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FOOTNOTES
"A nation must think before it acts." - Robert Strausz-Hupé

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Rx FOR SCHOOLS: THE 10 ESSENTIALS

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As the new school year is about to begin, I wish to share the following ten most important requirements for providing outstanding education whether the clientele is urban or suburban, public or private, elementary or secondary. All ten work jointly to support successful and motivating instruction. Happily, none of the ten "must haves" for excellent education requires financial expenditure, just an investment in human capital. The power of the ten is making them known to all stakeholders – teachers, parents, students, administrators –and each taking responsibility to make sure the classroom is a smoothly running engine of instruction that fires pistons of ideas and generates engaged, skilled students.

1. Gene Kelly Instruction

Like the great dance routines of Gene Kelly, successful instruction is well choreographed and strategically planned. This means careful consideration of students' prior capabilities and introducing new material that matches their readiness for the content. Teachers must overplan; "winging it" does not work.

But well-planned lessons are designed to elicit student-initiated questions that will reshape the lessons themselves --at which point the instructional dance should become improvisational, creating a learning atmosphere for original thought and creativity.

Motivating lessons are grounded by including the following:

- **"Grabbers" or hooks from the moment students take their seats. If students' curiosity is piqued immediately, they are motivated to learn.**

- **Equally important, lessons need conclusions that ask students to reflect on their learning, even if it's just a "prompt what did you glean from today's class?"**

2. The Bruner Effect

Jerome Bruner posited "we begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." Adapted presentationally, all material can be taught to any student at any age. A lesson I took with me throughout my career came from one of my first history teaching positions, in a very large classroom of almost forty students. One young lady was identified with severe

learning disabilities and assigned to the special education teacher several times a week for learning support. I befriended the special teacher and gave her the materials and description of my lessons one week in advance so that she could preteach the material. This scaffolded the history content prior to my class. After several weeks, the failing student was not only receiving 'A's, but the guidance counselor sought me out to ask what magic potion I was using that altered this student's attitude toward school.

3. Architectural Relationship

Learning is not an isolated act. It is dependent on the social relationship between teacher and student. As in architecture, where the foundation is the prerequisite of a solid structure, so too in education, the teacher-to-student relationship is foundational to a successful classroom. More deeply than befriending students, teachers build relationships on mutual respect and understanding such that, seeking their approval, students are motivated to learn and study. With students seeking the teacher's regard and fearing the teacher's disappointment, student behavior issues are significantly reduced. As professor and teaching supervisor, I armed student teachers with this wisdom, as they successfully fought the battles of illiteracy in an ineffective Philadelphia public school system.

4. Testing: A Two-Pronged Approach

The burning question for teachers is always "how do I know they are learning?" How can students *show* what they've learned? I am a proponent of "Mastery Learning," where students must demonstrate their mastery of the subject through repeated testing opportunities. My experience has taught me that this method not only enables students to retain material but increases students' use of more sophisticated thinking skills. Advantageously, since we live in a standardized test world, students must be taught test-taking skills and be exposed to standardized test questions in the classroom on a regular basis. Preparation for SAT-type tests develops critical thinking and problem solving skills. Preparation for AP type tests also develops subject area skills and teaches content. "Teaching to the Test," so often regarded as negative, is not the case if the test is meaningful. It is our responsibility to prepare students for these types of tests.

5. Teacher Cross-Pollination

In my most recent post, I facilitated an instructional transformation with the introduction of iPads for each student and teacher in a school that was previously lacking in any technological bells and whistles. By providing multiple opportunities (e.g. weekly department meetings, facultywide in-service, a teacher-led "iPad fair"), the school became a cauldron boiling over with new ideas on teaching. We even created an Apple-style "Genius Bar" staffed with our own faculty. *Teachers need time to collaborate on a weekly – or even daily – basis.* Frequent cross-pollination among faculty allows teachers to share their own ideas, strategies, and experiences, and gives their colleagues courage to "tinker" with their classroom teaching and grow professionally. Not to take advantage of internal talent and wealth of experience is a lost opportunity. If administrators want to introduce new ideas in a school building, have a few teachers study and become the internal experts and use their expertise to spread the knowledge. Outside consultants can be used to facilitate this process, but success rests on the internal talents and motivation of the faculty.

6. Great Expectations

On a daily basis I saw how teacher expectations either created acts of scholarly behavior or inhibited the very actions teachers desire from their students. I watched a master teacher whose expertise was teaching AP English and literature to highly gifted and talented students and was then assigned to teach several regular level English classes. She only knew one depth. By mid-semester her students were writing and discussing the literature with analytical sophistication. Teach all students as if they are gifted and talented even if they are not. Pretend. Just try this for a few days, and watch what happens. Your expectations of them changes their classroom behavior and attitude toward learning. Their confidence in themselves as learners increases dramatically and raises their interest in the subject matter, their likelihood to take risks for their learning, asking questions, volunteering answers, and tinkering with ideas and processes.

7. Repeating with Repetition

I have learned that most students, even the very bright and motivated (but excluding perhaps the profoundly gifted) need at least three interactions with material for learning that demonstrates true understanding to take place. This can include a variety of instructional experiences like studying for tests, taking the tests, independent student review, using listening, reading and writing regarding the same content. The brain needs repetition to create the physical change in the neurons that produce new learning. Using online instruction like that found on Khan Academy type is excellent for preteaching to introduce new concepts or post-lesson instruction to reinforce new learnings.

8. The "Mike Mulligan Effect"

In the picture book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, Mike digs fasters and harder when people are watching. So too for students. When students know that their work will be displayed or they are responsible for publicly sharing with an audience, students will be motivated to learn and work diligently to produce an outstanding product. As often as possible, teachers should create real arenas for students to show their new knowledge and products of all kinds: publications, presentations, and fairs, virtual or real. The higher the quality of the student product, the greater the learning, and this is driven by having a real audience.

9. Learning Content Matters

Yes, they can always look up the year of the Norman Invasion (1066). With the keyboard, a ubiquitous appendage of this generation, checking out information on the web when needed is an inborn skill. I believe that possessing knowledge provides an added dimension of understanding and depth to any subject matter. I was recently at a dear friend's 65th birthday party and his 90-year-old father-in-law, a well-read and erudite man stood up and quoted Milton with the greatest of confidence and ease – lines that lent meaning to the celebration and so enhanced the wisdom that my friend was seeking at the party. This simple act belongs to a previous generation that even my Baby Boomer group does not possess, let alone the Millennials and current babies of the Internet. Truly knowing information deepens your understanding of the world around you, gives you the ability to ask questions, and leads to more sophisticated knowledge. Socrates said "wisdom begins with wonder," but you have to know something to wonder about.

10. Writing Class, Exercising the Muscle

During my year career, I witnessed the sincerest efforts of the Writing across the Curriculum movement with the goal of creating a nation of literate written communicators. It did not happen, and here is the reason. Students learn to write well when two conditions are in place: frequency and feedback. The ability to give meaningful written feedback is a specialty and should be treated as such. A separate class should be dedicated to writing from kindergarten through Senior year. These classes, staffed with writing teachers who can provide constant valuable feedback on many drafts and rewrites, will hone students' writing skills. Although content area teachers are passionate about their subject, they most likely are not equipped to give feedback on writing. After all, professors who write are edited by professionals, and meaningful teaching replicates the real world. I also believe that elementary school teachers should have writing specialists just like we now have math and science specialists. Think of how this very deliberate devotion to staffing, curriculum, and time would change our nation's students and their communication skills.

None of the above recommendations will succeed in isolation; all ten must work jointly in order to create excellent education.