

Friday, October 31, 2008

Short Article

Students (and Teachers) "No-Excuse Zone"

Teachers need to model the "No-Excuse Zone" habit if they expect students to extinguish students' lethargic and excuse-giving behaviors. The reason for adopting the "No-Excuse Zone" response to students' excuses is that learning is easy, and because excuses have no place in describing a learning situation. Limited learning is an artificial construct, and excuses should not be used to explain away sub-standard effort or student disinterest. What are those Excuses? EXCUSE #1: "I don't have any good ideas."

FACT: Ideas are abundant and never were in short supply at any time.

Evolution prompted our ancestors to think, learn, create, invent, problem-solve, make decisions…so the capacity to develop new ideas is hard-wired into our genes.

Prompts to new ideas sprout in our minds like weeds in a garden.

And, the ability to produce new ideas is multi-dimensional. Each of the Multiple Intelligences (that think through us) produces a new slant on a similar concept. In fact, each idea has seven or more renderings in our imagination and experience systems.

In addition, each person is unique and benefits from a constellation of unique experiences…this makes our ideas different than every other persons, even if six billion people now live on Planet Earth.

The statement, "I don't have any (new, good) ideas" is pure bunk.

EXCUSE #2: "I'm not good at (an expert) at anything."

OK. So, what's stopping you from putting in the effort to become good at something on your way to expert status?

And you are in good company. Successful people always believe that they don't know very much because they realize that there is more to learn than anyone could possibly know.

But an expanding Internet Universe of knowledge is not an excuse for failing to apply yourself to a learning task.

So, think like daydreamer and a procrastinator. But think later, after you do something.

EXCUSE #3: "I'm not a skilled (technical, computer) person, so I am not able to do this."

"Skilled" and "technical" are matters of degree.

You can't type 120 words a minute, but you can "hunt and peck" five words a minute.

You can't recite the Rubyat from memory on national television, but you can talk to a group of students using phrases on note cards to jog your memory.

You can't run a sub four-minute mile, but you can walk, hop, crawl, roll or navigate your personal power chair somewhere.

The point: You can do something. So do it.

EXCUSE #4: "Learning this seems like it's going to take a long time, I just don't think I can finish it."

It is going to take a long time compared to what?

It will definitely take a longer time, if by this time (tomorrow, next week, next month, next year), you have done nothing about it.

A vehicle that sits in the driveway or garage gets zero miles to the gallon. (In fact, since a bit of gasoline evaporates as the vehicle sits for an extended period of time, gasoline decreases while movement remains non-existent.

Whether the learning or the learning task takes a long time is only a matter of perception.

Sure, it will require effort, energy and commitment. But, without starting; that level of effort, energy and commitment for the undone task will remain exactly the same.

However, if you get in gear and complete even a small portion of the task today, the remaining task will be less by tomorrow.

EXCUSE #5: "Rome wasn't built in a day."

Maybe not, but it was built.

Someone started. And someone else built on top of what earlier folks built.

We start with huge advantages because we have lots of resources, ideas and structures to build upon.

So, ignore this lazy, lame excuse of an excuse and get busy.

Summary

When students and teacher enter the "No-Excuse Zone," they meet the "tough-love" philosophy that ignores their excuses and tells them to "Get busy."

Whether the excuse giver is a perfectionist who is afraid to start because the results "Won't be good enough;" or whether the person is "just plain lazy," the return response is the same.

"Get to work. Your excuses gain no traction here."

"This is a "No-Excuse Zone."

"No parking is allowed."

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Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Short Article

How to Talk to the IT "Guy or Gal": Pay Exquisite Attention to Detail

Most modern teachers have to talk to the IT Guy or Gal to get equipment repaired, to get software installed or configured, or to get network resources connected. But, the stress and frustration of translating real-world needs (yours) into the unreal language of the Techie (not yours) can be avoided.

How?

Learn to pay attention!

And, accept that the miscommunication that often ensues is "your fault." At least, you will be able to make corrections to what you say, while the Techie is unable to adapt. Sidebar It is possible that the Urban Myth of the IT Professional entering into the world of servers, networks and Desktop Operating Systems was to compensate for a lack of people skills.

Equally likely is the possibility that a teacher's Intrapersonal Intelligences are more than adequate to bridge the gap across any of these alleged "people skills" shortcomings.

But, these Teacher-IT contacts are too infrequent (you only wish that these folks were around more so the technology stuff stayed working) for teachers to figure out the code that makes sense of the Techie's mind set. The Hidden Little Secret The secret to communicating with a Techie is to get painfully specific.

That's all there is to it.

But, when you think that you are being specific, you are not. Period. End of Discussion!

But, you protest…

Here are some examples:

A teacher says that she "Can't log in to the computer."

This means nothing to the Techie. These are empty sounds without meaning. The Techie then proceeds to extract the missing information from the teacher's message before he or she can provide assistance.

What missing information? Log in to what computer

Using what user account

To what domain

With what "User's Rights"

Associated with what "Error Message" Another example: "I can't access my files."

Information missing from the statement…Where are the files? On a USB Drive

On the Desktop

On the Hard Drive

In a Home Directory

On a Burned CD / DVD

In some Online Storage Location

What error messages were noticed?

Are the files visible, or missing?

What application created the files?

Would the file just not open, or if the files opened, was the result "rubbish"

Were there any AntiVirus messages? (The files could have been infected and quarantined or deleted.)

Do you have backup files? (Of course not!)

Etc. Learn the Correct Vocabulary The Techie knows that names of those "network thingies" and that "on-screen listie doohickey," but you don't.

This is time for a vocabulary lesson.

That network "thingie" could be…A network drop

A wall jack

A patch cord

A CAT 5, CAT 5e or CAT 6 cable

A computer network card

A NIC (pronounced "nick")

Trick question: Which of the above pairs refer to the same thing?

Answer:

A "patch cord" is the same thing as a CAT 5, CAT 5e or CAT 6 cable, although those numbers refer to different standard cable types.

A computer "network card" is a "NIC," or, Network Interface Card.

Here is what these items refer to:

The network drop is the part of the network that you see, or don't see. The drop comes from the ceiling or from overhead and drops down the wall in a visible "raceway" that protects it, or it comes down from the overhead through the hollow part of a wall.

The "Wall Jack" is what you plug the network patch cord (whatever it's category) into on the wall.

The NIC is what you plug the cable into on the computer. And when you plug that cable into the back of the computer, most often you should see light. This is a "link light."

A drop is "hot" if it works (generally turns on a light on the computer's network card on the back of the computer. (A "hot drop" is not warm to the touch.)

Once you know that terminology, you can talk to the Techie without frustration.

And listen carefully because the Techie will use the correct terminology, and will be specific. Accept Responsibility for the Broken Communication Every issues affecting the miscommunication with the IT Guy or Gal is your responsibility. Accept it.

Why?

Because you are the communications professional, and because you are the person that needs help to get back to work…or, to get your students' learning tools back in operation.

You also want to speed that help on its way. This means describing the "issues" as precisely as you possibly can. Make the effort. Poorly Communicated Service Requests equal Resolution Delays If the Work Order or Service Request contains errors, resolution can be delayed.

Examples: Technical support staff with the wrong specialties are sent to resolve the issue

Some issues can be resolved remotely, i.e., from the IT Office, and waiting for the Techie to arrive tomorrow is unnecessary

Some issues will take a long time to resolve, and you might need the Techie to bring a "Loaner" piece of equipment when they come

You are embarrassed because you caused the problem, but don't want to admit what you did

Some issues involve the loss of data, and you failed to back up that data. This requires time-consuming and expensive methods to attempt to retrieve files from the hard drive of a broken computers

Whatever the issue, copy the exact words of any error messages. This is important. How to Support the Technical Support Process Without Becoming a Techie Careful observation, patience, and recording everything pertaining to the service request are tasks that will speed up the resolution of technical issues.

And explain to the Techie that you don't know the technical terms, but want to learn them so that you can streamline the Service Request/ Work Order process in the future.

Admit that understanding the technical vocabulary is difficult for you, and ask ask the Techie to describe his or her thinking process as he or she goes about the troubleshooting and repair tasks.

And be grateful, thankful and express your appreciation. Express empathy for the "almost thankless position" that Techies face, hour-by-hour as frustrated users and folks that don't understand the stresses of IT Service unload irritation, rage, indignation or venom upon IT Staff…folks that are just doing the best job that they can. Sidebar Want to vent your frustration?

Focus your consternation, anger, indignation and resentment toward the Superintendent and Business Managers that squeeze budgets until the numbers "oink" and order the IT Department to "make do" with half the number of technical support staff that are necessary to provide the stellar support service that everyone deserves. In short, express the kind of support and understanding that leaves a positive memory and a positive feeling about you in the mind of the Techie. (Save the tirade for the Superintendent and Business Office folks that deserve it.) Make a friend. Be glad to see your IT Friend the next time, and your friend will be glad to provide whatever special service that is possible. Summary Empathy, kindness and a willingness to learn go a long way in communicating with IT staff members.

And specific, precise observations go a long way in assisting the IT helper to help you in an efficient manner.

And by the way, the same skills that are needed to communicate with the IT folks are the ones needed to communicate with your students.

Communicate with Techies with the same level of empathy, kindness and willingness to learn that you use to communicate with your students.

Teachers are people persons, and IT Staff are people. Accepting responsibility for the success of the communication and communicating your respect for each person are traits that define a Master Teacher.

The IT Guy or Gal can be your friend if you behave in a friendly and helpful manner. The choice for how smoothly and sweetly the Service Request/ Work Order proceeds is 80% to 90% yours.

Sunday, August 31, 2008

Short Article

Advocacy: Why Advocated Change Never Happens

Evolution and disintegration, growth and decay, building and demolishing…these are the natural order of the Universe. There is a natural conservation of mass and energy, matter changes form, and energy dances from one state to another.

Some folks might argue that since nothing remains constant, change is "inevitable."

But, although changes occur, these changes are active processes.

Where advocates for "real change" go awry is by focusing upon "change" as though change were a noun (a thing), or as a "state of events" in the real world. Sidebar The "mantra" for "change" is apt to reach a fevered pitch this political circus season.

But, this article avoids focusing upon rhetoric that is calculated to resonate with a perceived level of economic discord and social suffering.

Instead, this article focuses upon an "impossible idea"…that advocates can convince people to "change (as the Advocate defines) for the better." Advocates' Checklist for Change Change Advocates, including the folks that want to "make our schools better," have a playbook that was acquired though the school of hard (really punishing, below-the-belt punches) knocks.

