Responsive Teaching Produces Results: The New Knowledge Workers/Teachers of the 21st Century

James E. Barker

"If you want to be successful, put your effort into controlling the sail, not the wind."

—Author Unknown

The question of what constitutes a qualified, capable teacher is the heart and soul of our existence as educators. Unless schools, teachers, and systems define and develop qualified, capable teachers, America will continue to leave millions of its children behind.

The idea of a "qualified" teacher can be easily agreed upon. The idea of "capable" is a determinant that should be defined in terms of students' improved success, not teacher qualifications. Qualified, capable teachers are responsive teachers; they accept their accountability as measured by the degree of student improvement on standards-based assessments, not the number of degrees on the wall.

The former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, says, "The key to the operating system is the understanding that it's all about learning and driving results" (2001, p. 199). Teachers who do drive results with their students are "qualified and capable" of inspiring educational growth and of elevating students' levels of proficiency. These teachers are the new knowledge workers of the 21st century: those who respond to multilanguage, multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural challenges by adjusting their instructional sails to their students' learning courses, their profiles, and their varying performances.

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I speak as the superintendent in an urban school district in Erie, Pennsylvania, with 12,848 students, 46 percent minority students, 6 percent English Language Learners, and 72 percent of all students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Erie, which represents the new diverse America in all its richness, focuses on providing expanded educational opportunities for all. It is a typical American city where the No Child Left Behind Act will move students ahead or leave them behind, depending on our ability to create qualified and capable teachers.

Aiming for Competence, Not Comfort

I live the realities of the day-to-day successes and failures of teaching—and learning—in public education. When we fail there is no more devastating experience in the world. When we succeed there is no more exhilarating accomplishment than seeing the students' smiles of success. Schools and teachers cannot be successful until the teachers are responsive to the students' profiles of possibilities. High-quality, capable teaching is not about the comfort zone of the classroom; it is about designing instruction in the competence zone of the students.

The reality is that we need to be accountable for students' results in the business of education. Our teachers must change if we want to save our students from contributing to the creation of a new underclass of illiteracy, poverty, even incarceration. Society, through legislation of the No Child Left Behind Act, now requires that schools and students respond to global competition. This requirement demands greater percentages of students who demonstrate higher levels of achievement, thus providing the foundation for a bright future for our citizens and our society in a democracy.

Our commitment to excellence for all has shown us that educational leaders and teachers must have a new focus on results, a new focus on teachers, and a new focus on what matters—quality education for all students. If we know that the single most important factor in education is the competence and commitment of the teacher, then it is time we stop criticizing the students and start calling for greater teacher competence through responsive teaching.
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The challenge is to accurately define and develop the traits of a highly qualified, capable teacher. How can we meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act without a new concept of a quality, capable teacher?

I will share this superintendent’s view of the contemporary issues facing today’s educator. Then we will discuss what a highly qualified, capable teacher is: the responsive educator who practices ever-evolving customized instruction for individual students and groups of students. You can decide for yourselves whether you agree with the premise that responsive teachers hold the key, from legislation to implementation, for better educating all students.

Contemporary Issues

There is a disconnect between today’s teaching and the contemporary expectations of learners in America’s public schools. The problem exists from kindergarten through college. Many educators wrongly attribute student failure to demographics like socio-economic issues, status, poverty, culture, etc. The educational system is in critical need of instructional leadership to improve the daily interaction of teaching and learning in each and every classroom of the school.

Many teachers are trained to teach content, but they are not necessarily trained to teach the diverse and multilingual students they face each day. Unfortunately, many colleges and universities are still preparing presenters of content versus instructional leaders or responsive teachers. Current practice still promotes teacher-centered instead of student-centered learning. The consequence is the ever increasing gap between preparation and desired student performance.

The students needing the least amount of help are capable of learning the material almost in spite of how information is presented to them. Those needing the most help continue to see the canyon between what is expected and what is achieved grow wider year by year. In fact, high-poverty schools with high-minority populations are most likely to have teachers without a major or even minor in their field.
Teachers in such schools also demonstrate weaker verbal and math skills, coupled with fewer years teaching experience. What chance do urban students have of bridging the knowledge gap, with the least prepared teachers? Is it any wonder urban schools perform so poorly compared to other public schools?

