

## Friday Focus: On “Proficiency”

On Wednesday, while meeting with staff about the educator evaluation system, specifically the teacher rubric used as a framework for the summative evaluation, I found myself searching for clarity while trying to define the ideal of “exemplary performance.” This rubric, like the one for administrators and instructional support personnel, represents ESE’s latest attempt to communicate expectations for high quality teaching. We use rubrics with our students so that they can understand the expectations we have for their written products, and so they can hopefully use the feedback to improve in some specific and important areas.

So how do we feel when someone uses a rubric to judge the quality of our own work?

Our response will of course be shaped by our personal experience. Consider the overachievers among us who have typically received all A’s on report cards as a child, then a high GPA in college, and then again in graduate school, complimentary evaluations and observations every year for many years. What will they make of a rating that says “proficient?” What an underwhelming word for what is, in fact, pretty high quality teaching practice. “Proficient” almost sounds like “okay” or “good enough, I guess.” Makes me think of the expression “to damn with faint praise.” I don’t believe there is a market for coffee cups that say “World’s Most *Proficient* Mom.”

But here is a direct quote from the Teacher’s Rubric, the descriptor for “proficient” performance in the area of Curriculum and Planning: Subject Matter Knowledge:

*“Demonstrates sound knowledge and understanding of the subject matter and the pedagogy it requires by consistently engaging students in learning experiences that enable them to acquire complex knowledge and skills in the subject.”<sup>1</sup>*

Now this just the first sub-indicator out of *thirty-three*. Think about what it means. That in this school, (which is a very high expectation school) the teacher – if he or she is to be deemed proficient – must not only have “sound knowledge” (BTW, in elementary school, that means of all the subject matter, not just one or two subjects), but more importantly – the *pedagogy* that is required. (Pedagogy meaning the intersection of relevant learning theory with practice.) Although I believe there is something to be said about the generalization “Good teaching is good teaching, no matter the subject, developmental level, etc.,” different sets of teaching practices are effective in helping students learn to write, to solve math problems, to draw conclusions from a scientific experiment. The proficient teacher must “consistently” – not just *much* of the time, but more like *all* of the time – “engage” students in learning experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Standards and Indicators of Effective Teaching Practice: Teacher Rubric. Part III: Appendix C. ESE Model Rubric for Teachers.

- not just enforce compliance with them – so that they acquire “complex knowledge and skills”
- not just simple factoids and definitions.

So I hope you can agree with me that the teacher who manages to do all this in all subject areas all the time is a far cry from “just good enough.” And Subject Matter Knowledge is just one of the four sub-indicators that make up the indicator “Curriculum and Planning.” The next three are equally as portentous, as are the other three Standards of Teaching and all their indicators and sub-indicators.

So how could a teacher ever earn a rating of “Exemplary?” In this blog, I will try to demystify this holy grail of performance ratings and clarify the difference between “Proficient” and “Exemplary” ratings in the indicators and sub-indicators, at least as I see it.<sup>2</sup> I did use the “E” word a handful of times last year, and I think it only fair that I try to explain why I selected that rating rather than “Proficient” given that the rubric describes a very high level of performance either way.

Reconsider Subject Matter Knowledge. Exemplary performance in this area would, in my opinion, include such actions as creating teacher made materials rather than relying on the textbook and workbook programs, recognizing that new materials often need to be created because they don’t, according to your strong subject area knowledge, include enough emphasis on essential concepts, or don’t portray essential concepts vividly enough, or there is a need to adapt the materials to show interdisciplinary connections (Quadrant C) or authenticity and relevancy (Quadrant D). Many of our curriculum materials represent an overreliance in Quadrant A and B, foundational knowledge and simple application, skills in isolation without meaningful context, and for someone with exemplary subject matter knowledge, this will just not do. However, the curriculum materials at the same time create the framework of *What All Deer Hill Students Must Know and Be Able To Do* within the Common Core Standards, and so it is neither okay to play fast and loose with the curriculum content.

As I see it, a teacher who rates as “exemplary” in this category has a strong understanding of not only the Common Core Standards, but also the reasoning behind each standard’s inclusion, and can enhance materials to promote the purpose of the standards, not distract from them. Primary Source courses always impress me for their ability to impart deeply layered knowledge of global issues in a way that meets adult needs for information. The exemplary teacher finds a way to impart this knowledge in their classroom in a developmentally appropriate – and don’t forget engaging! - manner. Many grants proposals I have read include, as part of the rationale for the project, description of the subject matter and the underlying

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<sup>2</sup>I’m reminded of a terrific quote by Edwin Meese III, who was Attorney General under President Reagan. When asked to define “pornography” he said, “I can’t give you a definition for it, but I know it when I see it.”

pedagogy that reveals exemplary understanding of each and signifies great credibility for teacher success with the project.

The above are just a few examples of what I believe constitute above and beyond performance descriptors. The ESE has set one criteria for the Exemplary rating in every area: “At the Exemplary Level, an educator’s level of expertise is such that he or she is able to model through training, teaching, coaching, assisting, and/or demonstrating. In this rubric, this level of expertise is denoted by ‘Is able to model.’

I’m excited by the prospect of working with the faculty to create new ways of demonstrating proficiency and providing opportunities to demonstrate exemplary teacher performance.