Here are the "prize-winning" strategies: Pick the Right Fight - Don't play when you can't possibly win

Time your Tactics - Make the clock your friend, not your enemy

Expect "Push Back" and Resistance - The status quo defense will redouble their efforts to resist

Expect that Change will Take Time - Be patient, the typical education innovation cycle is 20 years

Remain Optimistic - But be realistic. Evaluate milestones and setbacks for what they are, signposts…not summary judgments

Focus upon Selective Change - Think strategy, tactics and advantage. Avoid forced submission and domination

Trust Innovators, and give them Both Responsibility and Authority - Find action-takers, calculated risk-takers and put them in charge. Let them experiment and experience failure. Allow them to make mistakes

Be prepared for the Long Haul - Plan to stick with the change process for a long time So, although innovation and change are really (think disguised) rants against teachers; and cunning campaigns to force teachers to do more uncompensated work, schools are really complex cultures with stakeholders that are aligned to divergent wants, needs, motivations and self-interests.

Change advocates often view their job as a sales pitch, i.e., they must sell buyers (teachers) on the benefits of working harder, smarter and differently to "accommodate the change."

Of course, this is a "hard sell," (no pun intended), and few teachers are tricked into buying (in) by this strategy. Sidebar If the benefits of the proposed change were so rewarding, the "changes" ought to speak for themselves, and no sales pitch would be required.

For example, attaching a worm or minnow to a fish hook exchanges the "unappetizing morsel" for a pan-sized fish. And people are motivated to perform this kind of exchange, day in, day out because the process is inherently rewarding. Exchanging something you can't (or won't eat), the worm or minnow for a fish is a high payoff activity. Another example: If people were able to step up to a counter and exchange a \$10 bill for a \$20 bill; they would stand in line, wait their turn, make the exchange, then return to the end of the line for another round.

Many people would repeat this process, day and night, until exhausted.

Sure, you have to overcome skepticism because people would hesitate, wondering, "What's the catch?" But, the promise of an exchange similar to this is what fuels gambling enterprises. What's in it for Me? Change advocates fail to realize that almost all of the "educational change equation" calculates out to the following benefits for the changer…

More Work Required

More Effort Required

Decreased Free Time

Additional Costs

Previous Efforts and Investments become Denigrated and Devalued

Supplies, Inventories and Resources for the old way are No Longer Needed

New Supplies, Inventories and Resources have to be Acquired

Old Habits that must be Extinguished and Unlearned

New Habits that must be Developed, Learned and Perfected

Old Skills that will Dissipate with Disuse

New Skills that must be Won with Stress and Effort

Self-Confidence that will Erode, replaced by a Temporary (we hope) Lack of Confidence because New Procedures are

Stressful/Convuluted Advocacy So, how do change advocates pitch an inherently undesirable product?

Answer: Rhetoric, psychological tricks, mind control and emotional appeals. These boil down to variations on two themes:

Do the extra work that the change demands, feel the pain. Do it for the benefit of your students

Do the extra work, feel the pain. Do it so that you can keep your job

Of course, neither of these "benefits" creates the intrinsic motivation inherent in activities such as fishing or gambling.

And the lack of real benefits may be partially responsible for so many new teachers leaving the profession within three to five years. Reason: "Forced Change" delivers too few benefits and too much stress.

Don't Fight the Culture Change

Advocates are reformers who want everything to go their "ideal" way. Of course, most other folks fail to identify the same outcomes that the Change Advocate identifies as ideal.

But, there are sets of beliefs, behaviors, standards and methods of operation that everyone is comfortable with. These complex "sets of influences" can be considered to be the organization's "culture."

Change Advocates complain that the culture is difficult to change, and that fighting against the culture almost always results in a "loss." The Change Advocate's advice: "Don't go up against the culture."

Of course, this is a wrong-headed, self-centric view when it comes to changing teachers.

Changing teachers is easy. All the Change Advocate has to do is make the life of the teacher easier and more productive, provide less work, higher pay and more help.

And that is where the "culture wars" argument falls apart.

What Change Advocates see as a "resistant culture," the folks involved see as an inferior solution to a problem that they don't recognize; a solution that makes more problems than it solves.

Message to school or teacher Change Agents: "Figure out real solutions that provide real benefits to teachers, and they will come begging for your solution."

Anything less, expect resistance. Summary Change Advocates fail to realize that change is process, not a thing.

Secondly, these Change Advocates fail to focus upon real benefits that appeal to the self-interests of the folks who own the habits, behavior, routines and systems that the Change Advocates wish to "adjust."

Change Advocates focus upon one stakeholder group, generally the lowest rung on the "Chain of Command" ladder; and use blame, guilt and rhetoric as the tools of their persuasion arsenal.

The Change Advocates seldom think of lucrative additional pay, additional help, increased benefits and various other compensations that could motivate the change that they advocate.

So, advocated change cannot, doesn't, seldom ever happens because 1.) the Change Advocates either have not done their homework; or, 2.) the solution that they propose is more tears, toil and trouble than the payoffs that ensue.

Since advocated change won't happen, let the teacher "blame game" continue.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Thursday, July 31, 2008

Short Article

Techie Advocacy: The Missing Relationship

Techie folks would like to advocate for Technology Integration in our schools because they believe that technology holds wonderful potential and promise for our students. Techie folks believe in hardware, software and infrastructure. And, they believe that the technology will continue to improve.

Techies also believe (erroneously) that, since students like technology so much, and since technology is easy for students to use; that the technology, by itself, can drive instruction.

Unfortunately, Techie folks believe more in machines and magnetic electron blips than they do in people... especially teachers.

And, it is this dichotomy that presents the greatest barrier, a wall that keeps Techie folks from delivering a service to education. Adversarial Relationship - Undercurrents Techies and teachers may appear cordial and collegial, but the undercurrents of distrust pervade their communication.

For one thing, the Techies tend to blame teachers for being reactionary, resistant and recalcitrant in integrating technology into instruction.

On the other hand, teachers tend to blame Techies for being out of touch, for being smitten with hard-to-use software and whiz-bang hardware, and for being the source of more work. Unfortunately, that extra work never seems to result in greater student achievement or improved test scores. Sidebar Of course, just what the "Integration of Technology" means, specified in observable and measurable terms is seldom specified by either the Techies or teachers. And everyone argues as though they alone know what it means. Technology - in a Naturally Weak Position: Advantage - Teachers But, it is the Techies that must change their position and adapt to teachers' beliefs.

The reason: Teachers can exist just fine without doing anything, without changing, without using this expensive technology.

It is the Techies that have to change their attitudes, change their beliefs, change their view of teachers, and change their misguided feelings of superiority. Techie arguments clamoring for teacher change (change to the Techie way of thinking) reside on the downhill side of a steep up-slope.

Put another way, when Techies pitch good stuff, they have to shovel it uphill to reach teachers. But, when teachers dump garbage, they just let it rain down on the Techies.

But, in the real world, the "good stuff" that Techies have to shovel so strenuously if they wish it to reach teacher…looks like garbage to teachers…and teachers are content to let it flow back down (untouched) to the Techies…with the rest of the garbage.

To carry the metaphor still further (beyond everyone's level of tolerance)…

No matter how much Techies attempt to perfume garbage and package it with bows, teachers just have to let it slide.

It is as though teachers have adopted the motto, "Beware of Techies bearing gifts."

Previous Techie Advocates left gifts that breached the protective ivory tower walls and laid waste to teachers' free time, shattered teachers' peace and calm with unsavory stress.

Now, ever alert and vigilant; teachers are not about to let Technology Advocates pull another dirty trick like foisting technology on them.

Teachers's advice to other teachers, "When you see the Techie coming, beware!"

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Monday, June 30, 2008

Short Article

Consistency: Start Now, Build Solid Habits During the Summer when Stress Levels are Low

Get your act together and develop a consistent teaching strategy. What better time to start than now? When students attend your classes, you must provide a way for those students to learn. The term for this is, "instruction."

But, creating a learning environment is difficult until you learn the nuances and subtle techniques that are required for you to motivate students and deliver instruction.

You can not expect to walk into class, parrot the methods that you were taught with when you were of school age; and hope to succeed. And it is folly to expect that the latest and greatest Instructional Fads will pay off by launching student into accelerated learning…acquiring concepts and skills in minutes, hours, or even overnight.

You will succeed by improving your teaching a little each day, testing the results of that work (not by testing students for content learning), and repeating the instructional strategies and processes that result in increased, positive student outcomes.

You will succeed further by testing what you try, then quitting the use of strategies and techniques that do not pay off in student achievement.

Consistency is the key to your ultimate teaching success.

Consistency is required for almost any self-improvement and instructional endeavor that you wish to turn into a pay off with positive results.

For example, if you want to lose weight, you must keep your diet on track, you must lay off the high calorie foods, you must stop drinking super-high calorie alcohol, and you must keep exercising. Failing to stay on the diet or slacking off on the exercise program will result in wasted time, needless hunger pangs, ridicule from your friends; and a static (resistant to change) overweight condition,

Another example: Learning something new, or becoming an expert in a new field requires consistent study. Expecting to learn while you sleep, while you eat and watch television, or by casual association with experts; is fraught with failure. And, you cannot learn by an initial burst of effort, and dwindling attention to review and practice. The failure to integrate new material into your short and long-term memories results in learning failure, application failure and failed performance.

So, consistency is required if you are to enjoy positive results from your teaching efforts.

However, the problem with consistency is that a huge goal (such as teaching students for a school year) requires a multitude of tasks that must be completed. This huge list of known activities…and all the surprise, unexpected tasks that pop up like mushrooms after a rain; seem overwhelming. Then too, we have a tendency to put off overwhelming tasks in favor of the "easy to do, easy to see results" kind of tasks.

But, if you break these huge goals into daily tasks that are limited in scope, then nothing about the daily items will seem difficult. This is the secret of successive small steps ending at the finish line of a long journey. (You take tasks, one doable item at a time, highest priority tasks first, and get busy.)>

To be successful in teaching, you must approach instruction and self-improvement in the same manner.

It is fantasy to believe that all you have to do is purchase the latest book on educational theory, purchase a magic black line master booklet, and put your teaching and self-improvement efforts on "AutoPilot."

Here is the fiction: That activity creates learning, and that you just create some…Homework

Student Projects

Internet Assignments

Reward Systems

Data-Driven Instruction Software

Student Online Portfolios

Parent Communication Blogs

Technology Integration Plans

…to ensure exponential increases in observable student outcomes.

