

Why A Focal Student Strategy

Why would I want to look more deeply at a particular student?

Have you ever tried to get good at seven things at once and then reflected that if you had chosen one and done it well, you would have learned even more? Not only more about that thing, but lessons that you could apply to other parts of your life? This is the basic premise of focal students.

Teaching is a complex enterprise. Great teaching that enables students to make dramatic learning gains is even more rare. Because transforming schools relies so heavily on developing increasingly effective teachers, focal students provide a way to make a daunting task manageable. Focal students help teachers develop the discipline of deeply understanding the students' needs, adjusting their teaching to meet those needs, and in doing so, impacting the rest of the classroom as the quality of their teaching rises. We call this the "ripple effect."

Focal students reinforce an orientation toward results. By setting specific goals for students and measuring progress toward these goals on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, teachers gather concrete evidence about the effectiveness of their teaching and how to make adjustments to better serve their students.

Focal students keep the focus on student learning and motivation. Focal students help teachers make the subtle, but critical shift from, "How well did I teach it?" to "How well did they learn it?" With focal students in mind, teaching is not just executing a well-designed lesson, but it's checking to ensure that the students achieved the objectives of that lesson. In addition, focal students give teachers a critical window into the factors beyond academics that influence learning. Factors such as what motivates a student, the student's belief in himself, or his perception of whether his teacher believes in him all impact learning. The process of "researching" focal students enables a teacher to build relationships with students who might otherwise have slipped through the cracks.

By focusing on focal students, teachers become more effective for all students. Preliminary data from teachers in Oak Grove School District in California tell us that the ripple effect is indeed happening. Teachers who accelerated 3 or more focal students by 1-2 levels on the California Standards Test also accelerated more students overall while allowing fewer students to drop proficiency levels than they did in the years before working with us. These data are debunking the concern that focusing on a few students will take away from other students in the classroom.

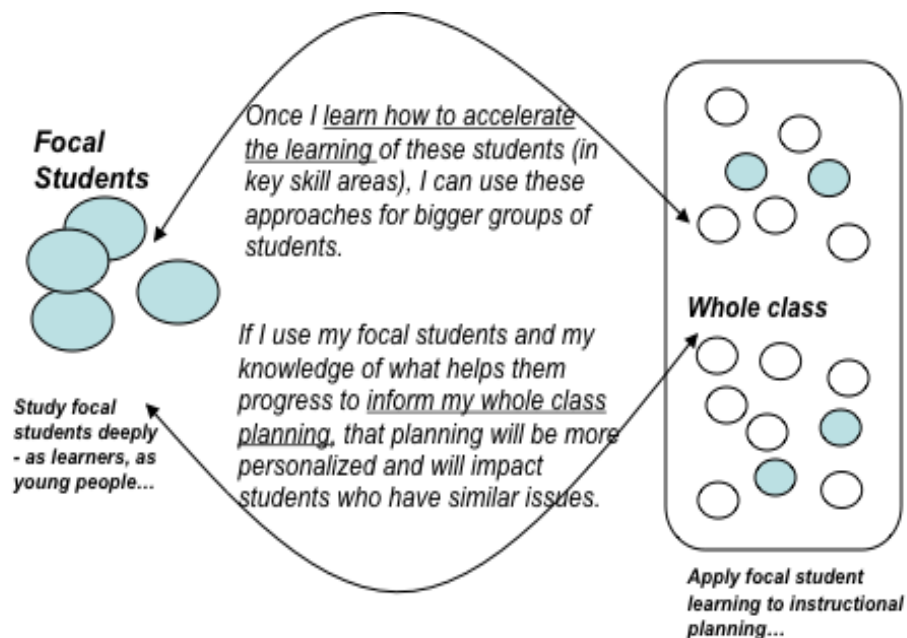
According to Mike Schmoker, author of *Results Now*, schools should dedicate at minimum 45 minutes every two weeks for teachers to discuss student data, set goals and plan instruction. "That way," he writes, "they can help one another ensure that they are teaching essential standards and using assessment results to improve the quality of their lessons." Experience with a Focal Student strategy suggests that an hour a week of student-centered teacher collaboration anchored in specifically identified students has an even greater impact.

