

Preface

IN MY CLASSROOM

All my students will develop the skills and behaviors they need to succeed.

Each child will get the time needed to develop the essential skills.

I will offer essential instruction at the correct instructional level.

In my class, children will feel physically and emotionally safe.

I will help children discover the importance and joy of learning.

Each day, children will experience positive relationships, respect, empathy, and love.

For decades, American schools have been engaged in a failed experiment, attempting to cram more content into a typical teaching day than humanly possible, asking children to learn overwhelming content at younger and younger ages without taking the time to build the foundation skills needed for learning success or behavioral success, and creating anxiety-filled classrooms in which children are less likely to fall deeply in love with learning. Fortunately, that is changing. There are educators across the country who understand the importance of the early childhood learning years and recognize that any school improvement initiative will have lesser results if we allow students to become compromised learners in the early years of school; these educators are beginning to stand up and speak up for good practice.

These educators are no longer willing to deliver a nonviable curriculum that attempts to cover vast amounts of content at the cost of failing to help children deeply understand and know how to use essential early learning skills. Teachers and administrators are recognizing that racing through rigidly paced or scripted lessons contributes to many students struggling and becoming disengaged from the learning process. These educators are choosing to become skilled observers of children, formatively assessing what students know and are ready to learn, and then delivering instruction well matched to the needs of their students.

For some teachers, this is a daunting challenge. Decades of pressure to cover greater and greater numbers of grade-level content objectives,

indicate which objectives were “covered” in their weekly lesson plans, and keep up with the pacing guide have compromised their ability to teach to deep understanding. Decades of preparing for quarterly assessments of content covered, and preparing for state- or district-required data collection and standardized testing have reinforced one-size-fits-all instructional practices. These teachers have succumbed to the pressure to “cover” content. They have decreased attention to observing children carefully, finding their specific learning readiness levels, discovering their special interests, and understanding the background experiences that shape each student’s knowledge base. Curriculum-driven instructional practices have replaced carefully designed instruction to meet the needs of their students.

In some districts, it will take an act of courage to stand up to the pressure-packed curriculum-driven juggernaut, to recognize out loud that this is harming many children and leading to poor outcomes compared with our international competition. At first, educators who speak up may feel outside the mainstream of school reform efforts that criticize teachers for not working hard enough, demand additional accountability requirements, and devise onerous teacher-evaluation systems.

It may be difficult to be the one who speaks up for slowing down the pace of instruction, for teaching less content but teaching it better, for giving some children the extra time needed to understand a concept or skill deeply, for letting children play and laugh, for abandoning a model that treats all children as if they are at the same level of readiness, for taking the time to develop language and social skills, for taking the time to build a classroom culture in which children are emotionally and physically safe, or for insisting that good early childhood classrooms are filled with joy. It may be uncomfortable to be the one who insists that we must devise a system that encourages teachers to do more than robotically deliver scripted content. But it is time for a groundswell of educators and community leaders to speak up for a system that values great teaching, attracts the best young women and men to this profession, and nurtures the development of master teachers.

Quality teaching practice is well described by research and by the experience of thoughtful educators around the world. By reading this book, you may become a fanatic for good practice and insist on using practices that help every young child develop the early learning skills and behaviors needed to become a successful lifelong learner.

Fanatically Formative offers readers both a big picture and the nitty-gritty details of school reform in the first few grades. You will understand how important the early childhood learning phase really is and how poorly many American students are doing. You will consider the long-term costs of failing to improve early learning outcomes for all of our children, and

especially poor and at-risk children. Readers will better understand how an ineffective curriculum-driven system developed, how educators can support each other in the development of models of effective practice, and how to deal with some of the challenges that will come along. The importance of quality preschool and parent engagement is explored. Pathfinders whose work leads us toward exceptional practice are celebrated. Specific action plans are offered for teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders. Readers will glimpse the train wreck that awaits us if we ignore the need for constructive change and readers will learn that we can choose a better future for our children.

This book is a call to action, an invitation for a legion of educators to become fanatically formative. Although the typical early childhood classroom may be curriculum driven, racing through content with some students who are bored and many who are overwhelmed, the fanatically formative teacher will insist on identifying essential learning outcomes and using formative assessment to have meaningful data on which to plan instruction that works for her students.

Although the typical K–3 classroom delivers the same content to all students at the same pace, the fanatically formative teacher recognizes that some children need more time and deserve more time. She optimizes learning outcomes by giving children learning activities at their instructional readiness level. She understands that pushing kids into the frustration zone causes less learning and lower test scores and does not allow herself to be bullied by well-intentioned colleagues into hurting children.

While the typical classroom is filled with teacher anxiety and student anxiety, the fanatically formative teacher takes the time to build culture. She teaches school behaviors and practices them until they become classroom routines, knowing that children learn better when social expectations are clear. She builds trust and relationship with her students, knowing that children learn better when they trust and love their teacher. She builds emotional and physical safety, knowing that many children need that safety to be able to optimally attend, learn, and remember.

While the typical classroom is pressure packed, the fanatically formative teacher has a viable curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards or state power standards, offers reteaching or additional practice to students who need it, and offers extended learning options to those who are ready. She has time for projects to integrate learning and activities to make learning come alive in her classroom.

The fanatically formative teacher recognizes that great learning is more likely to occur in a classroom in which there are engaged learners, where there is laughter, and where students support each other. The

fanatically formative teacher recognizes the relationship between great teaching and joy, both for herself and for the students she serves.

We have an opportunity to choose to build great classrooms and schools in which student learning is effectively nurtured, or we can continue the pressure-packed curriculum-driven juggernaut. We can choose to build schools that develop student engagement rather than frustration and apathy. We can create schools that attract the best possible candidates to become educators, or we can continue to push teachers into dissatisfaction and failure. We can create systems that work smarter rather than always harder.

This book offers the reasons, the research, and the action steps for transforming our K–3 classrooms into kinder and more effective centers of learning. The resolution to act will come from you. Imagine the impact of schools in which teachers identify essential early learning and behavior outcomes, use formative assessment to understand what students are ready to learn, teach responsively at the student’s instructional level, give extra time or help as needed, work within a safe and connected classroom and school culture, help students experience respect and empathy, rediscover the joy of teaching, and help students fall in love with learning. Imagine a generation of children educated in fanatically formative classrooms. For the future of your children and your community, stand up and speak up!