

# Three Key Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools

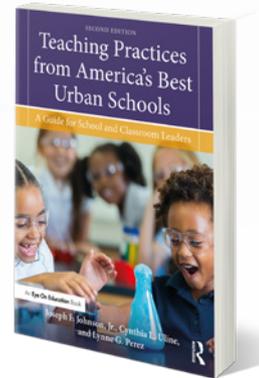


## Introduction

The American dream still lives in a few hundred remarkable schools across the nation. It has been our honor to identify, celebrate, and study amazing schools that achieve outstanding results for every demographic group they serve. The new edition of our book *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders, Second Edition* is about schools that face impressive challenges associated with urban life—including poverty, crime, the lack of social services, and big-city bureaucracies—yet meet these challenges with impressive resolve, strong leadership, and effective teaching. Since 2006, the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has been identifying, awarding, and studying many of the nation's highest-achieving urban schools. These schools provided multiple evidences of success (e.g., state assessment scores, graduation rates, attendance rates, discipline data, English-acquisition data, course-taking patterns) for their students in general. Additionally, the schools provided evidence that each racial/ethnic group served in these schools performed at levels above the average for all students throughout the state. As well, many of the schools demonstrated outstanding learning results for students with emerging bilingualism (Nieto, 2013, p. 75) and other groups of students who have traditionally been underserved by U.S. schools. Between 2006 and 2018, we visited, studied, and awarded 150 remarkable elementary, middle, and high schools that (1) serve predominantly low-income students, (2) did not use selective admissions criteria, and (3) achieved outstanding results for every racial/ethnic group served. This book is based on what we learned from educators in these typical schools that achieved very atypical results. Specifically, this book covers the nature of teaching in these schools. Through this book, we attempt to capture and describe the teaching practices that help set these high-performing schools apart from their counterparts.

Our studies of outstanding schools have helped us understand that educators, through their daily practice in classrooms, can rekindle the American dream. Through this book, we endeavor to pass the flame.

In this Snapshot, we feature three key teaching practices that these inspiring educators implement in their classrooms.



Adapted from *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders, Second Edition* by Drs. Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Cynthia L. Uline and Lynne G. Perez

## Making Students Feel Valued and Capable

# 1

*On the Minds of Educators Striving to Produce Equity and Excellence*

*How can I get each and every one of my students to believe, "My teacher sincerely wants me to succeed in life and my teacher is confident that I can succeed"?*

A group of six high school students from Dayton Business and Technology High School met with a researcher from the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST).

The researcher asked, **"How did you happen to attend this school?"**

One male student quickly responded, **"Most of us were kicked out of other schools."**

Another male affirmed, "Yeah. We got expelled because of stuff."

"So, how long will you attend this school?" the researcher asked.

"Oh, I'm not going back to my other school," one girl quickly explained.

"Me either!" other students offered in chorus.

"Almost all of us plan on graduating from this school," one of the girls explained.

"Is that because you're not allowed to return to your previous schools?" the researcher asked.

"No," one of the boys responded, while adding, "We could go back after one month, one semester, or one year, depending on what we did. But, we don't want to go back. We want to graduate from this school."

Before the researcher could ask why, one of the girls explained, "The teachers at this school care about us. They want us to learn."

Another chimed in, "Yeah, they want us to graduate. They believe in us."

"But, don't all teachers care?" inquired the researcher.

"Not at my other school. At least, they didn't care about me," responded one of the boys.

"At this school, the teachers really want you to understand things," one girl added.

"What do you mean?" inquired the researcher.

The girl responded, "At the other schools, the teachers just want to get done with whatever they're supposed to do, give you an assignment, and give you a 'D' or 'F' grade. They don't really care if you learn it or not. They just want a grade for their gradebook."

"Yeah, but here it's different," another student explained. "They're always trying to break it down for us so we understand it."

"What do you mean?" the researcher asked.

The girl explained, "Like, they're always trying to make it real for us. The teachers are always trying to make things make sense to us. They really want us to understand."

After a brief pause, the researcher asked, "So, do you feel you work harder here than you worked at your previous schools?"

In unison, the students nodded affirmatively. Then, the researcher asked, "Why do you work harder at this school?"

One of the boys answered, "Why do we work so hard? Well, you know that most of us kids went to other schools around here, and we were kicked out or suspended or other stuff happened." Then gesturing with his arms crossed, as if imitating his former teachers, he continued, "At my other school the teachers would see me coming and think 'Here comes trouble. Here comes a headache. Here comes my next suspension. Here comes a dropout.' They saw me as another Black statistic. Even though I knew I wasn't stupid, I pretty much figured they were right. I was never good at school. I had a hard time reading the textbooks. I just didn't see how I was going to get anywhere at school or in life." He continued to explain, "So, when I came here, I thought it would be all about hanging with my friends. But, when I got here, the teachers saw me differently." Then gesturing with his arms wide open, he continued, "They looked at me like 'Here comes potential. Here comes a future graduate."

Here comes a future college student. That's the way they treated me. That's the way they talk to all of us. So, when you're treated that way, it just makes everything different. You want to work hard because you want them [the adults] to be right about you. You don't want them to change their minds."

