



SEEING RESULTS

FROM 'BRUTAL FACTS' TO BEST SCHOOLS WITH MIKE SCHMOKER



"We are on the verge of the greatest age in education, if we would just do the things that we already know work."

—Mike Schmoker

In late September, SCOE began a year-long professional development effort called *The Leadership Series: Improving Learning for All*. Throughout the course of this school year, the Leadership Series will bring five nationally recognized experts to Sonoma County to share their thoughts about how schools can meet the challenge of attaining higher levels of student achievement. Over 230 administrators and teacher-leaders from 13 districts are participating in these sessions, which incorporate a substantial amount of time for school and district teams to discuss the presentations and plan how to put the strategies into place at their sites.

This issue of the SCOE Bulletin features a summary of the first Leadership Series session. In this presentation, school improvement expert and respected author Dr. Michael J. Schmoker discussed how schools can move from understanding the "brutal facts" about education to becoming "the best schools we've ever had." This summary of his presentation was prepared by Annette Murray, coordinator of the North Coast AVID Regional Center.



EFFECTIVE LESSONS: WHAT AND HOW

Mike Schmoker described a teacher, one individual teacher, who changed a school's achievement standing on writing assessments by consistently doing the following in every lesson taught.

- Clearly identified the standard being addressed or learning outcome desired for that day (for example, introductory paragraphs).
- Scaffolded instruction—that is, provided explicit step-by-step instruction—provided models and exemplars for students to study in pairs or individually, and checked for understanding using formative assessments *during the lesson*.
- Ensured engagement and attentiveness by calling on students randomly to share.
- Engaged students in writing their own introductory paragraphs *only when most or all demonstrated readiness* and used prompts that encouraged higher-order thinking.

The “brutal facts,” as Mike Schmoker calls them, are no secret to educators across Sonoma County. We already know from our own teaching practice and classroom observations that most students spend hours completing worksheets, watching movies, cutting and pasting PowerPoint presentations, and passively listening to group presentations. Students are mired in what Schmoker calls the crayola curriculum—busy work tangentially related to the curriculum that consumes an enormous amount of instructional time, time that students could otherwise spend engaged in analytical reading and discussion or completing writing and mathematics assignments.

Researchers have found that on any given day in any classroom across America what you are least likely to see is reading, writing, and discussion. In U.S. schools, teachers work in isolation, picking and choosing standards in a haphazard manner and generally teaching on the fly. This approach to curriculum has left our students dismally under-prepared for college and the global workforce. Only seven percent of low-income students will ever earn a college degree. Among college-bound students, our highest-achievers, only 32 percent are adequately prepared for college.

Yet, Schmoker claims that these brutal facts offer us a way out of our current situation. Yes, the school system has created barriers, but all of us in the system can easily change it tomorrow—*if we want to*. We have the tools at hand and simply need to put new practices into place.

The first step is to break down the barrier of teacher isolation. He suggests that teachers be organized into groups known as **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** based on grade level or content area. By meeting just twice a month and utilizing highly focused meeting protocols, teachers working together can improve *what we teach* and *how well we teach it*.

A key role of teacher-based PLCs is to ensure that a **guaranteed and viable curriculum** is implemented, says Schmoker. Working at the site or district level, teachers should identify the essential or power standards, then outline a map for teaching those standards throughout the school year. Next, by agreeing on and using **common assessments**, they can analyze the results of instruction and pinpoint student weaknesses.

For example, if the math PLC sees that students are scoring low on probability, teachers can create a lesson that re-teaches this concept, but presents it in a different way than in past lessons. If English teachers determine that introductory paragraphs are a common weakness, they can work together to develop a lesson to remedy this shortcoming.

Administrators and teacher-leaders have a critical role to play in monitoring the curriculum and results of common assessments. Schmoker advises administrators, working in partnership with teacher-leaders, to conduct at least one short, unannounced



walk-through in each classroom on a monthly basis. The goal is to look for patterns of strength or weakness in lessons that address the essential standards and to see if teachers are effectively engaging students in critical reasoning and higher-order reading, writing, and thinking.

