Study **Guide**

R E G I E   R O U T M A N

Purpose of the
Study Guide

The purpose of this brief guide is to deepen understanding of what you've read and thought about with the goal of increasing effectiveness, efficiency, and enjoyment in teaching and learning. Use the chapters in the book and accompanying study guide to take a close look at teaching reading and writing in every subject area and to examine teaching practices, in general. Notice what is happening now in your classroom, school, and district; what you might like to see change; what you need to put in place and what supports you need; how you will know desired changes have taken place.

While there are no "right" answers, conversing with colleagues about ideas and issues connected with teaching, assessing, learning, and coaching has the potential to stretch your thinking, raise new questions, increase understanding, and, perhaps, to help the group come to some important consensus. You, your colleagues, and your students will all be the beneficiaries of this dialogue. High achievement is not likely to happen and be sustained without schoolwide commitment, alignment of beliefs and practices, and ongoing professional conversations. I hope *Teaching Essentials* and the accompanying study guide may be a catalyst for successful school change.

Before the **Study Group . . .**

Read and Enjoy

Decide as a group (district, whole-school, grade-level, small-group) how many pages/chapter(s) to read for your first study group discussion and how much time to allow for completing the reading. Read the agreed upon chapter(s) in any way that suits your group. Perhaps, with a sticky note, mark one or two places that resonate with you the most. You may want to share what (page number) and why you selected the passage or quote. This is exactly how I read and prepare for my monthly book club with colleagues and friends.

Review and Reflect

If you can, take a few minutes to review the chapter(s) you read, think about pages and passages you may have marked, ideas you may want to bring up, or anything that seems important to you that may spark a richer conversation. You may want to jot ideas in a notebook. I write down all my thinking about teaching in one notebook and revisit it often.

With our busy teaching lives we do not often have the time to think and reflect on our students, our practices, and our beliefs. We close the door to our room and often become isolated. Enjoy this time to reflect on your practice. What do you feel good about right now? What challenges you right now? In your notebook or on an index card, do a *quick-write* (write for 2 minutes) and be prepared to share your thoughts with your study group if you choose. This reflection could also take place at the beginning of the study group as a way to engage all participants.

During the **Study Group. . .**

Discuss (20–30 minutes)   Focus almost all your time here.

Take a look on pages 4–10 at the questions for the chapter(s) you are discussing. Choose one or more of the questions provided, or raise your own important questions, as a catalyst for getting discussion and high-level thinking going. You may choose to have your professional conversa-

tions in vertical teams, by grade levels, whole group, or any combination of these that best suits your group.

Keep in mind that, out of respect for our busy lives, a professional book study group need not meet for more than 30 minutes and need not be weekly. As long as participants meet regularly and are prepared, that is, they have done the reading and some reflection on it, high-level conversations can easily occur.

It works well to have a facilitator (appointed by the group or a volunteer) who ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak, that the group stays on topic, and that the meeting begins and ends on time. The facilitator might also arrange for snacks (bottled water, fruit, and candy) to be on hand.

Wrap-Up (10-15 minutes)

Identify one or two ideas from the discussion that you may want to think about and apply to your own teaching practice prior to the next book study group. You may choose to write your thoughts in a notebook, at the end of the meeting, or after the meeting. You are encouraged to reflect and share your thinking with your study group (either in the present meeting or at the beginning of the next book study meeting.)

Decide and agree, as a group, what chapter(s) to read in *Teaching Essentials* prior to the next session as well as the next meeting place, time, and date.

Questions for **Discussion** and **Reflection**

A Brief History of a Literacy Teacher, Learner, and Writer

1. How do your own reading and writing habits, teaching history, and the politics of literacy influence how and what you teach?

2. How are you taking responsibility for "keeping up" as a professional? What professional and personal reading do you do? How and why is [that] reading and reflecting essential to your effectiveness as a teacher? What are some ways to "find the time" for personal reading?

3. Are there issues in your school and district that, perhaps, you need to take a group stand on? How is fear or helplessness playing a role (or not) in making needed changes?

