
What Makes a Great Teacher?

PDK SUMMIT OFFERS MANY IDEAS

BY ERIN YOUNG

GREAT TEACHERS DO MORE THAN JUST ADVANCE STUDENT LEARNING. THEY ALSO SPREAD THEIR OWN EXPERTISE TO OTHER TEACHERS.



Keynote speaker Thomas Guskey

In his office, Thomas Guskey has a poster of a photo from 1989. In the photo, one student is standing in front of four tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. To Guskey, the photo symbolizes courage — the same courage that educators need to call upon.

Guskey, the keynote speaker at the 2008 Phi Delta Kappa Summit on High-Performing Educators, urged attendees to become good leaders so they can lead the changes in education. But he warned that forging this path would take courage, similar to the courage displayed by the student in the photo as he stood before the tanks.

“Can you imagine the courage it took to do that?” Guskey asked. “That’s the kind of stand you have to take. When you do that, it will instill courage in others.”

Although educators may feel isolated when they try to create change in their organizations, they should remember that they have the knowledge base of the profession behind them, and they know what works and what doesn’t, he said.

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“We can’t be satisfied with managing change; we have to lead change in our classrooms, schools, and districts,” said Guskey, Distinguished Service Professor at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky. “We should use our knowledge base in good and positive ways to help kids learn in new and positive ways.”

The keynote address was part of last November’s PDK summit in San Antonio, Texas, and began with a panel discussion about what makes a great teacher. Panelist Barnett Berry, president of the Center for Teaching Quality, argued that great teachers do more than just advance student learning — to be great, they must also spread their own expertise.

“It’s not one, it’s not the other,” he said. “It’s both.”

Mary Clement, a panelist and associate professor of teacher education at Berry College in Georgia, said her list of what makes a great teacher has five elements: education, teacher preparation, hiring, quality induction, and ongoing support in a quality workplace.

“Who makes these things happen?” she asked. “We do. The people in this room. As one of my former professors always said, ‘If not you, who? If not now, when?’ We are professional educators. It’s through our work, through our writing, our professionalism, and even our activism. This is how we can help to create and support the steps on my list that will make great teachers.”

For panelist Sherie Williams, an assistant professor at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the definition of a great teacher is a teacher who creates a balance between curricular knowledge and the ability to build relationships with students. Research shows that students learn better when they have a relationship with the teacher.

“To make a wonderful, exemplary teacher, we have to help people learn skills to build relationships in the classroom,” she said.

But great teachers are not all alike, Guskey said. He asked audience members to think of a great teacher in their lives. About half of the audience selected a teacher who was harsh, demanding, and authoritative, while the other half selected a teacher who was nurturing, warm, and endearing.

“In all of our research on effective teachers, it’s been very difficult for us to come up with any set of personality characteristics that defines a highly effective teacher,” he said.

To further complicate the issue, Guskey said, research in Tennessee has shown that a great teacher in one setting may be a poor teacher in another setting. Tennessee has a value-added accountability program that can show on average, for each teacher, how much the teacher’s students have learned throughout the year.

“You would think we should be able to identify those teachers who are getting remarkable results, go and look at what they do, and just have everybody do the same,” Guskey said. “But what they’ve discovered is it’s not that easy.”

Instead, he said, teachers who are effective in rural schools fail when they’re put into urban schools, even though they’re doing the same things they did in the rural schools, and vice versa.

“They’ve really called into question this notion of best practices,” Guskey said. “Maybe best practices depend on where you are, the kind of students you’re teaching, the kinds of communities in which they live,

the cultural background they bring to school. Those things really need to be built in, because if what’s effective depends on the kind of students who are in front of you, then we have to prepare our teacher candidates to really be familiar with those kids, what they’re facing, and how they can be effective with them.”

He also reminded the audience that what students learn from great teachers often goes beyond what’s in the lesson plan.

“We learn so much from teachers besides the things they set out to teach us,” he said. “We carry forward those things for years and years afterward. How does that contribute to the effectiveness of teachers? More pressingly, how do we help young people entering teaching improve that and gather that so that when they become teachers, that can be a part of the quality they bring to their students?”

“You really need to go home and become good leaders,” Guskey said. “We have the knowledge base, but finding ways to put it into practice will take real courage at all levels.”



PARTICIPANTS AT THE 2008 SUMMIT SAID,

a great teacher:

- Has the ability to be flexible, optimistic, self-reflective, progressive, and innovative;
- Must possess the ability to build relationships with students and teachers and have a passion for teaching;
- Excites a passion for learning in his or her students through skillful facilitation, using 21st-century tools;
- Goes beyond the classroom as a collaborator with colleagues;
- Wants to improve himself or herself by learning good instructional skills;
- Is someone who knows the curriculum and works well as part of a team;
- Builds relationships and facilitates lifelong learning;
- Collaborates with families, peers, and the community;
- Shows appreciation and enthusiasm for cultural differences;
- Inspires others to achieve their potential;
- Understands the complexity of the teaching and learning environment;
- Has consistently high expectations for all students;
- Recognizes and adapts when he or she isn’t getting through to students;
- Addresses the needs of the whole child;
- Uses assessment to inform instructional decision making; and
- Gives back through mentoring.