



# *McCook Public Schools*

**“Equipping ALL Students To Succeed...”**  
Mr. Grant Norgaard, Superintendent  
Principals Tim Garcia, Kate Repass & Jeff Gross  
**Our PLC Path...**



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## **Our vision:**

1. Collaborative teams of teachers working together to ensure all students master our essential learning objectives (most important learning objectives)
2. Collaborative teams of teachers working together to develop formative assessments which measure student mastery of our essential learnings
3. Collaborative teams of teachers working together to intervene for students who have not mastered our essential learnings
4. Collaborative teams of teachers sharing their most effective lessons with each other
5. Collaborative teams of teachers sharing assessment results with each other
6. Collaborative teams of teachers working together to solve problems
7. All students mastering a guaranteed and viable curriculum
8. Systematic process to support student learning
  - a. Resulting in super high summative assessments such as NeSA, ACT, and ITBS scores
9. Students who demonstrate deep levels of cognitive processing that enable them to process information to create innovative solutions, ideas, and products
10. Be a PLC school

## **At the Beginning we Recognized:**

1. NeSA scores not where we wanted
2. Most teachers were working in isolation
  - a. Limited collaboration taking place concerning instruction and learning
3. Most teachers doing what they've always done
  - a. Limited professional growth
4. Curriculum was a mile wide and an inch deep
5. Students were covering a lot of material
  - a. low performing students mastering very little of it
  - b. HAL student not truly challenged
6. A lack of proper scope and sequencing in our curriculum
7. Assessed for grades rather than learning
8. No systematic process for helping students who don't learn
9. We were missing collaboration and a unified effort to ensure learning
10. Traditional special education processes were not working
  - a. intervention before special education label
11. Not every staff member was highly effective
12. Not every staff member used researched based practices of instruction
13. We have some highly effective staff members
14. We have some staff who used researched based practices of instruction
15. We did not have a unified vision for what we wanted to be

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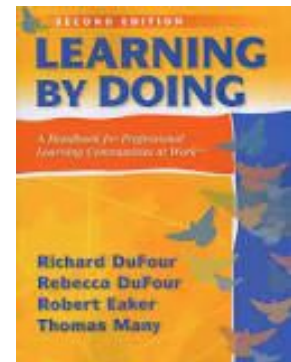
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## Our process:

Our PLC path has been a great learning experience for McCook Public Schools. We have had the opportunity to read many great authors, listen to top notch researchers and practitioners, and have great discussions about who we are, what we want and how we are going to get there.

For us, the process started with administrative team book talks. Every week our administrative team met together to discuss the business of the week, plan for upcoming events and to discuss research based writings that we were reading at the time. Some of the books we read as an administrative team are From Systems Thinking to Systemic Action, Results Now, Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap, Focus, Good to Great and Learning by Doing. Each of these books helped us to more clearly think about what our school system currently looks like and to give us a picture of what we wanted it to be. Although each of these books has value and can provide administrators leading the PLC change process Results Now, Focus, Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap and Learning by Doing were the most impactful when it came to truly understanding how a real & effective PLC school can have a significant impact on student achievement, and of those books Learning by Doing is the closest thing you will find to a guide.



Since it was not possible to read all of those books at the same time, our understanding of the PLC process and its effects on student achievement grew over time, as we finished one book and started another. The learning process for the administrative staff took about a year and a half to two years. Mike Schmoker's books Results Now and Focus really helped to etch in our minds a rough picture of what PLCs could do for our students. His research had a great deal of impact on us and gave us a vision. Reading quality research really impacted our thinking, and helped us take that "first step" with staff.

Our first district wide action was to have collaborative teams at every grade in every subject area start the process of identifying our essential learnings and to develop CRT assessments (locally created formative assessments) that would effectively measure student mastery of those essential learnings. The goal was to have 4 Essential learnings and 4 CRTs by the end of the school year. Knowing the process of helping teachers understand what we were trying to accomplish would take some time, we set out to educate the staff on what essential learning objectives were and what CRTs were and why we wanted to do this. We developed some common language and we created a [Prezi presentation](#) and I went to each building and presented. Along with the trainings that we were doing, principals were leading their staffs through book talks, the same books that we had read up to that point, and a PLC presentation role modeling session was presented at the beginning of the year to give an indication of what we hope to eventually see once PLCs were fully in place.

