Education Matters
April 2006
A publication of the Association of American Educators

Content Mastery

How to be more effective in helping Special Education students

By Donna Garner

Last November, Congress passed sweeping legislation that governs Special Education (IDEA). Besides doubling the amount of money to be spent on disabled children, legislators also made significant changes in the way that Special Education is to operate in our nation's schools. Since change seems to be in the wind for Special Education, it is a good time to discuss Content Mastery to see whether this component of Special Education is productive or counterproductive.

Because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its requirement regarding Adequate Yearly Progress, school administrators are zealously considering how to best educate Special Education students. However, the way most schools have implemented Content Mastery at the secondary level will not help Special Education students achieve success.

For the uninitiated, Content Mastery involves one or more classrooms where Special Education students can go to receive individual help from Special Education teachers and aides. Students who are labeled Content Mastery students may leave their mainstream classrooms during the class period and receive extra help. These rooms are specially equipped with computers, manipulatives, cassette players, listening stations, remedial software programs, highlighted textbooks, graphic organizers, and other adaptive/assistive materials and equipment. More importantly, Content Mastery teachers have copies and keys of mainstream teachers' tests. The Content Mastery teachers are to help students take their tests by offering them a setting without distractions and where other modifications can be offered to help them do well on their work. This is not to include giving the students the answers; unfortunately, that often happens in the heat of chaos and frustration in the Content Mastery room.

A Good Idea Gone Bad

Years ago Content Mastery started out as a worthwhile concept when applied to elementary schools. Special Education students in self-contained classrooms (where students had the same teacher all day) could be sent to Content Mastery for individual help whenever the other students were doing seatwork. The present problem with Content Mastery began when Special Education advocates surmised that this same concept could be applied just as readily in secondary schools even though students changed teachers each period.

It may work properly with a secondary course in which the teacher presents the unit for the day in a 30-minute segment and then gives the students 25 minutes of guided practice during which time Special Education students can go to Content Mastery for assistance. However, English/Language Arts/Reading (ELAR) classes do not work this way.

In ELAR classes, teachers are covering six strands of curriculum (i.e., spelling, vocabulary, grammar, composition, reading, literature) all in the same class. ELAR classes are very different from math, history, and science classes that cover one strand of curriculum. ELAR teachers are constantly moving from one strand to another during a class period. Students may

take a 10-minute spelling test, look at new vocabulary words for a few minutes, have a 15-minute presentation on a grammar point, go over a literature quiz from the day before, and work on a composition that is due in a few days—all of this during one class period. ELAR teachers are constantly trying to balance the six strands of curriculum, and the next day's format may be completely different. Any Content Mastery students who leave the ELAR classroom are undoubtedly missing valuable instruction from the mainstream teacher as he changes from one strand of curriculum to the next.

Mainstream teachers may spend weeks getting a student ready to do some particular assignment; but because Content Mastery teachers have not been present during the preparatory period of time, they may assume the assignment is too hard for the student and may tend to overcompensate in aiding him.

Even though mainstream teachers may work closely with Content Mastery teachers, there is no way that the Content Mastery teacher can be completely prepared to handle the same jargon, patterns, explanations, and procedures that have been taught to the students in the mainstream classroom.

Since the Special Education students are to go to Content Mastery only when direct instruction is not occurring by the mainstream teacher, the ELAR students generally do not have much time in Content Mastery. Therefore, the Content Mastery teachers have to perform their duties under very tight time constraints.

Gaming the System

One of the biggest problems with Content Mastery occurs when secondary students know their Special Education paperwork indicates they are to be allowed to go to Content Mastery for testing. As soon as the teacher passes out the test/quiz, these students begin to demand that they be allowed to go to Content Mastery. Rather than encouraging these students to become independent test-takers, Content Mastery provides a crutch and makes many of them dependent and irresponsible students.

Making Improvements

Special Education students, whose paperwork allows them to, should have an actual class period on their daily schedule for Content Mastery. It should be counted as an elective, a reading improvement class, or some other course-equivalent description that can be devised based upon state guidelines.

