

**Patterns of Practice: Ten
Decision Points from Arch
Ford ESC's Study of High
VAM Teachers in 2025**

Dr. JULIE WORKMAN

TEACHER CENTER COORDINATOR

Dedicated to supporting educators, strengthening instruction,
and creating positive learning experiences for **ALL** students
across the Arch Ford region.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE



TEACHER 3RD – 7TH GRADE

Taught 3rd – 7th grade students, building foundations, sparking curiosity, and inspiring a love for learning.



ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

Supported school operations, teachers, and students to create safe, efficient, and effective schools.



PRINCIPAL

Led with vision and heart to foster strong instruction, culture, and student achievement.



LITERACY COACH

Partnered with teachers to strengthen literacy instruction and improve student outcomes.



CO-OP SPECIALIST

Focused on supporting novice teachers and leaders through coaching, resources, and professional learning.



ADJUNCT PROFESSOR & RESEARCHER

Advances educational practice through teaching future educators and conducting research that drives impact.



COLLABORATION

Working together to achieve more.



FOCUS

Focused on what matters most—student success.



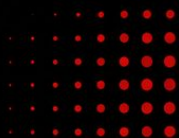
GROWTH

Committed to continuous learning and improvement.



IMPACT

Making a lasting difference in the lives of students and educators.





UNIVERSITY OF
CENTRAL
ARKANSAS™

Dr. DONNA WAKE

PROFESSOR

Ph.D., Temple University | Go Owls! 

Dedicated to preparing and supporting educators, advancing innovative teaching and learning, and using research to make a meaningful **impact** in classrooms and communities.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY & IMPACT



TEACHER 7TH GRADE ELA

Taught English Language Arts in 7th grade, inspiring a love of learning and critical thinking.



TEACHER EDUCATOR LA SALLE UNIVERSITY

Taught and mentored future educators at the undergraduate and graduate levels in Philadelphia, PA.



PROFESSOR UNIVERSITY OF THE OZARKS

Began my faculty journey in a beautiful learning community.



PROFESSOR UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

Now proud to serve as a professor at UCA in Conway, AR.



SCHOLAR

- Teacher Education
- Technology Integration
- Qualitative & Arts-Based Research



LEADERSHIP

- Assessment
- Accreditation
- Faculty Development
- Doctoral Mentoring



COLLABORATION

Building meaningful relationships to support educators and learners.



INNOVATION

Embracing technology and new ideas to enhance teaching and learning.



SCHOLARSHIP

Engaging in research that informs practice and advances the education profession.



MENTORSHIP

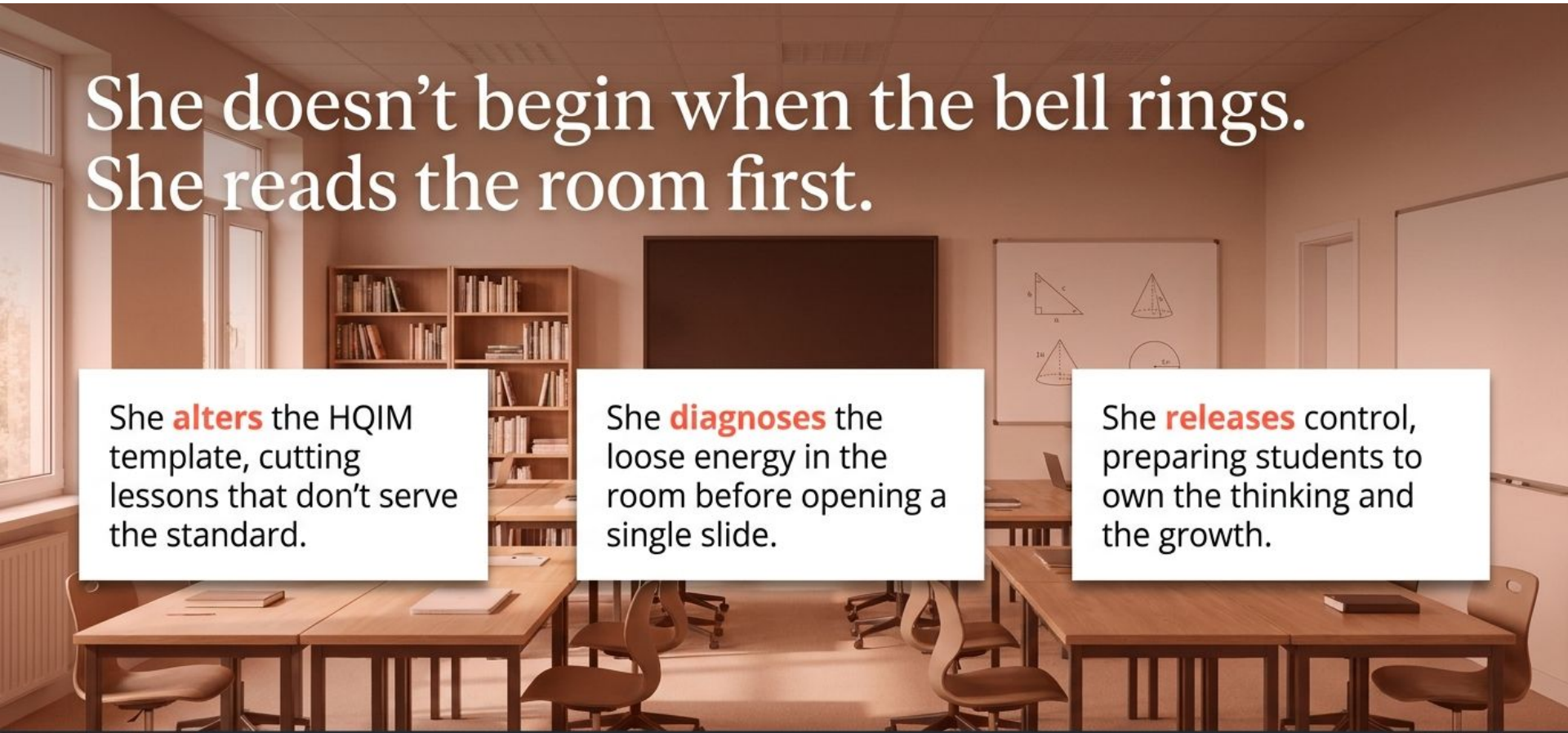
Supporting the growth of future educators and colleagues.



