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In Praise of American Educators: And How They Can Become Even Better

By Richard DuFour

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *In Praise of American Educators: And How They Can Become Even Better* by Richard DuFour. *In Praise of American Educators* confronts the criticism that American educators and public schools have faced in the 21st century and defines steps that educators can take to transform school culture and structure.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire team to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote a healthy school culture.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

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Chapter 1

Educators Under Attack

1. Briefly describe the national education reform efforts that have taken place in the United States since President George H. W. Bush took office.
2. How did No Child Left Behind (NCLB) indicate a turning point in education reform attempts in the United States? How did the Race to the Top program, prompted by President Obama and his administration, build on the priorities set up by NCLB?
3. What has been the trend in the way the media has reported on the state of American education since 2002?
4. What did the Hoover Institution name the five “best events” to happen in education in 2011? What do these events have in common?
5. Why did the court rule in favor of the media when they sued to gain access to data for value-added test scores of individual New York City teachers?

Chapter 2

The Phony Crisis

1. What evidence exists that supports the assertion that today's generation of American educators has accomplished more than past generations of teachers and administrators?
2. What do the National Assessment of Educational Progress's (NAEP) exam results indicate about student achievement over the past twenty years?
3. In 2014, what grades did respondents to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll assign to the nation's schools, and what grades did parents give to their children's own public schools? How would you account for this difference?
4. What three areas do critics cite when they insist that U.S. schools are failing even though they are reaping unparalleled accomplishments?
5. In what ways was NCLB flawed from the beginning?
6. What have several organizations, including the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. General Accounting Office, concluded to be flaws in NAEP assessments?

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7. How does the author counter the argument that poor performance of American students on the PISA exam is proof positive that our schools are failing?

Chapter 3

The Firings Will Continue Until Morale Improves

1. What is the rationale that individuals and corporations have presented as to why charter schools will improve other public schools? What have follow-up studies found regarding student learning and overall school performance in charter schools across the United States?
2. What did a Reuters investigative report find to be the state of charter school application and screening processes in the United States, and how does this differ from their intended processes?
3. How does the author address the argument that because charter schools and vouchers offer parents and students more choices for education, they are inherently positive for our educational system?
4. How did the passage of the G.I. Bill impact education in the United States?
5. How does assessment in the United States differ from assessment used in most countries in the world?

6. How does the author counter the argument that the way to improve schools is by having principals increase the supervision and evaluation of teachers?

7. What do advocates for value-added testing consider to be this testing process's strength?
What is the main issue with value-added measures?

8. Name some of the problems that result from requiring student achievement on standardized tests to factor into teacher evaluations.

9. What did a *Vanity Fair* magazine investigative article on Microsoft find to be key to the company's decline? What did this process involve, and how did it negatively affect the company's culture?

10. What does research say about the impact of merit pay on improving schools?

Chapter 4

Learning From High-Performing Countries

1. What are the three factors that determine the quality of a country's pool of teacher candidates, according to the National Center on Education and the Economy?
2. How do Finland's teacher selection and training processes differ from those of the United States?
3. How do teacher retention rates in Singapore and Finland differ from those rates in the United States? Why is this the case?
4. What are the assumptions that drive the theory of school reform in the United States?
5. What can and should the United States consider doing in order to make teaching a more attractive career avenue to students?
6. How does your school work to include learning and conferring with colleagues as part of teachers' important, routine work? In your school, what would you do differently in order to foster a teacher culture that constantly weaves teaching and learning together?

7. Briefly describe the conclusions that McKinsey & Company reached about cultivating teacher talent in investigating the world's highest-performing education systems.

Chapter 5

A Word About Teacher Unions

1. How does the author address the allegation that teacher unions are the cause of low student achievement in the United States?
2. How is the Ontario province a good example of a high-performing system that has profited from a partnership between a government and its teacher unions? What can school systems learn from this partnership?
3. Why did Judge Treu rule in the *Vergara v. California* case that due process for dismissal of tenured teachers is no longer considered a practical option for dismissing ineffective teachers?
4. Consider the example of how a state law could direct how districts approach layoffs. If you were to play a role in setting up this law for your state, what points or language would you include in the layoff policy?
5. What must unions be willing to do if they are to assume a leadership role in progressing education reform efforts?