The advantages of such a system are many. The Content Mastery teachers would have a class roster just like other mainstream teachers. The students would report to their Content Mastery class on time and would stay the entire period. This would eliminate the unsupervised traffic problem in the hallways. Confusion and distractions would be eliminated. Students would be guaranteed five periods per week of Content Mastery instruction, that should meet the Special Education requirements of proper intervention by the school district. This recommended plan should also meet the Special Education provision that requires students to be in the least-restrictive environment since they would be spending all but one period totally in mainstream classes.

Mainstream teachers would give test copies, homework assignments, special requests for assistance, and other such work to the Content Mastery teachers at least one day in advance. The students would have the entire period without distractions to work with the Content Mastery teacher who is now prepared to help them.

The Content Mastery students would always know they could get assistance on homework during that scheduled period each day. They would feel more secure by having such a daily schedule.

In this new system, the students would never miss any mainstream classroom instruction and could be a part of class learning activities. It is very difficult to make Special Education students feel a part of the mainstream classroom and the curriculum when they are constantly going in and out of the room.

Under the new system, the Special Education students who are sitting in the mainstream classroom would not take the test when the rest of the class does. They could use that time to do extra study. They would take the test during their assigned Content Mastery class period that day and would have extra assistance from a teacher who has had time to look over the test properly.

Content Mastery is meant to offer quality assistance to Special Education students who require extra help. If the program is organized right, it can be a tremendous support to very worthy students. ■

Donna Garner is an AAE advisory member. She taught high school for over twenty-six years, and was appointed by Presidents Reagan and Bush to the National Commission of Migrant Education. She was also appointed to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) writing team for English/Language Arts/Reading.

For a list of classroom strategies that Donna uses, contact wgarner1@hot.rr.com.

A Better Way to Grade Schools

Redefining how we measure school success will lead to real improvement.

By Bill Breisch

As winter turns toward spring, we turn toward a perennial spring event: student testing. With that testing comes the inevitable anxiety as states brace themselves for the annual status races.

My state, Wisconsin, is no exception. We look ahead to this testing season with concern about how our performance data will measure up to results from other states, other districts, other schools. As a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which requires students in numerous subgroups to move toward "proficiency" in reading and mathematics (and, soon, in science), schools and school districts will either be "making Adequate Yearly Progress" or be labeled "in need of improvement." Unfortunately, these assessments do not by themselves tell the full story about how well a school is performing.

The Problem

That the current system does not fairly depict the quality of a school or district became clearer than ever in a study released last year by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), a nonprofit organization comprised of some 1,500 school districts. NWEA has one of the largest repositories of longitudinal student achievement data in the world.

The study authors posed the question: If School A and School B had identical state test scores, would they have similar success with students? Consider that School A started the year with low-performing students and caused every one of them to grow twice as much as students in School B. We immediately realize that end-of-year testing data can tell us where students are at a point in time, but not where they started or how far they traveled to get there.

Some of the findings of this important study require us to challenge our current perception of school success. It turns out that:

- Schools with similar status levels differ substantially in the achievement gains of their students.
- More than 20 percent of "high-achieving" schools fall into the bottom quarter of schools in terms of the academic value they add to their students' achievement.
- Many "low-achieving" schools actually cause as much growth in their students' learning as the best high-achievement schools.

Impact of Focusing on Status

If you are appraising a school's success, it is important to determine if the school is adding academic value to its pupils and at what rate. Such growth information is critical in developing a more complete picture of school performance and school effectiveness. However, the current NCLB requirements do not factor in measures of growth and, as a result, cause unfair consequences for schools in several ways.

Fiscal Impact: Schools that effect substantial growth in low-performing students may still be subject to needless disruption (intervention, reconstitution, etc.) if they don't bring students all the way up to proficiency. This may result in loss of students, staff, and funds, not to mention morale, from schools that are, in fact, positioning low-performing students for future success.

Impact on High Performers: Under NCLB, two schools with mostly proficient students will be labeled as equally successful, even though one's pupils are making scant academic headway while the other's are moving toward superior performance. This can give parents and educators in high-achieving but low-growth schools a false sense of confidence and hope.

