LEADERSHIP, Not Magic

Steven Farr

Highly effective teachers show what it takes to close achievement gaps.

One of the recurring joys of my work is seeing the transformative, life-changing influence of teachers like Gillette Eckler. When Gillette met her 4th graders on her first day as a teacher in New York City, they were reading, on average, at a 2nd grade level. They were even further behind in math, unable to add and subtract numbers of more than one digit.

Outraged by the injustice of a system that gives low-income students like hers low odds of even graduating from high school, Gillette determined that she would do everything in her power to change their academic trajectory. She was convinced that her "scholars" had the same potential to achieve that students in higher-income communities did. She seized on the goal that they would gain access to the most prestigious middle schools in the city—schools that would put them on track to college. "These are the schools that my students deserve to know about and have the chance to attend," she explained.

Gillette began by building a classroom culture around hard work and hard-earned success. She established ambitious growth goals for each student and broke those goals into mini-goals with detailed plans for the order and pace of objectives. Using a system of individualized progress folders and a student-created "Super Scholars" wall display, Gillette rallied her students and their families to work hard toward their goals. As a culture of achievement took hold, students begged to be reassessed on their reading progress, competitively scrutinized other classes' progress, and helped one another so that the whole class could reach its monthly benchmarks.

Gillette went well beyond conventional parameters, stretching time and resources. She extended the school day, week, and year, as kids came before and after school for extra tutoring, joined her for learning on Saturdays, and worked on summer assignments. She provided extra learning opportunities outside her classroom—for example, taking students on a trip to Ellis Island as part of their study of immigration.

To recalibrate her own vision of excellence after her first year, she worked over the summer at a high- performing school, returning re invigorated and even more outraged about the opportunities denied to her students.

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Gillette had convinced her principal to let her loop with her 4th graders through 5th grade. At the beginning of her second year, she surprised her students by removing the desks from the classroom, requiring each student to "earn" a desk by demonstrating effort and progress on class assignments.

By the spring of 5th grade, Gillette's students had grown, on average, four and one-half years in reading in their two years with her. Every individual student passed the state's English language arts exam, and, collectively, her students ended the year with an average mastery of 90 percent on state math objectives. With Gillette's help in navigating the sometimes dizzying application process, 13 of her 24 students were accepted into one of New York City's selective middle schools, and the rest headed into their neighborhood schools with newfound self-confidence, resilience, and self-advocacy skills.

I've had the opportunity to observe many teachers like Gillette. For example, 7th graders in Felicia Cuesta's class in Los Angeles who were learning English as a second language and who had been lagging years behind academically caught up, and two-thirds of them exited the remedial English track. Students in Eric Thomas's high school English class in Baltimore who had been at risk of dropping out ended up choosing where they wanted to attend college. Many other teachers in low-income communities are changing the academic trajectory of their students.

In fact, there are too many examples of students in low-income communities making dramatic academic gains for us to believe that success is not possible. And yet, stories of highly successful classrooms do little to change many people's insistence that the achievement gap is an intractable, unsolvable problem. Their response to all these classrooms is, "Sure, there are some examples of success in low-income communities, but you can't replicate them. What those teachers are doing cannot be packaged and taught. It's innate, and it's rare." In short, it's magic.

I respectfully submit that that view is absurd.

Studying High-Performing Teachers

At Teach For America, we believe that teacher effectiveness is a key element of the quest to end educational inequity. To open doors of opportunity that have too often been closed, teachers must lead low-income students to dramatic academic and personal growth. And we know that teachers who successfully lead their students to such meaningful achievements are more likely to become lifelong advocates and leaders for systemic change.

We have observed a wide range of effectiveness among the 28,000 teachers whom Teach For America has recruited, selected, trained, and supported in the last 20 years. But as we have sought out—and learned from—our most successful teachers, we have seen an exciting trend. In a growing number of our corps members' classrooms in high-poverty communities, students are succeeding. And not only on assessments of basic knowledge and skills, but also in other areas that

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pave the way to achievement in school and life, such as critical thinking, self-confidence, perseverance, and self-advocacy.

How are these teachers doing it? What lessons can we glean from their success that can contribute to our collective quest to give every child an excellent education? For almost 10 years, I have been one of the many people at Teach For America obsessing over these questions.

We define great teaching not by what teachers do but instead by those teachers' impact on students' lives. Then we ask what common strategies we see in teachers who have the most positive, life-changing effects on their students.

Working with the messy—and often frustrating—patchwork of student achievement assessments employed across the United States, we identify teachers whose students began the year several years behind academically and ended the year caught up or ahead. We recognize that such data are an imperfect proxy for what we are looking for—nothing less than teachers who are putting their students on a different path in life. But whatever opportunities our students choose to pursue, the bottom line is that academic achievement opens doors—it is a proven, universal currency of privilege.

By compiling our data and our best judgments on other indicators that are more difficult to quantify, such as teachers' success in promoting students' perseverance and self-advocacy as learners, we identify Teach For America's most effective teachers—teachers like Gillette, Felicia, and Eric. Our studies of these teachers are qualitative, iterative, and ongoing—composed of observations, focus groups, interviews, video analyses, and conversations that generate new, stronger hypotheses to be explored in the next dramatically successful classrooms we find.