As part of our change process we needed to enhance our teacher's understanding that we needed to have a [focused curriculum that was absent of unessential learning objectives](#) which diluted the curriculum and wasted time. We also set out to help them understand we need to believe that our essential learning objectives were so important that students must master all

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of them, failure was not acceptable. This process helped us to establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum, and the assessments that would tell us if they had learned it.

The growth of our staff concerning the PLC process and the development of our essential learnings and CRTs was impressive, when you consider the change we were making in our system. Our teachers had to work very hard and were asked to do things based a great deal on trust, since the education of the staff on what we were doing was a work in progress. While many staff members saw the value in what we were doing and understood that the change envisioned had merit, they were also very professional in their concerns and desired a greater understanding of what we were doing and the reasons behind it. School leaders continued to have staff read the literature and studies behind our change process in an effort to answer some of these questions, and to attempt to settle concerns over this “new” thing/fad. Looking back on our process I know we could have done a much better job in this area. There was more we could have done to educate the staff and better books to start with for the book talks (*Learning by Doing*), but that is always the case. Ultimately, however, we had successfully accomplished a very important objective... we started the process.

As we entered our second year of the process we were aided in our endeavours by the approval of the board to allow us early out Wednesdays, when we dismiss students at 2:00 teachers have guaranteed collaborative time to share and work together. Teachers had sent a clear message to administrators that to effectively accomplish our vision we needed to provide teachers the necessary resources to do so, and one of those resources was time. Although early release time is not required for successful implementation of PLCs, it sure does help, and we are very appreciative to the board for the change to our calendar.

We also started off the second year with the goal of continuing to develop our teacher’s understanding of the PLC process and to identify 4 additional Essential learnings across the curriculum and 4 CRTs to measure them. While we recognize our teachers were going to have anywhere from 16 to 22 CRTs when the process was complete, and that at the rate we were going it would take a while to get there, we didn’t want to endanger the process with rebellion and actually we wanted to teachers to start to see the value in the process and push to identify and develop essential learning objectives and CRTs as they recognized the need. In other words, while we may have set the goal low, we believed teachers would identify more essential learnings and develop more CRTs than requested due to the impact this would have on student learning. This worked, somewhat.

The second year went well, but we realized that we just didn’t have as many on board as we liked and the process seemed slowed due to professionals educators still not understanding what we were trying to do and if it was really the right thing. I, having been a teacher, recognized this and realized that we needed to do a better job educating staff, so a plan to help our teachers better understand was devised. About this time my curriculum director had discovered a the book *Learning by Doing*; which is a wonderful book to help guide the process, not completely but a great starting point. She also discovered that the book’s authors had an organization called Solution Tree. Now, I’m not big on buying into programs or groups. I’ve always leaned toward taking something from here and something from their and focusing on what my school’s specific needs are when making decisions, but this group spoke the language

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we were speaking, they were saying the things we were saying and they were holding a vision we were holding... they were just doing those things a lot better than us. So, we hitched our wagon, so to speak, to their organization, and I have not regretted it.

During the summer between our second and third year we sent about twenty members of our staff, all volunteers, to Tulsa to a PLC institute conducted by the Solution Tree people. The Du Fours are the heavyweights in this organization. They have written many books, some of which we had read prior to beginning this process. The teachers that attended this institute came back with a much better understanding of what we were trying to do and why we were trying to do it. They came back sharing the same vision for learning and had a much better understanding of how to get there. I can't say enough about Solution Tree and their people. They have truly helped to move us forward by leaps and bounds. So, seriously, spend the money and get your people there.

The third year, this year, started off with a bang in places where teams had several members attend the summer institute and with slow movement where teams did not have members attend the summer institute. My conceptual processing kicked in, more people need to attend the different trainings that are put on by Solution Tree, which has happened and it is awesome to see how that has truly helped people grasp the big picture. I will also say that any of the trainings put on by Solution Tree will have a similar impact, whether the focus is PLCs or RTI they are all founded on the same basic concepts and help teachers better understand how we can impact student learning when we focus our energies on the right practices. I wish that I could say that our administrative team or myself had that impact, but I can't. It has been humbling in a sense, but I don't dwell on that too much when I see the positive change that has taken place at every building in the district. Money well spent.