School Choice Impact: If only final achievement levels are used to identify schools that make adequate yearly progress, students who change schools won't have all the information they need to make informed decisions about which schools are most effective. Not even parents and students, let alone teachers, have access to student growth data to know whether a school is really propelling students forward academically.

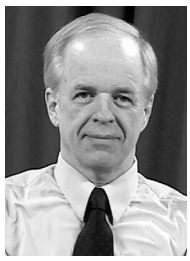
Redefining School Success

Accountability for school success is important, but we need to include high-quality growth measures (i.e., value-added assessments) if we are going to gauge the true success of a school or a district.

Parents with children in a number of Wisconsin school districts are beginning to see the power of looking at not only children's baseline achievement levels but also their growth. These school districts have recently begun to use the NWEA's computer-adapted and Internet-enabled test that measures growth in learning in reading, language use, and mathematics. Nationally, more than a dozen state school chiefs recently endorsed the concept of using a growth model as a measure of accountability.

Without some indicator of individual and collective student growth, we cannot identify schools that lack the required percentage of students scoring "proficient" and yet are making significant gains in reading and math. Conversely, we are not able to distinguish between "proficient" schools that are maximizing student learning potential and those that are merely maintaining the status quo.

NCLB should be a "floor" for states to judge school accountability, ensuring a minimal level of accountability while allowing states to develop additional indicators of school success. One of those indicators should be growth measures for each and every student—the only way we can begin to understand if a school or school district is truly successful in leaving no child behind. ■



Bill Breisch is director of instruction for the Monona Grove School District in Monona, Wisconsin. He can be reached at bill_breisch@mononagrove.org.

WHAT 'CHA READING?

In times not too-far gone, if you wanted to get to know someone, you asked him what he was reading. Today, the question is a joke, especially among teens. "Reading for fun?" (Big smile, followed by loud laugh.) "But seriously, how many tunes are on your i-Pod?"

By Mark Bauerlein

The decline in leisure reading is no laughing matter, however. In fact, the Department of Education's report, NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance in Reading and Mathematics, which was released last summer, offers some tantalizing information that suggests a connection between students' generally poor performance on academic reading tests and their declining leisure-reading habits.

Consider a chart buried deep in the report that records how often students read "for fun," not for homework or for the workplace but for their own pleasure. Among seventeen-year-olds, the number who "never or hardly ever" read rose 10 percentage points, while those who read for fun "almost every day" fell 9 percentage points from 1984 to 2004. Thirteen-year-olds followed a similar pattern. Those who reported reading "almost every day" dropped 5 percentage points, while those who read "never or hardly ever" rose 5 percentage points.

And what of the nine-year-olds, whose reading scores are up? Their leisure reading is also up, slightly. Those who report reading "almost every day" rose 1 percentage point since 1984, while those who reported reading "never or hardly ever" dropped 1 percentage point. That more than half of nine-year-olds (54 percent) reported reading for fun practically all the time is significant in itself, but that their numbers have remained firm while the older students' have plummeted deserves attention. At the very least, with achievement in each age group correlated with outside reading, we should widen our vision to consider the role of books in the leisure hours of teenagers.

There is an impressive and growing body of survey research on leisure reading that complements the NAEP 2004 study. A year earlier, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) surveyed more than 17,000 adults on their reading habits. (I was the study's project director.) The ensuing report, Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, showed that from 1992 to 2002 the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who read at least one novel, story, poem, or play in the previous 12 months fell from 53 percent to 43 percent.

> Among fifteen- to 24-year-old respondents, the average number of minutes spent per day reading was a meager 8 minutes—Eight!

At the same time, the portion of adults reading any book at all fell 8 points, from 59 percent to 51 percent.

A few months later, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released its American Time Use Survey. That survey asked more than 21,000 respondents to document their activities during the day, including work, sleep, school, and leisure activities. Among the leisure activity options listed on the survey was reading of any kind. Among fifteen- to 24-year-old respondents, the average number of minutes spent per day reading was a meager 8 minutes—Eight!

Soon thereafter, UCLA issued its 2004 American Freshman Survey, which showed that the number of entering college students who never read for pleasure rose 5 percentage points from 1994 to 2004.

