



SUPERINTENDENT'S END-OF-MONTH NOTES

February 2011

OUR MISSION is to provide educational excellence for all students.

IN THIS EDITION:

- Mulligan Saturday (Note #1)
 - Systemwide Book Study on Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement (Note #2)
 - Some Key Learnings from Robert Marzano's *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*—Chapters 1 & 2 (Notes #3 & #4)
 - Some Key Learnings from Mike Schmoker's *Focus: Elevating the Essentials To Radically Improve Student Learning*—Chapter 1 (Note #5)
 - Proposed 2011-12 Calendar (Note #6)
 - Budget Update: "Eyes Wide Open" (Notes #7, #8, & #9)
1. On Saturday, March 5, 2011, instructional strategist and curriculum expert, Dan Mulligan, will lead an all-day capacity building session in the "high probability" strategy of "Summarizing and Note Taking" ala the **Interactive Notebook**. Teams of seven volunteers from each school [this is *not* mandatory] will gather for an 8:30 a.m. start at DeKalb Technical College, Newton Center, 8100 Bob Williams Parkway, Covington. When applied with fidelity [as this strategy is intended], student mastery of content cannot help but increase! The session will end at 3:30 p.m. Light refreshments will be provided and lunch will be on-your-own. I look forward to seeing you in an important day of learning and sharing for all of us! ☺
 2. At last week's Leadership Team Meeting of Principals and Central Office Administrators, we kicked off the system wide book study of Robert Marzano's *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*. As noted last week, the "what" and "some whys" of this book study are as follows:

WHAT

- To gain a "deeper" understanding of the importance of background knowledge to academic achievement in schools. (Chapter 1)
- To understand and apply the "Six Principles for Building an Indirect Approach" to academic background knowledge. (Chapter 2)
- To determine the significance of wide reading and language experience and what, if anything, your school is addressing in this regard.—This may not be something a school wants to take on given that NCSS will be systematically addressing K-12 vocabulary beginning in the Fall of 2011. It could be that "less is more." But, each faculty and school administration is more than capable of determining what's "needed" and "best" for students when it comes to programs of "wide reading" ... Put another way, while this is an



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aspect of this book, it is one left to school choice heading into 2011-12. (Chapter 3)

- To discern and apply the characteristics of Effective Direct Vocabulary Instruction (Chapter 4)
- To understand, and be able to apply, the “Six Steps to Effective Vocabulary Instruction” in the classroom. (Chapter 5)

Note: The above five objectives represent five chapters. Five important chapters for the learning of NCSS students! (You can certainly read Chapters 6 and 7 related to identifying academic vocabulary if you wish. However, NCSS will have identified academic vocabulary, per Georgia Performance Standards/ACT/SAT, etc., for instructional purposes, K-12, prior to next fall. True, now, for grades 6 thru 12 on Share Point.)

SOME WHYS

- With approx. 63% of our students in NCSS receiving free or reduced lunch, and many from impoverished circumstances, we must pay close attention to what is known about them via this Marzano book on background knowledge. (We have purchased this book for TEACHERS and administrators so that each of us can develop a “deep” understanding of who these children are and how we can promote their academic success.)
- Approx. 58% of our students are African-American, 39% are Caucasian, and 3% are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. (As the Marzano book points out in Chapter 1, African-American and Hispanic students tend to make up a disproportionate number of students from economically poor families. Realizing this, and seeking to understand these circumstances as we must, impresses upon us to follow the research as to how to best build the academic background of these students.)
- Advanced students—headed to the nation’s best universities—are also served well by the development of *their* background knowledge for academic success.
- The Marzano book speaks to building academic background knowledge through both direct and indirect ways. Often schools are left with the more “indirect ways” as noted in his book. In NCSS, we must MASTER Direct Vocabulary Instruction—with fidelity—with our students or risk poor learning



