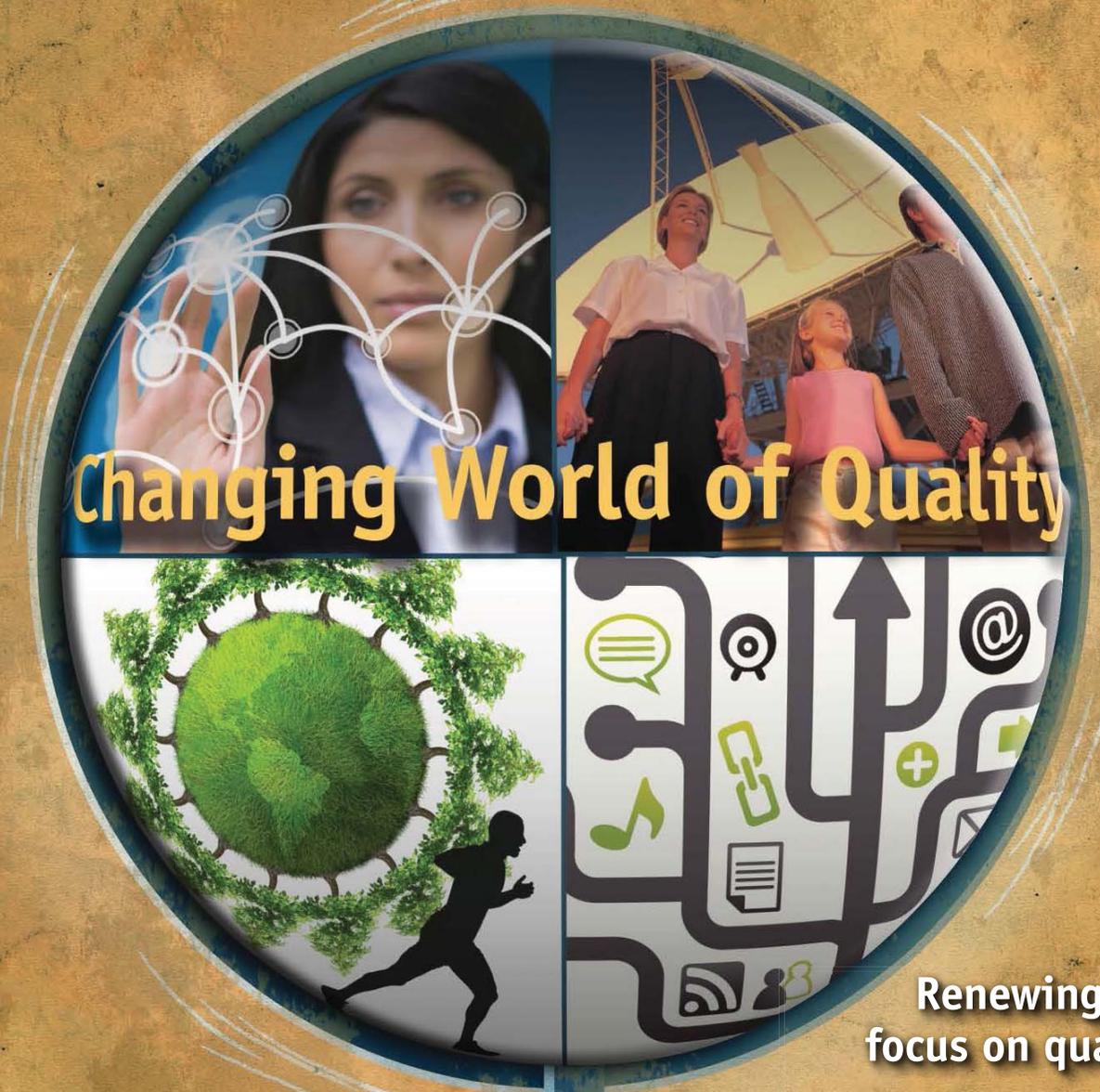


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Changing World of Quality

**Renewing the
focus on quality**

**Dealing with quality
in the midst of Flux**

**Finding new ways to
think about quality**

This excerpt from the 10th anniversary edition of the classic book on how to improve the education system introduces the first of 10 root causes that undermine success.

