

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Essential Questions: A Schoolwide Approach

Normal Park Museum Magnet Elementary School, Tennessee

March 2008

Topic: How to Organize Your Teaching

Practice: Higher-Order Questions

Highlights

- Administrators at this school support the use of higher-order questions through professional development that focuses on curriculum planning and effective instructional strategies.
- Each quarter, modules are developed by grade-level teams and are driven by essential questions and enduring understandings that anchor instruction.
- Starting at the kindergarten level, every student is expected to be able to provide rich explanations, and teachers scaffold instruction so that all students are able to engage in critical thinking.
- Open-ended questions and follow-up questions are important techniques for helping students develop understandings.

About the Site

Normal Park Museum Magnet Elementary School

Chattanooga, TN

Demographics

73.1% White

22.1% African American

1.5% Asian

2.1% Hispanic

1.2% Native American

36.2% Economically Disadvantaged

Normal Park Museum Magnet staff plan curriculum in grade-level teams to organize instruction that promotes student understanding and retention of key concepts. Distinctive features of the school includes:

- Nine-week interdisciplinary curricular modules based on “essential questions” and “enduring understandings”
- Weekly learning expeditions to partner museums that connect abstract concepts taught in modules to concrete and real-life experiences
- Quarterly Exhibit Nights where students create displays and act as museum docents to demonstrate their understandings
- Differentiated instruction in reading, math, and spelling where individualized lessons are designed to alternate between teacher modeling and student practice
- Socratic Seminars, text- or art-based discussions where teacher questioning leads students to explore of key ideas through a cooperative process
- Hands-on, intensive professional development in the summer and throughout the year

Full Transcript

Jill Levine, Principal: In order for teachers to be able to ask good questions in the classroom and ask in-depth questions, they need time to plan and time to think. So, as an administrator, I find that it's very important to program in that planning time. We have a full day before we do every new learning module for teachers to work as grade level teams and to really think about: What is the depth in this content and how do I gear students in that direction? What questions should I ask? Without that type of planning and that time for teachers to really think, it would be hard to make this happen.

Joyce Tatum, Magnet Coordinator: We design student work very carefully. We design understandings and essential questions. Traditionally in schools, teachers plan activities—especially at the elementary grades. Later on, they make out a test and hope it matches what they are teaching. That's not a good way. It would be like driving to Chattanooga and not knowing how to get here. So what we do is decide where we are headed first, and that work was designed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design*. So,

our first thing is to design where we are headed, then how we are going to assess, then what are we going to do to help our students get there.

Levine: To get teachers to understand the value of higher-order questions, they need to immerse themselves in learning using that method. So from time to time we have faculty seminars where we all sit in a circle; we bring in a piece of literature or a piece of art, and we have a discussion. People agree with each other; people ask other questions, but the teachers are involved in that type of critical thinking. Until they actually sort of immerse themselves in an experience, they don't necessarily have the schema to be able to answer tough questions.

Tatum: One of the ways we get students to provide us with rich answers is through rich questions. A lot of people think that young children can't give information like that. For example in our kindergarten, they are studying animals in the next nine weeks. They will be able to compare different kinds of animals. That shows up because the teachers have taught the information, but then they have moved to the next level and asked them to apply or explain. In our fifth grade class, they have just finished a module on World War II. That requires a lot of empathy on the part of students. We want them to understand that nobody is all right or all wrong and that we cannot live through those years, but we can be empathetic to what they went through. So by aiming the questions at higher-level thinking skills, we can get a product that's justifiable.

Levine: A big focus here is sort of fostering this idea in children that they need to be wide-awake to the world around them. So, they need to be constantly thinking and questioning what's happening and not just sort of soaking it in like a sponge. And I think it's important for a new teacher—or any teacher who is going to start to ask richer questions—to think in terms of asking one question and then asking another and another and another. So for example, where does a Tucan live when you are talking about the rain forest? The student may say which layer in the rain forest. How do you know? What's different about that layer than the forest floor? Why is that animal specially designed to live in that layer? So asking question upon question to get a deeper and more in-depth answer—when students are asked those type of questions, eventually they will start to give the answer on the front end so as to avoid all the follow up questions. But it's never enough to let just the first answer that comes out of a student's mouth sit. We should always be sort of probing and asking more to get more depth and more detail.

Tatum: In the third grade study of Australia, I was walking down the hall on exhibit night and a young man went, "Psst. Do you want to know how the earth has changed over time?" I went, "Yes, I would like to know that." So he explained how volcanoes and wind and deserts and earthquakes changed. It was fabulous. And this little kid, if you knew him, you would go like, "Oh, he can never do that." He can. And another child in the third grade talked about the cloud; we have a cloud display upstairs that's become a permanent exhibit. And how long did it take him? Thirty minutes to explain to the governor's wife about all the clouds. So our kids have that depth of knowledge of them being able to—on the spot—to put their thoughts together and to give a very coherent, persuasive answer.