IMPACT

Working every day to make a positive difference in the lives of students and communities.





She doesn't begin when the bell rings. She reads the room first.

She **alters** the HQIM template, cutting lessons that don't serve the standard.

She **diagnoses** the loose energy in the room before opening a single slide.

She **releases** control, preparing students to own the thinking and the growth.

Her VAM score is consistently in the 90's. This isn't accidental. It is intentionality as practice.

The Study Design

Highest VAM scores
in the region for 2025

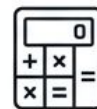
**Top 10 Teachers
in Each Area**



Composite



ELA



Math



Science

**Mixed Methods
Case Study**

14

in-depth interviews across all subject areas
in a variety of large and very small districts.

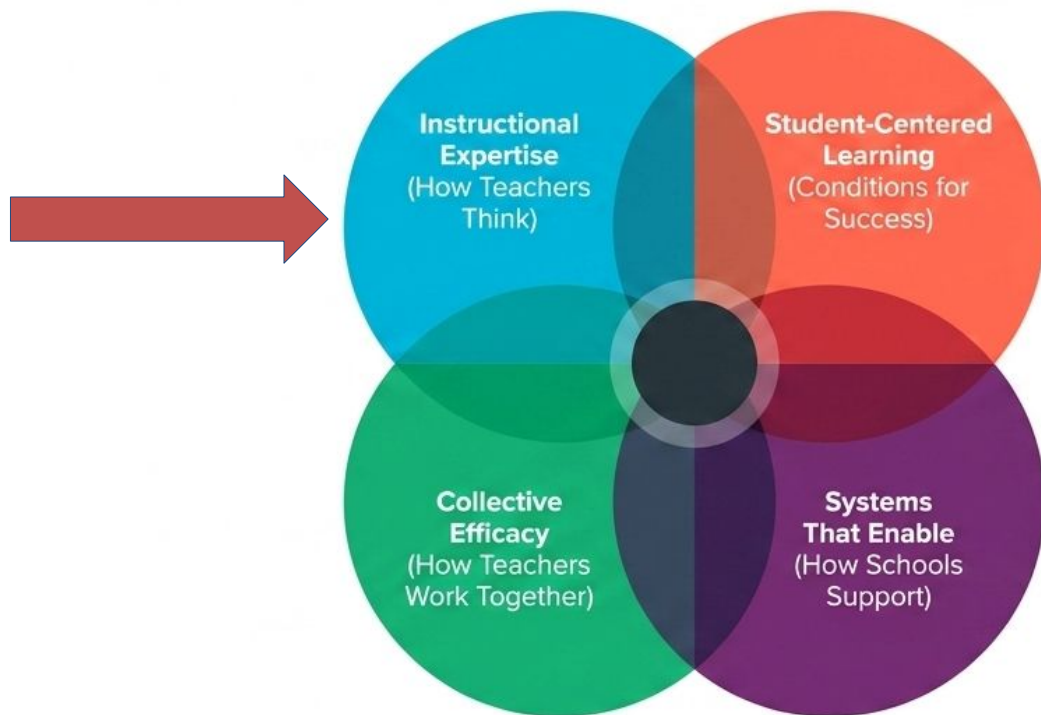
Participant Demographics

- Participants were from a variety of district sizes
 - *Range of School Size was 317 - 1568.*
- Ten of the fourteen interviewed taught third grade - the other 4 were science or math (Elementary and HS)
- Average Years of Experience = 21
 - *Range of Experience was from 12 to 37 years*
- Average Free/Reduced Lunch Rate = 62%
 - *Range of FRL was 46 - 100%*

Participant Demographics

- Average VAM Score of Participants
 - Composite: 91
 - ELA: 93
 - Math: 89
 - Science: 90

The Four Clusters of High-Growth Practice



Decision Point

I:

Intentionality as Practice, not

The decision-making that produces growth happens in the hours before, and even while doing, any single class period.