You would never fall for such an outrageous proposition, would you?

But if you want to real instructional success, the "real secret to education," you must…Listen to your Students Every DayAnd, to pull this off, you must:Avoid Projecting your Ideas, Motivations, Beliefs, Ideals upon your Students Believe that your Students Possess an Innate Wisdom about their personal learning

Find Areas of Student Motivation that Attract them to the Curriculum Content

Provide Emotional and Personal Support for Students' Demonstrations of Creative Thinking, Problem-Solving and Decision-MakingSuccess ToolsTeaching success tools are not high-priced software (or even the free Open Source software products. Teaching success tools are not the latest launched super fad books and repackaged educational

theories. The secret teaching success tools are a calendar and checklist.

And, the Office Productivity software that you already use has this capacity, built in to the E-mail and task-tracking program, Microsoft's Outlook. But, some printed paper forms placed in a notebook will serve just as well. Even an online service such as Google's Calendar could be useful.

The secret is not in the software or the forms, but in following-through with the tasks that you identify.

What helps you track your strategies is sufficient. This could be a daily planner, Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) [such as a Palm Pilot] or a basic stenographer's notebook.

All you need is something that tells you at a glance 1.) what you completed, and 2.) what needs to be worked on next.

Consistent use of a calendar, schedule book and checklist system can mean a the difference between a a highly successful school year...or a static, lackluster school year...or a year with nothing at all to show for it. So, learn to use these tools to keep your teaching focus consistent and outcome-oriented. And summer is the best time for you to get a head start on the upcoming school year.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Saturday, May 31, 2008

Short Article

Want to Keep your Job? Apply Business Rules and become "Fire-Proof" Perhaps you like your teaching job and you would like to keep it. Even in times of political uncertainty, budget chopping and test-driven neurosis; teaching is the greatest profession on Earth. Despite the "objective teacher evaluation process" to the contrary, it is still the campus administrator and peer group (cliques, in crowd) perception of you that counts toward your keeping the job. Sidebar Despite protestation to the contrary, it is still the teacher's perception of each student that determines each student's academic success. So, why not employ strategies from the business world to keep yourself employed? Positive First Impressions through the Entire Year While you have 20 to 30 seconds to project a positive impression, you can scuttle that impression in one tenth of that time interval. Destroying your positive reputation takes only the blink of an eye. It is your task to protect your image. But barring any snafus or gross miscues, your job is to distinguish yourself in the eyes of your boss. (This is much like the corporate world.) Rules of "Fire Retardation" It would be fantasy to believe that the rule of "academic freedom" protects teachers. This might be slightly true in prestigious colleges and universities, but is mythical in public education. In public education, the rules of bureaucratic survival are in play. So, here are the rules that should keep you employed. (Go as far with these as your values and ideals will allow.) 1.) Come in Rarely, Stay Late (or both) At least arrive with time to spare. Late, or last-minute rushing to beat your students to the door are distractions to the positive image that you are careful to build. And, arrive to class with time to spare after lunch. Make sure that you don't strand a bunch of students, especially Middle School or High School "cut-up-clowns and socially-challenged-misfits" outside the locked door of your classroom when class is scheduled to begin. (Leaving the door open so they can carry on inside the room generated even worse consequences. Miscues like these will be duly noted by your supervisor. 2.) Accept Challenges Avoid the, "That's not what they pay me to do" syndrome. Instead, "step up to the plate, go down swinging if you have to, but give the challenge your best effort." 3.) Keep Cool Don't wear normal or typical classroom stress on your sleeve (or on your face). When stress climbs to extraordinary heights; find safe, rapid and effective outlets. 4.) Complete Deadline-Tasks Ahead of Time Turn in everything that you are required to turn in ahead of time (preferable), or on time (minimum requirement). But, be sure to get a receipt if you turn in a item early. Principals' secretaries and department-chair type folks are known to loose just about everything; then they blame the folks at the bottom of the chain of command. Sidebar Yes, campus secretaries outrank teachers on the de facto (what really counts) chain of command. 5.) Befriend High-Ranking Secretaries Some secretaries can "turn the screws" and make your campus life miserable. Others can act as a "power-of-authority stand in" for the campus administrator. But no matter what their level of reach and influence, "Don't cross them!" Besides, it's easier for a campus to replace a Math, Science or Special Education teacher than to replace a masterful secretary. (Secretaries hold substantial, irreplaceable institutional knowledge.) This institutional knowledge, plus the tendency of campus principals to "back up" their secretaries, adds to the secretary's power and influence; making them formidable foes. Sidebar Just as teachers should avoid "power struggles" with students because teachers cannot win, your chances of winning in a power struggle with a secretary are "slim to none." 6.) Keep Current - Keep Alert. Know what is going on on campus, and steer clear of trouble spots. Steer clear of controversy, and avoid creating complaints. School districts, like most bureaucracies, are "complaint adverse."

Do what it takes to resolve complaints, and keep complaints from being flagged by your supervisor as "warning signs" of your unsuitably and unfitness for duty. 7.) Get the Job Done, and Don't Complain about the Obstacles There are always obstacles. Glitches abound. Work with a plan, and have a backup plan. Remain cheerful. Use the energy that whining and complaining wastes to bolster your success. Expect positive outcomes. If the challenge really is "impossible," give it your all, anyway. 8.) Keep Improving your Skills Avoid the "I am an expert, and there is nothing that I need to learn" rut. Listen to your peers. Offer personal support and advice; not the self-serving "put-downs that "know-it-all" folks communicate with every "helpful" remark.

Help your colleagues, but don't expect help back. Just share your best. 9.) Keep Secrets Keep all confidential information confidential. Period! 10. Communicate Major Ideas in "Simple Terms" Learn to say it in six sentences, and be decisive. Provide just the amount of information that your supervisors can grasp. (Imagine that they have a palm the size of a three-year-old, with matching coordination and mental agility. This will help you communicate with your supervisors.) 11.) Keep Energetic. Keep a Positive Attitude Remain optimistic. Focus on "can-do." Share a positive outlook and a positive attitude. Be the person that other people are glad to be around. Summary

Follow these rules of business success and you will "fire-proof" your teaching job.

Come to think of it, these business rules for success are really a formula for success in life in general. Integrate these strategies into your skill behavior and habit patterns. These strategies will increase your on-the-job worth wherever you work.

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Short Article

Teaching the "Right Kind" of Competition

We can teach children the "right kind" of competition. But modern educators seldom do so. Competition can be subverted and distorted. Or, it can be downplayed and drained of the educational value that our students can derive.

So, what is this "competition done right?" The Purpose of Competition The purpose of competition is self-improvement, skill improvement, self-mastery.

The subversion of this learning process is "winning."

The subversion process might include any the following: Winning at all cost

Winning through any means

Winning without caring about others

Building "super stars" instead of everyone's "personal best"

Focusing upon outcomes instead of processes

Focusing so much on winning that self-improvement is neglected

Of course, sports come to mind when we study this catalog of "ms-aligned" competition. But, competition for grades, competition on projects, and competition for girlfriends/ boyfriends also fit the definition of "competition gone wrong."

On a less personal level, there is the competition between corporations where one tries to win by putting the other out of business. Or, in the software business, there is the competition of Open Source software in trying to put

Microsoft out of business by giving their product away for free.

Another example is the competition of countries, with spying, market domination, foreign aid, colonization; and in the worst case scenario war.

Religions also practice subverted competition with missionary zeal, proselytizing, domination of governments, swinging the election process "their way," jihad, and smug, "one-up" arrogance.

All these examples are called "Zero Sum Games." That is winners and losers.

Positive competition makes "winners" out of everyone. Who Should We Compete Against? The Problem is in the Question We should ask "How we can improve everyone" instead of asking "Who we should compete against."

The answers show competition as a noble quality, or as a degrading enterprise.

For example, two siblings can vie for their parents' attention, praise and reward

Their efforts can be positive; Support the efforts of one another

Teach skills and tactics to one another

Share resources

Encourage and praise one another

Learn from their shortcomings

Celebrate each other's successes

Or negative; Out do the other

Sabotage

Undercut, spread lies, distort accomplishments

Create positive spin about themselves and negative spin about their sibling

Moving into the other sibling field of endeavor (game) instead of sticking to their own

Utilizing each opportunity to "beat" the other with higher scores, more winnings, better friends, more money; or any number of other subversions A Level Playing Field: "No Such Animal" Nature invents people with unique skills, talents and abilities. And if nature invents people this way, perhaps there is wisdom in coming into harmony with nature's process.

What would this harmony be? Developing, improving, elaborating, expressing those unique gifts?

And education should focus upon helping each student to grow and blossom in their own way, rather than funneling skills and talents into rigid, "pretend" challenges. Idealism Under the Radar Screen Of course you cannot keep your job with such educational idealism, even if the learning principles behind the approach are sound.

Your career survival depends upon "playing the part" of "test-prep-extrordinaire" for all to see.

But, behind the scenes, you can foster the ideals of cooperation and mutual support; and you can let these ideals leak out at times when everyone is distracted by high-stakes testing and bureaucratic "hullabaloo" Become a Remembered, High-Impact Teacher Surveys of the teacher that adults remember and appreciate most often turn up memories of that certain special teacher that demanded that every student lived up to their personal best.

What this trip down memory lane fails to place in perspective is that the right kind of competition, the competition of bettering your skills and abilities and reaching your personal best is the innate, correct competition.

Rather than besting someone else, the student does better than their previous best. And a few iterations of this competition with past personal best increases self-concept and self-esteem. This "correct competition" also anchors the

memory of the teacher who "broke the mold" and helped students "break free" of the herd. Help each of your students focus upon "besting their personal best" and become that most influential someone in many of your students lives.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Monday, March 31, 2008

Short Article

Time-Savers for Managing Teaching Strategies that the Internet in your Teaching

Here is a list of methods that can streamline the use of the Internet in your teaching. Method #1: Create and Use Templates Creating templates really saves time.

Any item that you believe will be used again is fodder for the template mill.

Look for items that don't change much, and convert them to templates.

Feel free to add other methods to this list, and share them with Classroom Toolkit readers. What tricks and techniques have you found to be helpful?

