Disrupt the Status Quo
Three Questions That Light the Way to Higher Standards

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Creative genius doesn't always lie in knowing all the answers. Journalist and innovation expert Warren Berger (2014) investigates the bold innovators who are changing our world and explains the "creative questioning process" they cycle through again and again—asking questions no one else is asking to find the answers all are seeking. Driven by an indomitable spirit of inquiry, these master innovators rethink, reinvent, and disrupt the status quo by asking three simple questions:

1. **Why?** This question invites you to confront a problem, articulate the challenge, and try to understand it better.

2. **What If?** While *why* questions help us understand our present situation, *what if* questions help us envision what might be.

3. **How?** Asking *how* invites you to turn speculation into reality. How questions are typically practical and actionable. How can I get this done? How might I take the first steps?

Let's explore how these three questions can light the way to higher standards.

Why Take On the Challenge of Higher Standards?

The answer is straightforward: higher standards mean an increased opportunity for all students. College- and career-ready (CCR) standards reflect a coherent vision of what students should know and be able to do to succeed in the rapidly transforming, increasingly globalized, technology-driven world of the 21st century. And we keep upping the ante; as Levy and Murname (2013) remind us, these days, advances in computerization demand ever more abstract work and highly refined technological skills that disrupt our traditional labor market, and eliminate "routine cognitive and manual tasks that [once] provided work for generations of high school graduates." Increasingly, our students have fewer employment options and the ones that exist demand an unprecedented level of technological know-how.

What does curriculum and instruction—driven by higher standards—actually look like? Imagine rigorous and relevant (Daggett, 2014), highly engaging teaching that captivates students with real-world innovations, in-depth content knowledge, and intellectually invigorating problem solving. Fullan (2011) describes exemplary instruction as literacy and numeracy teaching that is not only "engaging," but also, "precise, high yield, and higher order." Students are drawn into the work and strive beyond their comfort

level, determined to find answers to the intriguing problems at hand—and, in the process, they develop the drive and perseverance that makes continued academic success possible.

This is a *growth mindset*—first introduced by Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006)—in contrast to a *fixed mindset*. As the labels suggest, people with a fixed mindset believe they come into the world with a fixed amount of intellectual firepower. They accept failure as an inevitable reflection of their cognitive limitations. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, such as the successful innovators Berger showcases, refuse to be limited by real or imagined deficiencies of any sort. They believe that with enough hard work, perseverance, and practice, success is inevitable.

What If We Adopted a Growth Mindset?

What if schools and districts adopted a growth mindset? While simply adopting and implementing higher standards will produce welcome change within the existing system, what if we viewed our transition to CCR standards as an opportunity to reimagine what's possible in our schools and classrooms—for both students and teachers. What if we believed that with enough hard work and determination—and with help from CCR experts—anything might be possible? Harvard business professor and innovation expert Clayton Christensen (2011) establishes the difference between *sustaining* the status quo, that is, using CCR standards to improve existing instruction and curriculum versus *disrupting* the status quo, or using the CCR standards as an exciting opportunity to transform curriculum, instruction, and assessment

For schools that have adopted project-based learning and/or blending learning—formal education programs that combine online teaching and learning with brick-and-mortar schools—reimagining curriculum, instruction, and assessment and disrupting the status quo is already well underway. Digital tools and hands-on inquiry are shifting roles in the classroom and creating a ripple effect throughout the school system that impacts everything from pedagogy to planning and preparation.

Textbook driven instruction is out; so, too, are one-size-fits-all programs that limit responsive teaching—instruction that's flexible and shaped to address individual student needs. Adopting a growth mindset means that we are prepared to use "creative questioning" to take a hard look at every aspect of our curriculum and cycle through

asking why, what if, and how again and again as we work to realign our curriculum with CCR standards, find ways to infuse it with rigor and relevance (Daggett, 2014), and make sure that our students are able to apply what they know in new ways that will lead to new learning.

Expeditionary Learning, inspired by the exemplary work of veteran teacher Ron Berger (2003), provides a model of education powered by a growth mindset. Pledging to help students become "leaders of their own learning," Expeditionary Learning is committed to "creating classrooms where teachers can fulfill their highest aspirations and where students can achieve more than they think possible." And this is far more than lofty language! Expeditionary Learning schools have established a vision of student success that combines academic achievement through project-based learning, original student research, and arts infusion together with character education and high-quality work—winning both accolades and results. They take particular pride in their "100% Club"— nothing less than college acceptance for every student. Expeditionary Learning is a growth mindset in action.

We might all agree that the easy task is establishing the vision: increased opportunity for all students. But transitioning to CCR standards, particularly fueled by a growth mindset, demands far more of both educators and students. Implementing the vision requires focused, diligent, professional planning, organization, and continuous revision while launching, monitoring, assessing, and documenting the work—not easy to do in the midst of the day-to-day challenges of running a district, school, and classroom.

How Can We Transform Our Instruction, Curriculum and Assessment?

Once we've determined the *why* and *what if*, we can ask the practical *how* questions that lead to action. As the range of instructional and curricular innovation expands, the challenge of curriculum mapping and transformation increases as well. At first, the questions we ask may seem as daunting as the work itself. How will we help all schools in our district transform curriculum, instruction, and assessment?

- Are all schools in our district on the same page? What might curriculum mapping look like at one-to-one schools, Project-Based Learning schools, or schools guided by multiple iterations of blended learning?
- Do we all have the commitment and tools necessary to accomplish the work?
- Have we established interdisciplinary teams?
- Do we understand how to deconstruct a standard that is more rigorous and multi-faceted?

- What about vertical alignment? Do we understand how to determine the logical, consistent order for teaching the standards-based content at each grade or course level, so that we can focus on building skills and knowledge?
- How will we establish timelines, leadership roles, outcomes, responsibilities, and assessments?

These are just some of the questions educators must ask themselves as they move deeper into the work of transitioning to CCR standards. The work, when done right, can be tremendously energizing and hopeful, engaging the entire school community.

Disrupting the Status Quo to Transform

While it's tempting to jump headfirst into immediate implementation, both educators and students will benefit by stepping back and asking the three creative questions that guide all successful innovators: Why, What If, and How. Consider working with a CCR expert as you cycle through these three questions again and again. Work collaboratively with teachers, administrators, and other essential stakeholders to map out a strategic plan that provides the time, leadership, and professional development and resources needed to successfully implement CCR standards in ways that will transform your curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Disrupting the status quo provides promise: the promise of excellence for our students, of professional reinvigoration for our teachers, and of a collaborative community of practice that will support and inspire all working within its borders and beyond.

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