

# Focus on Learning

By Don Burger, EdD and Jennifer Ryan

Student learning takes place in classrooms facilitated by highly qualified teachers. Student learning does not take place in the boardroom, the central office, or any other office, even though these are important elements of the educational system. We know that interventions that have the greatest impact on student learning are closest to the classroom; however, the relationships among variables in the classroom and the educational system are complex and integrated.

Within the classroom, there are three main elements: teacher, students, and instructional resources.

The two main variables the teacher contributes to the classroom are content knowledge and instructional skills. However, having content knowledge or instructional skills alone is insufficient. Both variables must be considered in association with the standards and benchmarks to be taught, how the students learn, and the instructional resources available. The teacher must have the content knowledge and instructional skills to teach the variety of students in the classroom. A teaching credential or the ability to pass a test may not guarantee successful learning for specific groups of students. How well the students learn is the best test of teacher knowledge and skill.

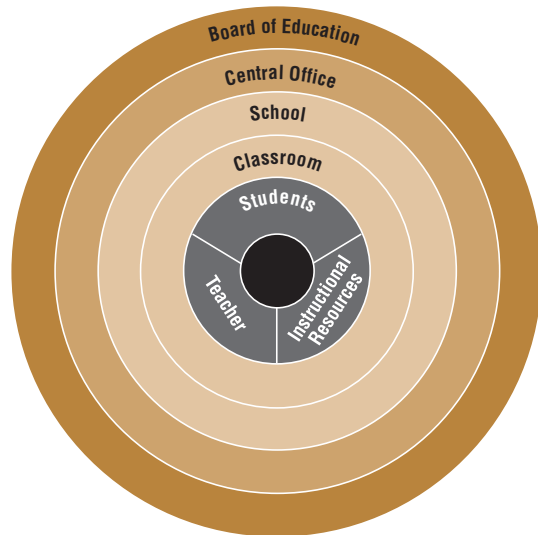
Students bring background knowledge and unique learning styles to the classroom. It is essential for the students to have the ability to understand the language of instruction and have the prerequisite skills to learn the standards and benchmarks being taught. Students who do not have the prerequisite skills have nothing to base the new learning on. These students need instruction on prerequisite skills before they will learn additional concepts assigned to the grade. It is important to remember that Pacific

students may have learning styles that are different from those of continental U.S. students. The culture, values, and the structure of languages in the Pacific are diverse. Consequentially, the processes of constructing knowledge are varied.

Instructional resources in the classroom facilitate student learning, provided the teacher can successfully use them. Resources need to align with standards and be presented in a format that is appropriate to the students' learning styles. Continental U.S. textbooks may not be relevant to Pacific student learning objectives, and they may not fit the context that Pacific students use to construct meaning. Locally derived materials may be more accessible, appropriate, and useful for teachers. High-quality classroom resources should provide standards-based information in a context that supports student learning.

The three classroom elements—teacher, students, and instructional resources—are integrated and dependent upon each other. In order to positively impact student learning, it is essential to recognize the effects of change within all three of these elements. For example, when introducing new curriculum, it is important to consider the context of student learning styles and prior knowledge. It is also necessary to provide professional development for teachers regarding curriculum implementation.

Since we know that interventions that have the greatest impact on student learning are those closest to the classroom, it may be useful to describe the classroom in relation to the larger educational system. If the focus is on student learning, the classroom should be located at the center of the educational system. Within the class-



**An Educational System Focused on Students**

room, parents and family provide the main support for the student. Around the classroom, the first level of support comes from the school. The second level of support is the central office. Beyond that is the Board of Education. Each of these layers is concentrated on a similar goal: student learning.

All the elements of the educational system must work together to achieve student learning. Parents must be aware of their children's learning progress and partner with the teacher to help the student reach his or her potential. Principals are responsible for providing teachers with professional development and instructional resources. Principals also serve as a bridge between classrooms and the central office. The central office should answer the phone with "How can I help you?" not "You must do this!" The central office channels resources to the schools to help them meet instructional goals. Overall, the Board of Education approves policy that guides the system. When the educational system focuses its efforts on the three main elements of the classroom—teacher, students, and instructional resources—it is more likely to positively impact student learning.

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