Permission to Forget

Lee Jenkins

Students learn in first grade that they have permission to forget much of what their teachers are teaching. How do they learn this? Six-year-olds learn that they have permission to forget through the Friday spelling tests.

The process is well known. New spelling words are assigned on Monday, various learning activities transpire Tuesday through Thursday, cramming takes place on Thursday evening, and a test is given on Friday. Numerous words spelled correctly on Friday are forgotten on Saturday. In fact, one teacher told me she gave the same spelling test two hours later and was shocked to find out how much was already forgotten.

I received this email in December 2012, two weeks after a school workshop in Paducah, KY: "A first grade teacher at St. Mary, who is now using the No Permission to Forget strategies, told the class that they were going to have five spelling words from last month's list on this week's test. Immediately, the kids start talking at once saying, 'That's not fair, that's old stuff. We already forgot those words.' Well, the teacher said, 'We are not going to forget them this time.' One little boy said, 'Do you mean to tell us that we have to know them, like, forever?'"

It is not only children who need to change their mind on forgetting. Dave Mundy, assistant superintendent of Westfield Washington Indiana schools wrote, "*Permission to Forget* has changed my perspective on instruction and administrative leadership, especially with the incoming Common Core Standards and the increased focus on a student's ability to build on previous knowledge. This focus on student comprehension and retention of information is right on track with the future of American education."

Any educational institution that is organized to permit cramming is unintentionally giving students permission to forget. Likewise, any initiative that purports to significantly improve education must take cramming out of the equation. This has been accomplished many times by implementing the strategies outlined in *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms*¹ and five teacher-authored books included in the "Continuous Improvement in the Classroom" series.² It must be recognized, however, that even without these books, many teachers figured out a classroom system to stop giving permission to forget during the year of their responsibility. So, these



students waited until summer to forget. This same permission to forget resides in all or nearly all U.S. schools. If this were not true, we would never be entertained with cartoons such as the one in Figure 1.1 by Lincoln Pierce.

Teachers certainly do not intentionally give this permission. As a former school administrator, I've interviewed hundreds of teacher applicants.

When asked, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" none ever said, "My professional goal is to help children with their short-term memory." Even though short-term memory is not the teacher's aspiration, it becomes the students' cycle—cram, receive a grade, forget, cram, receive a grade, forget.

I don't want to discount the importance of short-term memory. It does come in handy. For example, because of my career of writing and speaking, I spend considerable time in hotels. On more than one occasion I have checked in late, gone to my speaking engagement the next day, and returned to the hotel only to have forgotten which room is mine. Invariably, when my short-term memory fails me, there are five people in line to register and I waste time waiting for somebody to inform me of my room number. So, short-term memory has a place; it is not, however, the purpose of formal schooling.

Evidence of Permission to Forget Abounds

The evidence that permission to forget is embedded into American education comes from many sources.

- Grade 1-8 math textbooks normally set aside the first one-third of the pages for reteaching of the prior years' content. It is assumed students forget.
- I often ask educators in my seminars what percentage of the school year is spent teaching content students should know prior to entering their course. Results from more than 3,000 teachers show that 21 percent say they spend between zero and 20 percent of the year in review. Sixty-one percent of the teachers report spending 21 percent to 40 percent of the year

Figure 1.1



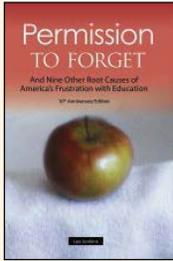
Permission to forget.
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in review, and 28 percent of the teachers say they spend more than 40 percent of the year in review. The overall average of all 3,000 teachers is 33 percent of the year spent in review.

