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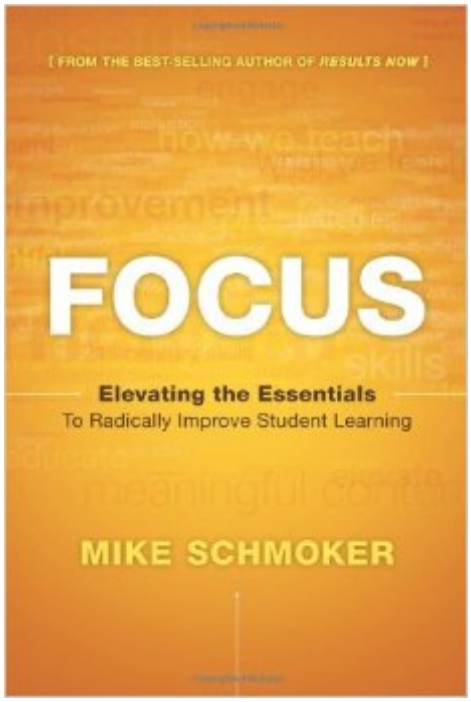
FOCUS: Elevating The Essentials To Radically Improve Student Learning



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Synopsis

Bestselling author Mike Schmoker describes a plan for radically improving student learning that is built on three core elements: a focused and coherent curriculum (what we teach); clear, prioritized lessons (how we teach); and purposeful reading and writing, or authentic literacy. With this "less is more" philosophy, educators can help students learn content at a deeper level, develop greater critical thinking skills, and discover more clearly how content-area concepts affect their lives and the world around them. Both a call to action and a blueprint for creating more effective classrooms, Focus: Elevating the Essentials for Radically Improved Student Learning will challenge your assumptions about schooling and show how educators who have embraced this approach quickly achieved spectacular results.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the conclusion of FOCUS, author Mike Schmoker identifies his own book’s weakness. He writes, "We know what to do, so please, let’s do it. If you’ll allow just a little more repetition in what has been an admittedly repetitious book...."Understatement, thy name is Schmoker. Throughout this book, he bangs away at simple templates you can use to teach, at the right way to lecture, at the necessity that reading, writing, and talking be at the core of all education. You might give him a pass and say repetition is one way we teach, or you might grow resentful and say ANYONE who is reading this book already cares enough and is curious about education, thus needing no repetitious drills to get the point.The book’s other weakness is its ambivalence over textbooks. Schmoker

appears to want it both ways -- condemning textbooks and their monopoly on what is taught in one breath, and extolling the virtues of their efficient and broad use of facts in another.So why the 4 stars? In short, his message, though redundant and perhaps inflated to reach book-length muster, is both sound and important. Depth, not breadth, is his war cry. Cut the standards in half at the very least. Mistrust even the new federal standards coming your way. Don't place all your eggs in technology's over-hyped basket. And finally, the key to good teaching is not some holy grail and not some undiscovered secret. It's been known for a long time -- and Schmoker will not only provide the details, he will pound away at the formula again and again, showing it by subject area, even, in chapters devoted to language arts, social studies, science, and math.At almost $28 for a paperback, this book is shamelessly overpriced. If you have a Kindle, opt for the $15 electronic version.

First, a brief review of what I was looking to get out of this text when I purchased it: I am currently a 5th grade teacher heavily involved with the school improvement process and developing an evaluation model for our district. This past school year I was sent up to 5th grade due to 80% of the district's fifth grade teachers retiring. I found the year to be chaotic due to the demands of not only adjusting to the grade level, but mentoring and the other long list of extra curricular activities that I enjoy supporting. Overall I have an excellent attitude and am a nationally recognized teacher. In a nutshell, my summer goal was to refocus on my classroom instruction and keep the chaos at bay for my students in this next school year. So how did this book do such an extraordinary job of meeting my goal?The school improvement goal for my building is focused heavily on incorporating writing across the disciplines and increasing the proficiency of informational text reading by our students. The book focuses on exactly this. The author explains with extreme clarity what needs to be focused on in order to significantly improve reading and writing. The simplicity of his recommendations is what struck me to the core- it is something that may easily be digested and implemented. I am particularly fond of the Discussion Rubric he outlined- a few simple points that even my fifth graders can understand and that I already have posted on my wall ready for next year. His advice is straight forward- read text daily closely, model how to read closely for students, have students practice reading closely daily. (Ok, my redundancy in that last sentence was intentional, as it mirrors the book's redundancy.

The core of Mike Schmoker's ascertions are correct: students benefit from ongoing assessment of how much they understand; direct instruction is effective; whole-class instruction is generally the most efficient way to teach (the faddish notion that there are individual "learning styles" is finally

being debunked); teachers ought to be on their feet, circulating as they deliver instruction.And we don’t need a lot of technology to accomplish the above.But I’m reminded of a seminal turning point which occurred in the 1992 presidential election. Ross Perot and George Bush had each taken a turn detailing their plans to get the economy back on track. Though their answers were somewhat different, both had made the task sound like an easy one. When it was Bill Clinton’s turn to address the issue, he turned to them and said something to the effect of: Gentlemen, your plans are easy to understand, and parts of what you said even made sense. But it’s not that simple.Schmoker’s breezy claims of 400% increases here and 92% meeting expectations there deserve a healthy dollop of skepticism. Every education reformer for the past 40 years has made similarly outlandish claims for all manner of failed ideas, from Whole Language to New Math to "hands-on" approaches that ignored the fact that at some point, to succeed academically and in most jobs, people have to be able to read and write and to analyze reading and writing.I don’t know much about the teachers, classrooms and schools Schmoker anecdotally cites.

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