Chapter 6

Laying the Foundation of a Professional Learning Community

1. What are the truths the author references to begin the second part of the book? Do you agree that these are truths, and why?
2. Write a mission statement that describes the actual practices that transpire in your school building. What disconnections do you find between this mission statement and your school's actual mission statement?
3. What are the questions that each pillar of the professional learning community (PLC) foundation challenges a faculty to address?
4. Consider the section that establishes why it is crucial that educators commit to high levels of learning for all their students (pages 105–108). Which of the bulleted items in this section catches your attention or unsettles you the most, and why is that the case?
5. What is the first step the author indicates a PLC will address in developing a shared vision statement?

Chapter 7

The Imperative of a Collaborative Culture

1. Why has teacher isolation been an enduring tradition in American education?
2. What are the three keys necessary to creating a collaborative culture that can help teacher teams build a PLC foundation?
3. By *team*, what does the author mean, and what does he not mean? How does a team function differently than a group does?
4. Consider the examples of SMART goals that are provided in this chapter. What is a SMART goal that you would set for your school?
5. What are the most powerful team structures in elementary and secondary schools, and why is this the case?
6. What does “collaboration lite” mean? Describe an example of collaboration lite that you have experienced in your school.

Chapter 8

Providing Students With Access to a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum

1. Who do you believe should be responsible for forming a curriculum that advances 21st century skills?
2. The author quotes E. D. Hirsch, who asserts there is no coherent plan to deliver a guaranteed curriculum in most schools. Do you agree with this assertion? Why do you hold this opinion?
3. Consider the two district approaches to curriculum development highlighted in this chapter. Does your district most resemble District A or District B?
4. Which of the five assertions for creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum do you think is the most important for your district to keep centrally in mind, and why?
5. In your own words, define the term *guaranteed and viable curriculum*.
6. Why are high-performing countries focusing on a reduced number of concepts and studying them in greater depth in their curriculum?

7. In your own words, describe the three-part test that Douglas Reeves has developed to help collaborative teacher teams weigh the importance of a standard.

8. What do Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe call the “twin sins of teaching”?

Chapter 9

Assessment to Inform and Improve Professional Practice

1. What does a commitment to helping all students learn at high levels need to entail?
2. What is a summative assessment, and what is a formative assessment? How may an assessment be both summative and formative? Why should education in the United States use formative assessments more frequently?
3. How may ranking or rating teachers and principals undercut the effectiveness of collaboration among these educators? Please provide an example of how ranking educators may not provide a clear picture of their actual abilities and resources.
4. Why should traditional tracking not play a role in a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels?
5. Answer the three questions presented on pages 183–184. What can you take away from your answers—and particularly your answer to the third question—as you reevaluate how you approach your mission as an educator?

6. Why does sharing the results of their students' common formative assessments with colleagues make educators feel vulnerable? Why must educators use these results in collective practice if they are to work effectively in a PLC?

7. What are some of the many benefits of common formative assessments?

Chapter 10

Ensuring Every Student Succeeds

1. What do *interventions*, *systematic*, and *effective* each mean as they are combined to become the idea of *effective systematic interventions*?
2. How do the original purposes of U.S. models of traditional education and special education differ from the purposes for which we are trying to adapt these systems today?
3. For what reason do schools most often avoid changing their master schedules? How has this reason manifested itself in your school's attempts to pursue change?
4. What are the nondiscretionary elements of an effective system of intervention?
5. Which teachers does Douglas Reeves find the most effective at working with at-risk students? Why do schools tend to take the opposite approach to the one that Reeves encourages?

Chapter 11

The Principal as Lead Learner

1. What is the fundamental premise of a guiding coalition or leadership team?
2. How do task forces differ from collaborative teams in a PLC? If a task force was created at your school, what topic do you think your task force should focus on?
3. Which areas of a school culture are loose and which aspects are tight in the PLC process? How does a guiding coalition communicate what is tight? In your experience, what practices or behaviors have you found to be most helpful in seeking to communicate clearly with your colleagues or organization leaders?
4. Define the terms *servant leadership* and *reciprocal accountability* in your own words.
5. Why are the monitoring strategies of micromanaging and laissez-faire leadership both ineffective? What is the best solution to this false dichotomy of monitoring practices?
6. What is the understanding of the term *consensus* in your school? What definition does the author suggest?

7. How well does your school balance celebration with confrontation? What are some memorably effective or ineffective uses of celebration or confrontation that you've seen applied in your school? What did these applications teach you about calling attention to good or bad events?
8. How does the author answer the question, Can celebration be overdone?
9. What are the specific responsibilities of the principal in a PLC, according to the author?
10. What is your reaction to the author's assertion on page 249 that "It is certainly true that part of the problem in American education is that we have taken good people—teachers and principals—and put them in a bad system that was never intended to help all students learn. It is equally certain, however, that those same teachers and principals must play a critical role in changing that system"?