

Educational Priorities

Jenks Public Schools rank the most important education issues facing the next U.S. president

By Lisa Muller, assistant superintendent for curriculum and school improvement, Jenks Public Schools, Jenks, OK

As this school year opened, an entry-year teacher, intent on doing the best job possible, asked, “How do I go beyond being a good teacher? How do I really affect the lives of my students?”

Veteran teachers stepped in to confirm what her instincts already told her: Knowing the subject matter only opens the door. Truly caring for students as people is what propels a teacher over the threshold to excellence.

Not long after that inspiring conversation with staff members, ASQ’s Presidential “Must-Do” List for U.S. Education—Educator Priority Survey arrived in my inbox. The survey presents nine educational issues, and all of them are worthy of intense focus.

As I pondered the relative merits of each issue and worked through my own prioritization process, I realized all nine issues and their rankings come down to the same factor the master teachers in my district shared with that entry-year teacher: demonstrating a genuine caring for students.

The first three goals provided the greatest opportunity for reflection as I sought to prioritize the list. My first instinct led me to place “Help all students meet achievement goals” as my No. 1 choice. After all, isn’t that what education is about? That goal supersedes closing the achievement gaps between rich and poor students or whites and minorities—both highly desirable goals in themselves—by its all-encompassing nature.

With those thoughts in mind, I propose the following ranking of the survey’s educational issues:

1. Ensure adequate and stable funding of school budgets at both the federal and state levels.
2. Attract and retain qualified teachers and principals.
3. Help all students meet achievement goals.
4. Close achievement gaps between rich and poor students.
5. Close achievement gaps between whites and minorities.
6. Ensure that students are learning 21st century skills that will help them in the future workforce.
7. Transform the No Child Left Behind policy to improve measurements.

8. Encourage more parental involvement in their children's education.
9. Eliminate budget waste and inefficiencies in the K-12 educational system.

Indeed, in my district, the first of three goals for the 2007-2010 triennium states, "All students who attend Jenks Public Schools during the entire period of these district goals will earn scores in the upper three categories on the criterion-referenced tests and end-of-instruction tests."

As a result, the superintendent, all central office administrators, all site principals and assistant principals, and each teacher in the district currently has a plan-do-study-act (PDSA) process in place to address the accomplishment of that goal. Better yet, after the first year of implementation, the study portion of the PDSA cycle revealed the district is well on its way to reaching the target. Performance on state-mandated tests improved over 2006-2007 levels, and all students who did not score in the upper three categories now receive targeted interventions to address the areas in need of improvement.

Working through challenges

I am fortunate to work in a district with a focus on student achievement and continuous improvement. But, Jenks Public Schools also faces challenges to which many other districts can relate—lack of an appropriate level of state financing and a large number of employees in the teacher and administrative ranks who are near or at retirement age. In light of those challenges, "ensure adequate and stable funding of school budgets at both the federal and state levels" and "attract and retain qualified teachers and principals" moved above "help all students meet achievement goals" on the list of priorities. Without appropriate funding and a well-educated, well-prepared workforce, student achievement suffers.

Jenks Public Schools spent \$6,098 per student during the 2007-2008 school year. Achieving more with less is a way of life in the district in an age when rising utility and fuel costs place operating dollars at a premium. In Oklahoma, there has been no increase in the state funding formula to meet these needs, forcing a continued focus on one of the other areas mentioned in the priorities survey: eliminating budget waste and inefficiencies.

Across the country, school districts face similar financial challenges. They might arise from inequities in funding across districts within a state or from a lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of the increasing number of students who arrive at the schoolhouse door less prepared for learning than we might hope. This includes students

who—because of poverty, the need to learn the English language or special needs—require additional attention and interventions to succeed academically. Such attention and intervention require additional funding, a resource our schools too often lack.

Measuring success

Well-planned, targeted and intensive interventions must also be implemented by teachers and administrators who are highly skilled and committed to student learning. The age of “I taught it, but they didn’t get it” is over. Teachers now must look to student achievement as the measure of success.

At Jenks Public Schools, 24% of the current site, department and district administrators are at or near retirement age, while 7% of the teaching force has reached the same milestone. As these experienced educators choose to leave the workforce, the nation must have equally skilled teachers and administrators to step into their shoes. Recruiting and preparing those teachers and administrators requires a commitment by universities, school districts and society as a whole to the concept of a quality public education for all students.

If we truly wish to demonstrate a genuine caring for students, we must commit to providing the funding it takes—first to recruit and train a new generation of quality teachers and administrators, and then to provide them with the tools they need to help every student meet achievement goals, whether that student is rich or poor, white or a member of a minority group.

My hope is that the next president of the United States demonstrates to school children across America that he genuinely cares about their success by helping provide the resources needed for all students to achieve at world-class levels. Our students are indeed our future, with the fate of our nation firmly tied to their success in the classroom and in the workplace.

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