The third year also saw the creation of What I Need (WIN) times across the district. Each building does this in a different way and at different times, but at each building the goal is meeting student needs based off of our formative assessment data (CRTs). We hope to continue to see these types of changes and we plan to see a change that will result in higher levels of student achievement. WIN time has been a grassroots movement, it has come from the teachers, and it is based on what our teachers have learned about the change process.

Response to Intervention has also begun to have a greater presence in our process during the third year. This is not an area that I have expertise in, so when several administrators expressed a desire and concern to ensure our process was doing what it was suppose to be doing I was skeptical, but quickly realized we were missing part of the PLC process. We didn't have a systematic way of dealing with students who didn't learn what they were suppose to learn. We needed to have a process in place to ensure we did not let any students fall through the cracks. So, since October of this year we have been training members of our staff on RTI. First, administrators and then teachers. Again, Solution Tree has been our go to company to keep our focus and our language consistent. Our RTI is still a work in progress, but the recognition of need is clear, so it will be more thoroughly developed over the next year.

The process we took is not the process to copy, it was simply the path we have taken to get us where we are today. Like I indicated earlier, I would change much of what we have done, but I definitely would not have waited to start. I believe that we have been learning how to be a

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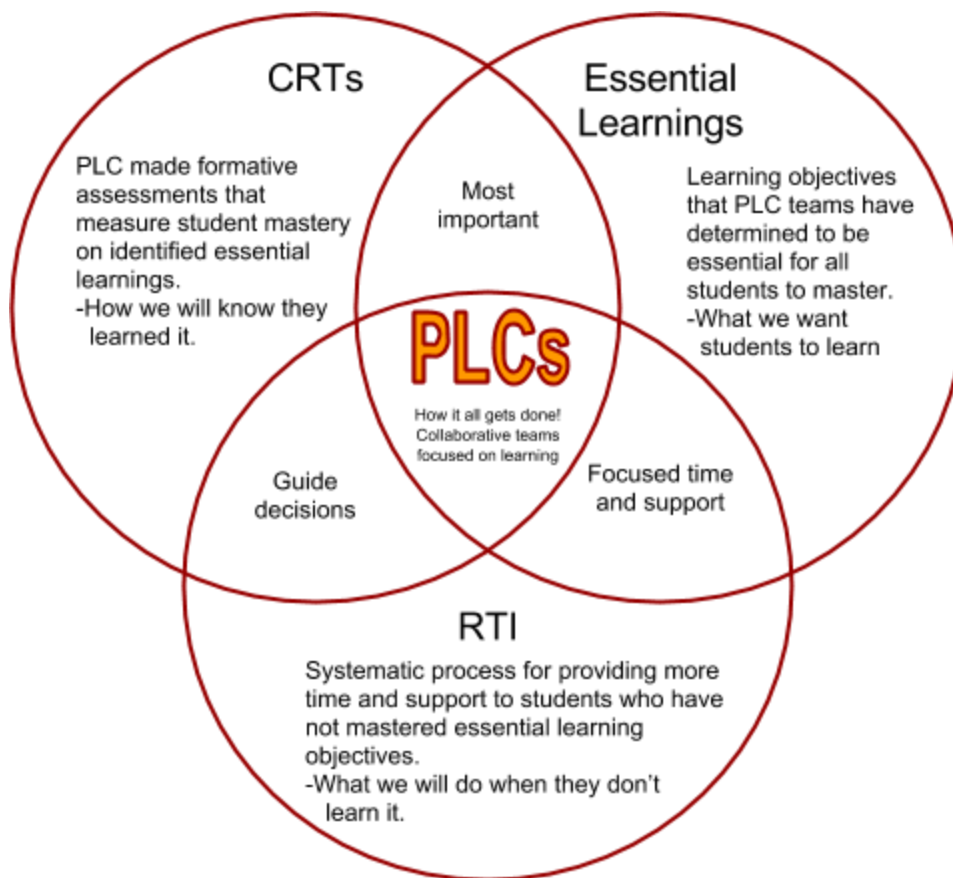
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PLC by doing it, by working through it, and I know that there is no cookie cutter way to accomplish the goal.

I hope that this helps as you consider your process/actions and feel confident that you are moving in the right direction. We know we have and we know that the achievement increases we have experienced are a direct result of what we have done.