Chapter **1**

Look Beyond What You See

1. How can we ensure that we celebrate *all* children's cultures and backgrounds? What are some ways you do that in the classroom and in your school, or what are some ways you can begin to do this?

2. What does it mean and look like in the classroom to "assume all students are capable"? Why are expectations so low for many of our students? What will it take to change that?

3. What kind of language do we need to use when we are focusing first on students' strengths? How can we be honest with students about their progress and, at the same time, affirming?

4. Discuss how English language learners and learners who struggle receive their instruction in your school and district. Are they in the classroom for the rich literacy and language experiences they need or are they pulled out during that time? What steps can you take to ensure that *all* learners receive challenging, relevant, and appropriate instruction?

5. How can you capitalize on, value, and affirm the language, experiences, and stories that all students possess and bring those qualities into the classroom?

6. What role does testing play in the curriculum? What steps can you take to ensure that excellent instruction—not test preparation—dominates daily reading and writing activities?

7. How do we help *all* students truly realize their dreams? (Because of the commitment and support of the superintendent of school, district administrators, and teachers along with a newly established scholarship fund, the *Dreams* students described in this chapter are already planning for college.)

Chapter **2**

Create an "I Can Do It!" Learning Environment

1. What does it mean to "hear all the voices" of our students? Why is that essential? What do we do in schools, unintentionally, to silence our students? Think about a student who rarely speaks up. How can you help that student make his voice heard and feel valued? What would you need to do?

2. How can we break the cycle of failure and disappointment? Real-world writing is one way to give children a voice and help them see possibilities for themselves. How can you use writing to empower *all* students? What does it mean to focus first on the writer and then on the writing? How can writing interesting texts improve students' reading abilities and interest in reading?

3. How does the language we use with students impact their engagement, motivation, self-esteem, and achievement? What does it mean to speak respectfully to a child? What does that language sound like? Take a look at the charts in your room, especially as related to expected behaviors. Are they worded in a positive and respectful tone?

4. Examine the literature you are using for instruction. Make sure that most of it is excellent, current, culturally relevant, and accessible to your students. If it is not, think about steps you can take to change that.

5. Discuss the role and meaning of celebration. How can celebration of students' strengths impact their competence, confidence, and motivation? How can we genuinely emphasize and name a student's strengths (before suggestions for improvement)? Think about a student who is hard to "celebrate." Try looking at that student through affirmative eyes and notice what the student can do.

Chapter **3**

Become an "Expert at Smartness"

1. How are you using current research and doing your part to ensure that research informs your thinking and instruction rather than directs it? What are you and your colleagues doing to advocate for best practices and to prevent fear and helplessness from setting in?

2. How do we hold onto, value, and apply common sense? How can we notice and apply to our teaching what we do as readers and writers?

3. How do you communicate with families so they understand the purpose of a study, requirements, and how their child will be evaluated *before* the study is underway? How does such communication enhance understanding and support between home and school?

4. How can you maintain and sustain weekly, or frequent, professional conversations? Knowing that schoolwide, high achievement does not happen without whole-staff collaboration, what can you do to make certain such conversations take place?

5. Knowing how significant the role of the principal is for high achievement in a school, how can you inform your principal about the why, how, and what of your teaching before an observation? What can you do to increase trust between you and your principal and colleagues?

6. Examine and talk about the use of technology in your school and district. Do what you can do to make sure technology resources and innovations enhance and ease instruction, learning, efficiency, and enjoyment—and not just add more hardware to the classroom.

Chapter **4**

Focus on Meaning First

1. How can we take required curriculum and standards and make them relevant for our students? Why is this essential to lasting learning?

2. Discuss "Teach it first; label it later." How can such teaching hasten understanding and make teaching more efficient and enjoyable?

3. Take a look at your instructional activities. How many are authentic, that is, a similar activity occurs in the world, such as writing a book review, sending a persuasive letter, reading a self-selected book for pleasure, seeking information because of a need and desire to know? Why (or why not) is this important?

4. What can you do to make a required textbook, where the reading level is too difficult for some of the students, accessible and meaningful to all students? (Reading and responding to the text aloud, round-robin style, will not meet that goal.)