Dayton Business and Technology High School is a charter school in Dayton, Ohio. The school won the America's Best Urban School Award in 2013.

In high-performing urban schools, as teachers got to know students, they deliberately helped students feel valued and appreciated. Teachers established and maintained a rapport that helped students perceive teachers as approachable. Teachers demonstrated a genuine interest in their students' ideas, concerns, and aspirations. "My teachers here know my name and greet me whenever they see me," a sophomore at MacArthur High School in Houston, Texas, explained. "They make me feel like I'm somebody." Similarly, a student at Cecil Parker Elementary explained, "When I see my teacher in the hallway or after school, she asks me how my family is doing. She cares about me and she cares about all of us."

## Focusing on Understanding and Mastery

# 2

*On the Minds of Educators Striving to Produce Equity and Excellence*

*How can I get each and every one of my students to believe, "My teacher wants me to understand this well enough to use it throughout my life and my teacher is wise enough and relentless enough to guide me so I will master it"?*

A science teacher at Horace Mann Dual Language Academy in Wichita, Kansas, explained (in Spanish) to her class of fifth-grade students that during the class period they would learn five concepts related to volcanic activity. She explained that by the end of the period, they would be able to describe (in Spanish) each of the five concepts and explain how the concepts were related. Immediately, she asked several students to describe (in Spanish) what they were going to learn during the lesson. Next, using Spanish vocabulary the students had previously mastered, the teacher explained each concept. Immediately after each explanation, she asked several students to explain the concept in their own words (in Spanish). After several students had explained each concept and students seemed fairly comfortable with the new vocabulary, the teacher invited pairs of students to come to the front of the room and pantomime a concept. Other students were expected to guess which concept the students were modeling. Every student was paying attention to the pantomimes, trying to be one of the first to guess the intended meaning. As students became more comfortable using the new vocabulary, the teacher asked additional questions that required students to explain the relationships among the concepts. The teacher asked questions of every student. If a student did not know the answer, the teacher asked another student but within a few minutes returned to the initial student with the same question. In this way, each student felt responsible for paying attention and learning the content, even if they could not respond to the teacher's initial question. By the end of the lesson, students were using the new Spanish vocabulary comfortably. Students asked questions about important details. The teacher used those questions to deepen the conversation and teach more about volcanic activity. At the

end of the period, as students left the classroom, the researcher stopped a few students and asked them what they had learned in class. In English, they explained the concepts they had learned, accurately and with impressive detail.

Horace Mann Dual Language Academy is in the Wichita Public School District in Wichita, Kansas. The school serves approximately 530 students in grades kindergarten through eight. The school won the America's Best Urban Schools Award in 2009.

## 3

## Promoting Clarity

*On the Minds of Educators Striving to Produce Equity and Excellence*

*How can I get each and every one of my students to think,  
"I understand precisely what my teacher wants me to learn and  
I see how my teacher is leading me toward understanding it"?*

A fifth-grade teacher at Highland Elementary was teaching his students to understand linear equations. In a prior lesson, students had learned about variables. In this lesson, the focus was on mathematic expressions. The teacher succinctly explained to students that an algebraic expression combined a variable and a value. He provided a variety of practical examples and then engaged the students in brainstorming many additional examples.

One student offered, "Like the number of points your team gets for a score could be a variable and the number of scores could be the value."

"Yes," the teacher responded. "So, what might an expression be for three scores?"

"Three S," the student answered proudly.

"Exactly! So, what does the expression 'Three S' mean?" the teacher asked a different student.

"It means three times an unknown number," the student answered.

"An unknown number of what?" the teacher probed.

"An unknown number of scores," stated another child.

Students were then directed to list expressions on sentence strips and then, on separate sentence strips, write out words that would indicate what the expressions meant. Later students played a matching game in which they matched the sentence strips by pairing the algebraic expressions with the matching word sentences.

Highland Elementary is in the Montgomery County Public School District in Silver Spring, Maryland. The school serves approximately 450 students in grades pre-kindergarten through five. The school won the America's Best Urban Schools Award in 2009.

## Conclusion

In the newly published second edition of *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders*, Drs. Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Cynthia L. Uline, and Lynne G. Perez share and explore even more great teaching practices:

- » Ensuring Culturally, Socially, and Personally Responsive Teaching
- » Checking Understanding, Providing Feedback, and Adapting
- » Building Fluency With Gatekeeper Vocabulary
- » Promoting Successful Practice; Leading Students to Love Learning, and
- » Developing Best Teaching Practices Throughout a School.

In addition to refreshed examples in this practical, research-based book, there are new features in this edition, including:

- » Additional "What It Is/What It Isn't" boxes help educators distinguish the subtle differences in the implementation of practices that lead to impressive learning results
- » "Practice Guides" and "Practical Next Steps" for each of the 8 Success Factors encourage self-assessment and collaboration
- » Expansion of topics address current developments in education and additional examples from award-winning elementary, middle, and high schools provide new insights.

*Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools* is a valuable tool for any educator in both urban and non-urban schools that serve diverse student populations, including English language learners and children from low-income families. Be sure to grab your copy today!

