

# The Whole Child Channel

## Reflection Activity

### Excellence for All

#### Goals and Objectives

- 1 To generate a perspective on the ways schools define, view, and approach excellence in education.
- 2 To propose alternative approaches to bolster excellence for *all* students.

#### Article Overview

“Excellence for All” by Robert Sternberg. *Educational Leadership*, October 2008, pp. 14–19.

Sternberg contends that schools should focus on excellence for all students, pointing to excellence models that fall short of that charge. The author notes that there’s more to excellence than the standard “three Rs,” challenging educators to instead focus on the other “three Rs”—reasoning, resilience, and responsibility.

#### Reflection Questions

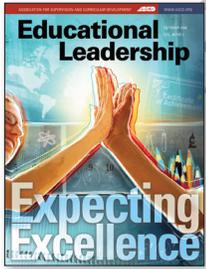
Use these questions to reflect on the key ideas and principles found in the article. Specifically, how might you use the key ideas and principles in your own classroom or school community?

- Sternberg presents four models of excellence: schools with programs designed to bolster students’ academic performance. Each model, according to Sternberg, is flawed. Select a model, preferably one that reflects your current environment, and lay out the reasons why you agree or disagree with his assessment. Cite examples from your district or school.
- What would it take for schools, such as those Sternberg has presented, to better assess their approaches? What external factors would influence this assessment? Consider those factors that currently inform schools’ academic approaches and policies.
- Sternberg cites three areas—reasoning, resilience, and responsibility—that should be permanently embedded in educational excellence models. His contention is that in many schools, these are secondary to the traditional “three Rs” (with emphasis on testing and its results). Is this an argument that you agree or disagree with, based on the work you undertake? Explain your point of view with examples that either support or negate Sternberg’s premise.
- Given the current state of education (high-stakes testing, performance standards, greater teacher accountability for students’ academic achievement, etc.), how can educational professionals address the alternative “three Rs,” as Sternberg suggests? How can the traditional and alternative “three Rs” be meshed so that students achieve (while meeting demands that are not likely to change) on both fronts?

# Excellence for All

*There's more to excellence than reading, writing, and arithmetic.*

**Robert J. Sternberg**



What does it mean for a school to be “excellent”? Is it excellent if no one fails but no one does terrifically well either? Is it excellent if the best, but only

the best, do superbly? This question is important because the way we define excellence dictates the way we achieve it.

## Common Models of Excellence

Let's look at four models of excellence that operate in our schools today. The following portraits are based on real schools that I have observed, although the names are pseudonyms.

### Looking Only at the Bottom

Administrators at Shadyside School know which side their bread is buttered on. The district's rewards go to the schools that best meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). So Shadyside has put its resources into ensuring that it looks as good as possible under NCLB's definition of excellence.

The school places heavy emphasis on reading and math. Several other subjects get some attention, but less. The school has dropped physical education and minimized music and art. It has discontinued its gifted program, which, the administration believed, always consumed more resources than it was worth for students who need special services the least.

Heavy spending goes into ensuring that students in the bottom half of the

class perform well enough to meet minimum-competency standards. Because many of these low-performing students come from one section of town, some Shadyside administrators have been quietly lobbying for a redistricting plan that would reassign that area to a different school, thus raising Shadyside's test scores.

So far, the result of all these efforts has been modest but noticeable success in enhancing compliance with the federal law.

No Child Left Behind was advocated as a national model for achieving excellence in our schools. But this model is problematic because it focuses attention on only the bottom of the distribution. Imagine a hypothetical school in which, indeed, no child is left behind, but all children are achieving barely passing grades—in letter terms, *D-*. Would anyone call such a school excellent?

Further, No Child Left Behind encourages schools to drop or minimize important programs that are essential to truly excellent education—such as music, arts, and physical education—because these programs do not boost passing rates on particular tests. Even social studies may get short shrift. Do we really want our schools to resemble the test-preparation cram courses given by private tutoring organizations?

The law discourages schools from providing special services for gifted students because they will pass the tests anyway. It has even motivated some schools to stoop to such dubious practices as encouraging weaker students to drop out. Is this any way to achieve excellence?

### Looking Only at the Top

Sunnyvale School is in one of the most economically advantaged sections of a wealthy suburb. The school is considered “la crème de la crème” in the district. To be admitted to Sunnyvale's gifted program, students need to have IQs in the top 1 percent of the general population. The school boasts of the number of its graduates who end up going to Ivy League schools and has a Hall of Fame for its most illustrious graduates.

Sunnyvale puts relatively few resources into students at the academic low end. Because few of these students are actually at risk for failing to meet minimum-competency standards, the administration believes it can afford to focus on stronger students who are likely to succeed in gaining admission to the most prestigious colleges.

The administration's general view is that weaker students do not really belong in the school. In many different, often not-so-subtle ways, the school sends the message to these students that they are a drag on its reputation. For example, academically challenged students tend to get the weakest teachers and diluted courses. Although the school is careful to meet its legal obligations to students with special needs, any parents who demand more are told that they always have the option of a private school.

Sunnyvale's model is the opposite of Shadyside's. Sunnyvale lavishes its attention on the top end, and the result is a *Matthew effect*—the intellectually rich get richer, and the intellectually poor get poorer. Can we really consider a school

Challenged