The NEA, BLS, and UCLA surveys all measure voluntary reading, not reading for school. The NAEP report did ask about assigned reading in school and for homework. Unfortunately, though, there are no surprises. Nine-year-olds are reading more in school, while seventeen-year-olds report no change.

Clearly, teens are spending their leisure hours on activities unrelated to homework or pleasure reading. It didn't take another study to prove what most adults already know about how teens spend their leisure time, but we have one nonetheless. Last March, the Kaiser Foundation's study, Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds, found that kids in this age group consume fully eight-and-a-half hours of media per day in just six-and-a-half hours. How do they do this? Multitasking! Teenagers will watch television, for example, while downloading music. Cell phones are an added diversion. NOP World Technology's mKids Study (2005) found that 75 percent of fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds, and 40 percent of twelve- to fourteen-year-olds, own cell phones.

This avalanche of diversions is consuming teenagers' out-of-school hours. As a result, when analyzing reading scores, we need to add the voluntary reading habits of teenagers to our ongoing concerns over curriculum, pedagogy, and school policy. Consider the proportions. English teachers have a student, on average, for five hours a week in class. They may also use homework to demand students' attention for a few additional hours. Outside of this, however, young people are chatting, surfing, blogging, recording, downloading, and playing computer games. Many of these are, to be sure, language activities, but they don't help develop verbal aptitude. (If they did, we'd see a spike in reading scores for seventeen-year-olds.)

All this means that during the semester, teens spend about eight hours a week reading, and up to fifty hours on various other forms of media. The imbalance is worse during vacation periods. The monumental reform efforts in the public schools may continue, but if reading scores among teens are to improve, the leisure habits of high school students had better change. ■

Mark Bauerlein is Professor of English at Emory University, and recently served as Director of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Source—Education Gadfly, *a publication of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, www.edexcellence.net.*

Participation in Literary Activities
Americans 18 years of age or older, 2002

Source: 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts as cited in "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004)

Performance Pay

Not so fast, governors!

By Kate Walsh

Merit pay for teachers has gotten a lot of play recently. Without a doubt, the principle that some teachers ought to get paid more than others has gained political currency around the country. More and more politicians—generally a risk-averse group—are coming out four-square behind merit pay, even if it means taking on the unions.

While I'm certainly glad that merit pay is gaining ground as the "right" thing to do, right doesn't always make might. The groundswell of public support could quickly seep back into the cracks, depending upon how we proceed from here. Merit pay could be doomed to failure unless governors support the careful experimentation that's needed to solve some of this reform idea's great dilemmas.

Structuring merit pay properly is hard to do. The systems need to be both fair and to be hefty enough to actually impact a talented teacher's decision to enter or leave the profession. Our collective naiveté, combined with unrestrained enthusiasm for merit pay, plays right into the hands of groups opposed to change. We have seen this in California where the unions have formed a formidable bloc in opposition to Governor Schwarzenegger's attempt to reform teacher tenure and institute merit pay.

The thorny problem of how best to determine a teacher's effectiveness—the only fair basis for deciding who gets merit pay—has by no means been worked out to the degree required for wide-scale adoption. Challenges include:

- Value-added measures of student learning, while certainly promising and the most reliable option on the table, cannot be used to measure the effectiveness of teachers who work with very young children, in high schools, and in nontested subjects like art, music, and history.

- Evaluations by principals or peers, when done with care and consistency, do correlate highly with student learning gains. However, this method must overcome a long history of ill-designed instruments and weak training of evaluators, not to mention widespread teacher suspicions that principals will play favorites.

- Letting the teacher decide for him or herself what goals to achieve, as Denver has done, brings its own challenges, both in administering a program predicated on unique goals for each teacher, and recognizing the possibility that a teacher's goals may not align with those of the school, school system, state, or taxpayers.

Although these problems appear daunting, policy makers must tackle them. Some experimentation is surely in order as well as some pilot programs coupled with rigorous evaluations. Meanwhile, we do know some things that offer useful parameters for moving forward:

1. Merit pay needs to be based on multiple factors. It should always not only include some measure of student achievement but also needs to include evaluations by school principals and senior faculty. It's neither workable nor even fair to base a teacher's income on a one-shot test. Critics have a valid point here.