Preparation
(Ready to execute)



Presence
(Diagnosing the room)

Actively sensing and adapting to the learning environment in real-time.

Compliance
(Following the guide)



Judgment
(Modifying for needs)

Making professional adjustments based on student responses and data.

Coverage
(Getting through it)



Command
(Moving around inside it)

Navigating and leveraging content with deep understanding and flexibility.

Decision Point 2: Know the Content Deeply, Not Just Teaching it

Command (Adaptive Expertise)

-  Distinguish accurate delivery from adaptive expertise
-  Build continuous content knowledge (concepts, misconceptions, connections)
-  Recognize flexibility from sustained immersion
-  Understand intervention requires depth (diagnosing, reteaching)
-  Know standards architecture deeply
-  Teach across disciplinary boundaries
-  Evaluate curriculum critically, not mechanically
-  Hold long-term learning trajectory in view
-  Treat content learning as ongoing professional work
-  Recognize autonomy makes expertise usable

“

“I know third grade. And I don't say things like this a lot, but I know that I know it. Some of it just comes with experience.”

“It took probably four years before I felt very comfortable. The first two years of physical science were rough—I spent weekends watching videos just to get the basics.”

“My first 10 years of teaching, I don't want to say was just surviving... Now I segregate everything. I analyze the standard before I give the assessment.”

“I went to a workshop with Jacob Sisson two or three years ago on questioning techniques, and it changed my classroom. I went from surface-level understanding to follow-up questions.”

“The moment I quit learning is probably the time I need to say it's time to go home.”

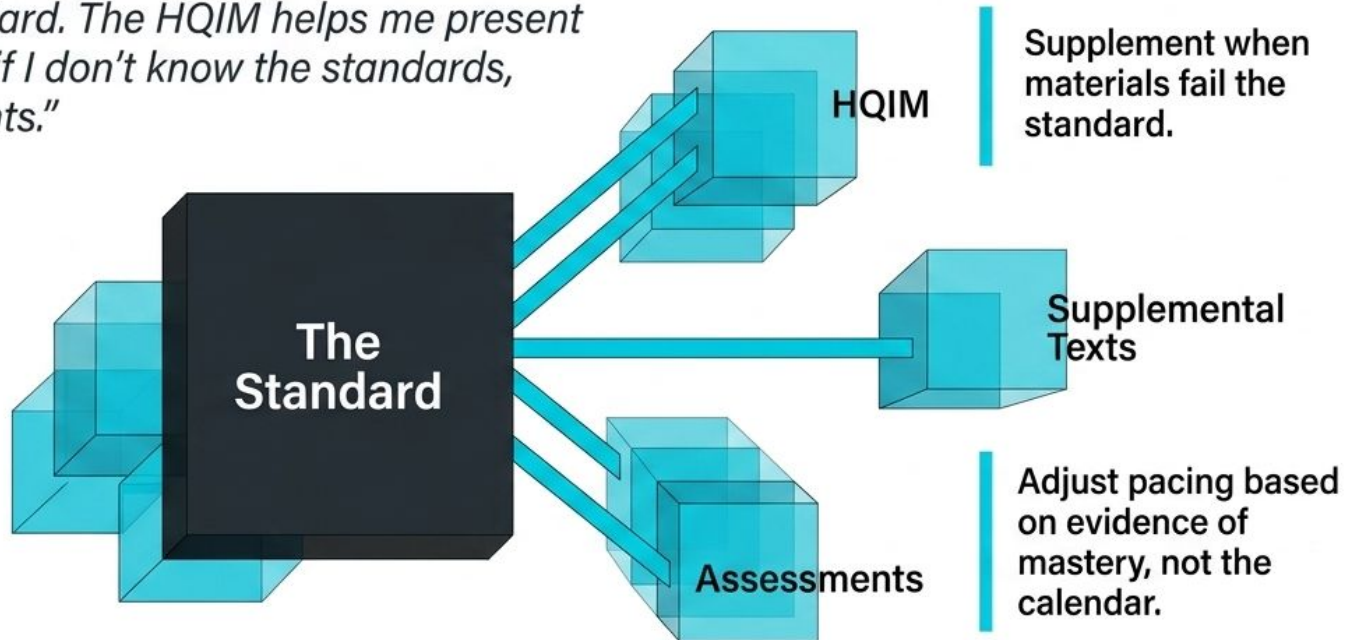
These teachers understand that high-quality curriculum alone does not produce high-quality instruction. Their deep content knowledge allows them to recognize misconceptions, fill gaps, make connections, and adapt instruction in ways that help students truly understand the material. They view expertise as something that is continually developed and refined throughout their careers.

