K-12 Toolbox: Questions That Guide Instructional Practice

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Abstract

The importance of quality teaching in the nation's public schools is receiving unprecedented attention. School districts are doing whatever they can to grow and retain effective teachers by providing the necessary resources and support to ensure teacher success. With this in mind, the Buhler School District set out to create a useful and research-based tool to help teachers with the fundamentals of classroom instruction. The K-12 Toolbox provides a series of guiding questions developed from accepted best practices in classroom instruction. The rich conversations and reflection inspired by the Toolbox's questions are designed to help teachers lead students to higher order thinking and improved learning.

Introduction/Background

The importance of effective teaching in the nation's public schools is receiving unprecedented attention. In remarks to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in 2009, President Obama said, *"From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom."* In the same year, former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in remarks to the National Education Association stated, *"Our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher—no matter what it takes."*

When a district hires a teacher, one of its many responsibilities is to provide resources, professional learning opportunities, and peer support to ensure that the teacher will be fully prepared to engage and inspire students in the classroom (Liesveld, 2005). New and experienced teachers, alike, need the tools to create engaging lessons, a grasp of the best teaching strategies common to all successful teachers, and the ability to understand what separates good teaching from bad (Robinson, 2009). In 2011, the Buhler School District administrators and instructional support staff sought to provide these tools, and more, for their teachers.

Due to cuts in state funding for education, the Buhler district had not been able to replace the retiring assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction two years earlier. The cuts to state funding coincided with the beginning of the new College and Career Ready Standards (the Kansas version of the

national Common Core Standards).   These new standards were going to change instructional practice, not just in Kansas, but across the nation.   The new standards brought increased instructional demands for classroom teachers and contributed to the call for change in instructional practice. It was during this period of transition that the Buhler team leaders, instructional leaders, principals and central office staff dedicated themselves to the task of moving Buhler educators from a teacher-driven model of instruction to a more student-centered, 21st Century model for effective teaching.

Over a period of several months, these determined educators collaborated to create a research-based set of strategies, a K-12 Toolbox, providing teachers with replicable and evidence-based approaches for improving instruction (SASS, 2008). The K-12 Toolbox is a carefully selected assortment of guiding questions designed to prompt teachers to examine their instructional practice and focus on the needs and interests of students. With this assortment of guiding questions, Buhler teachers could have at their fingertips a Toolbox of best practice approaches designed to showcase their students' untapped learning potential. The guiding questions encourage rich conversations for professional learning communities as well as for one-on-one teacher dialogue, inspiring both new and seasoned teachers to reflect on lessons and activities that lead students to higher order thinking and meaningful learning.

Process

The procedure for creating the K-12 Toolbox started with a vision for improving instruction even in times of financial stress. This work coincided with the adoption of the Kansas College and Career Standards, which provided Buhler educators with a rich opportunity to re-examine instructional practices across grade levels and content areas.

Teacher and district leaders examined Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Professional Practice ("Danielson>> The Framework", 2011), Robert Marzano's Framework of Effective Instruction (Marzano, 2007), the Insight Core Framework from Insight Education Group (Group, 2016), and the Baltimore City Public Schools' Instructional Framework (2011). After lengthy dialogue about each model or component, the brainstorming and creation of initial drafts of the Toolbox began. Instructional best practices were central to the creation of the guiding questions as the process of developing the strategies progressed through various stages (Stronge, 2004). The strategies began as statements, then were re-written as guiding questions, and edited numerous times until the Toolbox represented a comprehensive, yet user-friendly, and practical instrument for improving instruction.

The guiding questions were placed within one of the following three categories*: **Planning, Teaching, and Reflecting** (Baltimore City Framework, 2011).Within these three categories, each individual question was subsequently placed with one of the Five Rs: **Relationships, Relevance, Responsive Culture, Rigor, and Results**, which constitute the new Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) (KESA Educational Framework, 2016) framework for the five-year accreditation process. The KESA Framework involves a systems approach to accreditation where districts are awarded a rating based on growth. KESA authors wrote, "We believe that the Five Rs are equivalent to each other in their importance to the quality

of a system and that they encompass every concept contained in the ideas of quality education and continual improvement. Everything that educational leaders and stakeholders do, say, believe, model, teach, expect, and desire about education can be classified in at least one of the Five Rs" (KESA Educational Framework, 2016).

Classification of the guiding questions into three categories and further alignment of the questions with the KESA Five Rs (KESA Educational Framework, 2016), allows a teacher or instructional support facilitator to hone in on a specific area for improvement. For example, a teacher may be good at planning but struggles with many of the elements involved in the delivery of instruction. Similarly, that same teacher may be good at building relationships, but struggles to make his/her lessons relevant in the lives of students. The ability to pinpoint certain components of the K-12 toolbox for instructional improvement enables this instructional tool to be inclusive and comprehensive, yet practical.

The K-12 Toolbox

The three components of the K-12 Toolbox are ***Planning, Teaching, and Reflecting***.   A spiral approach is intended.   A thorough and thoughtful reflection about the classroom instruction leads back to careful planning and the spiraling continues with the next lesson taught.

PLANNING

What do I expect my students to learn?
Planning ensures greater success of the lesson. Planning clarifies goals and provides steps to achieve the goals. Careful lesson design and structured planning are absolutely necessary to meet the individual needs of students.

Relationships
 P1. Have I chosen instructional strategies according to how each student learns?
 P2. Am I reaching out to my colleagues for ideas?

Relevance
 P3. Is the lesson content relevant?
 P4. How will I use technology to engage students and help them learn?