5. For many of our English language learners and students who struggle, a lack of a rich vocabulary impedes comprehension, especially in academic areas. How can we teach vocabulary so we build background knowledge and understanding and accelerate learning?

Chapter **5**

Embed Assessment in All Teaching

1. Discuss how you can "embed" meaningful assessment into all your teaching by checking for understanding before, during, and after the lesson.

2. Why does beginning with assessment—for example, doing a shared writing before a curriculum study to find out what students know, need to know, and want to know—save time and increase learning in the long run?

3. Discuss how you and your colleagues check for understanding in reading, math, and the content areas. How do you know and what can you do to be sure that *all* your students are comprehending?

(Once one student has orally responded in a small group or whole class, we typically don't know what the others are thinking.)

4. Data analysis is a necessity for high-achieving schools. What does that mean, and what can you do at your grade level, specialist area, and/or whole school to ensure that data are not just collected but that the data is analyzed and used to improve instruction and learning?

5. What are your grouping procedures at the grade level as well as schoolwide and districtwide? Do you agree with them? Are they serving students well? How might current grouping practices be modified to accelerate learning and be respectful of all learners?

6. How can you move toward responsive teaching (with less "telling" teaching) and why is this important for lasting student achievement?

Chapter **6**

Teach for Independent, Self-Directed Learners

1. How can you apply an Optimal Learning Model to your teaching? How can this model help students evaluate themselves as readers and writers and set new, worthwhile goals? Why is this self-evaluation essential to students' ability to *apply* their learning in new contexts? How does this model help students to work and problem solve on their own?

2. How and why are scaffolded conversations integral to eventual student success and independence? What part do they play in the important "frontloading" process?

3. Analyze your management style. Is it directive or collaborative, student-engaged, and efficient or overly time consuming? How does your management style impact learning? What improvements do you think you might want to make that would increase student achievement and independence? What supports do you need to make those changes?

4. If you were a student in your classroom, would you be happy spending 8 hours a day there? Is the learning environment as attractive and organized as possible and do students have a say in making it that way? Do you negotiate curriculum, where possible, with students? If not, why not, and why does it matter?

5. Assess whether or not you are teaching for independence or if your students are teacher dependent for most activities. Do students know what to do, how to find and use resources and seek help, how to self-monitor and self-correct, and go on learning? If not, what steps might you consider taking? Without explicitly teaching students to work independently— that is, on their own, to apply smart thinking and problem-solving to new texts and contexts—we are limiting students' potential progress.

6. Discuss how two teachers (see pp. 106-110) used responsive teaching to prepare students for high-stakes testing in a manner that helped students improve the quality of their writing while taking increasing responsibility for doing so. What implications does their story have for your own teaching, student learning, and test preparation?

Chapter **7**

Put Schoolwide Coaching into Practice

1. What role does coaching play in your school and district? Are current coaching practices improving student achievement? Why or why not? What useful changes might be suggested for implementation?

2. Why is application of an Optimal Learning Model essential to successful coaching?

3. How can you increase trust between your colleagues, the principal, and district administrators? What kinds of conversations and actions increase trust? Decrease trust?

4. How can a principal be an evaluator as well as a co-teacher and coach? What can you do to support your principal so she is comfortable in both roles? If you are a principal, how can you build enough trust with your teachers so that they welcome you into their classrooms and are open to your feedback?

5. Discuss the possibilities of schoolwide coaching for raising achievement. What small steps can you begin to take at your grade level and/or school? How can you use "Looking at Your Teaching," p. 118 or a similar form you create to neutralize outside judgment and put more responsibility on the teacher-learner?

Chapter **8**

Live a Full Life

1. We work hard because we care so much about our students. How can we work smarter and have more balance in our lives? What can we eliminate, such as elaborate projects, long writing assignments, and complex planning that take lots of time and drain our energy?

2. How can we live our lives so we come to school refreshed and happy to be there?

3. What do you do for fun and relaxation? How do you bring your ordinary stories into the classroom to help bond with your students and help them tell their stories?

4. What are your next steps and essential actions for improving your teaching, living an interesting life, and enjoying what you do?