2. Merit pay bonuses must be large enough to persuade teachers to do something they might not otherwise choose to do. The $1,500 bonuses currently offered by a number of states and districts are likely inadequate. My hunch is that 10 to 20 percent of base salary is more appropriate.

3. Merit pay programs should acknowledge individual successes, not just schoolwide achievements. In other words, not all teachers in the same school should receive the same bonus— although perhaps all should receive some bonus.

4. Schools must help weak teachers achieve. Professional development funds ought to be directed at supporting teachers as they gain the skills they need to qualify for bonuses.

5. States and districts require a long-term strategy for sustaining any merit pay program. Too often, teachers are promised bonuses that prove short lived, ending as soon as the first budget crunch. One idea worth pursuing is to persuade teachers in experimenting schools to give up their automatic step increases, contributing these funds to the bonus package. Tweaking the existing uniform salary schedule is a promising way for merit pay packages to survive the test of time.

6. The resources needed to do merit pay right for all schools statewide do not exist. For now, it would be better to allocate resources to high-need districts than to spread limited resources too thin.

The teaching profession has no choice but to remedy an outmoded pay structure that is woefully insensitive to current labor force realities. Daunting though the challenges appear, there's no question that it can be done. Will it be perfectly fair? No system is, but the system we're saddled with now is remarkably unfair to teachers and, even more importantly, runs counter to what works best for students. ■

Kate Walsh is president of the National Council on Teacher Quality (www.nctq.org). This article is adapted from the Teacher Quality Bulletin.

National Emblem Project

The National Emblem Project, with Laura Bush as Honorary Chairperson, wants young Americans to learn the Star Spangled Banner by heart, all four verses; and the Cato Institute (800-767-1241) offers the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in a personal study edition for only $4.95, as a means of keeping our patriotic tests alive and energetic.

Robert Oliphant writes, "A nation's past lives on in its patriotic texts. To abandon or change them, as G.K. Chesterton put it, is to disenfranchise those who created them. Kept alive, though, their original fervor and energy can drive us toward our national future far more effectively and cohesively than misguided attempts by those in power to rewrite them, and thus reinvent our national past."

Oliphant offers a recitation-friendly version of the Declaration of Independence to help bring this national treasure back into our lives.

For more information see www.educationnews.org

Another Challenge to Status Quo Teacher Ed

This past fall, Southern Methodist University in Dallas opened its doors to more than a thousand graduate education students for an innovative yet controversial new program, the first in the country to explicitly focus on narrowing the achievement gap. SMU's new program concentrates on effective reading instruction as the key to eliminating the divide between white and minority students.

Cozying up to the No Child Left Behind Act, the program has drawn sharp criticism from some educators and policy makers, who contend that recent education reforms focus too much on testing and rigid teaching methodologies. "It's very dangerous and wrongheaded" to depend on a single approach to instruction, said Stanford ed school dean Deborah Stipek. "If you think about what we want our students to do and what teachers want to prepare them for, issues like social development are really important, as well."

However, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings defended the program, arguing, "The persistence of the achievement gap is evidence enough that the nation needs new teaching methods that have proven effective."

For more information visit SMU's Institute for Reading Research at www.smu.edu/teacher_education/reading/IRRproducts.asp

1,500 Online Teaching Resources

The Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE) website (www.ed.gov/free/index.html) makes it easy to find teaching resources on federal government websites. The site was developed with the cooperation of more than thirty-five federal agencies, and is updated each week with new materials and highlights.

FREE offers quick access to more than 1,500 resources in the arts, sciences, history, and other subjects from the Library of Congress, National Archives, Smithsonian, NASA, the National Science Foundation, and other federal agencies.

Here's a sample of what you'll find at FREE.

Constitution Resources – Resources for teaching and learning about the U.S. Constitution. View high-resolution images of the Constitution from the National Archives, read the biographies of the founding fathers, and much more.

Born in Slavery – 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery with 500 photos of former slaves.

Our Documents – 100 milestone documents in U.S. history, including speeches, treaties, Supreme Court cases, patent designs, and Constitutional amendments.