You can do this with: Test Formats

Lesson Plans

Assignment Formats

Student Project Formats

Journal Pages

Portfolio Contents and Portfolio Conference Format

Parent Letters

Discipline Reporting and Tracking Forms

Rubrics

About Anything

Setting up templates (and keeping track of them) takes a tiny bit of time in the beginning, but really returns the investment in the long run. Create Memory Joggers: "Cheat Sheets" that Help you Recall Information. Teachers must remember lots of information to be successful. There are subject to learn and remember, color commentary items to research and recall, and countless bits of information.

All this information can lead to a "paralysis" that is commonly referred to as "information overload."

Develop a strategy for capturing and retrieving this information.

Sidebar Check the Classroom Toolkit article, Let Google™ Manage Personal and Professional Briefings for You for more information on how to store and use Google's saved searches.

Techniques that work well (depending upon your skill with technology include: Linking materials to a hierarchy of folders with "shortcuts" that lead to each resource

Using a Mind Mapping program that allows inserting hyperlinks to launch any of these resources (This is a visual method for the same process as linking materials with shortcuts) These programs include: MindManager, MindGenius; Education (high-end, expensive programs) and Inspiration;

Using Word Processing Documents and Spreadsheets with embedded hyperlinks to connected resource, briefing and stored information. With Word Processing documents, if you create the document as an outline, and you will have a built-in menu system whenever you view the document from the "Document Map" view

Using a hand-held computer such as a Palm Pilot or Pocket PC to carry your information

Using a program such as InfoSelect; to store information and a program such as Surf Later; to capture Web site's (with all links active)

Again, this may take time to set up, but the payback in time saved is huge.

Create a Personal Start Page

This strategy is similar to the previous strategy, but instead, you create a personal desktop Website, or Web page that is a portal to the rest of the information on your computer, and on the Internet.

Just about anything can be included and accessed in this way.

Online resources that you can access include: E-mail Accounts

Resource Websites

Search Pages and Saved Search Terms

Forum Accounts

Blogs that you Frequent

Free Online Storage Areas

And so on...

The benefit for the online launch pad Web page (or Website) is that it is portable and quick.

For a free, Open Source, and easy to Use HTML editor, use Nvu;

Link to download the Nvu program; Some drawbacks include: You need a basic knowledge of HTML, or you need to know how to use a HTML Editor

The form can not remember all the passwords that you use. And, although you could list the log in name and password for each link, the Web page would not be secure.

One way to overcome the login and security process is by using a program such as RoboForm. The RoboForm software will create the links for you, and integrate these into the menu system of Microsoft's Internet Explorer or Mozilla's Firefox browsers. One drawback to this solution is that the RoboForm software must be purchased, and to use the software on multiple computers, a second version of the software, for USB Drives, must also be purchased.

However, if you spend a lot of time accessing Internet resources, RoboForm would be worth the money because of the time it saves you, even if it were ten times as expensive as its \$30.00 USD price tag. The USB program costs \$20.00 USD. Add-Ons for the Palm and Pocket PC hand-helds cost \$10.00 USD.

You can also use the Web page technique for managing a portal to all the files and programs on your desktop computer. This launch page or personal portal also works for a personal Web page on your school district's Intranet or Internet site. Using a personal portal, you can ensure that your students focus upon selected sites and approved resources since you can provide the links and search terms that you want them to use.

This approach can be used when your students are in your classroom, in a computer lab, in the library, and even from home (if the launch page is accessible from the Internet).

This approach saves time that would be wasted by having to repeat multiple Web addresses (URLs) to your students. Build FAQ pages or Wikis. Any information that you have to share over and over is ripe for inclusion in a FAQ page or Wiki.

This means writing once, and referring forever so that you don't have to keep answering the same question.

The FAQ page is similar to a Web page, but you can use a no cost Blogging program to set these up.

Sources of zero-cost Open Source FAQ Generators and Scripts include:

A Wiki program allows entry and searching for answers, but, often these programs allow others to edit, add to, subtract from or delete information.

Link to Open Source Wiki programs …

The negative issues surrounding FAQ and Wiki approaches to time saving are the amount of technology know-how that are required to get these strategies to function.

If you have the technology background, make these strategies work for you.

Plan and Choose Implementation based upon the "80/20 Rule"

The "80/20 Rule" is simple. Most of your results, benefits, measurable outcomes (the 80%) will be the result of a minimum amount of work and effort (the 20%).

So, as a time saving task, you just have to identify those "20%" tasks that pay off with greater outcomes.

Then, just do more of the 20% tasks and less of the other tasks.

Of course, teachers must teach 100% of their students, and each of these students is worth your investment of instructional time and effort.

But, the idea here is to find those high payoff tasks and to eliminate the low-payoff ones. Of course, the low-payoff tasks can also be considered to be "time-wasters." Summary Implement some of these strategies and and increase your efficiency in management of the Internet resources that you use to support your teaching efforts.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Friday, February 29, 2008

Short Article

Designing our Experience: We have a Lot More Control than we "Think"

Does what you believe have a direct effect upon your life? And do your beliefs support your goals and intentions for your life? Or, is deciding what to believe a dilemma? Is it easier to skirt that dilemma and accept the patchwork of indoctrination, conformity-pressure and "should-be's" that growing up dishes out?

The tendency of our brains to focus upon the stimuli that seems to make sense of our world (and to ignore evidence to the contrary) advances and ingrains our beliefs.

Our experience of "reality" is built upon the concepts and constructs that we believe to be real. What is real may or may not be the same for everyone. Hint: it isn't.

Even witnesses to the same event relate their experiences of that event differently. And descriptions of the same event or the same item vary when speakers of different languages try to explain them. A Random, Un-Planned Process? Beliefs seem to be randomly created and randomly reinforced by events and environmental stimuli. Belief development seems to be left to chance, unless you view beliefs as a byproduct of social indoctrination that is fostered (foisted upon?) in a noble attempt to socialize our young people.

Such beliefs seem idiosyncratic and out of reach of normal change methods, or are they?

So, what role do teachers play in ensuring that the indoctrination and belief-creation process at work in our schools is effective.

And, what control can teachers exert upon the belief structure of their students, and upon their own belief structures? Are teachers ensuring that their personal and instructional reality supports positive, worthwhile, self-affirming goals and intentions?

Sidebar Fantasies are experiences that we believe are not real. We relegate these experiences to the realm of the imaginative, to dreams and to daydreams.

The question is, "What is our personal reality" since events and occurrence are filtered by our beliefs.

One concern develops when one of our beliefs conflicts with another of our beliefs. Sometimes one belief cancels out another, similar to the way that one ripple on a pond's surface cancels another ripple. At other times, our beliefs can coincide, and increase the strength of one or both. Other possibilities … beliefs in conflict that: Eliminate one belief
Eliminates both beliefs

Transforms one belief

Transforms both beliefs

Subsume one belief within another

Merge with yet another belief or set of beliefs

Beliefs are more fluid and malleable than we have been conditioned to assume.

Why Beliefs are Important to Teachers? Beliefs are important to teachers because teachers are in the business of changing thoughts, ideas, behaviors, skills and beliefs.

Of course, it may be "politically incorrect" for a teacher to admit that the primary job of a teacher is to influence change, and teachers have to step gingerly whenever the subject of religion rears its "censoring, ugly head."

Education must rely on the open-ended ability to ask questions, tough questions, hard to answer questions, questions that don't have a pat, politically correct, or status-quo stake in our educational bureaucracies.

A fair and inclusive dialog must examine our educational (and our personal) realities. Real questions must be answered. For example: How do we change, fix, repair or adjust beliefs that server to limit our success (a disservice to ourselves and our students)?

How do we change beliefs that we don't even realize the we have?

How do we separate beliefs from religion, ethics, morals and values?

How do we change the beliefs of students in an ethical and moral way, especially if students and parents state that they don't want the religion and values of these students tampered with?

Can verbal communication (the main tool that teachers have to work with in changing the behavior and beliefs of students) really change the beliefs of ourselves and others? Making the Unseen and Hidden Known A body of knowledge and skills for changing beliefs, often at an almost instant pace is available using a technology known as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

This technology relies upon the fact that beliefs are moderated by sensory-mental processes, and that tampering with these processes can produce change and transformation … rather quickly.

Some of the NLP magic can be worked upon ourselves, but many of the belief-transforming processes require the help of others. We often need the help of others because we experience difficulty peering through our beliefs. Otherwise, pulling off the change and transformation process is easy.

Dissecting your Sensory/ Mental Processing Framework

The skills and steps of NLP Belief change are beyond the scope of this short article, however, Classroom Toolkit will investigate this topic in upcoming articles.

In the meantime, pay attention to the mental pictures, self-talk, and internal sensations that seem to be connected in some way to your beliefs. And, focus upon your self-limiting beliefs because you have need to tamper with beliefs that are delivering success and prosperity to you and your students.

Just remember that your internal processing power was designed for success. You can make changes that transform your beliefs, and these changes can appear to be magic.

Pay attention to your limits, and you quickly encounter what "limits you."

More likely than not, that which limits you is within yourself. Don't put up with believing that your barriers to self-actualization come from outside.

Do you have the courage to take charge and design your experience?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Short Article

Befriend the Difficult Other: Feel Better about Yourself

"Difficult Others" are often our most effective teachers. Why? "Difficult Others" are like rubbing the hair on a monkey's back. If we stroke in the smooth direction, we don't find the fleas that we uncover by stroking the hair in "rubbing-in-the-wrong-way" direction.

Don't get this wrong. Those difficult others may have "fleas and blood-sucking pests" hidden underneath their facade, but the irritants that are most useful for us to discover are our own. Another analogy that describes our relationship with the "Difficult Other" is that of the "splinter." When we ram a splinter under our skin, we receive constant "signals" often escalating signals, to take action and rid ourselves of the irritation. Here again, it's easy to assume that the irritant that needs to be removed is the "Difficult Other." However, honest (often painfully honest) self-examination reveals that the splinter, irritant, foreign object that needs to be plucked out, lanced, excised … is in ourselves.

It would be a mistake to apply the analogy of a grain of sand in an oyster as evidence that just coating the irritant with something slippery and smoothing over the irritant in passive coexistence is a manageable strategy.

By coating sand with a smooth substance, the oyster enters into a powerless accommodation with the irritant. And, the accommodation provides nothing of value to the oyster. The pearl only gives the grain of sand a comfy, secure new coat, and enhances its appearance. The oyster gets little positive, only some negative reinforcement (i.e., removal of aversive stimuli or punishment) and doesn't really resolve the problem until it finds itself in a stew.