From all these studies of individual teachers, a clear picture emerges: Great teaching is anything but magic. For all their differences in style, personality, background, geography, grade level, and subject matter, teachers who are changing their students' academic trajectories approach their classrooms in remarkably similar ways. Our best teachers are modeling approaches that can help good teachers become great.

Teaching Is Leadership

Our most effective teachers show that great teaching is *leadership*. Although excellent core knowledge, instructional strategies, content pedagogy, and classroom management are all essential to successful teaching, what most differentiates the great from the good are the leadership principles that govern how the teacher employs those skills.

In every highly effective classroom we study, we find a teacher who, like any great leader, rallies team members (in this case, students and their families) around an ambitious vision of success. We find a teacher who plans purposefully and executes effectively to make sure students reach that vision, even as that teacher

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also continues to learn and improve. Without exception, these teachers define their role as doing whatever it takes to ensure their students' success.

After studying hundreds of these teachers and contrasting their methods with those of teachers who produce less dramatic effects, we have identified six leadership actions that seem to correlate with exceptional student growth.

Setting Big Goals

Crystal Jones rallied her 1st graders around the idea that by the end of the year they were going to "read, write, and do math like 3rd graders"—an idea that excited them because they idolized the "big kids" upstairs. Taylor Delhagen got the high school students in his global history class invested in applying to and succeeding in college; to make that work tangible, he mapped out a "World Citizen's Rubric" that tracked students' progress. Meg Stewart challenged her students—who faced an array of disabilities, from speech and language impairments to Asperger's syndrome—to "double their learning" and demonstrate two years of academic growth in one year.

Our moderately effective teachers sometimes say, "I want my kids to learn as much as they can each day." As noble as that sounds, our most successful teachers think differently. These teachers know on the first day where they want their students to be on the last day. They set goals that create the urgency, focus, and alignment of effort necessary to make tremendous progress.

Getting Students Invested in Learning

In dramatically successful classrooms in low-income communities, I regularly see students acting in ways that some people may not believe. When Joe Almeida asks a question in his classroom, every hand shoots up. Lauren Hawley's students spent one recess identifying patterns in the playground, in their clothes, and in their lunch trays, because pattern identification had been the instructional objective that morning. In what was perhaps the highlight of my professional life thus far, when I crouched down next to a 5th grade girl in Sara Cotner's classroom and asked if she could tell me about what she was learning, she politely responded, "Can you ask me later? I'm kind of busy."

As we observe and interview teachers like these, we keep hearing the same story. Their students entered their class-rooms believing they were "dumb" and that no amount of hard work would change that. Although exceptional teachers use many and varied methods to convince students that their personal investment in learning does make a difference, we see some common patterns that validate what motivational theory researchers are finding. These teachers deliberately create and maintain a welcoming environment where students feel safe taking the risks necessary to try, fail, try again, and learn. They build strong relationships with their students and create a sense of community among them.

They also create a classroom culture in which academic success—for each individual and for the whole group—is highly valued. They infuse the class with

messages supporting achievement, clearly communicate students' academic progress to them, and strategically employ role models who embody values that lead to success. These teachers empower students with choice and responsibility in their own learning. All of these strategies build students' desire to work hard.

Planning Purposefully

Julia King, a 4th grade teacher in Gary, Indiana, whose students averaged gains of 2.4 years in reading and 1.7 years in math, started her planning process by envisioning exactly what her students would know and be able to do at the end of the year. She organized learning objectives into units and ordered them logically across the year so that the skills built on each other. For each week's plan, Julia looked at the objectives for that unit, wrote five assessment questions per objective, and only then planned her lessons.

With a tip of the hat to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (ASCD, 1998), we find that our most successful teachers are backwards planners. They begin any endeavor—from lesson plans, to long-term plans, to classroom- management plans—by asking, What result do I want? and How will I know I've gotten it?

These teachers even apply this thinking to the seemingly minor elements of running their classroom. For instance, one elementary teacher described her vision of getting her kids to and from the restroom in six minutes in a way that would both keep them quiet and provide a learning experience. She achieved this goal by having them whisper through a set of flash cards that offered a rapid-fire review of 1st grade sight words as they lined up outside the restroom.

Executing Effectively—"On Your Feet" Adjustments

When we ask our merely good teachers what it means to effectively implement instruction in the classroom, we often hear something like, "having a good plan and acting on it." Our most successful teachers answer differently. Effective implementation, they insist, is about the adjustments you make to the plan to ensure that you stay on track toward your objectives. Consider, for example, how Mariel Elguero thought through a situation in which students were not grasping the concept of distinguishing important from unimportant details:

> I realize we have a problem, and so I'm thinking, "What is the most efficient way to fix this problem?" It doesn't make sense to reteach because I'll probably lose engagement—I've already led 20 minutes of discussion. It doesn't make sense to individually conference with all the kids around the room because too many are having trouble. And… the group of students that needs help isn't small enough to pull to the back of the room during independent practice. In my classroom … we have symbols that students can use to show me whether they "need help" or "can give help." I decide to

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> change my lesson plan so I can still reach my objective. I ask students to show me whether they need help or can give help, and I pair students up to go back over the key elements of the lesson. Then I can circulate to the spots in the room where I am most needed.

