

Stop the Insanity!

It Takes a Team to Leave No Child Behind

Who says learning always has to be drudgery? Sarah Butzin, the founder of the Institute for School Innovation, proposes “triangulated learning” as a way to give children time to play and develop, even as they pursue high standards.

BY SARAH M. BUTZIN

WHAT HAS happened to common sense in this era of No Child Left Behind? What makes anyone believe that talking louder makes a deaf man hear? Albert Einstein reputedly defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

Yet that is what I see happening in elementary schools today. In response to high-stakes testing and higher standards for even the most challenging students, schools have responded by talking louder. They haven't changed the way they teach. Instead, they push more papers in front of the kids, keep them off the playground, and take away music and art. Here in Florida, they make kids repeat third grade if they can't keep up (an estimated 43,000 failed in 2003) and send

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them to summer reading “camps” to cram in a little more knowledge.

Everything we know about human nature and child development should tell us to pause. Children need time to play and time to develop at a natural pace. Every parent knows that not all infants learn to walk by age 1 and talk by age 2. Neither do all first-graders learn to read at the stroke of midnight on their sixth birthday. Young children need security and encouragement, not pressure and humiliation if they can't keep up.

Yet at the same time, there is a legitimate need for rigorous academic standards, high expectations, and reliable assessments to gauge each child's progress so that he or she is not left behind. The stakes are indeed high. Children of the 21st century absolutely need much higher literacy and mathematical skills than their grandparents. The world has been transformed through technology and global competition.

So how do you lay a foundation for solid academic skills without killing childhood? One thing is certain. One teacher working solo with a classroom of 20 to 30 children cannot do it in one year — actually 180 school days. And when you subtract all the non-in-

structional school time, including getting to know the children and playing catch-up from the previous grade, that 180 days really translates to about 100 days. In essence, one teacher has a little over three months to teach to high standards in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies.

What's the solution? Add more days to the school year? Reduce class size? Buy more computers and newer textbooks? Pay for after-school tutors and summer reading camps? Nope, those ideas have all been tried, and they don't work. Plus, they are very expensive remedies.

There is another option, which I call "triangulated learning." It takes a team approach to instruction and gives teachers the time and techniques to meet higher standards without stifling young children's natural desire to play and explore. Children can work at their own pace in diversified classrooms, using a variety of learning modes that best meet their individual learning styles. They can be challenged without being coerced.

And there are benefits for teachers as well. They become less isolated and stop taking the blame for the failure of the system. It's not their fault. Teachers are being asked to do the impossible — meet higher standards using the old grade school system in which one teacher is expected to do it all and pass the kids along through first grade, second grade, third grade, and so on. By the time children reach fifth grade, it's not surprising that large numbers of them have fallen by the wayside, especially if they lack a support system at home.

For the past 15 years, I've been working on developing a triangulated learning system that incorporates best practices from the past along with newer innovations such as computers and the Internet. It's really a system of "retro-techno" teaching. In 2003-04 there were over 15,000 students and over 450 teachers involved.

Triangulation is a metaphor for strength. A triangulated learning system taps the power of three to meet higher standards for more kids. Here's how it works.

Three core subjects. The three R's are still the critical elements for future success. The fundamental role of the elementary school is to lay the foundation for these basic skills. Thus the academic focus of the triangulated system is on reading, writing, and mathematics. This is not to say that science, social studies, and the arts are not important. They are in fact enhanced in this system by being incorporated into daily station work, as well as being explicitly taught. More on that later.

Three-teacher expert teams. Teachers work in teams

of three so that each teacher can focus on one of the core subjects. Higher standards and more challenging students have made the generalist teacher's role very difficult to maintain. Today's teachers must become expert in a core subject. Teaching reading *is* rocket science, and a casual survey course in reading methods no longer suffices. Highly qualified teachers need advanced and in-depth training in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Three-grade clusters. In the triangulated model, cluster teachers work across three grade levels, K-2 or 3-5. Multi-age groupings are especially effective, although grade-specific classes work as well. Teachers in a triangulated system have access to a broader range of materials and methods and thus can break free from arbitrary grade-level confinements. A third-grader has access to fifth-grade materials, and vice versa. Teachers in a triangulated system need not fear overstepping their boundaries and incurring the wrath of the next grade's teacher for "jumping ahead."