Instead, we benefit when the "Difficult Other" prompts us to examine the faults and flaws that are in ourselves. These flaws and faults are the ones that the "Difficult Other" launches, sets off, detonates. Our honest, truthful insightful examination of the situation and the relationship exposes: Inaccurate self-talk that incorrectly labels the meaning of the relationship, and incorrectly labels the meaning of the impact upon our lives

The fact that our self-limiting beliefs cause us to label the impact of the "Difficult Other" as a danger of threat to us and our lives

An "Outside of Conscious Awareness" mental picture (images, feelings, sensations, memories) that are "pushed-to-the-background" … painful avoidance responses to real-life experiences that we need to integrate into our psyche so that we can mature and act responsibly

Unfinished "Growing Up" and stunted wisdom that we fail to notice because we are so focused outward on the slights, scratches and bruises that we receive from the "Difficult Other"

So, use the unavoidable encounters with "Difficult Others" to further your own maturity and professionalism.

You can't avoid these encounters since "Difficult Others" are as ubiquitous as politicians at a lobbyists' free escort service.

So, if encountering "Difficult Others" is a natural occurrence, like sunburn, we might just as well take steps to protect ourselves.

And, most of those steps involve personal changes to a more rational belief system, and changes in the content of our self-talk. That means that the changes that matter most are changes that are within our control and within our sphere of influence (not dependent on others).

This is a difficult lesson, more difficult than blaming our stress, misery and frustration on our antagonist-enemy-superior-teacher, our "Difficult Special Other."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Monday, December 31, 2007

Short Article

Schools should be Run as Businesses: Reprise

Last month, Classroom Toolkit published an article about the long-term complaint (gripe) that "Schools should be run as businesses." [SidebarLink to the article, Should Schools be Run as a Business? What Business?](#) The complaint about schools being inefficient and poorly run resonates with politicians, the media and the public. In fact, many teachers, if they could

Sidebars was my personal observation when working for multiple school districts that in some cases the custodians had more common sense about what it took to run the school district than the district's administrators.

Teaching children is not quantum physics or advanced nuclear chemistry. Learning is innate in children, and children are eager to master their environment.

Schools where children don't learn are inexcusable. There is no excuse and no defense for such conditions. And it does not take terminal educational degrees, advanced calculus, multivariate statistics and experimental psychology to know that our schools have to expend a great deal of time, energy and money in their effort to block the learning potential for so many of our children.

This article examines what kind of business our schools' critics are referring to. Entrepreneurship People automatically think of "large-scale corporations" when they hear the complaint that "schools should operate more like businesses." But, most people don't realize that the economic powerhouse of our economy resides in "Small Businesses" rather than large corporations. Large corporations have operating capital, but they employ only a fraction of the workforce. The engine that creates jobs in our country is "Small Business." It is the spirit of the small business, the "Entrepreneurial Spirit" that school critics overlook. What makes Entrepreneurs Different? Entrepreneurs seem to possess a number of traits that differentiate the businesses that they run from the businesses that corporations run.

And, these traits may be just what school system critics wish that our schools would demonstrate in day-to-day operation. Here are a few of these traits:

Investment: Entrepreneurs invest in their business, and do not spend money on anything that does not result in profit

Consistent: Entrepreneurs keep on keeping on

Confident: Entrepreneurs are sure that what they are doing is right, and they exude that confidence

Patient: Entrepreneurs are willing to "bet the farm" and wait for the payoff

Flexible: Entrepreneurs build multiple skills and apply different strategies for different conditions

Accommodating: Entrepreneurs make things easy and comfortable for their clients and customers

Processes and Systems: Entrepreneurs develop processes and systems that they can replicate

Continuous Improvement: Entrepreneurs keep improving their business

Cloning Success by Training: Entrepreneurs package a "success skill set" and train every employee in

Measurement: Entrepreneurs know what is happening to every component of their businesses. And Entrepreneurs put streamlined measurement practices in place to keep in constant touch with the "pulse of their business"

Marketing: Entrepreneurs focus every effort, every message, every process and procedure on communicating the value of their business to the clients and customers

Delivering Benefits: Entrepreneurs deliver benefits to their clients and customers These traits might sound strange to an educator when framed around making money. But, these traits shouldn't sound strange when focused upon teaching children, serving their needs and improving the instructional process.

Entrepreneurs' Traits Reframed for Education

Here is what the entrepreneurs' traits would sound like if we rephrased them to match the "mission critical" processes of education:

Commitment: Means that we discover what methods are needed to teach every student, and that we keep working until every student is progressing and blossoming.

Investment: Means that Educators spend funds only on what is crucial to deliver our "mission critical, core functions" and we avoid spending any resources (time, energy, money, talent, training) on anything that does not add to our students' learning (our bottom line).

Consistent: Educators deliver top-quality services to students every hour of every school day, and the quality of the preparation time and training matches our highest standards.

Patient: Educators know what works for their particular students, and are willing to continue doing what pays off in increased student learning until students learn to their capacity.

Flexible: Educators build perfect multiple skills and apply different strategies for different types of students.

Accommodating: Educators adjust and adapt to the interests and needs of their students, and make learning as easy, fun, exciting and comfortable for students as we can.

Processes and Systems: Educators develop processes and systems that they can replicate, generally by the use of

technology; but also with quality training and mentoring programs. All new Educators are provided with as much help as they need so that they perfect their skills. This training is seen as an investment, rather than an overhead expense.

Continuous Improvement: Educators keep improving their business

Cloning Success by Training: Educators package a "success skill set" and train every employee in its application. The progress in improving is measured for every employee, and support for improvement is provided as a job "perk."

Measurement: Educators know what is happening to every component of their businesses. And Educators put streamlined measurement practices in place to keep in constant touch with the "pulse of their business"

Marketing: Educators focus every effort, every message, every process and procedure on communicating the value of their business to the clients and customers

Delivering Benefits: Educators deliver benefits to their clients and customers
Implications for our Critics
It may be difficult for the "corporate-minded," "chain-of-command-oriented" managers of our schools to convert from a minimally effective outlook to a "success-oriented, entrepreneurs' mind set."

Frustration and stagnation may have become institutionalized and solidified within the governance structure of some school districts. And, there is seems to be little relief from the politicians that impede progress by "layering" multiple, costly, non-productive policies and restrictions upon the management of our schools.

However, whenever the critics chant the; "Schools should be run as a business" mantra; we can deliver a "hot-air-deflating" retort by agreeing that this statement is true...if and only if the business model that schools use is an entrepreneur-type business model.
Final Word
And, to get in the last word, teachers can point out that, although the school district operates as a "bloated-budget, top-heavy, bureaucracy" (as Charter Schools often prove); I, as a teacher, operate as an entrepreneur within the system in delivering instructional service to my students.

Whatever the outcome of the total system, each teacher can run their own classrooms as an entrepreneur. This is the best method for assuring each students's success.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Friday, November 30, 2007

Short Article

Should Schools be Run as a Business? What Business? Critics moan and gripe that schools should be run as a business. By this, the critics mean that schools should operate within budgets, "cut out the fat" of wasteful extravagance, and focus upon core competencies and quit engaging in unproductive activities.

The critics also mean that schools should have every student on grade level at the same time, and that the money allocated for this target is more than adequate. (For schools that cower and ask, "Please a little more, Sir," the answer is "You can be replaced by a more cost effective and efficient model" (of teacher, principal, director, superintendent).

These critics also calculate shrinkage (technical term for lost product) of students (students that fail to graduate on time and within budget) because students are categorized as products. Sidebar The shrinkage (loss rate) should include: Drop Outs: (School leavers). There is a conflict in the critics' thinking on this issue since they sometimes categorize students as products, and sometimes categorize students as "customers" Defects: Students that can't function or perform at grade level at the specific school month that performance is measured Theft of Service: Teachers on the dole, drawing and undeserved paycheck because students have not progressed to specification Parents as Customers Parents could also be considered customers, as in "The customer is always right." Of course, teachers see this philosophy as administrative "waffling" and lack of support.

The corollary to this belief is, "If parents are always right, then teachers who disagree with them are always wrong." If students were to be treated as "always right" customers, then classroom management and discipline degrades to "The inmates are in charge of the asylum" level of control. Sidebar Teachers should be solicitous in fulfilling each student's learning needs.

What is detrimental is when one student places demands on the classroom system to the detriment of other students. The classroom milieu needs to operate for the benefit, satisfaction and support of all students. All students' rights must be maintained.

Of course, the Special Education needs of some students may require classroom compromise, and adjustments must be made.

What the critics forget is that substandard and defective materials are thrown on a pile by factory-based businesses, then sold for scrap, or, dumped into any convenient, unwatched place that can be found (such as our oceans). Perhaps our run-schools-as-a-business critics would like to meet the children that they want to discard. But, back to identifying the "Business" that our school systems should be in.

Sidebar Classroom Toolkit identified the multiple, multivariate roles that teachers take, and we won't repeat these. Here is the link to that article, Teaching: The Science of the Art

Are schools diploma mills, job training organizations, college prep factories? Or, are our schools total care facilities, holistic personal service organizations or self-improvement agencies?

Are our schools flexible service providers that accede to the wishes of parents, bend to the will of the community, squeeze to the propaganda of the media or contort to the whims of politicians?

Are classrooms screening labs where experimental studies are designed to maximize learning outcomes? Or, are classrooms artists' lofts and environments of free expression, refuges of personal creativity and genius?

But as the Internet boosts efficiency and world-wide communication as it propels progress, business is moving from an Industrial Economy to an Information Economy.

With these economic realities, everything about business changes.

But, does the business of education change with the times and pressures of the real world? Does the curriculum change?

Some items that a competitive, business like school system curriculum would integrate (actually build from the ground up rather than just remodel) include: Problem-solving

Decision-making

Strategic Planning

Project Management

Collaborative Task Group Operations

Marketing Skills

Relationship Building Some things that social engineers who believe that our schools should be operated as a business agree upon include and

A focus on the job of teaching students

A mandate for schools to live within the cash flow (abundant budget for what is important, not administrator whims

To deliver results, not persistent excuses

To give the "paying public" (customers, clients) what they want. Schools must not tell customers, clients, community members what the schools think that these stakeholders need

Making innovation and testing high-priorities

Acting on complaints, making changes that work

Obeying the Law: Firing ineffective superintendents, administrators, teachers

Keeping our schools safe. Prosecuting sexual abusers

Providing sufficient, adequate training and supervision that encourages success

Note: Efficiency means "doing right things right"

Effectiveness means "doing right things well"

Practical Barriers to "Bottom-Line Thinking" Schools should heed the bottom line, but should not cower and crawl prostrate at its feet. (Excuse the mixed metaphor. We all know that that a line has ends, but not feet.)