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- results on both basic skills (CRCT, GHSGT) and college-level assessment measures (ACT, SAT, AP).
- I am certain there are other, equally important, “whys” ...
- 3. In last week’s Leadership Team Meeting of Principals and Central Office Administrators, NHS Principal Craig Lockhart and Porterdale Elementary Principal Lizzella Dodson presented a lesson on Chapter 1 of Marzano’s *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*. Some key learnings passed on to us were:
 - “**Background knowledge**” is what a person already knows about a topic. Example: the best way to get to work
 - “**Academic background knowledge**” is what a person already knows about academic content. Example: how photosynthesis works in science
 - **Two Types of Intelligence:**
 - ~ **Fluid intelligence:** our ability to process and store information (innate ability).
 - ~ **Crystallized intelligence:** our ability to learn from facts, generalizations, and principles (learned intelligence).
Note: Research studies have shown “crystallized” or learned intelligence to be a stronger correlate of success in school than “fluid” or innate intelligence.
 - Fluid Intelligence + Academic Oriented Experiences = Academic Background Knowledge
 - **How do students gain background knowledge?**
 - ~ **Direct Approach:** through caring/competent mentors and/or through “field experience” (museum, art gallery, zoo, park, aquarium, etc.)
 - ~ **Indirect Approach:** through Direct Vocabulary Instruction and/or through wide reading.
 - **Given that not every student enjoys a caring/competent mentor or has adequate “field experience,” what can schools do to build sufficient background knowledge for academic achievement?**
 - ~ Use Indirect Approaches
 - ~ **Marzano:** “I strongly fear that if schools do *not* implement indirect approaches like those outlined in this book, they will continue to be a breeding ground for failure for those students who grow up in or near



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poverty.”

4. Also in last week's Leadership Team Meeting, Liberty Middle Principal Vic Lee and Clements Middle Principal Joy Scavella left us with the following key learnings from Chapter 2 of *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*:

- Background knowledge is “stored” in permanent memory in bimodal “packets,” both linguistic and nonlinguistic (i.e., verbal and nonverbal).
- Nonlinguistic approaches are more effective. (Over time, our linguistic or verbal descriptions shed their connections to a particular context, instead of describing a specific event, they describe general forms of the event.)
- **Six Principles for Building an Indirect Approach**
 - ~ Background knowledge is “stored” in bimodal packets (linguistic and nonlinguistic)—classroom activities should be designed to enhance students' linguistic representations of the “target” information and their imagery of the target information.
 - ~ The process of “storing” experiences in permanent memory can be enhanced—the more times a student processes information, the more likely the student will remember it. (Research has shown that students require about **four exposures to information** to adequately integrate it into their background knowledge.)
 - ~ Background knowledge is multi-dimensional and its value is contextual—(1) develop background knowledge that will enhance success in specific academic subjects, and (2) link learning to something the student already knows.
 - ~ Even surface-level background knowledge is useful—it does not have to be detailed to be useful in learning.
 - ~ Background knowledge manifests itself as vocabulary knowledge—the relationship between vocabulary and background knowledge is **explicit** in the research. (Three-year-old children from welfare families have about 70% of the vocabulary of children from working-class families and only about 45% of the vocabulary of children from professional families.)
 - ~ Virtual experiences can enhance background knowledge—reading is a “virtual” experience promising “a rich array” of such experiences; the more students “talk and listen” to others, the more virtual experiences are generated; educational television is a virtual experience; technology [*GSM emphasis*] can provide students with places they could not otherwise go enhancing “virtual” experiences.



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5. You will recall that NCSS Principals and others “redelivered” some key learnings last semester from English teacher, administrator, and Coach Mike Schmoker via his award-winning book, *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning*. Dr. Schmoker has just released a new book entitled *Focus: Elevating the Essentials To Radically Improve Student Learning*, ASCD, 2011. While we are not “redelivering” this work in our schools, I am reviewing this work in our Leadership Team meetings. Schmoker challenges us to look thoughtfully at the work we do in classrooms and schools. Some key learnings in Chapter 1 of this work follow:

- Three major studies have reinforced the power of simplicity, clarity, and priority in effective organizations: *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *The Knowing-Doing Gap* by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, and *The One Thing You Need to Know* by Marcus Buckingham.
- There’s an **IRON LAW** to be learned by organizations and by educators in particular: “We will never master or implement what is most important for kids if we continue to pursue multiple initiatives before we implement our highest-priority strategies and structures.”
- “To succeed [in improving schools], we must attain piercing clarity about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercise the relentless discipline to say, ‘No thank you’ to [other] opportunities ...”

Note: It was at this point that I asked our leaders to recount the NCSS mission, two non-negotiable goals, and two strategies (one system wide and one school-based). Why?—According to this new Schmoker book:

“For an organization to maintain focus on its highest priorities, it must simplify and repeatedly clarify them so that everyone in the organization knows implicitly what to do and what not to do.” [See attached NCSS Strategic Plan for Teaching-for-Learning-for-All.]

- The most effective actions [in classrooms and schools] are “well known practices, with the extra dimension that they [are] reinforced and carried out reliably.”
- The most effective organizations [education included] accomplish “more” when they focus on “less.”