- A major school district in a resort town had a large dispute over when to start the new school year. The educators desired mid-August, and the business community advocated the Tuesday after Labor Day. When the educators were asked why starting mid-August was important, they replied that finishing the semester before Christmas was the issue. Then they were asked why finishing the semester before Christmas vacation was important. Educators replied that if finals are given before vacation, students perform much better than if finals are given after vacation. It seems that some educators don't blush when confronted with the fact that students don't even remember for two weeks what they are taught. As I said in the preface, this book is not about bashing educators. Permission to forget has been implemented for so many decades that it is ingrained in the thinking of educators; it is not given a second thought.

David Jaffee describes well the process, begun in first grade spelling, as it is carried out at the university level. "When we tell students to study for the exam or, more to the point, to study so they can do well on the exam, we powerfully reinforce that way of thinking. ... On the one hand, we tell students to value learning for learning's sake; on the other, we tell students they'd better know this or that, or they'd better take notes, or they'd better read the book, because it will be on the next exam; if they don't do these things,

Permission to Forget, Tenth Anniversary Edition



Author: Lee Jenkins

Abstract: This book describes 10 decades of wasteful practices buried deep within U.S. schools. Today's educators did not invent these wasteful practices; they inherited them. Five of the root causes involve wasting time, and five involve

wasting student potential. Ten years ago the first edition of *Permission to Forget* was published, and now this landmark anniversary edition is available. Its legacy of improvement is demonstrated by report after report from educators

describing what happens in schools when these root causes are removed. Root cause removal is free, unlike legislated reforms. Teachers, principals, and district superintendents must collaborate to remove these root causes—none of these groups can make this happen alone; only together can teams of educators lead the removal of these 10 wasteful practices and provide America the education it desires.

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they will pay the price in academic failure. This communicates to students that the process of intellectual inquiry, academic exploration, and acquiring knowledge is a purely instrumental activity—designed to ensure success on the next assessment.³ Students are taught to ask, “Will this be on the test?”

“This dysfunctional system reaches its zenith,” Jaffee continues, “with the cumulative ‘final’ exam. We even go so far as to commemorate this sacred academic ritual by setting aside a specially designated ‘exam week’ at the end of each term. This collective exercise in sadism encourages students to cram everything that they think they need to ‘know’ (temporarily for the exam) into their brains, deprive themselves of sleep and leisure activities, complete (or more likely finally start) term papers, and memorize mounds of information.”³

- A sixth grade student, his father, and his teacher are having a conference. Teacher says, “Dad, your son needs to learn his times tables.” Dad, looking over at son, says, “I thought we did this last year.” Son replies, “I didn’t know you meant learn them like *that*.”
- A first-grader brings home his spelling words with a couple of misspelled words. Mom states, “I see you did pretty well, but you missed two words. Let’s work on the words you missed.” Son replies, “No, Mom, I don’t want to.” “Why not?” Mom asks. “These are important words

that you misspelled.” “Well, Mom,” says son, “these words are never coming up again. I don’t need to know how to spell them.”

- California curriculum leaders had a great concept for organizing U.S. history content. It doesn’t work, but the concept is exemplary. Curriculum designers were attempting to overcome the problem of fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade U.S. history classes all starting with European exploration and ending about the time of the Civil War. The same content is taught three times. The proposed solution was to teach fifth grade up to the American Revolution, teach history from the U.S. Constitution to 1900 in the eighth grade, and continue up to the current time in the 11th grade. Why doesn’t the concept work? Students forget the prior taught history, so eighth and 11th grade teachers have little residue of knowledge on which to build.