Schools cannot be run as a bottom-line worshipping business. Here are the reasons… Businesses follow the 80/20 Rule. That is, businesses focus on the top, profitable markets.

Imagine if we decide to target (and graduate) the top 80% of our students, and let the other, harder to teach, less motivated students flounder. Oh wait! For some of our schools operate with a 60% graduation rate. For these venues 80% would be a over a 130% improvement. Businesses drop unprofitable product lines

Businesses quit "making the thing" and quit offering the item or service that the public doesn't want. Oh wait! Aren't we doing the same thing when we drop art, music, drama, health and P. E. classes? Aren't we doing the same thing when we support high school athletics (such as football, basketball, baseball)? Aren't we doing the same thing when we focus upon the public's appetite for "test score improvement" instead of providing a balanced and long-term focus on life-long learning?

Businesses cut labor costs Fire them, outplace them, offer retirement bonuses, save funds by a reduction in force… Oh, wait! Don't we offer early retirement incentives to rid the school district operation of costly seniority (long-time on the job) labor.

Of course, we loose lots of institutional intelligence in the process, but schools don't have the money to hire all those out placed folks back as consultants… often for more money than they were making when employed.

Businesses go to great lengths to avoid litigation

Keep out of court, compromise with criminals when the cost of litigation (or bad public relations) exceeds the cost of the loss. Calculate costs before becoming embroiled in any legal proceedings. Oh wait! Don't we take prudent measures by pretending to offer Special Education students the services that they are "entitled to" by giving their parents everything that they want? Don't we continue to employ ineffective teachers who threaten to bring suit if they are fired? Don't we oust unpopular superintendents and pay them for the remaining years of their contracts (pay for no work), just to be rid of them?

If the mission of our schools is to act like a business, then our schools are performing this task with the noble skills of any bureaucracy. The Real Mission The real mission of our schools is to pull off an operation similar in complexity (but without the budget) of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) space program.

Here, fail-safe, i.e., expensive, multiple backup plans, feats of skill, engineering and an exquisite focus on collaboration account for success. Any margin of error is unacceptable, so every precaution is checked and rechecked to mitigate error.

Of course, fail-safe systems require backup equipment and backup employees. In the case of school districts, for example, what about a private tutor for every student that is "falling behind?"

Expecting "fail-safe systems" with "skimp and save" funding seems like the trait of someone that has been "sniffing moon gas."

If these "run schools as a business" rants typify the pontifications of our elected officials, we might stop and wonder who released them into the wilds inside the Beltway of through the metal detectors of our state capitals. An Educated Response to Critics So, the next time that folks say that schools should be run as a business, and do more with the resources that they have; ask them exactly what business they think that our schools should be in.

In a polite way, this simple questioning strategy will expose their ignorance, and, as long as you don't "rub it in," further gentle questioning on your part will make you look "very smart" in their eyes.

But, what do you expect to public to know about education? If school district executives and politicians don't know what it takes to teach children, how can we expect members of the public at large "to have a clue about the educational system that they complain so much about?" Executive Decision-Makers

Another way that schools fail to mark time with businesses is in the hiring and paying of executive talent.

Can you imagine a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) leading a corporation with \$33 million to \$1/2 billion USD working for \$100K to \$600K in salary… with limited fringe benefits, few perks, and zero stock options?

Of course, the school district is not making a profit. All that money coming in is tax money or state and federal warrants. Well, if schools are not making money, why don't we let them? Schools making as much profit as they could would really be running schools like a business, would it not? Complex Challenges: Sound Bites too Small The challenges facing school districts are complex, and often inflicted from outside (such as from politicians and the media). Sound bites prove to be too small a package to communicate these issues, yet sound bites are about the size of the attention span of our decision-making, customer public.

If that public had a clue about the complexities of our educational system, they would give teachers an olive-branch crown to wear and lavish praise at our feet.

Anyone want to bet that this won't happen anytime soon?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Wednesday, October 31, 2007

Short Article

Putting Students Ahead of the High-Stakes Test: Intra Classroom Public Relations Ploy?

Your students perform to their potential when they (think, feel, believe, know) that you care about them as (individuals, people, an important part of your life). But how can you "pull this off" when you are focused upon "teaching to the high-stakes test," and when your job is on the line?

Don't your students know that passing the high-stakes test is good for them, is pivotal for their economic survival, is their ticket to all the success and happiness of the "American Dream?"

Answer: They've heard this line hundreds of times (if not more), and they don't believe it. Fake it 'til you Mean It? The basic communication that you have to model, personify, be congruent with is; "It's not about me, your teachers, or about test scores; it's about you and your happiness."

Your attitude, thoughts and behaviors can't trick students, though. Your slightest self-interest will betray you.

Your approach has to demonstrate, show, objectify, "operationalize" real caring, and do this in a way that students recognize.

If you were a sales person, you would have to put the customer's needs before your commission checks. As a teacher, you are selling ideas, and you have to put your students' needs before the test scores.

It would be OK, if what students were called upon was easy, required nothing but a few dollars from their pocketbook, or required them to press the lever in a voting booth hard enough to dislodge the chad.

But no, what you ask students to do is substantial, difficult, with learning and unlearning barriers to surmount. The student that works after school 'till one A.M. is not lazy just because your homework was not completed and turned in in meticulous fashion.

The teen mother who got two hours sleep because she was nursing her ill and crying child is not disrespectful if she nods off during your extended period of pontification. When you take the time to know your students, take the time to find out how you can help them; then you will have the knowledge (to go with your gut wisdom) of creating a flexible path for each one's learning. The Most Unfair Method of Instruction: Treating Each Student Equally. Students are individuals, and need individual pathways to happiness.

Students are like diamonds, and each one must be studied in order to bring out brilliance and sparkle.

Politicians often think of the students that we graduate as our products, but it is shortsighted to think of students as raw materials that is to be processed in conformance to quality control standards.

Instead, we make students our "products" by tailoring our work to their needs. Hard to Understand Concept: Instruction Changes with Each Student. Master teachers understand that the ebb and flow of instruction changes with each student that is added or is subtracted from a classroom. Less talented teachers cannot comprehend the fact that communication changes, relationships alter, and assignments must be revised and adjusted to account for the new group dynamic.

Master teachers embrace this fact with relish and excitement because they learn something new, and because they perfect their skills with each student interaction.

Less talented teachers bemoan the fact that students don't act, think, feel, learn the ways that the teacher wishes that they would.

Celebrating the differences in students is the hallmark of a Master Teacher, and the lack of such perception of the value of each student is the "Scarlet Letter 'L'" (for Looser) that such a teacher proudly displays by their words and deeds.

So, the next time that a principal or school administrator browbeats you about redoubling your "teaching to the test" efforts; politely agree and promise to do your best.

But, know in your "heart of heart," that for you, students come first.

The paradox is that when your students come first, they achieve superior outcomes on those high-stakes tests. Students who perceive that the test scores are more important to their teacher than they are, lack the motivation, confidence and self-esteem to excel on the test.

Make sure that your students know that you care about them, and they will take care of you (and your job security) at testing time.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Sunday, September 30, 2007

Short Article

The Myth that Schools are "Under Funded": Busted! Everyone agrees that our schools are "under funded."

But, this collective group wisdom is a myth of mythical proportions, an Urban Legend of the most pervasive kind. Let's explore the facts…

To do that, we need to inspect the mission of our schools.

Here are some of the goals that our schools are tasked with…Transport students both ways in air conditioned busses fitted with seat belts. Not!

Watch over our children and return them home in one piece in better condition than they arrived (i.e., babysitting)

Feed our children on schedule, possibly with better food than they can get at home. If that is not possible, at least give them better food than they can get at the fast food places that their families frequent

Teach children how to pass all the high-stakes tests that "flesh is heir to"Putting our Schools' Fiscal House in OrderThe first step in eliminating this myth is to cut the fat from our school district's budgets.

All superfluous activities and money-wasting expenses, i.e., not focused upon improving test scores, must be eliminated.

These include:Art, Music and Drama Classes

P. E. Classes and Sports

Sex Education

Driver's Education

Technology and Computers

Labs. Let's concentrate on "book learning"

Counseling

In-School NursingRule: "If it ain't [sic] one of the three R's, we don't need it."

Places to cut back…Special Education programs

Dyslexia programs

Programs for Gifted and Talented StudentsThe key strategy here, because these groups bleed our schools through court rulings, is to provide a commensurate education. This strategy is easy. Determine how much money there is to spend, and back off on regular education targets so that the regular education targets match the average Special Education goals. In this way, everyone will focus on the same, lowest common denominator, and the budget math equation will be balanced.

As far as the Gifted and Talented students go, they have oodles of ability, and can take care of themselves. Who needs a separate program for them?Next Step: Back to BasicsOff loading any staff member that isn't directly teaching (to the test) will result in huge financial savings to our school districts.

But, trimming only at the teacher level, without pruning administrative and executive positions leaves an already top-heavy bureau cry with an unstable budgetary center of gravity (i.e., the budget tips and wobbles at the top.

Scaling back the paper shuffling requirements that most of the top level managers, administrators and executives twiddle with can free them up for productive work in the district's classrooms.Do we Really, Really Need to Pay for

These PerksFirst of all, health insurance for teachers, even though we provide minimal coverage at high cost to each teacher can be eliminated. And, since we don't need sickly teachers (they prove to be poor role models) we can replace them when they get sick.

Likewise, any teacher that is clumsy enough to be injured on the job and callous enough to file a Workman's Comp claim can be terminated at a school district's earliest convenience.

And, teacher sick days and personal days off create a drain on our school's budgets while providing no productivity benefit. A budget-minded school district should patch these money rat-holes at once.Belt-Tightening Service

ReductionThere is a need to perform a cost-benefit analysis to determine if certain services that the school provides are cost effective.

For example, transportation.

In some states (such as Texas) a school district is only required to provide bus transportation to students if some students are transported. If no students are transported, imagine the savings. So, many school districts should get out of the transportation business. Bus Fleet operation is not a core school district competency anyway, so, let all students (and their parents) fend for themselves.

The key here is a cost-benefit analysis. This analysis will determine if the loss in revenue from lower students' average daily attendance, and the increased legal and litigation costs (of taking parents to court for not ensuring that their children are in school) is smaller than the money saved by eliminating school bus service. If the savings are greater for eliminating bus service, then by all means, ditch the buses. (No pun intended)

Air conditioning and heating.