When coaches begin coaching conversations with teachers by centering attention on focal students, the whole dynamic between the teacher and coach becomes more collaborative. Instead of the coach critiquing the teacher's instruction with reference to "best practice," the two are working together to observe how the teacher's instruction is affecting the focal students' learning and what s/he might need to do differently to accelerate that learning.

As Mike Schmoker points out, "improvement is not a mystery." In the classrooms in which the teacher has adopted a focal student mindset—that is, a teacher who continuously assesses learning of her/his focal students, examines data and uses that information to plan instruction toward mastery of standards—student achievement is accelerating. With sustained attention to focal student learning and a determined effort toward results, the opportunity and access gap for historically underserved students and families can be narrowed and closed.

Key Ideas on A Focal Student Strategy

- Focal students give teachers a critical window into the factors beyond academics that influence learning. Factors such as what motivates a student, the student's belief in himself, or his perception of whether his teacher believes in him all impact learning. The process of "researching" focal students enables a teacher to build relationships with students who might otherwise have slipped through the cracks.
- Focal students reinforce an orientation toward results. By setting specific goals for students and measuring progress toward these goals on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, teachers gather concrete evidence about the effectiveness of their teaching and how to make adjustments to better serve their students.
- Focal students keep the focus on student learning and motivation. Focal students help teachers make the subtle, but critical shift from, "How well did I/we teach it?" to "How well did they learn it?" With focal students in mind, teaching is not just executing a well-designed lesson, but it's checking to ensure that the students achieved the objectives of that lesson.
- By focusing on focal students, teachers become more effective for all students. When teachers discuss focal student learning in their grade level teams the conversation becomes practical, anchored in data, and specific. All of these elements make for a more productive learning session and increase the likelihood that teachers can apply what they've learned from a peer to their own classrooms.
- It's not only important for teachers to examine focal students' academic needs together, it's also important for them to talk about their focal students' affective needs and build a collective commitment to their success—not just raising their academic scores, but developing young people with unique strengths, interests, experiences and dreams.



Developing a Trusting Learning Focused Relationship with Students

Partnering with students in their learning requires opportunities to see and understand students up close. Having this type of access to the student requires trust, yet many teachers and students report feeling disconnected from each other and distrustful at times. Developing effective learning partnerships is essential for educators to be able to support students to succeed, particularly those who have a history of failure or negative experiences in schools.

The idea of learning partnerships is rooted in the concept of personalization that many schools have embraced, but it goes one step further to build relationships for the specific purpose of directly improving a student's academic skills. These partnerships set the stage for the teacher's effective use of formative assessment and the student's conscious movement toward independent, self-directed learning.

Purposes

- **Learning:** explore a vexing issue or something I've been curious about... get "beneath" what I tend to usually see or understand.
- **Action:** try different approaches to see if I get different results with this student.
- **Theory:** develop deeper understandings about why things happen the way they do.
- **Equity considerations:** How can a focal study inquiry help me understand more deeply issues that impact low-achieving students' abilities to be successful?

Potential Criteria for Selecting Focal Students:

- Students we can learn from (remember we can learn from any student we study)
- Student not showing adequate progress to be successful as they move through our school grade-to-grade
- Outside the sphere of success (currently not being fully served by our school)
- Have few attendance issues (are present enough that we can track progress and follow up on intervention efforts)
- Often representative of a larger group of students with similar skill gap challenges

Focal Students Drive Inquiry Work:

The charge of inquiry work is to answer the essential question: *How will we transform our learning conditions in a systematic way as to ensure acceleration for students moving through the grade levels?* How do we create a more equitable system that ensures that all students coming into our school reach grade level performance and beyond?

The key sub-set of questions we are trying to answer in our inquiry is:

- Who is not being successful? How predictable is this pattern?
- What is preventing this group of students from being successful? How do we know?
- What learning conditions have we created that either inhibit or promote students being successful? (e.g., curricular decisions, pedagogy, means of assessment, etc.)
- What types of reproductive habits, policies, and/or practices are we engaged in (related to the learning conditions)?
- Why have we allowed this situation to exist as a school?
- What instruction, intervention, and support will most effectively ignite acceleration for this group of students?

The core work for teachers is to have conversations about the above questions as they engage in inquiry/intervention cycles anchored by formative assessment data, review of student work, and collective study of instructional planning and practice.