In a 1998 *Kappan* article, “Seventeen Reasons Why Football is Better than High School,” Herb Childress wrote, “Students picked up enough information to pass the test, did their work well enough to get the grade, and then totally forgot whatever it can be said they had learned.”⁴

Ronald A. Wolk wrote, “I took two years of high school algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, and forgot most of it before the ink on my diploma was dry.”⁵

Edward Deci has researched this subject. He reported, "People employing tests to motivate learning are unwittingly defeating the desire to learn in those people they are attempting to help. ... It seems that when people learn with the expectation of being evaluated, they focus on memorizing facts, but they don't process the information as fully, so they don't grasp the concepts as well ... those who had learned expecting to be tested had forgotten much more. ... Evidently, they memorized the material for the test, and when the test was over, they pulled the plug and let it drain out."⁶

Students know their algebra II teacher will not demand that they remember the content they were taught last year in geometry. If there was any doubt in students' minds, it was erased when they were asked almost no questions about algebra I in geometry. Yes, some algebraic thinking is necessary in geometry, but there was no effort made to ensure students remembered all of algebra I while in geometry.

Implications of Permission to Forget

The instructional implications of no longer giving students permission to forget are obvious. The financial impact is huge. The cost to operate America's public schools is over \$3 billion per day. (*A Public Education Primer* reports the total cost for public schools in 2007–2008 as \$604 billion. This works out to \$3.35 billion per day.)⁷ Many propose adding 30 or more days per year of schooling. The cost for these additional 30 days would be \$100 billion per year. It is safe to assume that at least 30 days a year are currently devoted to rework because students have permission to forget. Eliminating permission to forget will come at a cost because staff development is not free. Staff development investments are slim, however, compared to adding 30 days of instruction.

In this volume I am not rewriting the details of *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms*, but will state a few of the basics. When permission to forget is denied, students are always assessed on long-term memory, never short-term memory. For example, students in eighth grade physical science are responsible for the information and performance content of seventh grade life science and sixth

grade earth science. All nongraded feedback and every graded evaluation draw from the entire previous year's content plus the current year's content. Students are informed in every grade that the expectations for their current grade are not going away. They need to file the knowledge away in their long-term memory because the content will come up over and over and over. Weekly assessments in science, in an example from Central City, NE, include five questions from the current course, four from prior science courses, and one question on the scientific method.

The power of removing permission to forget brings great confidence to teachers and students, as exemplified by Cecil County, MD, teacher Katie Ryan. She wrote, "Taking away 'permission to forget' has allowed me to narrow in on the essential skills and knowledge my students need to learn. There is no guessing anymore! The students and I are clear on the expectations from the very beginning. With everything teachers have to do on a daily basis, the L to J process (the data/formative assessment process described in *Improving Student Learning*) has saved me time. (Note: The process described in *Improving Student Learning* is labeled "L to J" to reflect the movement from the L-shaped curve at the beginning of the year to the bell curve in the middle of the year and the J-shaped curve at the end of the year. See <http://www.LBellJ.com> for details.) The students and I are able to focus on new learning that will occur, rather than what has already been taught. Student learning is more evident with the L to J process than it ever was in the past. There is no more guessing about whether a particular student or an entire class is learning. The proof is in the process. The best part is, the students understand their growth and achievement. They are completing tasks and activities with purpose. They have taken responsibility for their own learning."

Michael Clay Thompson suggests in his powerful book *Classics in the Classroom* that "essay tests on literature should be cumulative for the entire year, causing students to consider each new book in the light of all previous books, expanding the literary discussion of each new book."⁸ Think about how contrary to this advice are the computerized reading programs that ask questions only about one book at a time.

Taking away permission to forget has received the most acclaim of any aspect of my speaking and writing. Angela Farmer, of Paducah, KY, stated, "It was a paradigm shift from what 'they don't remember' to what 'we cannot let them forget.'" Mike Carney of Jenks, OK, wrote, "We used to have the mindset of 'that was last chapter, so it's in the past,' and so did our students! Understanding that knowledge comes from building a foundation and then adding layers toward a common structure causes us to hold our students accountable for everything they have learned, whether it was last chapter or last year. Our teachers love knowing that they don't have to reteach what was taught in the past." This building of knowledge, instead of cramming for grades, has resulted in the Jenks High School end-of-year biology exam, administered by the state of Oklahoma, improving from 59 percent meeting standards in 2003 to 93 percent meeting standards in 2012.

