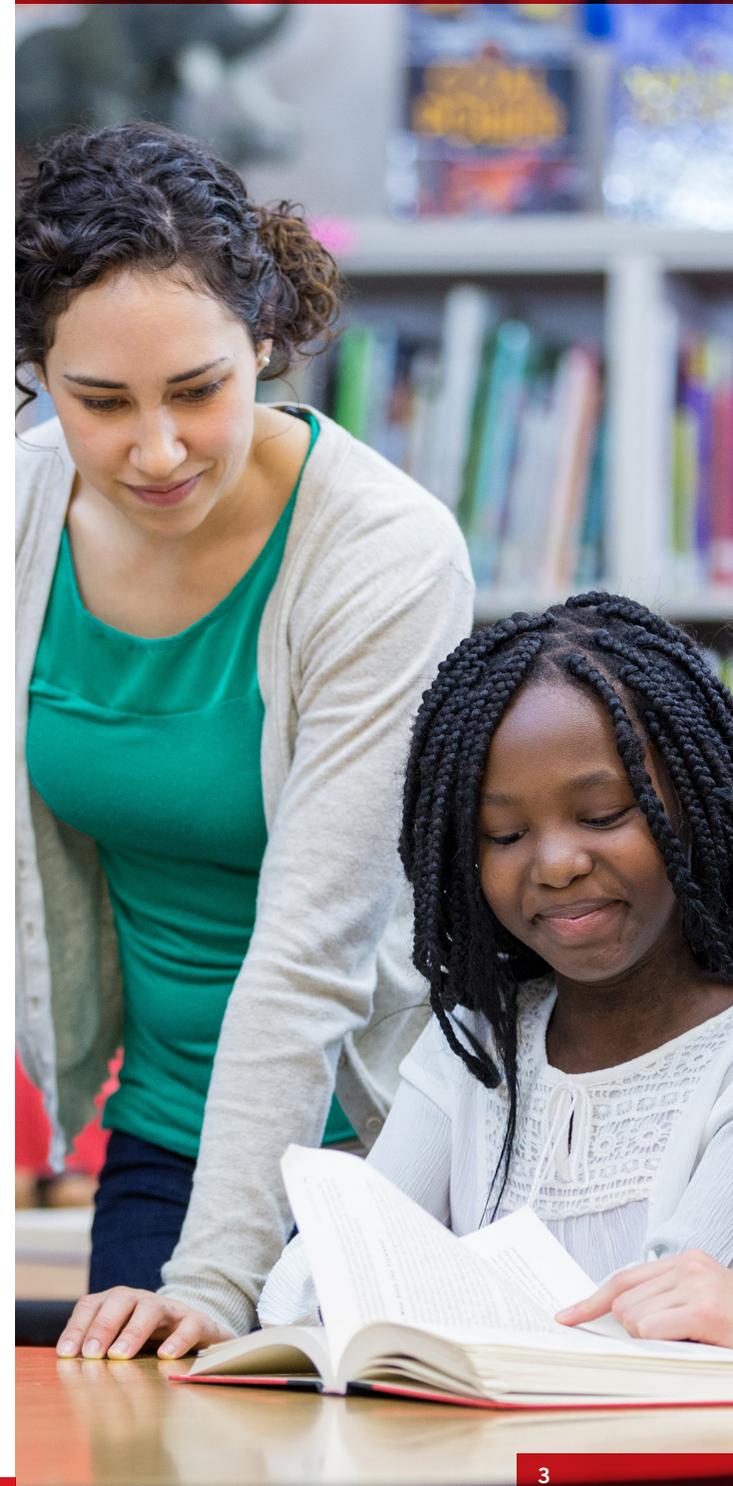
For teachers to communicate learning intentions to students, they must "find clarity in the standards," noted Hattie, "in order to translate clear learning expectations for students."

SUCCESS CRITERIA

A learning intention won't include specific detail beyond a general statement, such as "learn to use a formula to solve a math problem" or "learn to write an opinion piece." The details appear in the success criteria.

As Hattie clarifies, success criteria are intended to help students "understand what the teacher is using as the criteria for judging their work." It also offers evidence that the teacher is clear about the criteria used to determine if the learning intentions have been successfully attained by changing the flavor of the feedback, says Vandas: "It's not just, 'Oh, your writing looks pretty good. Maybe add some more details.' It's 'You've got to have a powerful claim in your argument, and I don't see it here. Go look at the success criteria and exemplars.'"

While every student faces the same learning intention and success criteria, what differs are the activities students undertake to show their learning. Education leader and author Larry Ainsworth calls success criteria a "map to the learning destination." They provide a direction for instruction and serve as continual motivation for students.