One belt-tightening solution here is to move to a four-day school week.

The benefit here is that school buildings only have to be heated (or cooled) for four days instead of five. Provide only cold water from both taps in the rest rooms, or, remove one tap and install automatic shut-off valves instead of faucets. If you remove the hot water faucet, remember to salvage the copper. The price of copper has increased, and if the money earned from the sale of scrap copper may cover the cost of the labor that is required to remove the extra faucets from all district rest rooms.

Many students don't wash their hands with soap and hot water anyway, after using the rest room facilities; so, these procedures will have limited statistical impact in the increased disease and illness that students and staff experience. As far as saving electricity, remember that all staff must to turn out the lights when they leave their room or workspace. Docking staff member's pay with a small fine for leaving the lights on while out of the room may be legal in some states. Check with the Attorney General of your state before instituting this procedure. Living within Our Budgets School finance is simple. Living within the district's means is doable.

This is as easy as listing all expenses in priority order, then drawing a line that reflects real money. Every budget item above the line is funded. Any budget item below the line is discarded.

Of course, standards have to be set so that adequate funds are provided to ensure that each of the items will be funded to a level that guarantees success. The "business as usual" strategy of doling out partial sums and spreading resources too thin has to change.

In fact, this exercise in "fiscal irresponsibility" is the single cause that propagates the "schools don't have enough money," myth. Public Accountability The clamor for accountability often targets teachers in its gun sights. But, the correct accountability for our schools is for the public at large that pays for them. The din is raised demanding that teachers do a better job of teaching. What is overlooked is that the public needs to do a better job of looking at its own culpability. Actually, the public receives better schools than they pay for because teachers are driven by idealism and fear of complaints.

The public wants to pay for a no-frills educational flat, but then wants to move into the penthouse.

And, it is the complaint-adverse bureaucracy that props up such a stupid notion, and perpetuates the under funding myth. Why should teachers work without compensation

Not our Business Brothers' Keepers

If addition, our schools mission lacks a funding commitment to provide pre-employment technology training. So, most of the money that is spent on technology can be saved. Once we realize that if employers want our schools to train students in the use of technology, then those employers should fund that training directly, and in proportion to the benefits that they derive.

Schools cannot afford (no pun intended) to carry businesses when those businesses fail to contribute their fair share of the costs.

So what if the community" believes that schools should prepare students for future job markets. Does that same community submit to the tripling or quadrupling of the money that they invest in taxes to pay for this luxury.

If this "community demand" is not matched by money on demand for our schools, then the demand is a veiled, hollow complaint. High-Roller Budget Panic: Wastrel Tactics of Budget Managers How many times a year, in how many departments, do budget managers play "high-roller wastrel?"

Everyone knows this tactic by its pseudonym, "spend it or loose it."

This "money wasting extravaganza" happens in school districts in two ways: Budget managers approach the end of the budget year with dread. If they don't spend all the money that they were allocated, then they will loose the unspent amount for the following year

A huge sum of money is made available by rolling over funds, for some state or federal program, and hundreds of thousands must be spent within a few weeks So, higher ups scramble to purchase "big ticket" items, most of which will never be used Suggestions for handling this fiscal misfeasance: Loose the money! It is better to have a smaller budget the next year than to dump money in the "spend it now or loose it landfill." Reward the budget managers who didn't spend the money with a 10% finder's fee Send the money back to the state or federal government, or Find out what teachers need ahead of time with the secret technique of "asking them" Gather teacher purchase requests, and hold them until the state of federal money becomes available Planning and sound fiscal management are the cures for bureaucratic waste and abuse. Enlightened management could be rewarded, instead of being punished like it is under the current system. Call the executive decision-makers bluff. Let the budget amount fall to draconian levels where the department of organization cannot function. Then place a special request for the funds. The ploy here either will work, or, it will get the budget manager fired. Maybe both. But, letting a budget fall to unworkable levels will be seen as the "fault" of the highest levels of the school district, and, with luck, might just get the people who really cause budget waste to be fired. These perpetrators (perps) should be prosecuted for the waste and abuse that their unenlightened approach to budgeting and spending creates. Summary While these recommendations distort and obscure the boundaries between fantasy and satire, one thing is clear. Our schools need leaders with the courage to confront the "under funding myth" with a clear message.. "We deliver the best quality educational product possible, and we do this as efficiently and effectively as possible. However, we are only going to do what we have money to do, and mediocre results from partially funded initiatives are a thing of the past. We are only going to do what we have money to do. If our community has other or more priorities, then prove it by providing the funds. If the community can't cough up the money, then quit complaining. You are getting just what you are paying for." And, reward the staff members that save real money, and fire

the folks who trod the bureaucratic budget road to perdition.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 09:00

Friday, August 31, 2007

Short Article

Rabbit's Foot Leadership

"Rabbit's Foot leadership" is about the only type of leadership that is available to executives and managers of our public schools. Why "Rabbit's Foot?"

As the joke goes, "How can the foot be lucky? Look what it did for the rabbit."

The metaphor of the rabbit stems from the era of Aesop. In the fables by the same name, the rabbit was portrayed as a timid creature, with a level of courage lower than any other animal, except for the frog.

In the same way, bureaucratic leaders exhibit a scarcity of courage on the "courage level dipstick." The only group that registers lower on the "courage-o-meter" are television network executives who prefer to air salacious and lurid (as close to the smut surface as they can get without a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) fine, instead of educational and uplifting programming. Sidebar You do support your local educational television station and Public Radio, don't you? Characteristics of the "Rabbit Foot & Leader The key to understanding the Rabbit's Foot leader is to understand survival by dodging, survival by running in circles to avoid predatory issues.

Rabbit's Foot Leadership is being nimble on one's feet, hopping just out of reach of danger; not venturing too far out of the bureaucratic comfort zone lest another danger lurks.

This is called "Leadership by the Quick Step,"; (some would call it the "Shuffle"); i.e., dancing just out of the reach of danger, but skirting "new dangers" by taking an indefinite stand…"Spin your Partner, Twist Again!" Safety in the Rabbit Hole When the hound-pack of accountability, track-record, and transparency begins closing in, institutional survival tactics must be employed (no pun intended). These survival tactics mean ducking into the rabbit hole. Sidebar The bureaucratic "Prime Directive" differs from the personal "Prime Directive" in this way. The personal prime directive is to "protect your job at all cost." The institutional "Prime Directive" is to "protect your boss' job at all costs, even at the cost of your own…neck, hide, skin.

Captains go down with the ship, but "Good Soldiers" take a bullet for their "big chief." Descriptions for what might happen to the "protect-at-all-costs" job if "ducking into the rabbit hole isn't effective include seeing the job go…Up in Smoke Down in Flames

Out the Door

Off the Charts

On the Rocks

Into the Fire

Against the Ropes

From Heaven to xxx The trick is to "set the hounds on someone else's track, and let an underling take the…Rap

Fall

Flack

Fallout

Tail-Kicking

Whipping In the "almost words" of an immortal commercial, "The underlings take the licking, so the boss goes on ticking." Borrowing Another Icon And there is no copyright infringement in drumming up the image of another rabbit-related drum-thumping icon, but the idea of just drumming along in a mindless fashion is enough to energize any Rabbit's Foot school leader. Sidebar This is parody, and the Supreme Court sanctions our right to borrow. Another Rabbit's Foot Leadership skill is in "Beating one's own Drum."

"Tooting one's own Horn" is necessary, even if the band bus wallows in the swamp after deferring to "executive guidance."

No matter how many "sour notes" are played by this "fan club solo," "the show must go on," and the "Spin" must be doctored. Rabbit's Foot Leadership to the rescue. Talk fast, think on your feet, grasp for any passing flotsam to keep afloat…other hallmarks of Rabbit's Foot leadership.

Of course, some folks will decry this state of affairs…

But, no, we're not going there because this is an article about school leaders, not politicians and elected officials…although there is some infidelity to the cause of educating our children.

That proclivity of rabbits (and some politicians) isn't the focus of this article. How does Anything at All Get Done? Noticing that Rabbit's Foot Leaders such as the ones described in this article abound in the school district habitat, one might worry…and assume…and lament that "nothing of value will ever get done in our schools."

This would be true except: Students learn in spite of administrative bungling and issue sidestepping

Teachers learn to "fly under the radar" and avoid detection for employing sound instructional strategies amidst the wail of administrative directives

Teachers and students are so incredibly creative and inventive that they can make the most of a bad learning

environment So, it is the "on the dodge" pattern of the Rabbit's Foot Leader in our school district bureaucracy that enables any teaching at all in the classroom environment.

Of course, this brings to mind the mixed metaphor of another group of critters, each personifying this trait of Rabbit's Foot Leadership.

Not sure which one we mean? Well, it isn't menagerie in Henny Penny's barnyard.

Give up?

Here's a clue…

Picture four monkeys, three with hands strategically placed to signify traits of the Rabbit's Foot Leader.

And the fourth monkey. Come on, you know. It's on your back!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Tuesday, July 31. 2007

Short Article

Teaching: The Science of the Art

There has been a long-standing debate concerning whether teaching is a science or an art. Of course, the fallacy of creating a dilemma is that teaching is not an "either-or," but a "both."

Teaching is both a science and an art. And, teaching is a "whole lot more," too.

If teaching is more than a science and an art, what is it? Teaching can be labeled as a/ an…Baby Sitting

Banker

Cafeteria Monitor

Chaperone

Coach

Computer Trainer/ Technician

Consultant

Crowd Control (Playground Duty, Bus Duty, Hall Duty)

Counselor

Executive

Information Marketer

Knowledge Worker

Law Enforcement and ParaLegal

Librarian and Media Specialist

Maid/ Custodian

Manager

Mediator/ Negotiator

Party Planner

Planning and Project Manager

Producer/ Director

Public Relations

Referee

Sales Person

Secretary

Software Trainer

Zoo KeeperNot a Great DebateAs debates go, the "science or art" debate is pretty ho-hum, dull.

Besides not caring about the debate because they are too busy, teachers have opinions based upon their personality and their indoctrination.

SidebartIt still holds true that teachers tend to teach the way that they were taught. This speaks volumes about the effect of modeling upon learning. It is also true that a "preponderance" of teachers are first born and only children, so maybe early learning affects later roles in life to a large extent. But, younger siblings are apt to become artists. But, there is a Science to the ArtThe basic focus of science is the "Scientific Method."