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- “To protect the core [work], leaders must work diligently to ‘filter’ what comes into the organization—the ceaseless assault of new programs and trainings that seduce employees away from the core—in our case, from monitoring and implementing sound curriculum (what we teach), effective instruction (how we teach), and authentic literacy (purposeful—and usually argumentative—reading, writing, and talking).” Schmoker calls this putting “*first things first!*”

- As regards “authentic literacy,” Schmoker says:

- “It is the ‘**spine**’ that holds everything together in *all* subject areas.”

- “It is the unrivaled ‘key’ to learning both content and thinking skills; grossly under implemented in schools.”

Note: You may recall that I’ve quoted this book recently in suggesting that textbooks may have been overlooked for the kind of serious, deep reading that students *need* to do, especially if headed to college where they will encounter numerous texts assigned to various courses. While textbooks are *not* the curriculum, they give weight to both relevant content and much needed skills for success in post-secondary education and in the modern workplace. For a most interesting article related to the importance of students tackling complex texts, see “**Too Dumb for Complex Texts**,” *Educational Leadership*, February 2011, Volume 68, Number 5, by Emory University Professor Mark Bauerlein. Says Bauerlein:

“The clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend complex texts. When faced with a U.S. Supreme Court decision, an epic poem, or an ethical treatise—works characterized by dense meanings, elaborate structure, sophisticated vocabulary, and subtle authorial intentions—college-ready students plod through them. Unready students falter.”

“Does the gap widen because [college] unready students don’t have the intelligence or background knowledge to understand complex texts? To some extent perhaps, but ACT suggests that the difficulty lies just as much in students’ lack of experience with reading complex texts. ACT asserts, “The type of text students are exposed to in high school has a significant impact on their readiness for college-level reading. The more students are exposed to complex texts, the more they realize that they can’t complete their studies through ‘a single superficial reading’.”



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“Complex texts require a *slower labor*. Readers can’t proceed to the next paragraph without grasping the previous one, they can’t glide over unfamiliar words and phrases, and they can’t forget what they read four pages earlier. They must double back, discern ambiguities, follow tricky transitions, and keep a dictionary close at hand.”

“Complex texts force readers to acquire the knack of slow linear reading. If they rarely encounter complex texts, young students won’t even realize that such a reading tack is a necessary means of learning. Unready students [for college] might be just as intelligent and motivated as the ready ones are, but they don’t possess the habits and strategies needed to carry on.” [So, they drop out of college, *GSM emphasis.*]

6. **The Proposed 2011-12 Calendar is now on the homepage of our NCSS website.** It was discussed by Board of Education members at their Planning Meeting of February 25th. Thanks to Dr. Shelia Thomas and her Calendar Committee for a job well done! The Board of Education is scheduled to vote on the calendar at its March 8th meeting.
7. **As we enter the coming 2011-12 fiscal year and contemplate the next two after that, we begin to truly understand how challenging the economic climate is in Newton County.** As you can see from the **ATTACHED** “Superintendent’s Recommendations Following BOE Direction at Planning Meeting of Feb. 25, 2011,” the school system is not in great shape when it comes to projected “Ending Fund Balances” for 2012-13 and 2013-14. It is no one’s fault per se, but it is a most distinct reflection of a most negatively impacted local economy made worse by difficult economic times at the state and national levels. Read carefully the attached chart with the asterisks at the bottom. **As we approach the financial future, we must do so with proverbial “eyes wide open”** ... Let’s not say that we were surprised ... as here it is [attached] ...
8. **The Board of Education has scheduled a vote on major budget reductions for their upcoming meeting on March 8, 2011, reflecting cuts totaling \$8,269,688.** Given proceedings now underway in the state legislature and in the U.S. Congress, we must be prepared to understand that with BOE action on March 8th, it does *not* necessarily signal that our budget reductions are complete heading into 2011-12. Indeed, we could find March 8th being only the first of two rounds of cuts ... I pray not.



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9. Given Notes #7 and #8 above and John Maxwell's *17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, I'm reminded of "The Law of the Scorecard":

"The team makes adjustments when it knows where it stands. The scorecard is essential to evaluating performance at any given time, and is vital to decision-making."

While few, if any, know the budget future for sure in NCSS, we must realize that our future work must be a "cost-effective" and "results-oriented" one ... The "new normalcy" for public schools, to quote the U.S. Secretary of Education, *is one* of accomplishing more with less ...

GSM
2/28/11