Linda Davis of Egyptian School District, IL, reported about "taking away the permission to forget; you could see the light bulbs for the staff and their readiness to embrace the idea that has proven to be one of the most positive changes the district has ever implemented."

The elementary staff established the structure in Table 1.1 for spelling from first grade to fifth grade. Students are not given the opportunity to cram; when they number their paper for the weekly spelling test, they do not know which words will be randomly selected. Further, in grades two to five, they are expected to remember words from prior grade levels. Egyptian Elementary School sends students on to middle school who have never learned to cram! Since spelling is on the report card, a perfect score is 25 percent correct first quarter, 50 percent the second quarter, 75 percent the third quarter, and 100 percent the last quarter. The grading scale is built accordingly. Parents have adjusted to a measuring system for long-term memory, versus the traditional string of 100 percent for short-term memory. Both parents and students are provided the complete list of words for the whole year the first week of school. Further, there are no duplicate words; all words for the next grade level are new.

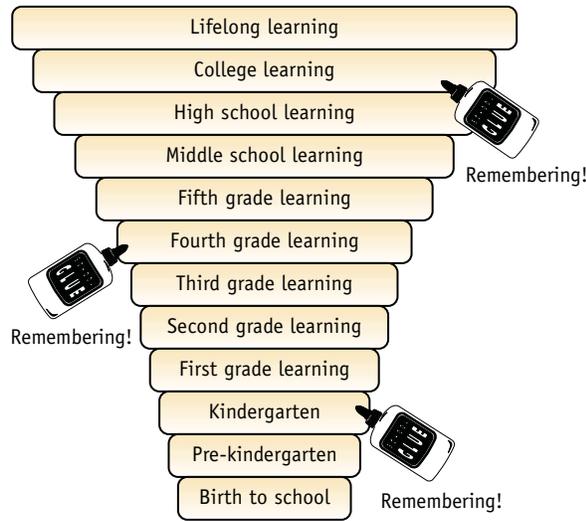
Table 1.1: Structure for Elementary School Spelling

Grade level	Total number of words for the year	Words per test	Number of words from current grade	Review words from previous grades
1 st	150	12	12	0
2 nd	200	16	12	4–1 st
3 rd	250	20	5	4–2 nd , 1–1 st
4 th	300	24	18	4–3 rd , 2–2 nd
5 th	400	24	18	4–4 th , 2–3 rd

Dan McCaulley, author of *Continuous Improvement in the History and Social Studies Classroom* and former Indiana public school teacher, stated, "As Lee Iacocca used to say, 'This changes everything!' Somehow there used to be an unwritten law that stated teachers must never speak of things to come and must never speak of items already covered after the test." Bill Hatfield, superintendent of Massac County, IL, schools wrote, "It has increased the awareness of our staff in regard to learning and retaining versus learning and forgetting. This awareness has had a positive effect in regard to our delivery of instruction. It also has made our assessments a meaningful instructional device." Joni Ebel of Columbus, NE, middle school wrote, "Students are held more accountable ... they know the expectations are raised for what they are responsible for knowing and learning." Melody Russell, author of *Continuous Improvement in the Mathematics Classroom*, and Gering, NE, middle school teacher, wrote that the concept of "Permission to forget has reminded me that students and teachers are responsible for all learning that has occurred. Just because 'the test' is over does not mean the information should be forgotten."

Vickie Hedrick, author of *Continuous Improvement in the Language Arts Classroom*, and North Carolina resource teacher wrote, "Normally, teachers spend a couple of weeks before the EOGs (end of grade) reviewing what has been taught from the beginning of the year, and to their dismay, many times students have forgotten everything. Even with this refresher they do not hold on to the information. By using L to J all year long, students did not need this review time, which allows time for the teacher to teach all of the year's standards." As can be seen

Figure 1.2: Building Blocks for Learning



by the comments from these teachers and administrators, permission to forget is so deeply rooted into America's educational practice that people do not really see the problem *until* they learn how to remove permission to forget, and are in awe at what students can actually learn and retain. She goes on to relate a common request from students: "Why can't we have L to J in additional subjects; it helps us learn."