According to Cay Evans and others (2001), in high-poverty schools with a significant minority population, teachers are less likely to have a college major or minor in their field, they have weaker verbal and math skills, and they have fewer years’ experience.

For example, in the Education Policy Analysis Archives, Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) shows that in 1994, more than 80 percent of high school teachers of academic courses in Wisconsin and Minnesota had fully met state certification requirements and had at least a college major in the field they teach.

The comparable proportion of teachers with full state certification and a major in their field in Louisiana was only 64 percent. Interestingly, students in Minnesota and Wisconsin have typically scored at the top of the distribution of national assessments of reading and mathematics, along with four other states with similarly well-qualified teachers. Together, these states held six of the top ten spots in the national rankings in reading and mathematics in 1994 and 1996.

Students in Louisiana have typically scored near the bottom of the NAEP distributions—no higher than 47th of 51 states in any of the assessments reported by 1996. Six other states with proportions similar to Louisiana’s of teachers holding a license and a major in their field all fall in the bottom quartile in the national rankings of average student achievement scores.

These data are as timely today as they were in 1996. Highly qualified, responsive teachers must first have a major in the field they teach. High percentages of students are not succeeding in reading and math in elementary schools. How can a certified elementary teacher with one, or at most two, courses in reading and math teach those subjects to all students? The answer is that they cannot. The result is large percentages of American elementary students receiving a poor
foundation in reading and math, which cannot be overcome in the course of twelve years of education.

These data were again confirmed in the most recent research regarding teacher quality. The U.S. Department of Education’s revised draft (2003) of "Improving Teacher Quality Guidance" cites facts from Education Week’s "Quality Counts 2003": Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers. At the elementary level, more than 13 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools have fewer than three years’ experience, compared to fewer than 9 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools.

At the middle school level, over 50 percent of students in high-poverty middle schools take a class with a teacher who hasn’t acquired even a minor in the subject he/she teaches. This is compared to about 44 percent students nationwide.

At the high school level, students in high-poverty secondary schools are twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to have a teacher who is not certified in the subject taught (26 percent versus 13 percent).

Only 50 percent of all students in high-poverty secondary schools have teachers who have both majored in and become licensed in their subjects. This is compared to about 70 percent of all secondary students in low-poverty schools.

Clearly, we are not teaching all students equally. All students deserve highly qualified, responsive teaching by the knowledge workers/teachers of the 21st century. The best teachers are consistently with the best students. Unfortunately, there is no reward or motivation in the profession to do otherwise. How can America provide equality of opportunity with such blatant disparity in teacher quality?

What Is a Highly Qualified, Capable Teacher—A Responsive Teacher?

According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), states and school districts must ensure that all students have effective teachers, that is, teachers with the subject-matter
knowledge and teaching skills necessary to help all children meet high academic standards regardless of individual learning styles.

Specifically, a "highly qualified" elementary school teacher has obtained full state certification or licensure, holds at least a bachelor’s degree, and has demonstrated competency by passing a rigorous state test, which may consist of passing a state-required certification or licensing test or tests in reading, writing, mathematics, and others areas of basic elementary school curriculum.

A highly qualified middle or secondary school teacher has obtained full state certification or licensure, holds at least a bachelor’s degree, and has demonstrated a high level of competency in each of the academic subjects in the teacher’s subject area by passing a rigorous state academic subject test, or through successful completion, in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, of an academic major, a graduate degree, coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major, or advanced certification or credentialing.

NCLB: A Good Starting Point

The No Child Left Behind Act is the right message at the right time, a foundation from which to build. First, we need to provide the support so that all teachers can help more students reach the kingdom of opportunity through competence. To be truly qualified, a responsive teacher must go to the next higher order of personal and professional development to reach the level of educational knowledge worker.

Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) states that teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly. Teachers need to see how ideas connect across fields and connect to everyday life. A skillful teacher figures out what students know and believe about a topic, and how learners are likely to hook into new ideas.

Hammond (2000) goes further to say that successful teachers tend to be those who are able to use a range of teaching strategies and who use a range of interaction styles, rather than a single, rigid approach. Effective teachers adjust their teaching to fit the needs of different students and the demands of instructional goals, topics, and methods.
An additional review of the literature (Wise, 2000) shows that members of the profession as well as many policy makers believe that teachers should be well grounded in the content they plan to teach and have a firm grasp on how to teach it effectively to a diverse community of students. The "how to teach" part includes knowledge of child and adolescent development, instructional strategies for various types of learners, assessment and evaluation strategies, classroom management, and strategies for teaching those of differing abilities.