Decision Point 3: Curriculum as a Starting Point, not the End

"I start with the standard. The HQIM helps me present those standards, but if I don't know the standards, I can't help my students."

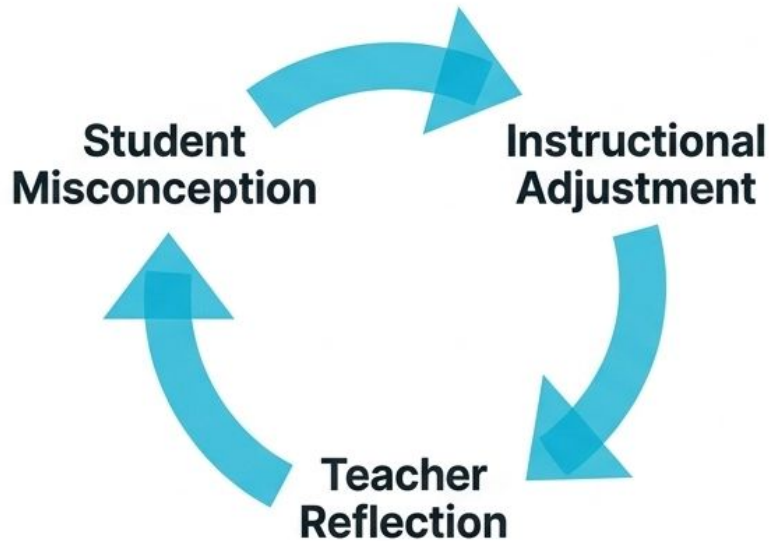
Unpack the specific cognitive demand of the standard.

Sequence intentionally to build prerequisite skills.



Decision Point 4: Use Assessment to Improve Instruction, Not Just Measure Learning

"If I see a common misconception across all the work I'm grading—that's on me."



Locus of Accountability: Use error patterns to adjust instruction, not assign blame.

Define Mastery First: Identify the exact evidence required before launching the unit.

Personal Data Ownership: Set professional goals based on personal instructional data gaps.

Which Resonates with You the Most?

Choose the decision point that feels most important for your next instructional move.

1

Decision Point 1

Intentionality as Practice, Not Performance

2

Decision Point 2

Knowing the Content Deeply, Not Just Teaching It Correctly

3

Decision Point 3

Curriculum as a Starting Point, Not The End

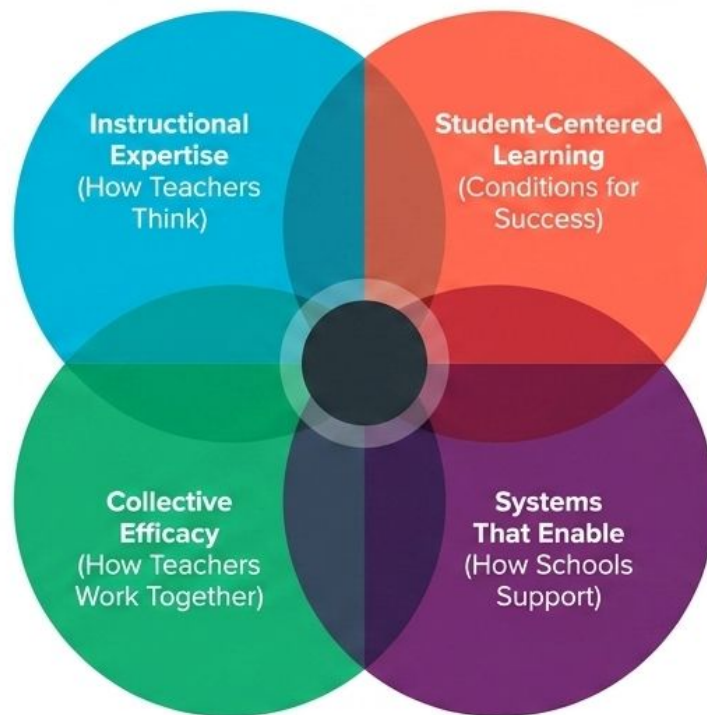
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Decision Point 4

Use Assessment to Improve Instruction, Not Just Measure Learning

Turn & Talk: What evidence from your own practice makes you choose it?