## Mixed Messages

At the very beginning of this change process the administrative team and I introduced some goals and some approaches to how we wanted to bring about sustained systemic change to McCook Public Schools. We introduced the PLC concept to teachers, along with a goal of identifying four essential learnings and four CRTs that would measure student mastery of the four essential learning objectives that were identified, and even though the administration team understood these elements were all inclusive under the PLC umbrella, we did not clearly explain this. Later we started to training members on staff on RTI, but even that is not a separate idea or movement in education. It was and is part of our overall process for change that should



directly improve student learning in McCook.

Professional learning communities have always been the focus of bringing about the change that many of us envisioned in McCook, and with the implementation of PLCs we could then go about the business of focusing our curriculum, developing locally created formative assessments, and

planning interventions for those students who failed to demonstrate mastery on those assessments. We have always believed that our essential learnings are our most important learning objectives and required more time and support. CRTs were are most important assessments and would guide teacher decisions. RTI would be the process by which we make

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decisions to help students who did not master our most important learning objectives though added time and support.

Each of these concepts were always part of our overarching goal, but our communication to staff concerning that fact was not well executed. The end result is the appearance of multiple improvement endeavours taking place simultaneously and unconnected. Like the requirement for Instructional Theory Into Practice (ITIP) training that all teachers needed to have. While ITIP training is still required for all incoming staff and believed to be an essential training, it is not necessarily part of our PLC initiative. ITIP training and implementation stands alone as a characteristic employed by all master teachers. Essential learnings, CRTs, and RTIs, on the other hand, are all connected by one big idea, which is teacher collaboration.

Through The PLC process many new actions that have been requested of teachers to complete are under the PLC process: SMART goals, curriculum alignment, pacing guides, mission & vision statements, norms, etc. All of these activities are implemented to improve the collaboration and discussions that take place between teachers resulting in more student learning.

## **Conceptual Thinking: Using Experiences, Observations, and Facts to Innovate and Create**

### **Just the Facts?**

If you were asked whether it is better to possess the ability to recall a lot of information in the form of facts or the ability to process information to solve complex problems or innovate new ideas, which one would you choose? Which ability is more important to you in today's world? These are essential questions for educators to ask, because what we believe will become our practice, and our practice will impact every student that enters our classroom.

Most people would love to be a star Jeopardy! player, to be the person who can remember the name of famous authors or quote the date the Cubs last won a world series. Society has groomed in us a false impression this ability to recall information is a sign of intelligence. I use to love to play the original Trivial Pursuit game, a game I was fairly good at because it gave my competitors a false impression of me being smart due to my ability to recall trivial facts. There were several categories in the game I did well in because of my inherent interest in those topics. I loved to play with my peers, because it gave me a chance to show off and boast about how much I remembered about these topics, but it was a false sense of self-worth, and even though I knew this to be the case, I relished the undeserved adulation and praise from those I could beat.

Ken Jennings' 74 consecutive wins on Jeopardy! is amazing, and Ken is clearly a very bright man. He has won over three million dollars on games shows, so recalling facts has really worked well for him, but (big BUT) I wonder if his greatest accomplishments are actually in what he has done following his rise to fame. He has written three books, multiple columns for



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magazines, and invented games covering trivia that thousands of people play every week. I propose Ken's innovative ideas since his victories has added more value to our culture and society than his awe inspiring performance on Jeopardy!.

The fact of the matter is, almost everyone wants to be thought of as smart, like Ken Jennings. To be called smart is a compliment and enhances self-esteem, just as it did when I could beat my peers in a game of Trivial Pursuit, but I argue this feeling of intellectual superiority is an illusion if it is solely based on recall. It just happened that I knew a lot about the categories Parker Brothers/Hasbro felt worthy of including in the game. Ask me about the internal combustion engine, however, or even more recent versions of the game which included pop culture, and I get schooled by anyone who is up to date on the current society pages. Did I suddenly get dumber? Maybe, but I don't really think that's the proper conclusion. I believe it had more to do with the facts I valued over the others I did not.

Recallable facts are surface level bits of information which are valuable to know to an extent. But since the advent of Google, the value of retaining facts seems far less important than it once did, but even in the past facts could only take you so far. What really matters now, and what has always mattered when it comes to intelligence, is conceptual or critical thinking.