Michael Poliakoff (2003, p.10) says, "Aspiring teachers must demonstrate academic excellence themselves, so that they will model for their students a commitment to learning and achievement. They must also acquire sound and proven methods of instruction, so that they can impart knowledge as well as skills to their students."

In their book, No Excuses, the Thernstroms (2003) make rock-bottom demands for a qualified teacher, passing a minimum competency test; experience and educational credentials beyond a bachelor’s degree; licensure; as well as skills and knowledge. They agree with James S. Coleman’s research that the verbal skills of teachers directly influence the achievement of their pupils, and that the effect is strongest for African American students.

Dr. Robert Marzano (2003), quotes a study by Wright, Horn, and Sanders, which says that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. In addition, the results show wide variation in effectiveness among teachers. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor. Effective teachers appear to be successful with students of all achievement levels regardless of the levels of heterogeneity in their classes.

The basis of the best education in America is a highly qualified, capable teacher, a responsive educator who promotes and implements the school/district vision of higher measured performance, manages curriculum and instruction by aligning standards with instruction, and accepts accountability. The responsive teacher works to improve school climate, meets the challenges of professional expectations, including
knowledge of and integration of differentiated instructional strategies, makes data-driven, research-based decisions, is interested in the students holistically, and supports their development as people.

A high-quality, capable teacher is well-versed in knowledge management and has a statistical performance control mechanism in place that responds to students’ rate of learning. What the teacher knows or does not know will determine what the student knows or does not know. The bottom line is that students depend on the teachers’ knowledge management for their knowledge growth. Teachers know what they need to know about the student and the content to solve the instructional mystery of how to join the two in demonstrating competence.

High levels of student proficiency are achieved by putting a highly qualified, responsive teacher in front of every student. Then and only then can the goals of No Child Left Behind be realized, and can America truly be the land of opportunity for all. A new, responsive teacher model can help bridge the performance gaps of teachers and students. The result is successful realization of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and of moving all students to proficiency, and beyond.

**How Do We Create a 21st-Century Responsive Teacher in the New Era of Education for All?**

Responsive teaching will produce results. This idea is grounded in the reality that continuous learning is based on research, data, and accountability for regularly improving student performance. We want to help the responsive teacher acquire the content knowledge skills and tools to educate all students, to align teaching standards to diverse learning styles, to use data to redirect learning, to continuously pursue new knowledge, and to engage other professionals in an instructional/curricular cohort group.

Outmoded teacher preparation and instruction methods have placed teachers/professionals in a role that was not designed to educate all children. The failure of students to achieve high standards can be attributed largely to inadequate teaching skills, as with an architect
who does not know the sequence of how to build a house. Teachers who are the architects of learning have to put all the components together to educate the whole child. Teaching skills need to be clearly delineated, designed, and developed if we are to have all children meet the No Child Left Behind standards in all the required areas.

We need to rethink teacher preparation and professional development so that our teachers have the comprehensive knowledge, tools, and abilities to educate all students effectively to compete in a global economy. We need to get serious about retraining existing teachers and redesigning teacher preparation programs. The current educational system does not have the capacity instructionally to educate all students.

The six essential characteristics of a highly qualified, capable, responsive teacher can be illustrated within six tenets:

1. **Content**

   Responsive teachers certainly must have thorough content area knowledge. However, current course requirements do not address the instructional needs of content learning for all students. Teachers need to be provided with the necessary skills to construct a better plan to improve the higher-order learning accomplishments of students.

2. **Methodology**

   Responsive teachers must be well trained in research strategies and methodologies. We know there are multiple styles of learning but we have not tapped into multiple strategies of teaching. To bridge the performance gap of students, teachers must have multiple supports and multiple strategies. Teachers must be supportive of the psychological profiles of the students, and be aware of cultural, instructional, and emotional diversity. Knowledge of the factors that positively affect learning for all students is essential. A responsive teacher knows there are many roads to competence in the standards.
An example of a proven road is the research done by the American Psychological Association with the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (1993), called the Learner-Centered Principles. Knowing the whole child by understanding the learning process, motivational influences on learning, developmental stages, personal and social factors, and individual considerations can guide a responsive teacher to contribute to student learning. The process is not about feeling good, it's about producing results. Improved performance is the only student achievement in the new era of education. The cure has to fit the diagnosis. Right now, we give students the same instruction, regardless of their learning profiles.

