Addressing barriers to learning and closing

Sociology, Communication

Addressing Barriers to Learning and closing the Achievement Gap: New Directions for Student Support Closing We all recognize the urgency arising from the demands made by the No Child Left Behind Act. Many schools are being designated as low performing. Increasingaccountabilitydemands require demonstrating progress for students who are " economically disadvantaged, from racial and ethnic minority groups, have disabilities, or have limited English proficiency. " All schools will be evaluated on criteria designed to identify sites that are " persistently dangerous. With increasing ccountability tor student outcomes and dwindling budgets, it is essential to rethink use of existing learning support resources to maximize a school's capability for addressing barriers to student learning and teaching. Beyond the Learning Gap Americans increasingly are aware of this learning gap and are seeking ways to address it. The international comparisons grab the front-page headlines, and officials try to Infer recommendations from how one country performs compared with the performance of another.

Policymakers carefully study, state by state, scores on the ost recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, as if one could divine a strategy, from the scores, for improving performance. Scores of all local schools are printed in the newspaper, and school boards and parents discuss why students In some schools score much lower than others. As important as it is to know how well students are learning, examinations of achievement scores alone can never reveal how the scores might be improved.

We also need information on the classroom processes on teaching that are contributing to the scores. unfortunately, many olicymakers have ignored this fact, making decisions about the future ofeducationwithout even the

most rudimentary information about what is happening In classrooms. In 1995, faced with low reading andmathematicsperformance on the National Assessment of Educauonal Progress, California's superintendent of public instruction formed two task forces, one for mathematics and one for reading, to study the situation and propose solutions.

California, after all, was highly respected for Curriculum Frameworks that guide reading and mathematics instruction in the state. The Frameworks provided a comprehensive outline for what students should learn and guidelines for appropriate Instructional methods. If the Frameworks were so good, why was achievement so low? In meetings of California's mathematics task force, the discussion often turned to the Frameworks. Were the teaching methods or curricular emphases recommended in the Mathematics Framework perhaps to blame for students' low achievement?

A debate ensued among members of the task force, a debate that has been reflected more broadly in public debate around the country etween proponents of " reform" teaching and those in favor of more " traditional" teaching methods. Some believed that the Frameworks were not working and should tOf2 the discussion was a key fact: the state of California had collected no data on the extent to which the Frameworks had been implemented in the state's classrooms.

This did not stop the state, however, from undertaking a revision of its Mathematics Framework. But on what basis could the Framework be revised? Without knowing what teachers were doing, how could the effectiveness of the Framework be determined? We do not mean to single out California; no

state that we know of regularly collects and uses data directly related to instructional processes in the classroom. Policymakers adopt a program, then wait to see if student achievement scores will rise.

If scores do not go up and this is most often what happens, especially in the short run - they begin hearing complaints that the policy isn't working. Momentum builds, experts meet, and soon there is a new recommendation, then a change of course, often in the opposite direction. Significantly, this whole process goes on without ever collecting data on whether or not the original program as even implemented in classrooms or, if implemented, how effective it was in promoting student learning.

If we wish to make wise decisions, we need to know what is going on in typical classrooms. Fortunately, the same TIMSS that generated a new wave of concern about students' achievement also collected a wealth of information about educational factors that might help us understand the different levels of performance in different countries. TIMSS researchers analyzed textbooks; asked administrators, teachers, and students about their beliefs and practices; and ideotaped teachers teaching typical lessons.

The TIMSS video study of teaching, which forms the basis for this book, is especially significant because it provides a penetrating and unparalleled look into classrooms in three different countries. For the first time, we had a full video record of a representative sample of U. S. classrooms. More than that, we had the same kind of information from Germany and Japan. We could now compare more than achievement scores. We could examine similarities and differences in the instructional methods that lay behind these scores.