Continually Improving

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy may have best articulated the pattern of continuous improvement that we see in highly effective classrooms:

> Every teacher [must], by regarding every imperfection in the pupil's comprehension not as a defect of the pupil, but as a defect of his instruction, endeavor to develop in himself the ability of discovering new methods.[1]

Reflecting on the pace of student progress, our most influential teachers continually seek to improve their own skills. Meg Stewart, for example, routinely videotapes her morning classes and reviews the footage in time to tweak afternoon lesson plans. Norleida Moody uses her daily drive home to reflect on what worked and didn't work in her class that day. The most effective teachers we study are the most eager to talk about their failures—and what they have learned from them.

The teachers who are getting the greatest results treat their classroom as a laboratory. Shannon Dingle, a middle school special education teacher, describes her approach this way:

> It's easy to say, "The kids just aren't getting it." But if that's the case, then I'm not doing what I need to do as their teacher. … If they're not mastering concepts they need to master, then I need to learn how to teach them more effectively.

Working Relentlessly

We rarely talk to one of these dramatically effective teachers without hearing, "If I take my big goals seriously, there is just not enough time in the day, not enough resources in the classroom, to get it all done." Then that teacher goes on to describe how he or she finds more time and more resources.

These teachers have kids in their classrooms before and after school and even at lunch. They run Saturday classes, evening tutorials, and family learning sessions. They apply for grants and scrape up resources. One moment they are teachers, and another they are coaches, nurses, or social workers—they do whatever it takes to ensure that students succeed. They realize that given our current flawed system, they must work relentlessly, increasing the time and resources available for learning, to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

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Ending Education Inequity

A look at the teaching lives of some of the most successful Teach For America fellows, working in some of the most challenging environments in the United States, offers crucial insights about what is required to close the achievement gap.

Many more good teachers can be great teachers. The highly effective teachers we have studied all embody common principles that can provide a general road map for other teachers. In many cases, frameworks for highly effective teaching have not sufficiently emphasized some of these principles: the powerful role that goal setting and motivational theory can play in student learning, for example.

These common principles do not amount to a cookie-cutter vision of excellence. In fact, the ways in which our highly successful teachers manifest these general principles vary dramatically. Some classrooms are loud, boisterous, and dramatic; others are serene but intense. And no single personality archetype correlates with dramatic teaching success. But by learning from the common approaches of highly effective teachers, many more teachers—of all styles and personalities—can lead students to transformative achievement.

Highly effective teaching in the most challenging contexts is not for everyone. Although I have seen plenty of evidence that great teaching can be taught, our findings also suggest that certain mind-sets and beliefs are necessary for success. For example, a strong internal locus of control that leads a teacher to assume responsibility for students' failure or success and unwaveringly high expectations for children from low-income communities are non-negotiable starting points. If someone does not possess these mind-sets, the likelihood of that individual advancing student learning is greatly diminished.

Great teaching by itself will not solve education inequity. The highly successful teachers we are studying make heroic efforts to compensate for students' extra challenges and for a system lacking capacity to address those challenges. To ultimately solve education inequity, however, we must look for ways to make their efforts more manageable and sustainable.

Ideally, responsibility for changing students' academic trajectories would be spread among the teacher, the school, and the community. In other words, what's important in the long run is not that all teachers do everything these highly effective teachers are doing, but that all students experience all the opportunities currently being provided by these teachers. This requires strong school leaders and systems that are built around these same leadership principles. When all classrooms in a given school share a compelling vision, every teacher's influence is amplified.

Education can and should be a great equalizer, a means of upward mobility for all children regardless of race, economic background, or geography. Yet, the sad truth is that the most accurate predictors of student achievement and opportunity in the United States are still where a child is born, the color of a child's skin, and the financial resources of a child's family.

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Highly effective teachers acting as strong leaders in their classrooms are by no means the sole solution to this injustice, but they are a crucial component of the hard work necessary to eliminate the achievement gap. Although the challenges ahead remain steep, these educators' students have much greater chance of progressing on a path filled with opportunities for success in college and life.

These teachers are not only forging a path to broader opportunities for their students, but also creating a road map for the rest of us to follow as we journey toward the goal of ending education inequity.

Resources

[1]Tolstoy, L. (1967). On teaching the rudiments. In L. Weiner (Ed. & Trans.), *Tolstoy on Education* (p. 77). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1904)

Steven Farr is chief knowledge officer at Teach For America and author of *Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap* (Jossey-Bass, 2010); steven.farr@teachforamerica.org. The book's companion website, www.teachingasleadership.org, offers concrete resources, as well as videos of teachers performing key actions that correlate with student achievement.

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