LEARNING PROGRESSIONS

Ainsworth, who designed Corwin's Teacher Clarity workshops, defines "learning progressions" as the "sequential building blocks of instruction" or "instructional scaffolds" that students use to work their way up to the learning intention. It may be helpful, he suggests, "to think of learning progressions as the daily 'chunks' of instruction." "Quick progress checks" — also known as formative assessments — serve as checkpoints along the way.

Hattie states that each progression represents "higher expectations of challenges" for the learner.

These are different from the progressions represented in the learning standards. Think of them as "micro-progressions," allowing the student to move up a single rung of the ladder that reaches all the way to the standard itself.

During the workshop, teachers get dedicated time to collaborate in developing learning intentions

and success criteria for their units of study. They break that work down further into the discrete steps students will follow to succeed as well as the formative assessments and feedback to support and document the learning progress.

Even by the end of the first day, says Vandas, participants "walk away with a learning intention and success criteria for a unit of study that they can use with kids, ready to implement right away."



TEACHER CLARITY IN THE REAL WORLD

FOR THE PAST FOUR SUMMERS [Caldwell School District](#) in Idaho has run “Summer Institutes” to bring teachers up to speed on the Common Core State Standards. As Jodie Mills, chief academic officer for the district, explains, “We deconstructed the standards. We scaffolded them back up. We then did some alignments, both vertical and horizontal. Then we got to a point where we dove into assessments.” By then, however, teachers had really begun struggling “with all of the interventions and things we were trying to do that we thought impacted kids.”

That’s when the school system called on Corwin. Hattie’s message on effect size and impact resonated for Mills and the other district leaders.

Caldwell is not a wealthy district, notes Mills. With a high-poverty student population of 83% to 86%, a minority population of 62% and a special-ed population of 13%, “we’re absolutely working with a demographic that [requires us] to understand the impacts we’re having on students — and it needs to be sustained impact.”

When the new learning standards were introduced, Mills recalls, “we were in the same boat as everybody else,” wondering what to do and how to get teachers up to speed quickly. At the same time, she says, “we wanted to make sure the

money we have is spent on things that directly impact kids. We need to be incredibly strategic. If it’s something that’s an adult favorite but we don’t see impact on kids, we don’t do it.”

In 2015, when the three-day Institute ran again, Corwin education experts led three one-day sessions through which the 200 teachers in attendance rotated. The topics: Visible Learning, learning intentions and success criteria, and high-impact instruction.

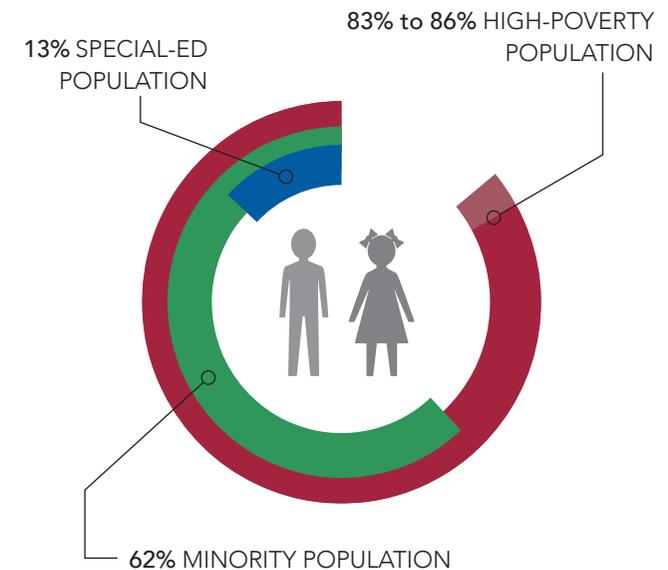
While the initial workshops are typically a day or two, the richest results come in the follow-on coaching that brings teachers together by grade level or content area to hammer out actual learning intentions and success criteria for use in the classroom.

As a result, “We’ve seen widespread implementation of the practice within the district, and the coaching has helped immensely with that,” says Mills.

Besides providing a shared vocabulary for teachers and school leaders, laying that foundation has given the district “a clear direction and a clear definition of what that direction is and what success looks like,” she adds.

THE CALDWELL DISTRICT

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TEACHERS “LEAVE THEIR EGOS AT THE DOOR”

The gains have been remarkable, asserts Mills. “There’s more of a professional dialogue. [Teachers] leave their egos at the door. They come in, and they truly are talking about what is impacting kids and the impact they’ve had, not necessarily on the teaching but on the kids’ learning. No longer do we say, ‘I taught it, but they

didn’t learn it.’ It’s, ‘Wow. I’d better go back and find out why they didn’t learn it.’”