Becky Hanson, of South Sioux City, NE, created the graphic in Figure 1.2 to help elementary students see how taking away permission to forget has lifelong benefits. *Everything* you learn in each grade is an important "building block" that is *expanded each year*. The previous years of learning are built on top of your earlier learning ... for the rest of your life.

You do not have permission to forget!

More Online

To read the remaining sections of this chapter, "Education and Business Share the Same Problem," "Please Blame Permission to Forget for Poor Results," "Conclusion," and "Key Recommendations," go to asq.org/pub/jqp.

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Lee Jenkins

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Permission to Forget

Education and Business Share the Same Problem

Lee Jenkins

W. Edwards Deming stated that the solution for education is not to be more businesslike because the root causes of problems in government, business, and education are all the same. In his seminars he often criticized business for making short-term decisions that are good for the quarterly report but bad for the business overall. For example, he described a manufacturing company that was near the end of the quarter and was about to show a loss. Pressure was on to ship orders before the end of the quarter in order to show a profit. One piece was missing from a supplier, but it was decided to ship anyway. This way, the shipped products could be counted as accounts receivable and thus a profit could be reported for the quarter. Three weeks into the next quarter the manufacturer flew representatives to the various locales that had purchased the product to install the missing piece. This was done, of course, at great cost to the company's long-term financial health. In Kurt Eichenwald's book *Conspiracy of Fools*, which is about Enron's collapse, he wrote, "Fastow's plan would increase Enron's long-term exposure, all to avoid a quarterly loss."¹

Deming wrote, "No number of short-term successes in short-term problems will ensure long-term success." The sentence for education is, "No number of successes on chapter tests will ensure success on high-stakes, standardized exams."

Jeffrey Liker writes in *The Toyota Way* that "Inventory hides problems and inefficiencies. Inventory enables the bad habit of not having to confront problems."² So, returning to Dr. Deming's insight that business, government, and education have the same issues, I wondered, "What is education's *inventory* problem?" I concluded that it is starting off each and every school year with a review of prior years' content. The "permission to forget" problem is buried. If educators were to all state, "Permission to forget is *over*; you have to *remember*, and we are starting with

new content today, the second day of school," problems would surface that would have to be solved. At Toyota, the parts to be assembled today arrive the very same morning. No inventory. Do problems occur sometimes because the part is not available? Of course, and then the problem has to be solved. The same is true for education. Let's stop providing *inventory* by automatic review and solve the *permission to forget* problem. Melody Russell, author of *Continuous Improvement in the Mathematics Classroom*, starts new instruction for her current course the second day of school, which allows all of the current year's standards to be taught. She states that prior to taking away permission to forget she could never teach all the standards before the year was over.

When teachers first start the process of assessing students only on long-term memory, some parents have a concern. The issue is that their son or daughter is not answering 100 percent of the questions, as formerly done with short-term chapter quizzes. When educators explain that they are trying to overcome the cramming/forgetting cycle, parents are usually understanding and supportive. They know from their own educational experience the futility of cramming. They can understand that cramming may be a workable tool in getting a college scholarship, but remembering high school content is really important for college completion.

Please Blame Permission to Forget for Poor Results

It won't be long after readers have completed this chapter that they will pick up yet another article such as *Education Week's* article of May 10, 2012, entitled, "2011 NAEP Science Scores, Achievement Levels, and Achievement Gaps." The article explains that 36 percent of students are below basic achievement level, 34 percent are at basic, 29 percent are proficient, and one percent

are advanced or superior.³ It is my hope that when the next article is printed, readers will not think poorly of the science (or whatever other subject is named) teachers but remember that everyone (students and teachers) is performing exactly as the system is set up. Actually, it is now even worse since the initial publication of *Permission to Forget* because of the pressure of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to raise test scores in reading and math. Science was almost left out, and history and geography were completely left behind. It is sad when some politicians praise NCLB and then lament that students today have such poor knowledge of U.S. history. These same politicians left history completely behind in the legislation! So, if we add together the facts that even less science, history, and geography are being taught, and what is taught is evaluated with chapter tests and other “permission to forget” assessments, we obtain a great big fat zero.