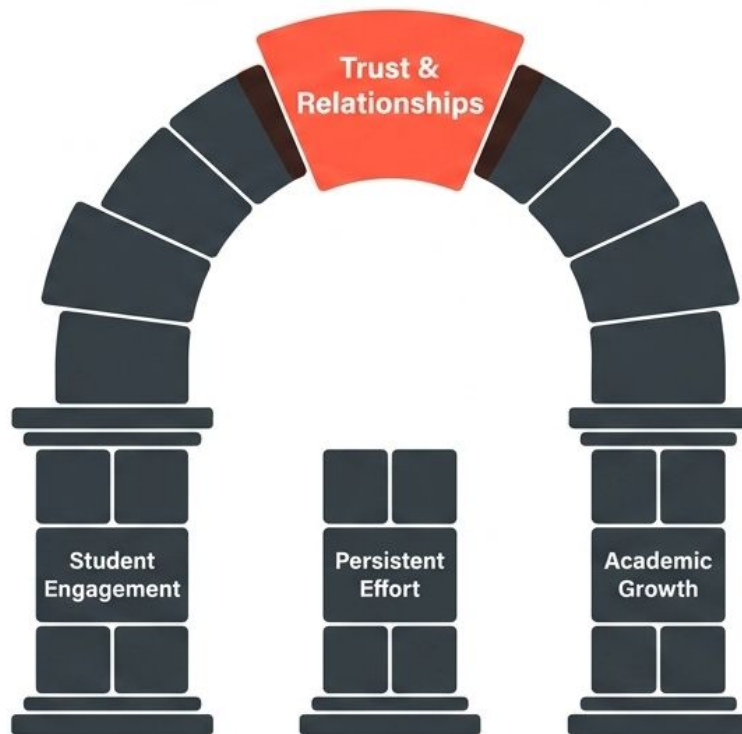
The Four Clusters of High-Growth Practice



Decision Point 5: Relationships are Load-bearing, Not Decorative

"I have strong relationships with students. I think that's part of the success - the secret sauce."

Model growth mindset by valuing mistakes publicly.

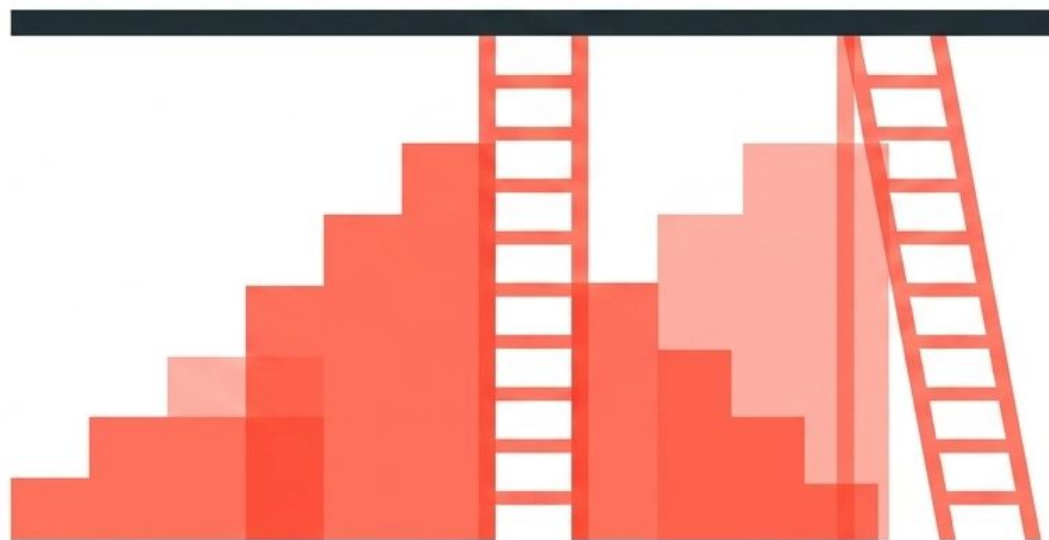


Gauge emotional readiness before launching content.

Help students connect academic effort to personal, meaningful lives.

Decision Point 6: High Expectations without a Lowered Floor

The Standard / High Expectation



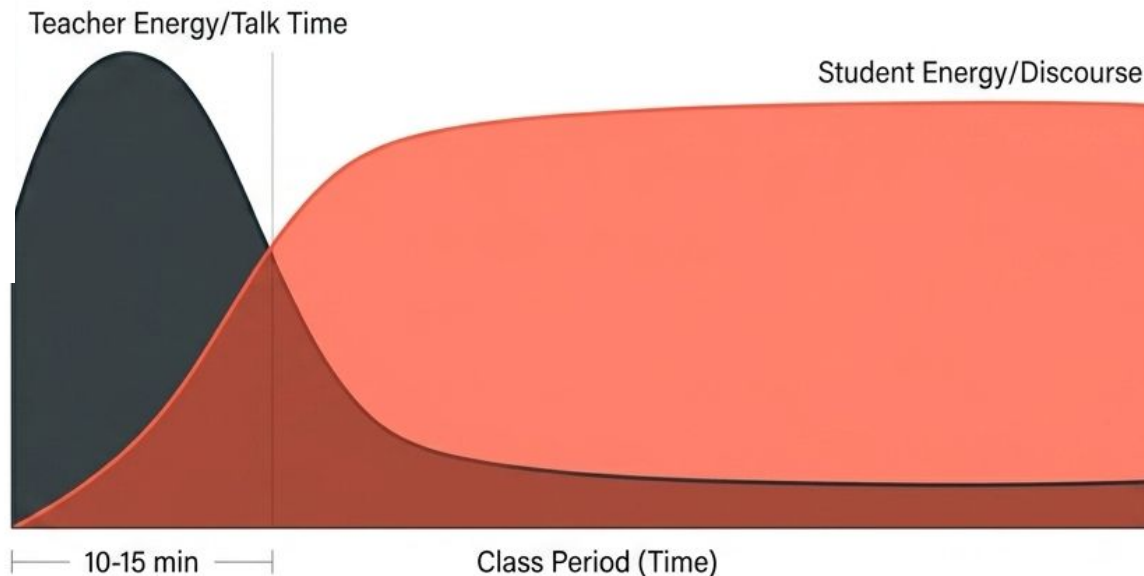
"All of my students can learn... They're going to need different supports. But I'm going to still expect you to do it."

