



Transcript of Education Next Interview with  
Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*, and Steven Farr, author of  
*Teaching as Leadership*, conducted by Mike Petrilli

Interview available as a podcast at  
<http://educationnext.org/learning-from-great-teachers/>

Mike: Hello, this is Mike Petrilli. I'm an Executive Editor at Education Next and a Vice President for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. I'm here today with two authors of recent books. The first is Doug Lemov, *Teach Like A Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*, is his book. And also Steven Farr, author of *Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap*. Doug and Steven, welcome.

Steven: Good Morning.

Doug: Thanks for having me.

Mike: Both of these books are going to be reviewed in a future Education Next. For those of our listeners who have not yet read the books, or haven't read about the books, let's start like this. Give an example of one or two of the kind of concrete bits of advice that you're giving teachers in these books. Doug, why don't you start?

Doug: Sure, well concrete is probably the word for a lot of the advice in my book, and I'll give you a quick example. One of them is, I talk about the importance of things that are traditionally below the threshold of discussion for teachers, like how to pass out paper or how to train your students how to pass out papers. I use an example in the introduction of a teacher named Doug McCurry, who now runs the Achievement First schools, training his students to pass out papers quickly, and

having them do it with the stop watch. Then when they do it, he says, “Pretty good, see if you can pass them out in 15 seconds.” Then he says, “Pretty good, back out in 12.” Then they do it in 12, and he says, “Pretty good, back out in 10.”

Sometimes when I show a video of this to people in workshops, they respond to it by saying, “This is trivial. It’s unimportant and it’s also – this isn’t what teachers should be talking to their students about.

They’re supposed to be talking to them about adding fractions with unlike denominators or causes of the Civil War.” Then you give the numbers on it, which is, if you can save a minute every time you pass out papers or collect papers, you do that 10 times a day you have 190 school days a year, you end up saving something like a week’s worth of instruction that you can spend on causes of the Civil War, adding fractions with unlike denominators, just by attending carefully to practicing this routine for how to pass out papers.

I just think it’s interesting that there isn’t a teacher training program that I’m aware of with one small exception in the country that would stoop to teach teachers how to teach their students how to pass out papers.

Mike: Okay Steven, what about you?

Steven: Sure, so Teaching as Leadership is sharing our findings from studying dramatically effective teachers in low-income communities. One of the patterns that we see every time we go into a classroom where kids are starting the year far behind and ending the year caught up or ahead, is an intense focus on student investment.

What we’ve learned from these teachers is to a one, they all say, “My kids come in the door thinking there are smart kids and there are dumb kids, we’re the dumb kids, and that’s the way it is.” What these teachers say is, “I have to change my children’s mindsets to believe

that hard work and success are correlated.” Among the concrete suggestions that come out of this book, that come straight from these classrooms are strategies for bringing children--as they’re taking on the hard work of academic learning--bringing children to believe that they can and want to succeed.

For example, in most of these classrooms, teachers are creating visual representations of student’s progress. A child learning to read may be working very hard and may not be able to see him or herself the progress that’s being made, so these teachers help do that. Whether it’s graphs or charts or there’s all kinds of creative ways that these teachers do this, or concrete techniques for creating a culture of achievement and a culture of welcoming teamwork in the classroom.

In Chapter Two of this book we go through a number of the strategies that teachers use to invest students in wanting to work hard to achieve ambitious goals.

Mike: Now, Doug, you said something interesting. You said that you don’t know of any teacher training program in the country that would stoop to teaching this sort of thing, and yet it strikes me that this is exactly the kind of thing that new teachers need to know--the tricks of trade, and lessons from highly effective teachers. Why do you think that ed schools haven’t, by and large, taught this sort of thing and are you at all hopeful that this might change?

Doug: Well, I think that’s a great question that we should all be asking, and when I hear Steven talk about his book and saying it comes from watching what actually works, and measuring what actually works among teachers in high-need populations, that’s the shared premise of both books, which is I think we both went out and tried to answer the question “what really works here?” and to drive this, not from an

ideology or a theory of what teaching should look like, but to really honor teachers who are successful and say, let's look at what they actually do.

I think that teachers are incredible problem solvers, inspirational entrepreneurial problem solvers. I hope that the rest of the field gets to the point where they want to be data-driven and look at what works and build the profession up from the specifics of what great teachers do, as opposed to building it down from the abstract.