Conclusion

Educators are held accountable for students’ long-term memory as measured by standardized exams and performance at the university, in the military, or in other occupations. Students, however, are only held accountable for their short-term memory as measured by chapter tests and Friday quizzes on the current week’s curriculum. The education system has a major disconnect.

Debi (Mo) Walters of Arizona State University asks, “Why spend time teaching and learning if it is not to be remembered and not important for future experiences?”

Jeff Burgard, author of *Continuous Improvement in the Science Classroom*, provides great hope in his comments. He wrote, “Students really can remember long term. They even come back the next year to say how surprised they are at how much they remember compared to their peers that did not have the L to J process the year before. This year, I have been fortunate to have students come to eighth grade from my seventh grade class last year. Those repeat students scored 100 percent better on the first L to J quiz than those not exposed to the process in seventh grade. I made it a point to put both sixth and seventh grade information on the quiz so they were not allowed to forget year-to-year content.”

Key Recommendations

1. Approximately 70 percent of every nongraded weekly quiz and 70 percent of every graded exam should include questions from the current course, and 30 percent of every nongraded weekly quiz and every graded exam should be from the content of prior courses. For example, an algebra II quiz or exam should be 70 percent algebra II and 30 percent algebra I and geometry. In schools with an interdisciplinary curriculum in which all strands of math are taught each year, 70 percent of junior-level exams should be from the junior-level course and 30 percent from the prior two years’ content.

This recommendation is true for all subjects. For example:

- Eighth grade history exams should be composed of 70 percent eighth grade U.S. history and 30 percent fifth grade U.S. history.
- Eighth grade physical science exams should be composed of 70 percent eighth grade science plus 30 percent sixth grade earth science and seventh grade life science. (The exact sequence of science courses changes from state to state, but the concept is the same.)
- Ninth grade English exams should be 70 percent ninth grade content and 30 percent middle school content.
- Third grade spelling tests should be 70 percent grade-level words and 30 percent first and second grade words.

2. Make it district policy to begin each new year and each new course with the new content for that year. This will probably mean skipping the first few chapters in the textbooks. The practice of Melody Russell in Gering, NE, is worth understanding. She stated to her students on the first day of eighth grade math, “We are starting on eighth grade math today. Here is a list of what you will learn in eighth grade, and here is a list of what you were taught in seventh grade. If there is anything on the seventh grade list you forgot, come see me and I’ll teach it to you.” When a student reminded Ms. Russell that the year is supposed to begin with review, she simply replied, “Permission to forget is over.”

3. Remember Akio Toyoda's canoe and boulders analogy as told by Jeffrey Liker and Gary Convis in *The Toyota Way to Lean Leadership*.⁴ (This canoe story will remove readers' permission to forget about educational inventory.) Toyoda states that if a person is paddling down a creek with many boulders, he has no worry if the water level is high. However, it is when the water level is low that the canoe is in danger. He then goes on to explain that at Toyota they do not store up inventory; it must arrive the day it is to be used. He says that inventory covers up problems just as high water covers up the boulders. Are there some problems because some parts do not arrive on time? Yes, and then the problem is addressed and solved. By starting off the new year with no review, a myriad of problems will be exposed—problems that in today's education world are not even addressed. And when the problems are exposed, they can be solved.
4. Remember the words of Albuquerque English teacher Chris Kelly: "I do so much more teaching rather than reviewing. I see students truly understanding what it means to master the

material." When permission to forget is no longer a possibility, students understand the purpose of real schooling.

J. M. Juran states, "In the U.S.A. about a third of what we do consists of redoing work previously 'done.'"⁵

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