

## Focus

# Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning

by Mike Schmoker

This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding and application of the information contained in *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*, an ASCD book written by Mike Schmoker and published in January 2011.

You can use the study guide before or after you have read the book, or as you finish each chapter. The study questions provided are not meant to cover all aspects of the book, but to address specific ideas that might warrant further reflection.

Most of the questions contained in this study guide are ones you can think about on your own, but you might consider pairing with a colleague or forming a study group with others who have read (or are reading) the book. You can join the discussion group for this book on ASCD EDge at [www.ascd.org/FocusG](http://www.ascd.org/FocusG).

### Introduction

1. What in your life and work affirms the need for simplicity—the need to focus on only one thing or very few things at a time? What in your experience affirms the need to focus on certain fundamental priorities before pursuing other interesting (but less worthy) pursuits?
2. What in your school experience affirms the importance of coherent, content-rich curriculum; abundant amounts of purposeful, extended reading and writing; and structurally sound lessons? Why should these be our "jealously guarded priorities"?
3. Read the block quote on pp. 2–3 ("There will be no more initiatives . . ."). Why would it make good sense to do as prescribed in the quote?

### Chapter 1: The Importance of Simplicity, Clarity, and Priority

1. Why are educators diverted toward ineffective practices before ensuring the implementation of the most essential proven principles and practices?

2. Have we—all practitioners—made a thorough case for the three priorities described on pp. 10–11? Have we made the case for the stunning and immediate impact that these priorities would have on student learning and college and career preparation? How could we do this? On what occasions? How often should we revisit, clarify, and reinforce these priorities?
3. How are the examples on pp. 12–13 (dealing with coaching and surgical hygiene) analogous to the simple, rich opportunity we have to improve schools?
4. Why would it make sense to use something like the "warning" on page 14?

## **Chapter 2: What We Teach**

1. Does the description of 21st century education make sense to you? What benefits would it have for students, if it were embraced?
2. Why is content essential to critical thinking? Discuss.
3. Why is authentic literacy as or more important now, in the digital age, than it was in the past?
4. Why have David Conley's four intellectual standards (see p. 38) been so rarely a part of curriculum and instruction in most schools? How could we ensure that they are frequently and consistently implemented?
5. Why are "parameters" like those listed on pp. 39–40 so vital to the consistent implementation of authentic literacy practices across the curriculum?
6. Why do you think so many standards are poorly written, and why are there so many?

### Chapter 3: How We Teach

1. This chapter describes the simple elements of an effective lesson that are still all too rarely implemented. Do you believe that all teachers are perfectly clear on these elements? Is there a need in your school to revisit these elements and provide a slow, careful review (a "refresher course") on these elements? Would it be a good idea to share the evidence of the stunning and immediate impact these elements would have if consistently implemented in a school?
2. How could you or your leadership team or faculty ensure that these simple, well-known elements are finally implemented? What actions and routines could you initiate to ensure their consistent implementation?
3. Does "lecture" in your school resemble the kind of engaging "interactive lecture" described on pp. 68–73 in this chapter?
4. Review curriculum topics, standards, and units in any subject area for which "interactive lecture" would be enormously effective and engaging for students.
5. What elements of the "literacy template" (see p. 74) make it engaging—no matter how often you employ it—in any subject area?
6. After selecting any course in your curriculum, designate which parts of the curriculum could be taught with either (or both) of the templates. Try to approximate the percentage of the curriculum for which you could productively employ one or both of the two templates.
7. Revisit this question: Have we—all practitioners—made a thorough case for the three priorities described on pp. 10–11? Have we made the case for the stunning and immediate impact that these priorities would have on student learning and college and career preparation? How could we do this? On what occasions? How often should we revisit, clarify, and reinforce these priorities?

## **Chapter 4: English Language Arts Made Simple**

1. List and discuss the most important, concrete changes that you, your team, or your faculty intend to make to English curriculum and instruction on the basis of this chapter. Rank these changes in order of priority, then brainstorm and rank-order the immediate steps you can take to begin implementing your first priority. Be sure to consider the following issues:

- Deciding the amount of reading to be done per English course (the actual number of books, articles, etc.)
- Deciding how literature should be studied and experienced
- Selecting the number of nonfiction books and other texts students should read
- Reducing or eliminating extraneous standards
- Improving and simplifying early-grade reading curriculum
- Selecting the number and length of formal papers assigned for each grading period or year
- Reducing students' paper load

### **A Brief Note on Textbooks**

1. Now that we know how vital it is for students to learn to read carefully selected portions of content-area textbooks, how will you ensure that such reading becomes a routine feature of instruction in the disciplines you teach?

## **Chapter 5: Social Studies with Reading and Writing at the Core**

1. List and discuss the most important, concrete changes that you, your team, or your faculty intend to make to social studies curriculum and instruction on the basis of this chapter. Rank these changes in order of priority, then brainstorm and rank-order the immediate steps you can take to begin implementing your first priority. Be sure to consider the following issues:

- Significantly reducing the number of topics to be taught in each social studies course, and dividing them by quarter

- Carefully selecting textbook pages, current articles, and historical sources to be read for each of the essential topics on approximately a weekly basis
- Choosing which topics and standards to which you will apply the templates for literacy and interactive lecture in each social studies course
- Developing, as a team, good higher-order questions and prompts for each common reading
- Deciding how you will teach and model close, analytical reading in social studies
- The number and approximate length of argumentative/analytical papers to be assigned for each unit and grading period

### **Chapter 6: Redefining Inquiry in Science**

1. List and discuss the most important, concrete changes that you, your team, or your faculty intend to make to science curriculum and instruction on the basis of this chapter. Rank these changes in order of priority, then brainstorm and rank-order the immediate steps you can take to begin implementing your first priority. Be sure to consider the following issues:

- Significantly reducing the number of topics to be taught in each science course, and dividing them by quarter
- Ensuring the appropriate number of labs and hands-on activities and making sure that they are meaningful and linked directly to the science content being studied
- Carefully selecting textbook pages and articles to be read for each of the essential topics on approximately a weekly basis
- Deciding how you will use the templates for literacy and interactive lecture throughout the course
- Developing, as a team, good higher-order questions and prompts for each common reading
- Deciding how you will teach and model close, analytical reading in science
- Selecting the number and approximate length of argumentative/analytical papers to be assigned each grading period

## Chapter 7: Making Math Meaningful

1. List and discuss the most important, concrete changes that you, your team, or your faculty intend to make to math curriculum and instruction on the basis of this chapter. Rank these changes in order of priority, then brainstorm and rank-order the immediate steps you can take to begin implementing your first priority. Be sure to consider the following issues:

- Judiciously reducing the number of math standards to be taught, and dividing them by grading period
- Carefully selecting textbook pages to be read for essential math topics as well as documents that can be used for making "quantitative arguments"
- Deciding how to integrate the templates for literacy and interactive lecture into the math curriculum
- Developing, as a team, good problem-solving questions and prompts for math readings
- Deciding how you will teach and model close, analytical reading in math
- Selecting the number and approximate length of argumentative/analytical papers to be assigned each grading period

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