Three-classroom rotations. Students rotate to the subject classrooms in their cluster for three 60- to 90-minute periods. One of the classrooms serves as their cluster home base. The home base teacher is responsible for the science and social studies lessons for those students. Students also go to special areas (art, music, and physical education) as normally scheduled.

Three + three learning stations. There are six learning stations in each of the three subject classrooms to provide self-paced practice through different learning modes. After the teacher presents a brief whole-group lesson, students move to the stations to practice and apply the lesson concept in a variety of ways. The six stations are:

- a Teacher Station for small-group tutorials or enrichment;
- a Computer Station for integrated instructional software and Internet explorations;
- a Textbook Station for written work;
- a Challenge Station for learning activities in a game-like format;
- an Imagination Station for artistic and creative expression; and
- a Construction Station for hands-on learning.

In addition to these six basic stations, many classrooms add supplemental stations for science and social studies activities. This is especially true in schools using 90-minute rotations.

Three years of continuous progress. Triangulated learning takes "looping" to a new level. One year (180 days) is not enough time to get to know every student's strengths

and weaknesses and to discover what turns each one on to learning. In the triangulated system, students have a different home base teacher each year but the same three subject teachers for the three years they are in the cluster. In other words, the third-grade teacher who is the reading specialist for the cluster will get a new third-grade group each year for home base, but her initial third-graders will return to her in fourth and fifth grades for reading. This design also reduces the lag time at the beginning of each new year, as the cluster teachers already know two-thirds of their students.

Three learning modes. Triangulated learning uses 1) technology, 2) hands-on learning, and 3) paper-and-pencil activities to engage students in challenging work. High-quality instructional software that is integrated with lesson objectives adds motivation, individual self-paced learning, and immediate feedback. Hands-on learning adds developmentally appropriate tasks for young children maturing into the abstract phase of learning. And traditional printed text and paper-and-pencil work still have their value.

MAKING THE transition to triangulated learning takes commitment and effort. It requires support from the top down. Triangulated learning works best when teachers have appropriate materials, training, and coaching to help them move from isolated, solo teaching to teaching in a team context, identifying as a specialist, and using computers and active learning strategies. The history of education reform is strewn with the wreckage of wonderful models that have come and gone because teachers learned a theory and method but lacked the follow-up coaching and resources to sustain the new approach.

Teachers making the transition to triangulated learning will need more than good ideas. They need effective software and materials for the technology and hands-on stations. They need to learn how to function as part of a team and to communicate effectively with their cluster peers. They need standards-based curriculum planning guides to help them coordinate instruction with their cluster teammates and to align topics across the three grade levels in their cluster. And most important, teachers need to learn classroom management techniques that are appropriate to self-regulated, multidimensional classrooms where children are active learners.

In 1995 I founded the Institute for School Innovation (ISI), a private nonprofit organization, to create a learning community of innovative educators and

to support teachers with research-based materials, training, and coaching. ISI disseminates Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered), which is a vehicle to help schools get started with triangulated learning. At ISI we continue to draw from the expertise of the hundreds of CHILD teachers with whom we work. They help us upgrade the CHILD materials so that we can continue to offer teacher-created station activities along with updated software-correlation guides and lesson-planning guides that are aligned with state standards. We also host an annual conference and offer support groups for CHILD teachers to share ideas and help one another. You can learn more on our website at www.ifsi.org.

And does it work? By all measures, triangulated learning beats self-contained teaching across the board. Since I first developed the system at Florida State University in 1988, numerous independent studies have documented the success of CHILD students in reading, writing, and mathematics. We've even followed their progress into middle school. Their test scores are consistently higher than those of traditional students, their behavior is better, and parent enthusiasm is very high.

But most important, we have ample evidence to suggest that we are creating a wonderful classroom climate that engages children. They look forward to coming to school, they are eager to participate, and they feel good about their accomplishments. They even have time to play!



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