- Flexible grouping based on recent data, not fixed ability.
- Hold the floor for students with IEPs, EL status, and poverty.
- Celebrate granular, incremental growth publicly.

The Scaffold / Flexible Floor

Decision Point 7: Academic language as access, not an add on.

*Students leave class tired,
not the teacher. The
asymmetry is the goal.*



"Student discourse is like a must, y'all, a must."

Stillness is a pedagogical problem, not a management preference.

The reasoning is the authority in the room, not the teacher.

Peer learning is legitimate pedagogy.

Decision Point 8: Cognitive Load on Students, Not Teachers

Shift from transmission to construction. Students who construct knowledge retain it.

Design conditions for construction. The teacher's job is to design conditions for student thinking and work, not to be the primary source of information.

Student discourse and physical engagement are non-negotiable. Build regular opportunities for explanation, challenge, and active participation.

The teacher is not the authority; reasoning is. Foster peer learning and student data ownership for motivation.

These teachers create classrooms where students are active participants, leading to greater engagement, independence, and learning.

Which Resonates with You the Most?

Choose the decision point that feels most important for your next instructional move.

5

Decision Point 5

**Make Relationships
Load-Bearing, Not Decorative**

6

Decision Point 6

**High Expectations Without a
Lowered Floor**

7

Decision Point 7

**Academic Language as Access,
Not Add-On**

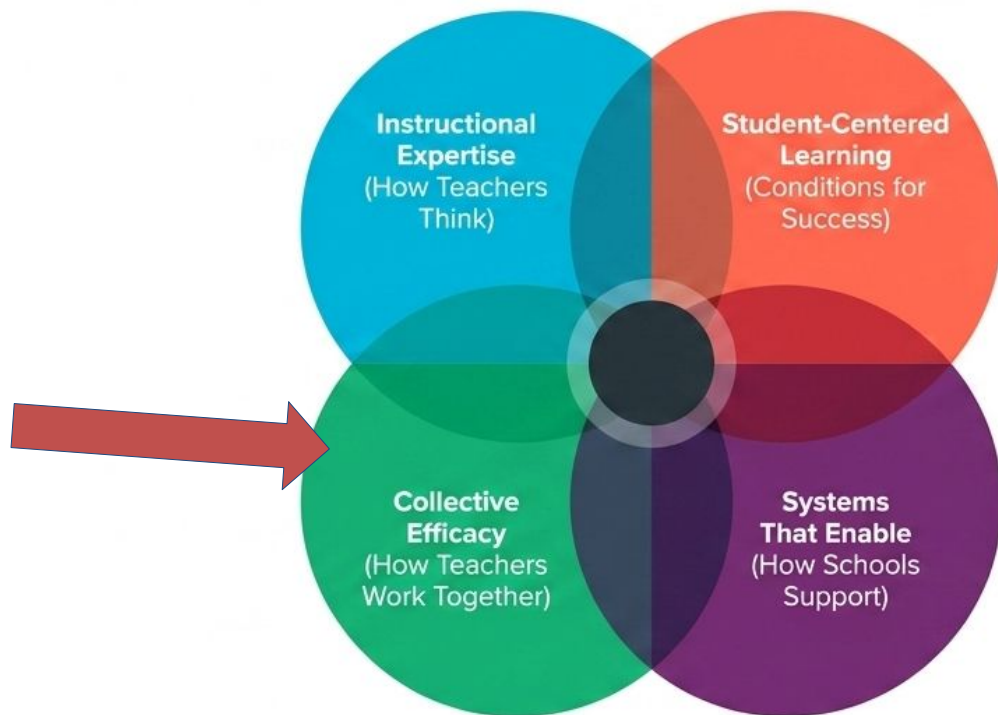
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Decision Point 8

**Cognitive Load on Students, Not
Teachers**

Turn & Talk: What evidence from your own practice makes you choose it?

