

**“Leaders of the past needed to know how to *tell*.
Leaders of the future will need to know how to *ask*.”
Peter Drucker**

Drilling down and up from MCPS' Four Essential Questions

MCPS Essential Instructional Leadership Questions

In a very short time, people at all levels of the system seem to have accepted the principle that the school system's ongoing improvement efforts are designed to address four essential questions:

1. *What do students need to know and be able to do?*
2. *How will we know they have learned it?*
3. *What will we do when they haven't?*
4. *What will we do when they already know it?*

This core of common understanding has effectively brought “continual improvement” out of the realm of an external strategy to be *deployed down* the system, and made it part of the district's work from classroom to boardroom.

I propose, below, that this common language and base of knowledge could now be used to support a common way of understanding, not just how to *improve* the district's work, but the management of that work itself – which is *instruction*.

This rapid acceptance of this thinking framework may be explained by the fact that people are intrinsically wired to learn from their own actions, and these questions focus that learning.

Also, if one believes that the most meaningful “answers” have to be informed by those closest to the work, then MCPS's experiences so far illustrate how a central organization's *power* lies in structuring and extending the organization's common questions, and providing common access to the “data” needed to develop situationally-appropriate answers.

“My question”, as a member of MCBRE's Accountability & Assessment Committee, is first, whether this framework can be used as a common way to think about the work of everyone involved in the “system” that develops a student's *learning capacities*– teachers, administrators, parents, and the student him/her self?

And then (because Questions 2-4 for all of them are *information*-dependent) used as a way to determine the nature of the information required to support that work, where it can be found within the work processes, and how it can be made accessible when and where needed?

Here is a way to begin to think about applying the student-focused questioning process more broadly.

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MCPS Essential Instructional Management Questions

The school system's ongoing work of supporting *individual* student learning is designed to address four essential student-focused questions:

1. What do **students** need to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know they have learned it?
3. What will we do when they haven't?
4. What will we do when they already know it?

The first question gets a lot of attention because of its effects on curriculum and testing. Interestingly, questions 2, 3, and 4 address another dimension because their needed “answers” have to be usable in the instructional process. They are instructional management questions -- questions whose answers are the “gap-closers” between what students need to know and do and what they actually know and can do.

For those “on the line” where two interrelated work processes -- *teaching* and *learning* -- take place, answers have to be developed *when* and *where* they are most needed by those who directly manage those processes.

In a way, the answers to this “new” level of essential questions are necessary prerequisites to the development of sustainable answers to the original ones. They identify the requirements of a coherent *support system* for the leadership and management of instruction.

This can happen as these new questions extend “up” in the system as *leadership* concerns, and also drill “down” to the student to release the untapped power of the student to engage with, and *co-manage* with the teacher his/her own learning. This suggests, for example:

MCPS Essential *Instructional Leadership* Questions

1. What do **teachers & principals** (and *parents*) and district staff need to know and be able to do in order to answer *Instructional Management* questions 2-4?
2. How will we know they are doing it?
3. What will we do when they aren't?
4. What will we do when they already are?

The answers to these questions can help create the *just-in-time* support that flows through the staff of Community Superintendents and clusters, and the *just-in-case* support developed by central office areas such as professional development, human resources and technology.

They also can be used to support the *parent's* instructional support roles.

Possibly the most critical application will come from recognition that the desire to ask and find answers to these same four questions are also pre-wired into every student.

MCPS Essential *Instructional Management* Questions for the Student

1. What do *I* need to know and be able to do?
2. How will *I* know I am doing it?
3. What can *I* do when I'm not?
4. What can *I* do when I already know and can use it?

MCPS has already see the power released by building these questions into the instructional process at *Waters Landing* and other schools that have extended data-driven *decision-making* to the student and parent in ways that have a direct influence on results.

Now, for the first time, the management dilemma that schooling's product also has a role in its process has a way to be addressed... and hopefully, *systemically* supported.

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I believe this framework for thinking about the nature of the work involved in the instructional process has implications for the district's *support processes* including, but not limited to, the *information* support of the developing IMS, and the A&S Professional Development System.

- It could open a needed dialogue about “information” (other than “hard data”) that is the currency of the instructional process -- where it is, what form it takes, how it can be generated, made functional, exchanged, and made accessible where and when needed.

- It also could focus attention on the unique information needs of principals and those at the Community Superintendent and cluster levels whose ability to respond is often dependent on information developed through “monitoring” and “supervisory” roles which, in the past, have served to shut down, rather than open up, the flow of honest information required for *just-in-time* problem responses for principals.

- And in terms of the concerns that have driven the intended work of the MCBRE's *Accountability & Assessment Committee*, this framework might provide the community and the district with a coherent, common way to make better sense of the confused mix of concepts and terms (e.g., ways to *generate* information such as “assessment,” and standardized testing; and ways to *use* information such as “accountability,” “shared accountability” and “formative” evaluation).

Trying to understand each of these as individual processes make it difficult to see and understand the core roles of information and data as essential common elements for *working smarter*.