State assessments were intended to ensure that every school and every teacher was being held accountable for the performance of their students. The state legislature wants to use

2. Which is the most basic unit of matter?

- A. compound
- B. element
- C. mixture
- D. molecule

Google this question, I find the answers to be very interesting and disturbing at the same time. factmonster.com states it is an atom, but since an atom is not a choice it is clearly an element, since an atom is the smallest portion of an element. I don't like ambiguity or this question.

fear and competition to motivate teachers to perform at high levels, believing this will result in a higher quality of education for our children. The problem with this philosophy is that it ignores best assessment practices, and takes the focus off what truly has the power to improve student achievement. Which is highly effective instruction which results in student learning. Learning should always be the focus and assessment should be used to guide it.

While some state assessments do a good job of asking students to interpret data and to make predictions based off of displayed values, the majority of state assessment questions are simply asking students to recall facts (trivia), and this ability, as I indicated above, is over emphasised. Take for example this test question pulled from Nebraska's [8th grade science practice test](#), it is simple recall. If you also look at the [8th grade science table of specification](#) page, you will get a clear picture of

how the state valued [science Depth of Knowledge \(DOK\)](#) when asking students about what should be the state's most important learning objectives. If that's not the case, why?

According to the table of specifications there were no DOK 4 questions, which are the questions that would require the deepest level of conceptual thinking, or according to the state, questions that require the highest cognitive demand. There were 5 DOK 3 questions,

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which is good to have but too few in number. There were 27 DOK 2 questions and 42 DOK 1 questions, which seems to me to be a clear indication that the state, via its assessment makeup, encourages surface level knowledge over conceptual thinking... doesn't it?

Highly effective teachers understand we first decide what the students need to know and be able to do, then design the tool by which we measure student mastery of that learning objective via formative assessment or CRT. Master teachers do this so they can design lessons which will enable the student to master the objective; thus, successfully demonstrate mastery on the assessment. The state test indicates the state does not value conceptual learning, if this is the assessment that we will use to judge teacher/school quality. There is really no other position one can take, since the state test is dominated by surface level knowledge questions and completely absent of questions that require the highest level of cognitive demand.

Since the state tests are absent of conceptual thinking, we must locally ensure we do and assess students in a manner which requires them to demonstrate conceptual thinking, and teach to ensure they can. We cannot locally underestimate the need to prepare our students to perform at high levels and we cannot honestly confirm students have mastered an essential learning objective without the student demonstrating the ability to use the learnings in an innovative way. This is not an easy task and will take months of work to accomplish, but our ultimate goal is to create formative assessments which show us how well our students understand our essential learning objectives conceptually.

Understanding the value of facts is an important element when designing instruction for students. While it may seem that my position is one where I request we don't teach facts, this is actually not the case at all. I recognize it is important for students to have certain facts and information mastered for them to think at a higher level. Certain information is absolutely necessary for us to grasp larger concepts, which is why it is so important to [unpack the power standards](#)/essential learnings, so we know students know what they need to know before engaging in conceptual thinking activities (that's a lot of knowing). Facts are important, but we must understand that facts are bits of information that help us better understand larger concepts, solve problems, or create new ideas, which is exponentially more important.

