

# WHO'S THAT TEACHER?

**Matrix shows how to support teachers at different levels**

BY GARY WADDELL

A principal makes countless decisions during the school year, ranging from bus routes to discipline, curriculum alignment to master schedules. It doesn't take long to realize that the majority of these decisions pale in comparison to decisions about how to select and support highly skilled teachers. What teachers know about teaching and learning, how well they know their students, and their capacity to provide powerful learning experiences form the core of students' school experience. Nothing matters more.

My experiences as a counselor listening to students and as a principal

focused on increasing teacher capacity led me to wonder why some teachers were wildly effective with nearly any student they encountered while others failed miserably in reaching students academically or socially and emotionally. The best teachers engaged students academically while connecting with them emotionally in ways that created profound differences in both experience and results for their students. Sadly, I found these master teachers to be the exception rather than the rule. This experience led me to question the differences I observed in teachers and the implication of those differences for designing professional learning. I wanted a way to identify and support master teachers.

**AXIS ONE:  
KNOWING THEIR STUFF**

The first necessary capacity of

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highly skilled teachers concerns content knowledge and effective instructional practice. These teachers know their stuff. They have solid mastery of their content and hold a clear understanding of the academic standards or competencies against which student success is measured. Beyond this content knowledge, they are adept with powerful instructional strategies and are nimble in their use. They know,

are master teachers in the purest sense of the word. They are the bedrock of any effective school. Students learn from them and love them. At their worst, they are academic technicians, teachers about whom the common school lore is, “Well, the student will learn something, but he won’t necessarily like it.” Teachers who are strong in these content and instructional competencies fall somewhere along

standing of the distinction between equity and equality. They understand that equity involves each student getting what he or she needs rather than each student merely getting the same thing.

These teachers understand what motivates students. They create connections with their students and understand and value their experiences. They are able referees and guides for not only the academic but also students’ social and emotional growth. These are the teachers with whom hard-to-reach students thrive. They connect with students and parents and tend to establish strong connections with both. They do more than give lip service to their commitment to students — they live it. They know and are known to their students.

Student-focused educators range from highly effective teachers who motivate and inspire students in mastering rigorous content to those who are nurturers but lack the content knowledge or instructional savvy to provide their students with the academic structure required to achieve academic success.

**THE TEACHER EFFICACY MATRIX**

These two distinct skill sets form an axis that describes something essential about teachers, their skill, and the types of professional learning that are appropriate for them. Along axis one is content mastery/pedagogy and along the other is their student focus — their capacity to understand and motivate students. Combined, these skill sets form a matrix with four distinct quadrants. The teachers represented in each are markedly different from each other. Each quadrant suggests not only a different type of teacher, but a different type of supervision and support necessary to move them closer to quadrant IV, the master teacher.

The matrix is a tool for under-

**TEACHER EFFICACY MATRIX**



for example, how to present new material, to preteach, and reteach. They skillfully assess student understanding and provide subsequent differentiated instruction based on that assessment. They are comfortable with students with weak academic skills, English language learners, students with special needs, or advanced students. These are skilled educators with whom nearly any student will progress academically.

At their best, these teachers form their schools’ instructional core and

the continuum from technician to master teacher as a consequence of their will and skill to know and connect with their students in meaningful ways.

**AXIS TWO: KNOWING THEIR STUDENTS**

Teachers who achieve mastery along this axis know their students well. They know and value their students as individuals as well as in the context of their family, racial, and cultural groups. They have a deep under-

## Quadrant IV: THE MASTER TEACHER

Master teacher status is the goal for every teacher. These teachers are what Todd Whitaker (2002) calls “superstars.” They are remarkable in their ability to connect with and motivate students in the context of rigorous academic requirements. Their students are academically successful, typically making significant progress regardless of their starting point. Every principal wants to hire such teachers, and every parent wants them for their child. They have a knack for maintaining a mutually clear focus on students’ well-being as well as their academic needs.



### SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT

Since master teachers tend not to be the subject of parent complaints, student behavioral problems, or staff conflicts, principals are tempted to leave them alone, putting out fires elsewhere and addressing the deficits of lower performers. This is an easy trap for administrators to fall into and one that has troublesome consequences in the long term.

Spending time and energy supporting master teachers is one of the best uses of a school administrator’s time. These teachers, while highly skilled, too often function in isolation. Providing intentional, targeted support to master teachers contributes significantly to a school climate in which the standard of performance is high. Such support is also motivating to lower-performing teachers.

A core principle for promoting master teaching is to provide support for professional reflection and learning. Master teachers often do not know just how effective they are and are their own worst critics in looking for how they can best reach students. A core element of support for master teachers is to cre-

ate professional learning communities in which master teachers can connect and collaborate with other high-functioning colleagues. Reducing the isolation and privatization of practice that many master teachers experience provides a vehicle for their ongoing growth as well as serving as a venue for sharing their expertise. Providing thought partners and critical friends through a professional learning community context can be motivating for master teachers.