Traditionally, that is the way that we thought about it. We have an idea for what teaching should be, and then we say, what should that idea look like in the classroom rather than the starting point being let's look at what works, at what drives results among students and let's then extract them. Let's observe that and learn from that and see what the teachers who make a difference in student's lives really do that differentiates from the merely good.

Mike: Steven, are you getting any response from education schools interested in the kind of things you write about in your book?

Steven: We are. We are using this book to catalyze conversations with education schools. I think there are a few things coming out of those. I've had sporadic conversations with schools of education and one is just what Doug said, the idea that our most effective teachers can be our greatest source of knowledge, I think is something that is helpful to talk about. I'm not sure that all schools of education think that way, but I think that this conversation is helping in that direction.

I also think, alongside, I agree with Doug's assessment of the landscape, but there is common ground here. There are things that schools of education are doing that we do see in the most effective teacher's classrooms. I think that it's helpful to acknowledge that and

build from that common ground. We have these common purposes. The process of building knowledge, I think we can push with both of these books, and I'm excited about the reception and the conversations that we're having.

Mike: Now let's talk about the reform crowd. It strikes me that you can go to a New Schools Venture Fund Conference or many other educational conferences and you'll hear a lot about charter schools and you'll hear about teacher quality or teacher effectiveness, but you won't generally hear much about teaching and learning, at least until your books came on the scene. Why do you think that is? Why is it that reformers are so afraid to talk to about this black box of the classroom? Doug, why don't you go first?

Doug: Steven, you've got more to say about this one. I think it's a really fascinating question. I'd like to piggy back off what you say.

Steven: Sure, you know Mike, I think it starts with--this is really hard. For our first ten years of Teach for America, when we would get out and see our teachers' classrooms, we saw a lot of good teaching but not a lot of life-changing teaching that we want to see. A fraction of our teachers were figuring out how to do this and that fraction has grown and grown.

To speak from the perspective our book, we have taken this public because over two decades--and really ten years in earnest--of studying what this takes, it's taken that long to come to a level of confidence that we have a model of what we're learning from these teachers. We feel confident enough in this to know that we're getting really great traction with our new teachers coming in, by sharing with them what our most successful teachers have done before them. Part of it I think is, it really is difficult.

Doug:

I think there's also a hidden driver of this, which is technology. I think that when we all imagine technology infusing education and infusing the classroom, we imagine computers and flat screens and smart boards and things like that, but there are actually two important technological advances that have made books like mine and Steven's possible, and one is just measurement infrastructure. Quality of data. Reliable data. State testing data that you can use to determine who's actually successful. Then, easy access to large data sets to be able to begin to understand what success is.

Secondly, at least very strongly for me, but I also think even for Steven, video is increasingly becoming a commodity. You used to need to hire a professional to videotape something, and now you can walk into the back of a classroom with a Flip camera and videotape a teacher, pretty much any day of the week, any hour of the day. That's powerful because it creates a record of what teachers actually do. It's an archive that you can look at with other teachers and say, "Ah hah, here's how this teacher handled it differently from a typical teacher who has less compelling results."

This is one of the things that we're starting to see in the aggregate across these teachers, and this is what makes them so powerful. The technology of video becoming a commodity makes a lot of this work--the deeper analysis of teaching--much more possible.

Steven:

Mike, can I add just that I think that you're right. Those of us in the reform realm have a greater responsibility to study what's working and share that. I also do think this needs to be taken in the broader sort of national ideology of what is effective teaching, and the fact that 20 years ago when they made a movie about Jaime Escalante, not because he was successful, but because everyone thought he was

cheating, right? The ETS investigated his classroom because the assumption was, this cannot be done in low-income communities.

Today the new rationalization is, okay fine, there are teachers out there who are successful, but you can't really describe it. You can't replicate it. You can't articulate it in a way that lets us scale it up.

I think another common theme of both Doug's work and our work--and I think there're just great synergies between these--is that that idea that we can't describe what effective teaching is, is simply wrong. I think that the backdrop against which our work is happening is with that assumption among people both in education and outside of education.

Mike:

Well, that's a very optimistic way to end this segment. Looks like not only we can identify effective teachers, but we can identify in particular what they're doing to be effective, and other teachers can emulate them.

Well, thanks so much for joining us. Again, on the show we've had Doug Lemov, the author *Teach Like A Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* and Steven Farr, *Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap*. Doug and Steven, thanks so much for joining us.