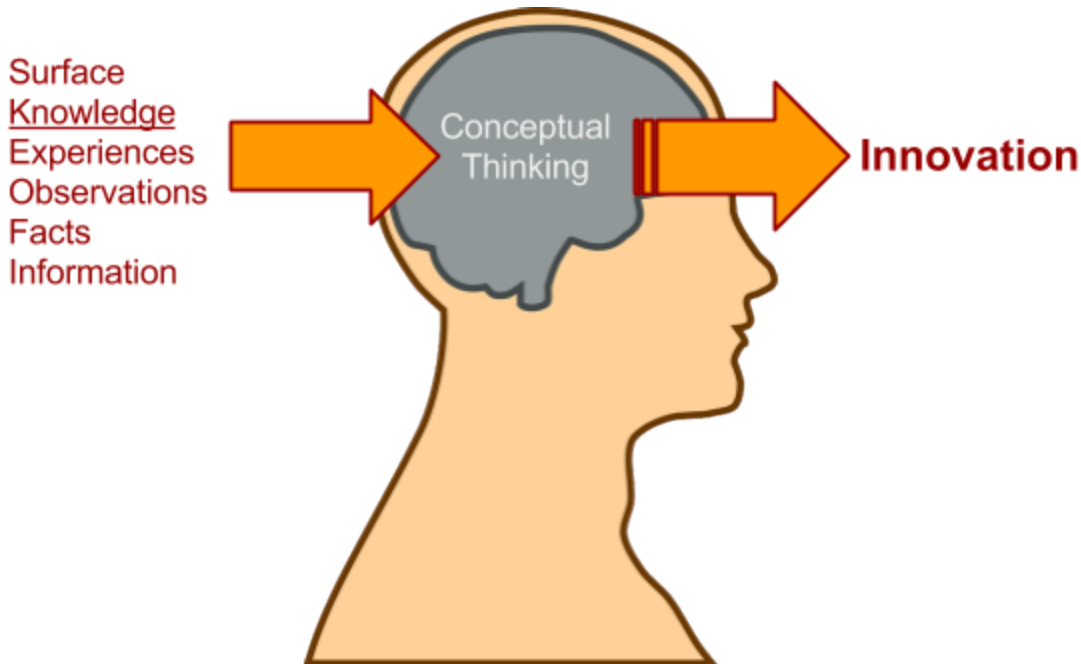
I recognize it would be very difficult and inefficient to design every lesson plan and formative assessment to include DOK 4 level questions; therefore, many formative assessments will be focused on determining what surface level knowledge our students possess, but if all of our formative assessments look that way, we are in error and need to refine our assessments to correct them; which, will require us to also correct our lesson plans, since they are designed to enable students to demonstrate mastery on our assessments. Once we have our assessments and lessons designed in a manner to measure our students critical thinking skills we are well on our way to producing a highly educated student, but do all learning objectives need to be mastered at the same level or depth? In short, no.



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There is no place for cramming mills, for test-driven surface instruction, for enquiry schools pushing thinking skill training - for Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind, the tyrant teacher in *Hard Times* described as 'a cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts'. Instead, what is needed is a balance between surface knowledge and deeper processes, leading to conceptual understanding. The choice of the classroom instruction and learning activities to maximize these outcomes are hallmarks of quality teaching (Kennedy, 2010).

## Are All Learning Objectives Created Equal?

Not all learning objectives are equal in importance. Two years ago we introduced the [target and offset target to staff](#). The goal was to work through our curriculum/state standards and identify the learning objectives that we believed to be most essential for our students to master. We went through a process of We described those most important learning objectives as essential learnings, and once they were identified we were to consider them our power standards, appropriately placing them on a higher level of importance over other state or local standards. The power standards were placed in the center of our target, and we committed to spending more time and providing more support to these learning targets since we believed they were the most important. Other learning objectives of lesser importance were then placed in the next two rings of our target. Learning objectives we believed were good to know and be able to do were placed in the second ring, while learning objectives we felt were worth knowing were placed in the third ring. And many learning objectives were completely left off or out.

We did this at this time to ensure that our instruction was focused. We had read a great deal of research indicating students in the United States are introduced a huge number of curricular objectives, and struggled to demonstrate mastery on any of them. We also found many classrooms were using the textbooks as their curriculum. Textbooks that were developed to sell to as many school districts in as many states as possible, meaning they needed to

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include as much as possible so not to offend a teacher or teachers' favorite topics. This resulted in teachers working hard to cover all the material before the end of the year, rather than focusing instruction on important learning objectives and teaching it until all the students mastered the material and then moving on. Students were covering a lot of content, and mastering little of it, especially our slower learners, who inherently need the most support. This created a "Jack of all trades master of none" student body. Eliminating this mile wide curriculum was a critical first step in our process.

What we did not discuss at that time was depth of understanding. We did a great job of discussing with our peers what was most important and who should teach it, but we did not necessarily do a good job, District wide, of discussing the depth of understanding each student should have concerning each learning objective. If not all learning objectives are equal, then the depth to which we cover them should not be equal. I believe it is clear that once an essential learning objective is placed in the center of the target, not only do we provide greater time and support to the mastery of that learning objective, we also teach and assess that objective at a deep level.