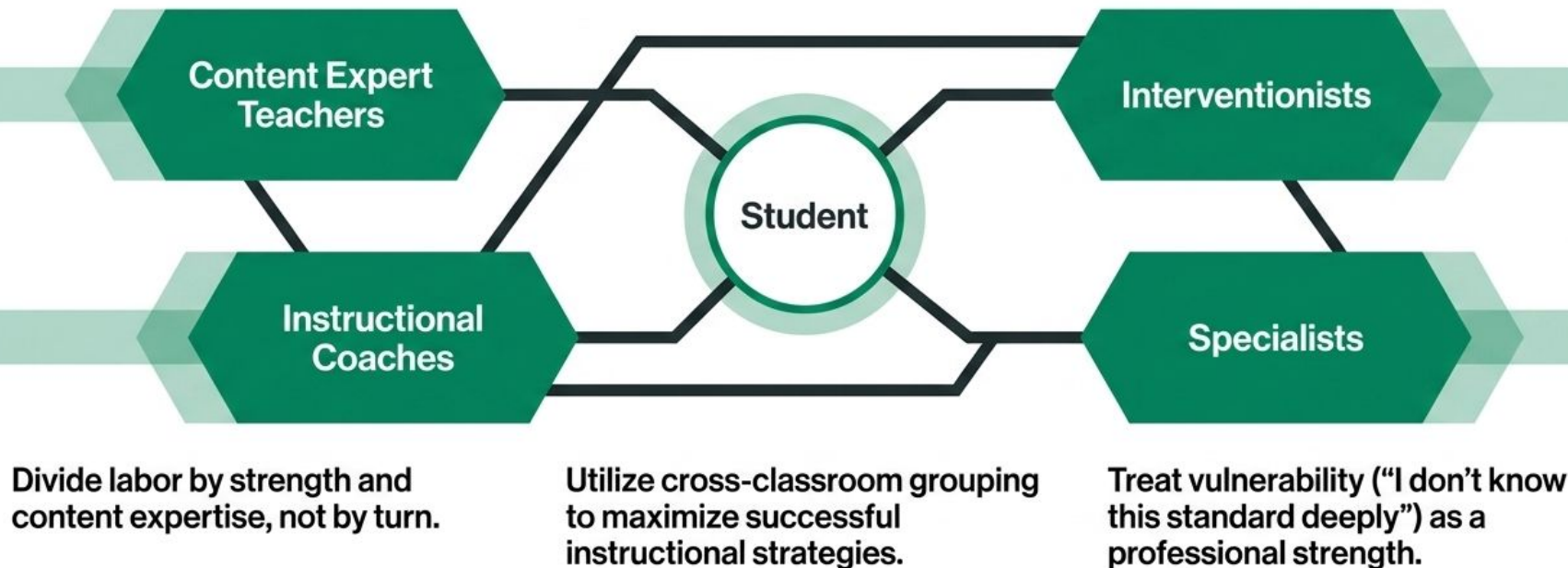
The Four Clusters of High-Growth Practice



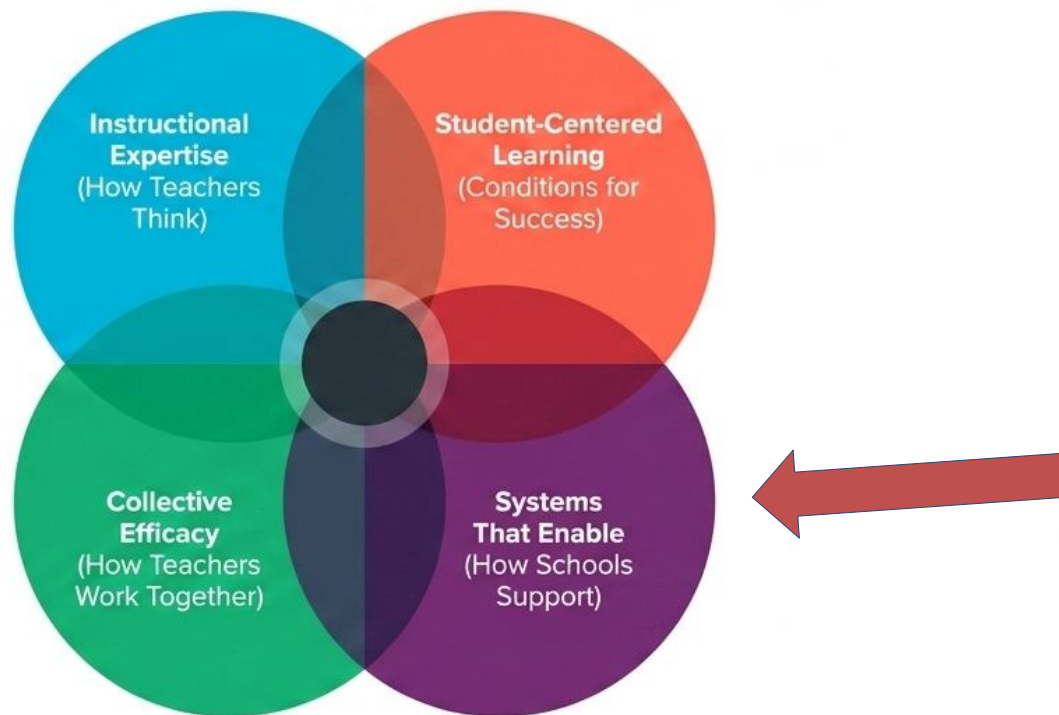
Decision Point 9: Teaching as Collective Responsibility, Not Classroom Isolation

Classroom Isolation → Shared Expertise

“In my group, we each play a role. I take on the math subject, my colleague takes on literacy...”