3. Data-driven decision making

The responsive teacher must be able to gather and analyze multiple measures of student data. The data allows the teacher to make informed, accurate decisions on instructional alignment between the content and the students’ zone of learning possibilities. The information includes student performance data, perceptual data, cultural data, school data, and so forth. These multiple sources of information enable the teacher to make appropriate instructional decisions about each student, groups of students, and the entire class. Data drives the decisions of the contemporary educator. “We appeal to school staffs to commit to the school improvement process by looking at the data to help guide the process and inform them if what they are doing is making a difference with student learning.” (Bernhardt, 1998)

4. Professional upgrades

Responsive teachers are clearly focused on professional upgrades—education is about ongoing professional development based on best practices in the field, as well as current scientifically based research. For example, the School District of the City of Erie has structured an Instructional Leaders Academy partnership with Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.
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The university and district work together to create teachers as researchers to meet the challenges of No Child Left Behind. Public schools are bombarded with research done by professionals outside their own local districts, but national research may or may not be relevant to local circumstances.

Principals and teachers, too, seldom embark on their own research to analyze the district's local children and the facets of their lives affecting their academic achievement. The Instructional Leaders Academy collaboration promotes research in the educational setting by providing professional development to those most closely connected to students whose achievement they are facilitating.

5. Teacher support network

A teacher support network is critical in providing the scaffolding necessary for success in the classroom. We need to develop cohorts of competence, and provide mentoring, online chats, and team meetings to collaborate on what works. We must be ready to respond to the instructional support needs of the teacher. Teachers who consistently bring students to higher levels should be rewarded through a business-like model, a return on results.

6. Beliefs

The teacher’s belief system is of ultimate importance, given the previous five skill sets. A disturbing fact is that many teachers still struggle with the reality that all students can achieve high standards. Teacher training and professional development must include a component that deals with myth busters. Before they accept the challenge of educating all children, teachers first and foremost must be taught that success is achievable, that all children can work from strengths to overcome weaknesses. Lawrence Lezotte (2001) has tried for decades to send this message through his "success for all" model. Students can never achieve high standards with teachers who have a belief system to the contrary.
Conclusion

Highly qualified, responsive teaching is the proactive focus designed to increase student performance, with the teacher as a blend of practitioner, researcher, and data driven detective.

This educator agrees with the principle of Adequate Yearly Progress and the idea that a responsive teacher is essential to student learning. The time is now to better prepare new teachers and re-educate current teachers. A new model is necessary to develop successful knowledge workers/teachers who educate all students.

As leaders in education, it is our collective responsibility to provide every educator with a combination of skills in teaching to reach all students. An educational scaffold can be built that allows each student to achieve high standards. The responsive teacher is the knowledge architect of a new generation of high performers in a global economy. The winners will be better-educated students, more satisfied teachers, and schools preparing learners for the new millennium.

As educators, we must teach what matters and develop an instructional structure that supports the standards, curriculum, instruction, and accountability necessary for success. Together we must focus on the destination, not on the journey. The sooner we start celebrating the destination, the better. We must believe it is possible to Leave No Child Behind.

The key is our ability to create the new knowledge worker of the 21st century: high quality, capable teachers for all. Informed educators will bring the pieces of the puzzle together so that responsive teaching is the model for the foundation of success for all. Everyone is looking for one single answer, the infamous "silver bullet," but the contemporary educational solution rests with each of us, teacher by teacher, student by student, standard by standard, working toward academic excellence for all.

The challenge is great, but the loss of one child’s future is a greater price. Abraham Lincoln, twelfth President of the United States, so eloquently stated a message in 1862 relevant to our question of why
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we should work toward creating a qualified, capable teacher. “Still the question recurs. ‘Can we do better?’ The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew” (Phillips, 1992, p. 137).

Students’ varying learning results clearly support the notion that we must do better for all of America’s children. As educators, we must rise to the occasion. America’s teachers can educate all American children. We will think anew and act anew with the six tenets for creating a responsive teacher. We have answered the question of what a qualified, capable teacher is, so that we can achieve the goals of No Child Left Behind. Let’s work together to ensure that a highly qualified, capable, responsive teacher is in every classroom in America.

References