Likewise, targeted observation and support, most often heaped on lower-performing teachers, can provide a useful context for the deep reflection that master teachers need for continued growth. These teachers are constantly trying new ways to reach and teach students and are hungry for feedback and an opportunity to analyze and debrief their work. The master teacher tends to be a powerful consumer of professional learning and can be an able peer coach. The mere act of a principal spending time and energy in support of a school’s master teachers sends a powerful message about what is valued in the school’s culture.

standing teachers’ skills and needs. Assessment of teachers along the two axes is a function of a teacher’s performance with students along both academic and interpersonal constructs. The descriptors of the four quadrants and the teachers who reside in each provide a framework for identifying and supporting teachers.

### THE ROAD TO MASTERY

Perhaps no task is more critical for a principal than selecting the right teachers and supporting them appro-

Quadrant III, the Technician, p. 14

Quadrant II, the Caretaker, p. 16

Quadrant I, the Struggler, p. 16

priately in their growth toward mastery. While no teacher exists purely in any specific quadrant at all times, understanding the quadrant in which a teacher best fits provides a context for understanding what they need to become more effective with and for students. The notion of differentiated

supervision and support is not just a good idea for students, but for teachers, too. It provides a framework for administrators and coaches to understand the unique nature and needs of teachers where they are and, more importantly, what it takes to move them toward becoming a master teacher. Students deserve no less.

### REFERENCE

Whitaker, T. (2002). *Dealing with difficult teachers (2nd ed.)*. New York: Eye on Education. ■

**Quadrant III: THE TECHNICIAN**

Technicians usually get the job done, though not always with all students. They may appear as traditionalists on a staff, serious and dogmatically focused on academics to the exclusion of all else. Their students frequently achieve academic success, but their classrooms can be cold, businesslike, and impersonal. There is little room for trial and error, and learning occurs, when it does, in the absence of culturally responsive instruction. Typically, their students are neither known as individuals nor are their feelings or racial or cultural identities known and valued. They are teachers who are known for academic rigor but who lack the skill and/or will to meaningfully engage all learners.



**SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT**

With a critical skill set firmly in place, these teachers know their content and how their students need to be able to perform on measures of academic achievement. A weak understanding or disinterest in their students as individuals and learners holds these teachers back from the levels of excellence associated with master teachers.

Opportunities for explicit learning about student motivation and engagement are ideal for technicians. They benefit from work designed to address their often tenuous understanding of equity and the lived experience of their students as individuals with unique racial and cultural backgrounds. Further, they can benefit from professional learning around the role of deep and responsive differentiation of instruction. These teachers, who place a high value on performance, can be meaningfully paired with master

teachers in peer coaching or critical friend roles.

Technicians may become entrenched in their belief that delivering rigorous academic work is their only job, and issues of student motivation and engagement detract from that work. Guiding these teachers through professional learning focused on knowing students as individuals and as learners can be profound. A strategy such as guiding the teacher in analysis of a focus student is a useful frame for learning. Once a struggling student has been identified, the teacher interviews the student to understand the context of his or her life and learning, analyzes the student's progress, and then designs specific interventions for the student. This process can be a powerful tool as teachers move from an analytic stance to understanding the power of knowing and differentiating for their students.

**Quadrant II: THE CARETAKER**

Caretakers place student well-being at the forefront. They are nurturers who hold a deep commitment to their students and their well-being. They often form lasting bonds with their students and do much to build both students' self-esteem and positive regard for school. What limits caretakers is their failure to connect their strong student focus with equally strong academic rigor. They are largely kind and supportive, but they lack a firm handle on academic content and the strategies necessary to equip students with the specific skills necessary to increase student achievement.



**SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT**

As nurturers, caretakers have students' best interests at heart. As such, they tend to suffer from a skill deficit rather than a will deficit. Addressing the needs of these teachers primarily involves providing structured professional learning around content standards, instructional methodology, and curricular mastery as it relates to student success. These teachers can acquire the skills necessary to move from caretaker to

master teacher through professional development and coaching toward deep understanding of content standards, intentional and strategic instructional planning, and knowledge of differentiation strategies. Working in professional learning communities with both technicians and master teachers contributes to structures that provide these nurturers with the content mastery that they require.

**Quadrant I: THE STRUGGLER**

When a school has struggling teachers, their identity is no secret. They are weak in instructional delivery and student focus. They are teachers whom parents rally to keep their children away from and principals regret having to place students with. These teachers accomplish little academically or socially and emotionally for students and are typically a drain on administrators' time. These teachers' students perform poorly on assessments and tend to show a disproportionate level of behavioral issues, an artifact of their experience in classrooms that provide for neither their academic nor social and emotional needs.



**SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT**

The potential for struggling teachers to do more damage than good is tremendous. While they can make improvements, their deleterious effect on students and school climate is significant. They can hinder the growth of caretakers and technicians through their negative presence and impact on school climate as well as monopolizing administrators' time. It is tempting for principals to spend the majority of their time with these low-performing teachers, leaving higher-achieving counterparts without sufficient support and feedback to continue in their growth. While the investment of time is often justified by the need

to increase these teachers' skills, the disproportionate allocation of time fixing problems caused in these classrooms is a slippery slope for any administrator. They can be the bane of a principal's life as they invest time in support and, often, disciplinary documentation and processes. The wise administrator contains that time wherever possible in order to spend more time supporting and nurturing master teachers and those actively moving toward becoming one. The support offered to struggling teachers must be targeted, explicit, and focused. Professional learning should be coupled with accountability to measure progress.