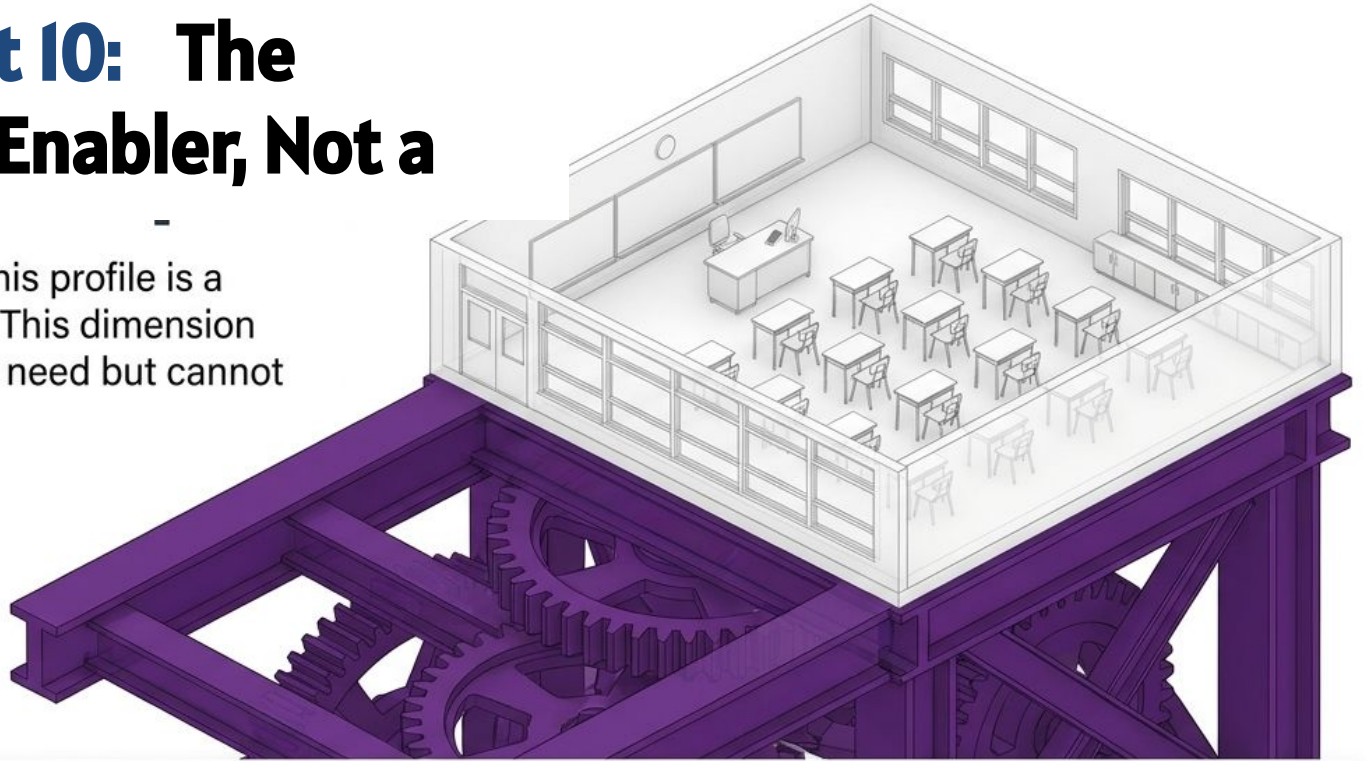


The Four Clusters of High-Growth Practice



Decision Point 10: The System as an Enabler, Not a Backdrop

Every other decision in this profile is a choice a teacher makes. This dimension describes what teachers need but cannot provide for themselves.



“Teachers who resist taking full credit are making an accuracy claim, not performing humility.”

The Infrastructure of Excellence

What looks like Individual Initiative...	...Actually requires Structural Conditions.
Shared Practice 	Requires Protected Collaborative Planning Time
Deep Data Analysis 	Requires Half-Day Sessions with Sub Coverage
Simultaneous Small Groups 	Requires Strategic Aide Scheduling
Instructional Autonomy 	Requires Administrative Trust and Risk-Taking

“Our admin is fabulous—they give us a half day, put subs in our rooms, and we analyze all the data together.”

Questions?

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