When teachers meet as PLCs, their discussions must be centered on **teaching and learning**, not logistics. (See meeting format, next page.) Most meetings are broken, says Schmoker, but we can fix them by specifically focusing on what students are—or are not—learning. This requires clear goals for what we want students to know, effective ways to measure what they are learning, and a willingness to strategize together to ensure that goals are met.

Administrators should monitor PLC meetings to track their progress. Which teams have established written protocols? Which teams are using them? How many teams have created common assessments? Have the PLCs created successful lesson plans?

Finally, small wins should be recognized and celebrated. This alone may be the single best way to improve morale, promote momentum, and overcome resistance. If only one of 15 classrooms is teaching essential standards, celebrate that, then set a goal for 2-3 classrooms to do it next month. Check progress again, celebrate again, and plan the next small step forward.

Ultimately, Schmoker believes that schools must redefine literacy instruction across the curriculum. “It is the ability to read well that is the single best indicator of future economic success,” he says. “The crayola curriculum of dioramas, illustrated posters, and mobiles must be left behind so that students can engage in **authentic literacy**.”

He defines authentic literacy as analytical reading, persuasive writing, and discussion. Simply put, students must read, write, and talk. Non-fiction articles should be read with pen in hand and students should read and re-read text with a critical question in mind. Then, they should engage in discussion about what they’ve read and have the opportunity to write persuasively about the topic. This is a goal for students at *all* grades levels. Writing and discussion



ABOUT THE PRESENTER

Michael J. Schmoker, Ph.D., has been an influential voice in education. A former central office administrator, middle and high school English teacher, and football coach, he has written four books and numerous articles about education.

His most recent book is the bestselling *RESULTS NOW: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Results in Teaching and Learning*, which was used as a reference during this seminar. One of his early books, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, is among the most widely used books by school leaders in the United States.

Mike Schmoker is a frequent presenter at national conferences and has consulted with hundreds of schools and districts in the areas of curriculum, assessment and literacy instruction.



Team members from the Healdsburg Unified and Wright school districts

FORMAT: For a teacher meeting

Mike Schmoker outlined this simple meeting format for teachers to use when meeting in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This format will effectively focus the discussion on teaching and learning.

Start with a clear annual goal

- For example: The percentage of our students who are at or above standard in reading will increase from 74% in 2007 to 80% in 2008.

Each month

- Choose one identified low-scoring area to work on.
- What is the standard? How can we assess it?
- Begin with the end in mind, then build backwards.

Quiet write (1 minute)

- Identify a few strategies that address the identified area—front-loading vocabulary, reading text twice, retelling to a partner, etc.

Brainstorm (4-5 minutes)

- Each person in the group, in consecutive order, has the opportunity to contribute one idea or strategy. It must be stated succinctly, in 20 seconds or less.
- A recorder writes down each idea on chart paper.
- There is no discussion or criticism of the ideas.
- Expect to piggy-back or build on each other's ideas.

Select the best of the strategies (3-6 minutes)

Build the lesson (4-10 minutes)



Petaluma City Schools' team at work during the Schmoker seminar

prompts can range from “Who would be a better friend, Spider or Turtle?” to “What do you think are the most important lessons of World War I?”

Mike Schmoker concluded his presentation by saying that the brutal facts about education are not difficult to validate, nor are they hard to overcome. But educators must change business as usual.

“We are not even scratching the surface of our potential,” he said. “Imagine if we could just put these simple ideas in place—targeted teamwork, measurable goals, guaranteed and viable curriculum, and radical changes to literacy instruction. We could change the face of education. The results would be stunning.

“Couldn't you build these concepts into your program *this year*?” Schmoker challenged. “Don't you think you would see achievement increase?”

Our schools are floundering in a status quo where most students never go to college and even our highest achievers need remediation once they get there. Today, the United States graduates 30,000 engineers a year compared to China and India, which graduate 300,000 and 750,000 respectively. The stakes are high for the next generation and we educators owe it to our students to institute changes in our education system. From Mike Schmoker's perspective, we can do this—starting today—by focusing on instructional and leadership practices that ensure greater student results.

Learn more: You can see a short video clip from Mike Schmoker's presentation and access some related articles he's written at www.scoe.org. ♦



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