



The Essential Facts

Tool helps students gain and retain knowledge, get excited about learning

by Amanda Hankel

In Lynnette Bumgarner's first-grade class at Gateway Elementary in Greenville, SC, students look forward to a special activity every day: Essential Facts time.

The Essential Facts System™ is one of many quality tools being implemented in the Greenville School System, and for Bumgarner, it's been instrumental in helping her students retain and build on the knowledge they gain throughout the school year.

The system consists of various "facts" based on the state's curriculum standards in each subject—science, math, language arts and social studies. The facts are worded in fill-in-the-blank format, and represent the units within the standard curriculum for a grade level.

The system was the topic of a session at ASQ's 2011 National Quality in Education Conference, presented by Brenda Byrd, principal of Bethel Elementary School in Greenville, and Tami Miller, leadership development coordinator for the Greenville Chamber, which has worked with area schools to implement quality initiatives for 10 years and continues to support sustainability.

"Securing future economic success through education is just one of the ways the chamber works to build a premier business community," said Miller.

While all teachers and grade levels use the system differently, Bumgarner, who has been using the tool in her classroom for three years, places all of the facts in a bucket at the beginning of the year and tells her students it represents everything they're going to learn during the school year.



The idea is that she asks students a few of the facts every day. Some of the facts the students will have already learned. Some of them the students are just learning, and others represent material the students have not covered yet.

Exposing students to questions they may or may not know the answers to helps them retain knowledge they've already gained through repetition, and builds knowledge on topics they still must learn. All of the facts go back into the bucket after being pulled, so the facts can be repeated throughout the year.

"I start off at the beginning of the year by saying, 'Everything in this bucket is what you're going to learn over the next 180 days,'" she said. "We make a big deal about everything we're going to learn. Then I say, 'Now, it's the first day of school, are you going to know everything in this bucket?' and the students will answer, 'No,' and I'll say, 'So we won't be upset if we don't get them all right.' It's telling them that it's OK that we don't know these yet, but we can't wait to learn them."

In Bumgarner's class, Essential Facts time is part of the morning routine. After calendar time, the class sings an Essential Facts song Bumgarner created. Then, at this point in the year, she pulls five essential facts from the bucket. She starts the year pulling three. As students learn more and answer more correctly, that number is increased to four and then five.

The facts are pulled randomly, although they are color-coded by subject for Bumgarner's reference. She can pull specific facts if she wanted the students to cover a specific topic, but usually it's random. Bumgarner reads the question to the class and as a group, students try to formulate the answer.

"For example, there might be one we pull in math that says, 'A [blank] is a shape with four corners and four equal sides,'" Bumgarner said. "One of the kids might say, 'Oh, that's a rectangle!' and I'll say, 'OK, that's close, it has four corners and four sides. But I'm looking for something that has four corners and four equal sides.' And they'll think about it and say, 'OK, we know that's a square.' It's building on things we already know. When we use them over and over throughout the year, it helps to build that knowledge."



In addition to retaining and building knowledge on facts the students have already learned, Bumgarner said she's seen great strides in students' ability to connect an Essential Fact that may have been pulled before the students knew the answer, and when they actually learn it in their lesson.

"You can just see the light bulb come on," Bumgarner said. "The students get excited and say, 'Oh, I remember that! We pulled that Essential Fact,' or 'I've heard that before, we learned this yesterday during Essential Facts.' They really tie it in. It's not one of those things you do in the morning and then don't think about it again until the next morning. We always relate back to it."

Bumgarner recalls one recent example in which students tied an Essential Fact about the word "scarcity" to a lesson just a few days after the fact was pulled.

"They didn't know what it was—that's a big word for first grade," Bumgarner said, "But we're just now getting to the unit about needs and wants, which covers scarcity. So when we pulled that fact, I said, 'I'm so glad we pulled this one because we are going to be learning about it this week.' And when we started the unit and talked about it in the lesson, that word wasn't as big, scary and overwhelming. They had just enough prior knowledge to connect it so when the lesson came about, they showed a better understanding."

Engaging students

To track their progress using the Essential Facts System™, Bumgarner's class keeps data in the form of a line graph to show how many facts they answer correctly every day. The class starts the year getting mostly two or three facts correct, then progresses to three or four and then four or five. The students can see over time how they're able to recall more facts.

The students also set goals as a class, and get small rewards if they reach their goals. For example, if the class reached five days in a row of answering every Essential Fact correctly, they earned a cookie celebration. It's happened once so far this year, but the class has gotten close other times, Bumgarner said. Now, the class has a goal of answering all of the facts correctly for 10 straight days. If the class does it, Bumgarner has promised to make brownies.



The class also made a poster that hangs outside the door of its classroom that says, “We’ve reached our Essential Facts Goal.” The days the students reach their goal of answering all the facts correctly, they hang it outside the door, and sing and dance to a song chosen for that day.

“It’s a quick little celebration, it doesn’t take too much time, and they’re just excited to get to sing, dance and celebrate that they remembered all their facts,” Bumgarner said. “But it’s not about the cookies and all that, it’s that they feel great that they know the material, and they have more confidence going into the different lessons.”

At the end of the year, Bumgarner’s class combines with another class to hold an Essential Facts Super Bowl. The teachers split the classes in half and hold a competition in which they spend a half-day going through every Essential Fact.

“The kids love it because it’s reviewing everything they’ve learned throughout the year, and it’s making them continuously think,” Bumgarner said. “It’s not, ‘I’ve just learned something, and I get to forget it.’ It’s, ‘I’ve learned it, and now we get to continue to learn it and use it.’”

While the first-grade students participate in Essential Facts as a group, teachers in higher grades tend to individualize the Essential Facts activities by reading the questions aloud and having students record their answers in notebooks, Bumgarner said. Students then self-correct, and the teacher will ask how many students answered correctly. This gauges where students are as a class and also allows students to track their individual progress.

The quality picture

On a broader scale, Greenville Schools has been an innovator in using quality in the classroom, officially implementing quality tools about four years ago. Today, classes in the district are using quality tools such as data notebooks for goal setting.

“There are so many different tools, you could almost use a different tool for everything you do in class,” Bumgarner said. “Greenville County is doing a great job implementing quality in all the schools and really owning it.”



The Essential Facts System™ is just another example of how the use of quality tools in the classroom can help enhance learning and excite students about the knowledge they're gaining.

“My students absolutely love Essential Facts time,” Bumgarner said. “They look forward to it. They want to see what they know. It’s such a simple concept to grow vocabulary knowledge, retain core facts in different subjects and help build that knowledge before lessons are taught. It’s a priceless tool to be able to use so quickly every day, to help the kids maintain what they’ve learned throughout the year and be excited about what they’re going to learn.”

Note

For more information on quality initiatives in education, visit the Greenville Chamber website at www.greenvillechamber.org and the South Carolina Quality Forum, which is responsible for the state quality program based on the Baldrige framework at www.scquality.com/home.html.