While acting as evaluators of their impact, teachers have learned to stop being the experts. They now recognize that they struggle with learning just as the students do. “Boy, a little humility goes a long way,” Mills marvels. “Teachers need to know the direction, but if they can model cognitive dissonance and if they can show that they struggle out of [the ‘learning pit’], I can’t think of a better role model for our kids.”

Thus, students also have begun owning their own learning, even at the youngest ages. Vandas points to the first-grade teacher teams at Caldwell, which have been using the terms “learning intentions,” “success criteria” and “learning progressions” with their students all year and having them track their progress in notebooks. “The kids were not only clear about where they were, but [they] learned how to talk the talk. They learned how to explain the criteria. They learned how to give feedback about the criteria. The kids learned the language of learning along with the teachers.”

Recently, the district has been analyzing results for data on student writing. “It’s obvious that in the schools that have picked up on the success criteria and intentions and shared that with the kids, they have stronger performance on this particular assessment than the other schools that haven’t,” Mills asserts.

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WHAT'S NEXT FOR CALDWELL

Now Vandas and her colleague Ainsley Rose spend time not only during the Institute days facilitating sessions with the educators, but also in on-site visits to each school working directly with principals, instructional coaches and teachers. That time is spent in coaching and addressing specific “sticking points” they face. Vandas also meets with Mills to plan next steps for the district, “so there’s always a district influence over what’s happening in the building, but still they have the autonomy to take it where they need to go,” says Mills. The result: “We’ve got 10 buildings heading usually in 10 different directions, but it’s always leading toward the ‘Promised Land.’ ”

On the last day of those visits, principals and coaches are brought together to get a preview of what’s coming next. These sessions give them “an opportunity to be in the pit, to have that cognitive dissonance in a very protective environment so they can ask questions and see how it’s going to work,” Mills observes. Then, when the teachers start going through their own learning processes, those principals and instructional people “have an opportunity to be the experts in the room,” she adds. “We’re not just focusing on what teachers need in the building, but we’re also providing supports for the principals through this journey.”

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Vandas appreciates the district's approach. "Caldwell has set up the work so that the summer is for new training and for next-step ideas, and we can take them on a journey over time," she explains. Then professional development during the school year "is for implementing what they learn in their own way, in their own buildings, in their own culture."

And the journey continues. This summer's Institute will focus on feedback, says Mills. "We've got learning intentions and success criteria [implemented] in most classrooms. Teachers understand how to get clarity. Now how do we get kids to the point where they're clear and they're giving us really good feedback? It's definitely already happening in some classrooms. But we want full-scale, districtwide implementation of that so we have assessment-capable learners from K to 12. It's a matter of time before we absolutely rock this place."

IN THE COURSE OF FINDING SUCCESS

with John Hattie's Visible Learning and Corwin's professional-development program, Caldwell School District has emerged from the "learning pit" with several lessons worth remembering:

Inspire rampant buy-in. The principles of Visible Learning have gained fans not just among teachers, but also among leaders at the school, district and state levels. "We give them some best practices, make sure they understand the research and help them get started," says Corwin's Kara Vandas. "And then they just really take it and run with it. It becomes their way of doing things."

First comes trust. Before teachers gain clarity, they'll experience cognitive dissonance, which generates struggle and discomfort. Caldwell "had to do quite a bit of culture- and trust-building to get to the point where we could have a conversation with teachers about what they didn't know and have it be OK," says the district's Jodie Mills. "We encourage failure, we encourage them to struggle — as long as they're doing something that's strongly supported with data and evidence and will impact kids."

Achieving lasting impact takes time. Caldwell is heading into its third summer of working with Corwin, and with each intervening year teacher clarity runs deeper, says Mills. "I was adamant about the fact that when we started down this journey, I didn't want to buy a product. I didn't want to buy the smell of a new book. I wanted to invest in people. At the end of the day, that's what this is about."

There are no silver bullets in education. Organizations in education are "susceptible to the pendulum swing," muses Corwin consultant Ainsley Rose. "We're always searching for that silver bullet." The best antidote is really understanding what's needed for professional development and being intentional about how to carry it out. Adds Vandas, "It wasn't like, 'OK, everybody, we have to have some PD, so what are we going to do?' They had searched out Hattie and Corwin. They knew what they wanted."

5 LESSONS LEARNED

"Capture" the journey. As Caldwell moves the needle on learning for its teachers and students, Mills worries that much is being forgotten about the struggle the school system has gone through to get as far along as it is now. "Too many times our end result in education tends to be standardized assessments or the high stakes," she suggests. "We need to honor the journey we've been on. Educators are terrible about celebrating their own successes. And I want to remind them of that." Declares Rose, "If you're not documenting what you have been doing along the way, it's very easy to fall back into that trap of saying, 'OK, we've done Hattie now. What's the next thing?' Progress is relative to where you started. You need to know where you started to be able to say, 'We clearly are making an impact.'"



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