Nationalatlas.gov – Make a map of your state or community by selecting features to display: cities, roads, rivers, population, crops, or water quality. Find an aerial photo of your neighborhood.

Explore Themes in American Art – Ten genres of American art: landscapes, portraits, and more.

Exploring Earth – 100 animations and images illuminating key concepts in earth science, including coal formation, nuclear fission, and hurricanes.

Mathematics Across the Curriculum – Materials for teaching math in art, history, literature, and music, as well as science, engineering, and other disciplines traditionally associated with math.

President Bush visits with students at B.W. Tinker Elementary School in Waterbury, Connecticut.

A Friend of Education

While many liberals won't acknowledge it, President Bush has budgeted more for education than did President Clinton.

By Gary Beckner

The National Education Association and a number of its state affiliates are circulating a new missive to their members criticizing President Bush and the Republican-led Congress for "cutting education spending." In some states – California, for instance – teacher unions are even producing radio and television ads to chastise the President. This is the same claim the NEA and "education friendly" congressmen have been making since President Bush's second year in office.

But is this criticism warranted? The fact is that congressional appropriations for education are up more than 29 percent since President Bush took office. However, during these politically charged times, the President is never going to get the credit from the very people who should be pleased – the education establishment.

Each year at its convention, the NEA bestows a "friend of education" award – usually to some influential politician who has pushed for more money toward education. With this in mind, one would think a 29 percent increase in federal education spending would have gained President Bush at least a nomination for the award. After all, he has spent more on education than a previous "friend of education" award winner, President Clinton. We're guessing that President Bush is not holding his breath in anticipation of receiving the NEA award.

Here are some proposed increases in the President's 2007 budget:

• $1.475 billion in high school reform grants to focus more attention on at-risk students struggling to reach grade level in reading and math.

• $380 million to prepare students for global competition.

• $200 million more for Title I school improvement grants.

• $100 million increase for the reauthorized Special Education Grants to states for a total of $4.3 billion, or 69 percent, over the past five years.

• $240 million more into the Pell Grant program.

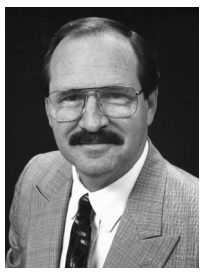
These are just some of the proposed increases. However, budget numbers can start to get fuzzy and give the NEA and its friendly legislators the ammunition they need to criticize the President. Besides these increases, next year's budget removes forty-two programs that, in the Administration's opinion, have proven ineffective. These cutbacks represent a 5.5 percent decrease from the 2006 budget.

So there you have it: actual federal spending on education has increased every year during President Bush's time in office; however, for 2007, he has proposed a cut in the total budget. Spending in real dollars will most likely not go down because Congress hasn't shown the political will to eliminate any programs. But you have to give the President credit for trying to reduce the federal budget deficit. For actual federal spending to continue to increase for effective education programs, one of two things must happen: the federal government must either scale back or get rid of ineffective programs, or raise taxes. This is a foreign concept to the NEA, which has never met a tax it didn't like.

The NEA and many sincere liberals believe more federal and state money can solve our problems. Others, including many teachers, are convinced that help from the federal government, although sometimes welcomed, is not the solution to all of our problems.

We can agree that government at the federal, state, and local levels must anticipate having to allocate more funds towards repairing eroding school facilities, buying more books, and attracting and retaining the best teachers. However, until public school spending is reformed, most of the new money will never make it past the bureaucratic blob and into the classrooms – as any teacher can confirm. Until there are systemic changes, more money could actually exacerbate our problems and simply stall much needed reform.

You can be sure that if we don't stop the bureaucratic creep, we will continue to hear pleas for more money for many years to come. ■



Gary Beckner is the Executive Director of the Association of American Educators.

association of american educators

Education Matters is a publication of the
Association of American Educators (AAE)
27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230
Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

www.aaeteachers.org; (800) 704-7799
E-mail: info@aaeteachers.org
Gary Beckner, Managing Editor
Kelley Autry, Associate Editor & Researcher
Diane Meyer, Editorial Assistant
Bobette Craycraft, Editorial Assistant

Presorted Standard
US Postage Paid
#400
Laguna Niguel, CA