

## ***Foreword from The Handbook for SMART School Teams by Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill***

# **Foreword**

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Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*

Nearly two decades have passed since the National Commission on Excellence in Education argued in “Nation at Risk” that national security was in peril because of substandard education in the nation’s public schools. The Commission made frequent references to decline, deficiencies, threats, risks, afflictions, and plight. It made no attempt to be subtle in offering its reason why foreign competitors were overtaking American business and industry: the failure of public education. The foundations of society were being eroded, the American way of life was in peril, and our future as a nation was in question – all because of bad teaching going on in American schools.

The attempts to reform American education have continued almost unabated ever since. For some reason, the unprecedented economic boom enjoyed by the United States in the mid to late 1990s offered no respite. After all, if economic downturns could be traced to poor performance in schools, as “Nation at Risk” suggested, schools should get much of the credit for rising economic prosperity. Oddly, the correlation between the economy and school performance seemed to disappear when things were going well. In fact, during this period of prosperity, state legislatures around the nation continued to rail against public schools, demanding higher standards and greater accountability.

An unstated, but unmistakable, premise of this collective call for accountability in K-12 education was that schools and teachers needed to be awakened from their lethargy by threats of dire consequences. Educators have been told that they must improve results or their student will be sent to other schools, the state will take over their school, or the school will be closed. The assumption behind this threatening posture seems to be that schools could get better results if educators were simply willing to demonstrate greater commitment or to put forth more effort.

Some educators have responded to these attacks by launching their own counteroffensive. Any attempt to hold schools accountable for students achieving academic standards elicits knee-jerk reactions of opposition. States have no business imposing on local control. Standards rob teachers of their creativity and the ability to individualize instruction. *Drill and kill* has sucked all the joy out of learning.

Assessments are invalid or discriminatory. The assumption here seems to be that if educators will be sufficiently oppositional, state standards and testing will disappear.

*The Handbook for SMART Schools Teams* is based on a different set of assumptions. Authors Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neill recognize and honor the commitment and effort being demonstrated by our nation’s teachers. They regard teachers with respect and empathy rather than disdain. They understand that improving student achievement is not a function of scaring teachers into caring, but rather that it is a function of helping teachers acquire the knowledge and skills to grow.

But if Conzemius and O’Neill will not be included among those who denigrate educators, neither will they be among those who call for an end to student assessment and school accountability. They embrace rather than reject different forms of achievement data and offer strategies to help teachers work collaboratively to use that data as an engine for continuous improvement.

When we wrote *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, we argued that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement was helping educators develop their capacity to function as professional learning communities. We called for schools in which teachers worked together in collaborative teams that engaged in collective inquiry on the big questions of teaching and learning. We envisioned teachers participating in action research and working together in continuous cycles of analyzing examples of student work or student achievement data, identifying areas for improvement, developing strategies to bring about the improvement, supporting each other as they implemented the strategies in their respective classrooms, gathering new information and data resulting from the improvement initiative, analyzing that information and data to see what worked, and then starting the process all over again.

*The Handbook for SMART School Teams* gives teachers specific tools and strategies to do exactly what we proposed. It is a rich resource for those who continue to believe that the best way to improve schools is to develop the people within them. Conzemius and O’Neill not only call for the focus, reflection, collaboration, and leadership capacity that characterize SMART schools, but they also offer extremely useful tools for getting the job done in the real world of schools. Their work makes a valuable contribution to the literature on school improvement. More importantly, their ideas and suggestions will resonate with grateful teachers and administrators.

Authors Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neill are founders of QLD Learning, LLC. For more information or to purchase *The Handbook for SMART School Teams* visit their web site at [www.QLDLearning.com](http://www.QLDLearning.com).