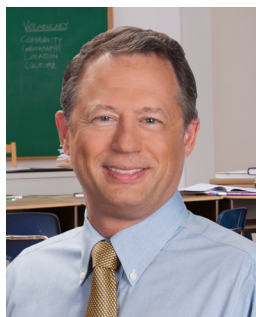


Transforming Schools by Transforming Our Mental Model of Instruction

The principal's instructional vision is critical in the shift to rigorous, standards-based classrooms.



By Michael Toth, CEO,
Learning Sciences International

In my travels across the country, one of the things I enjoy most is visiting schools. My colleagues and I are often invited into classrooms by principals eager to showcase their schools. The classrooms are typically well organized with hard-working teachers dispensing knowledge to well-behaved students dutifully following directions. Is there something wrong with this picture?

When I am training district or school leaders, I ask them to envision an effective classroom. What do they see in their mind's eye? Often their vision for instruction or mental model looks like this: A charismatic teacher holding students in rapt attention in a well-managed and orderly classroom.

I ask them to contrast that mental model of instruction with this one: The teacher is mostly listening, walking around while skillfully facilitating and monitoring groups where students are vigorously questioning each other about the content. Students are engaged in cognitively complex tasks, researching in literature and on the Internet, and citing evidence to support their claims. The classroom resounds with the good noise of students engaged in learning with their peers. The students' learning takes center stage, instead of the charismatic lecturer.

Which classroom would you want your child to be in?

It is important to note that the traditional mental model of teaching is not wrong. At one time it served well, but the world has changed, as has the rigor of new academic standards. Students can Google facts from their ever-present smart phones, making memorization less important. Today's employers are seeking employees who can think critically and organize themselves into teams to solve complex problems and invent solutions. Our classroom learning environments need to reflect the way people work in today's workplace.

A principal can only lead a school to his or her level of instructional vision.

So how do principals change their mental model of effective instruction? In our experience, it starts with a RigorWalk™ of their school. A RigorWalk is a process of looking for specific scientific indicators of school leadership practices and rigorous standards-based instructional practices. A trained expert in the instructional shifts to rigorous standards-based teaching walks the school side-by-side with the principal, looking at and debriefing student and teacher evidence. Through this principal-coaching process, the principal develops a new mental model of instruction, so that he or she can lead the school forward by providing professional development and feedback to teachers in a supportive cycle, until the full transformation to rigorous instruction occurs.

Through our work with RigorWalks and Demonstration Schools for Rigor, we have seen principals, teachers, and entire schools repeatedly make this transition. When teachers transition away from traditional teacher-centered classrooms where they are doing most of the "work", to the new student-centered classrooms focused on real-world activities, where students are doing most of the "work", we see the love of teaching return and re-energize the faculty. Teachers tell us it used to feel like they were pushing the students, and that they had to push harder each year. Now the students pull them to the learning.

It all starts with supporting principals to transform their mental model to a new vision for instruction through walking their school to see what is possible. When their mental model changes, their instructional leadership changes too.

Michael Toth is founder and CEO of Learning Sciences International. He advises state departments of education and district superintendents on issues of leadership and teacher effectiveness, school improvement, and leadership pipeline development and tracking systems. He is co-author, with Dr. Robert J. Marzano, of *Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference: A New Model for Teacher Growth and Student Achievement* and with Dr. Beverly Carbaugh and Dr. Robert J. Marzano of *School Leadership for Results: Shifting the Focus of Leader Evaluation*.


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