Responsive Culture
 P5. Does my classroom environment promote curiosity and creativity?
 P6. Does the classroom environment promote independence and self-directed learning?
 P7. How have I planned for active learning?
 P8. How will I establish classroom routines and smooth transitions to maximize learning time?

Rigor
 P9. Is the lesson challenging and engaging?
 P10. How will the lesson connect different subject areas?

<u>Results</u>

P11.   Have I built flexibility into the lesson so I meet the needs of a variety of learners?

P12.   How can I help students set personal learning goals?

TEACHING

How will I know they are learning?

Quality teaching requires knowledge of the subjects to be taught, of the skills to be developed, and of the curriculum and materials that organize and embody that content. Teachers must possess the skills, capacities and dispositions to employ such knowledge wisely in the interest of students.

<u>Relationships</u>

T1. Do I create a positive, caring classroom environment for my students?

T2. Do my students feel respected even when redirected or disciplined?

<u>Relevance</u>

T3. Do my students understand how the lesson relates to everyday life?

T4. Do my instructional strategies, tools, tasks, and activities engage my students?

<u>Responsive Culture</u>

T5. Do my students know that taking risks or making mistakes is an important part of learning?

T6. Do my students take ownership for their own progress by setting and tracking learning goals?

T7. Do I have my students work in pairs, groups, teams, and individually?

T8. Do my students have ample opportunities to explore their creativity?

<u>Rigor</u>

T9. Do my students support their answers with evidence?

T10. Do my students have the tools and building blocks to be successful as they move to more challenging content?

<u>Results</u>

T11. Are my students understanding the lesson content?

REFLECTING

How will I respond if they don't learn?

How will I respond if they already know it?

John Dewey said, "We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience." The questions below allow teachers to think critically about how to change future classes for the better.

<u>Relationships</u>

R1.   Am I conferencing with each student regularly?

R2.   Am I keeping parents informed?

<u>Relevance</u>

R3.   Was the lesson relevant?

Responsive Culture

R4.   How can I regularly celebrate student learning?

R5.   Do my questions and assignments inspire my students to be curious learners?

Rigor

R6. Was I prepared with resources and supporting materials when presenting the lesson?

R7.   Am I creating a culture of learning?

Results

R8.   What data do I have to indicate whether or not the students understood the lesson content?

R9.   Are there skills or concepts that need to be retaught?

R10.   Did I give students immediate feedback on their progress?

R11.   How do the students feel they are doing?

Application

The K-12 Toolbox was not designed for the purpose of evaluating teachers. The intent is for the Toolbox to be formative in nature, providing teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators with a non-threatening and user-friendly instrument for the improvement of classroom instruction. Teachers, instructional coaches, and principals use the guiding questions to focus on areas in need of improvement.

In its third year of implementation, feedback from teachers, principals and superintendents is very important to the process. A handful of school districts across Kansas are already taking the lead by utilizing a version of the K-12 Toolbox to help their classroom teachers discover new and engaging classroom strategies. Teachers and Administrators in Buhler, Haysville, Halstead, Valley Center, and other school districts across Kansas have expressed appreciation for the K-12 Toolbox.

> A Buhler High School Math Team Leader had this to say about the K-12 Toolbox, "The framework provided us with a reflective tool that connected the domains of teaching with the 5 Rs of instructional practice. I listed all the questions in random order and then we each identified our 5 strengths and our 5 weaknesses. We then looked at the Toolbox framework and made connections and reflections to which R had most of our strengths and which R had most of our weaknesses. Using this information, our math team had an honest conversation about what we can learn from each other and listed all of our strengths and weaknesses as a department to analyze if we were heavy in one domain or R as a department."

A Halstead, Kansas principal stated, "I especially enjoyed learning about the K-12 Toolbox. This is something all of my teachers can use," and an instructional coach commented, "Our school has been looking for a tool that will help us support our teachers and give them specific and practical ways to improve their instruction." A Buhler Middle School teacher said it this way, "The K-12 Toolbox speaks to the careful balance educators must maintain, recognizing that many factors within the control of the teacher play a role in student success."

Brad Neuenswander, Deputy Commissioner of Education for KSDE, has provided copies of the K-12 Toolbox's guiding questions to several school districts in Kansas. Listing each of the Toolbox questions under one of the Five Rs (Relationships; Relevance; Responsive Culture; Rigor; Results) was inspired by the Deputy Commissioner's vision to include the Five Rs in the KESA Accreditation process (KESA Educational Framework, 2016).

The K-12Toolbox.org website was designed with input from a range of teachers, principals, instructional designers, and educational consultants. Since the launching of the K-12Toolbox.org website in October, 2016, the site has received over four thousand visits. The website provides easily accessible support for teachers and administrators as they work together to provide classroom lessons that mirror best practice and engage students.

Summary

One of the many responsibilities of a school district is to provide resources and support that promote the success of any teacher the district hires. Taking that responsibility to heart, teacher leaders and administrators in the Buhler School District collaborated over several months to create a research-based set of strategies, a K-12 Toolbox, providing teachers with replicable and evidence-based approaches for improving instruction. Designed as a positive and practical approach to best practices, the K-12 Toolbox is a user-friendly guide for instructional delivery in the classroom. Beginning in fall of 2016, educators have been able to instantly access targeted videos, articles, and resources for each of the Toolbox's guiding questions. This innovation provides easily accessible support for teachers seeking proven instructional strategies.

As President Obama proclaimed, nothing is more important than having a quality teacher standing in front of every classroom. Donald O. Clifton, former Gallup Chairman, may have said it best, "Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being" (Clifton, 2014).

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