

VOICES

from the Field:

WHAT IS A MASTER TEACHER?

What Practicing
Teachers, Principals, and
Superintendents Have to Say

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A MASTER TEACHER?

*“When a man does not know
what harbor he is making for, no
wind is the right wind.”*

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Teaching and learning have been vital to the progress of mankind for thousands of years. In the United States, it was immediately important to the founding fathers to create the common school. Today, we want to educate all children to high levels. As a result, the pressure for teachers to teach and students to learn has reached the highest level in the history of the world. This focus is not going to diminish. It is only going to accelerate because of the reality that the world needs a highly educated and competitive workforce.

THERE IS NO COMPLETE CRITERIA OR STANDARD FOR BECOMING A MASTER TEACHER

We want and need the best possible teachers in our classrooms—teachers who can pick up all students from where they are now and take them as far as they can go. That’s why it’s so important that we uncover what research and experience tell us are the criteria for becoming a master teacher. Without a definition of a master teacher, how can we inspire aspiring teachers to want to become one? How will we know how to develop our current teaching force? How will we know how to reward our

master teachers and use them to the greatest extent possible in our schools? We ask, “What performance does a master teacher exhibit? What professional beliefs, attitudes, and skills do master teachers possess and practice? Are there degrees or levels of master teaching?”

The paradox is: With all the needs and the demands for teachers to be highly effective and students to achieve at higher academic levels, we could find nobody who had taken the time and devoted intellectual energy to define a master teacher. While many have offered a narrow or partial answer, nobody has offered a whole and comprehensive answer. This is vitally important. In achieving any kind of desire or goal, one has to know what one needs to do to get there.

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While there is considerable research regarding how students learn and how better to teach those students to learn, it’s a partial package. We could find nobody who has dealt with the whole teacher and the whole task of becoming a master teacher. And, many practicing teachers will tell you that, regardless of the degrees with which they graduated or grades they earned, they weren’t ready with the mindset and skill set that they needed to be a master teacher.

If a practicing teacher wants to become a master teacher, there are no precise guidelines he or she can follow. Equally important, schools have no guide for developing master teachers in a comprehensive way. If a person desires to have a career in education, there isn’t any place he or she can go to find what he or she needs to learn to become a master teacher.

The truth is this: Many of us started our first day in the classroom feeling more like novices than highly trained professional educators prepared to relate to and teach all of our students effectively. This, of course, could also be true for other professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, and architects. Yet, in those professions, there is a clear measurement of whether practitioners are knowledgeable enough to begin practicing their professions. Violations of standards and practices in these professions lead to severe consequences. If a doctor doesn’t follow best practice, a patient can die. If an architect does the same, a building can fall

down. An accountant who doesn't follow the tax code puts his or her client in jeopardy.

For a teacher, unfortunately, the guidelines for becoming a master teacher are incomplete and unclear. And the consequences for not being one may not surface in a student's life for years.

We have set out to research and develop a model that school districts, professional organizations, colleges, universities, state departments, and federal agencies can use to design training for the development of master teachers. If the combined efforts of all these agencies were utilized to develop master teachers, schools could become all we want and expect them to be, and the classroom teacher would find greater success and satisfaction in teaching.