



Steps for Success

By Amanda Hankel

For Lee Jenkins, an educational consultant and owner of LtoJ Consulting, the word quality has an especially unique meaning in education. It goes back to the teachings of W. Edwards Deming, who compared quality to quantity. Education's word for quantity, Jenkins says, is cover.

"You hear it all the time," he said. "It's a way of saying, 'I taught it, or it was in the book.' Meanwhile, quality means the students actually learned it."

Dr. Deming also taught that the quality of a product could go up, but the price could still go down, an idea that has historically been rejected in education.

"In education, quality would mean higher standards," Jenkins said. "So, you have higher standards and a higher success rate at the same time. In education, it's been traditionally thought that if you raise the standards, the success rate goes down. Or, if you raise the success rate, which we call "Easy A", then you have to lower the standards. But, the quality principle would say, 'No, you can have high standards and the high success rate at the exact same time.'"

Thus, this concept of achieving quality, not quantity, in education, and achieving high success rates with high standards has been the basis of Jenkins' consulting work for the past 10 years. In a recent presentation at the 2011 National Quality Education Conference, Jenkins outlined 12 key steps to implementing quality education. But when asked about the key takeaways from the presentation, Jenkins singled out a few steps that he said are crucial in building the foundation of quality education.

1. Alignment: Tell students what they'll learn for every grade level and in every course.

"We don't do that now," Jenkins said. "We give it to them chapter by chapter."

Jenkins advocates that everything students will learn for the year should be laid out for them during the first week of school. Even in first grade, Jenkins said. If there are 200 spelling words in first grade, the teacher should supply a list of all 200 the first day of school.

“If a student gets the spelling words at the beginning of the week, crams for them Thursday night for the test Friday and then does the same thing next week, you won’t have quality,” Jenkins said.

This step holds students, teachers and parents accountable for ensuring students learn the material before the end of the year so there are no surprises.

2. Feedback: Have a way of knowing, almost every week of the year, whether a student is on target to learn the end-of-the-year content.

“For example, I was in a classroom in Nebraska in October last year,” Jenkins said. “It was the 51st day of the year, so 28% of the year had been used up. But when we gave the kids an assessment of what they were supposed to know by the end of the year, they got 40% right.”

Students and teachers should always know how much of the year we’ve used up, how students know of the end-of-the-year content, and if they are on target to learn it all by the end of the year.

3. Remove barriers: Look at what is in the educational system that’s keeping students from being successful, and change it.

One example is student enthusiasm. As Jenkins explained, research has shown that in kindergarten, 95-100% of students reported that they love school. Each year after kindergarten, that percentage goes down until students reach 9th grade, where about 35% of students report loving school, then the numbers go up a bit for grades 10, 11 and 12. What isn’t known, however, whether that increase is attributed to students liking school more, or because there is no way of counting the attitude of students who have already dropped out.

“That’s a barrier,” Jenkins said. “It’s really hard to have the kind of success we’re looking for when two-thirds of the kids don’t want to be there. We’ve been told as educators that it’s the



job of the teachers to motivate the kids to learn. But really, the advice should be to figure out why the kids are losing their enthusiasm for learning and stop doing those things.”

4. Focus on the teaching.

This step, Jenkins said, is where educators often mistakenly start.

“We start there, thinking if the teachers just taught better, the kids would learn more,” Jenkins said. “In fact, great teaching on top of a system that is not working well doesn’t give us nearly the results we want.”

So, what does a great teacher do better than average or poor teacher doesn’t? Jenkins said it’s all about ensuring the content makes sense and is meaningful.

“The brain learns instantly,” he said. “The struggle to learn is really the struggle to make sense of something. Once it makes sense, you’ve got it.”

Overall, Jenkins said the first four steps are the foundation for achieving quality in education. And while he says these four are all important, he’d be thrilled if attendees walked away with just one point in their mind—step one: tell students what they’ll learn in the year. It’s a small, yet significant step that can make all the difference in improving the quality of education.

“There is no grand big thing in the sky that is going to fix everything,” Jenkins said. “But if we make a habit of making lots of little changes year after year after year, and we can prove that these little changes make it better; this is improvement.”

For more information on Lee Jenkins’ work, visit his website at www.ltoiconsulting.com.

Registered conference attendees can access Jenkins’ full presentation at <https://secure.asq.org/conferences/ngec2011/proceedings/index.html>.