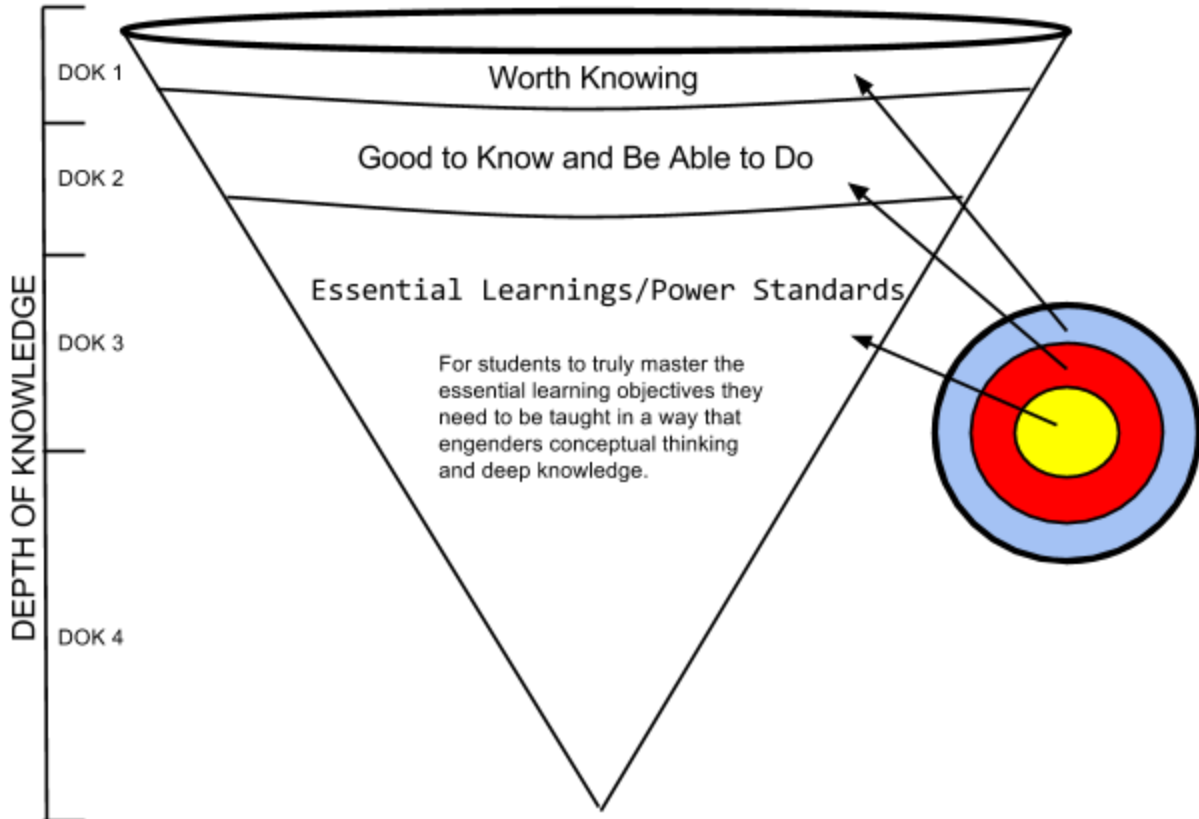
If we were to take our target and tip it on its side we would see it is not flat; rather, it is cone shaped. As essential learning objectives move closer to the center of our target, we would find our need to teach and assess that learning objective at deeper and deeper levels, while the learning objectives in the outer rings of our target would require us to only teach the objective at a surface level.

## **Knowledge Has no Real Power Without the Ability to Wield it in an Innovative Way**

While I would love to have my intellectual cannon filled to the muzzle with facts, I recognize that without the ability to use that factual knowledge in an innovative way, I lack the true intelligence. Great minds have the ability to solve problems, create new ideas, and generate novel approaches to all kinds of situations. I hope to have this ability, I also hope that we engender this ability in all of our students, if we do not, I question our value as a system and profession.

I have always believed teachers have the ability, more so than any other profession, to change the world in a positive way, but this can only be accomplished if those whom we have been given the charge to educate have the capacity to think conceptually. Without the ability to think conceptually, the world becomes a place of limited options and opportunities; however, a mind which has the capacity to think conceptually has the power and ability to create limitless opportunities for themselves and for everyone else.

### Our Target Tipped Sideways



Essential learning objectives need to first be identified and then taught and conceptualized at DOK levels 3 & 4 for mastery to be achieved; thus, eliminating a mile wide inch deep approach to instruction. *(Also see Bloom's taxonomy as a reference for instructional depth.)*

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