And, it is the scientific method that sets Master Teachers apart from their "Run of the Mill" colleagues.

This does not mean that Master Teachers are smarter than their colleagues. It also does not mean that they possess "Teaching Intelligence" and their colleagues don't.

It does mean that if their colleagues went about practicing the science of teaching, they could learn to be Master Teachers, too. What is the Key? The key to the science of teaching is observation.

But, this is not a "just watch what happens" kind of watching. This is a make a prediction (a hypothesis) about what you are seeing, hearing, sensing in the observation and communication with your students.

This is about making predictions about the way your students think and behave, about how your students learn and remember, about how your students process and perform.

Then, this is about performing an experiment to determine if your guesses, hunches, intuitions were accurate.

It is the testing out of your guesses to find out if you were correct that turns a teacher into a Master Teacher.

This "guess/ test out/ guess again/ test again process" forms the basis for teachers to zero in on the crucial elements to develop flexible habits of successful teaching…Acting on vision (AoV)

Plan into Action (PiA)

Executing with Elegance(EwE)

Activities and Instructional Deliver Skills (AnIDS)

Application and Performance (AnP)Driving Instruction with Creativity, Emotion, Intuition and EnergySome folks believe that these are the basic skills for the art of teaching.

But, this could be a "Shining Star" performer, a "center of social attention" and a less than effective teacher.

But, all the person of Creativity, Emotion, Intuition and Energy has to do to become effective is to adopt the Scientific Method, create "guesses" about what is happening in the minds of students and observe what is happening during student interactions with each other.

The important indicator is whether the teacher relinquishes the spotlight and steps off of stage center.

Driving Instruction in a Lab Coat

Of course, the opposite of effective can happen with too scientific an presence in the classroom.

A teacher that creates a "test-tube" environment where sterile, aloof, void of tenderness, feeling or heart can kill interaction.

Observer with out a personal presence is neither science or art, but incompetence in disguise as a human.

Authentic Human Interaction

In the end, the Science or Art debate is just silly.

But, one thing that teachers without theory is authentic human interaction.

For years, the idea of "authentic assessment" has floated with the "Tides of Fad and Foolishness," and the great idea (which fits into the science and the art models) has languished.

But, even more important is the idea that the teacher acts, expresses, and communicates as an authentic person.

The full expression of this would probably be called the Science and the Art of being and communicating as a fully human person.

Whether it takes a science or an art to be yourself, might set off a even more serious debate.

One thing is sure, if being authentic is all it takes to become a successful teacher, then there will probably be a passel of politicians and a Supreme Court ruling that outlaws the practice.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Saturday, June 30, 2007

Short Article

Poverty Consciousness: Why School Districts do the Opposite of what they Should during Economic Slowdowns
How many times have we heard the phrase, "budget concerns," muttered in the same breath as "education," "school district" or "teaching?" Other phrases often correlated with "budget concerns" include:

Budget Crisis
Budget Shortfall
Belt Tightening
Cutbacks
Funding Crisis

These are associated with the dreaded and dire predictions such as…

"Reduction in Force"
"Staff Cuts"
"Shrinking Cash Flow"
"Austerity Measures"
"Shared Pain"

What these phrases have in common is a focus upon "limited resources for unlimited needs." What these trite cliches reveal is a "Consciousness of Poverty, impoverished thinking and a focus upon lack of resources." So many Words: So little Creative Thought
The fact that so many negative words and phrases are in play during educational management dialog and governance decision-making anguish indicates that the "under funding mind set syndrome" and its associated "concept-shortfall" is rampant.

This "short-sighted" perception and impoverished belief system permeates the thoughts and feelings of school district leaders who otherwise show good sense. This limited perception and narrowed point of view sets the scene, plays dirge background music and infects otherwise jolly souls with the "doom and gloom" of career expectations of shared misery and learned hopelessness.

Sidebar
This is an interesting phenomenon observed with…
The Urban Myth of 65 words for snow among eskimos
There are multiple "Eskimo" languages

Eskimo languages are "polysynthetic." This means that nouns can be added together to perform the same function that adjectives perform in English

"In fact, the number of Eskimo words for snow is unbounded, because Eskimo languages (like many native North American languages) are polysynthetic. Polysynthetic languages allow noun-incorporation, resulting in a single word that is the equivalent of a phrase in other languages (Spencer 1991), having a system of derivational suffixes for word formation to which speakers can recursively add snow-referring roots. As in English, there is a handful of these snow-referring roots, such as for "snowflake", "blizzard", "drift". What an English speaker would describe as "frosty sparkling snow" a speaker of an Eskimo language such as Inuinnaqtun would call "patuqun", and express "is covered in frosty sparkling snow" as "patuqutaujuq". The concept is the same in both languages. This is true of things other than snow: "qinmiq" means "dog", "qinmiarjuk" "young dog", and "qinmiqtuqtuq" "goes by dog team"."

See Wikipedia for exposure of this myth

165 words for tree bark in the Cherokee language

The Cherokee language is also polysynthetic

The kinds of uses for in the Cherokee language included the blend of the word bark to mean "cloth and paper," processes done to tree bark, how the bark was collected (by hand, with fire, with tools), what side of the tree the bark was found, how the bark was used (medicine, dye, writing, etc.)

There are too many references for this. Perform a search at Google(TM) "words-for-tree-bark-in-cherokee-language"

160 words referring to "camel" among the Bedouins

Link to a great article about camels citing this fact

Words that are important multiply, and these words present subtle variations to show distinctions, shades of meaning and different aspects and viewpoints.
Litmus Test for Poverty Consciousness
What this focusing upon "scarcity and lack" does is create a sort of "tunnel vision" and a shared commiseration among school district executive decision-makers, folks that should know better and who should do better to help their clients. (Note: Clients are those persons whose care is held in trust. In the case of school district executives, students, teachers and district staff members are the executive decision-maker's the clients.)
By riveting their attention upon "limitation and lack," school district executive decision-makers focus everyone's attention (an attraction force) upon what they do not want to attract.

This does not mean that placing attention upon the negative condition is the "cause" of the deepening, depressed (and depressing) cash flow. The process involves the fact that belief systems tend "help" people see what they believe. In the case of scarcity-and-lack-focused school district executives, the process tends to warp and skew their decisions in favor

of digging on the "slippery slope" of the money sump, and sliding headlong into its morass. They tend to expect the worst, and act like economic ruin is a forgone conclusion unless they take drastic, painful-to-their-clients, measures.

SidebarThe Law of Attraction:

Some folks believe that one function of the human mind is the ability to attract into our lives exactly what we focus upon, what we imagine vividly, what we accept and believe as though this event or condition has already happened.

This process is called "Creative Imagination" that is different than the "Law of Attraction." See Wikipedia for a discussion of the Law of Attraction. We are not discussing "mystical principles" here, but the tendency for people who are under stress to...

Begin to narrow their vision toward "tunnel vision"

Perceive threats more vividly, with heightened levels of threat and panic

Perceive opportunities less vividly, if at all

Begin to process information with their least strong thought modality, i.e., use their weakest thinking skills in problem-solving

Communicate their stress in ways that diminish the confidence that others have in their insight and their decisions

Sink into a "See, I told you so" defensive position when their ideas are questioned or challenged

This creates a mental depression in thought and ideas that become associated with limited resources and lack. This is a "rut," a fixation upon all the woes that "school district flesh is heir to, and a self-limiting process that leads to creative solution stagnation." Batten Down the Hatches Action paralysis (from panic and fear) infects the "creative thought glands" of school district executive decision-makers; those leaders who should know and do better, but who instead "circle the wagons" into a defensive position.

Their patented response: to "Batten down the fiscal hatches" and await (and wait out) the "long winter of discontent."

A ship at sea, when faced with a mammoth storm, perfect or otherwise, dumps ballast or cargo to increase buoyancy. A school district, faced with economic turmoil and money-sucking whirlpools, dumps staff to lighten the load. Backwards, Knee Jerk Of course, the knee-jerk reaction is backwards. What should be done is to focus upon increasing revenue and cash flow. Instead of "moan and groan" commiseration with colleagues and a "Woe is us" acceptance, school district decision-makers should become pro-active. Really, the time to have taken care of this issue was "before hand" because no thinking person believes that school district executives are ever "blind sided" or "caught with their pants down" about the financial straits that they find themselves in from time to time. So, what adaptation lifeboat does the panic drive school district decision-makers to cling to?

Downsizing staff, austerity measures and "belt tightening," early retirement incentives, reduction in force for "non-essential" programs and other variations of "retro" thinking are the "bureaucratic life preservers" that the vision-challenged decision-makers grab for "dear life." What should be Done The pro-active solution for school districts to increase cash flow, increase sales, increase fees and make more money preferably long before the "economic wolf" comes howling at the door. This is only a metaphor. Wolves are much nicer than creditors and politicians. In fact, in North America, there are no documented cases of a wolf or wolves (except maybe rabid ones) having attacked people. This may not be true in Europe. But, even in Europe, the wolves may have been attacking the horse, or horses, and not the rider or carriage occupants. Of course, there are some restrictions upon Not-for-Profit organizations such as which have 504 C 3 tax status. But, even if school districts made taxable money, it is an easy matter to pay taxes on profits. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) rules for a not-for-profit organization maintaining their tax-exempt status is a comparison of the percentage of profit-making, compared to the organization's total exempt activities. The amount of non-exempt business revenue must be small, if not substantially related to the organization's tax-exempt mission. Since even small school districts have budgets in the multiple millions (or tens of millions) of dollars, school districts would be so lucky as to be making too much money by normal business means! A Business Analogy Here is what a business would do if it followed school district "worst practices."

In times of economic down turn (recession or depression), the "don't have a clue" organization would... Fire sales staff

Decrease commission rates paid to sales staff

Lay off production staff, managers

Cut all overtime pay

What businesses need to do in times of economic down turn include:

Transfer more staff to sales

Increase commissions

Offer productivity bonuses

Offer bonuses and discounts to customers for increased orders

Increase marketing efforts

Increase proven advertising

Find new markets Options for School Districts

Even though there are some federal and state restrictions upon how a school district can generate income, there are lots of things that school districts can do to increase cash flow. Some of these options include:

Grants

Incorporate a Private Foundation

Increase Fees

Move to a Four-Day School Week

Fundraising
School Business Partnerships
Selling Ad Space
License Materials and Collect Royalties for…

Distance Learning
Training
Professional
Books
Textbooks
Curriculum Materials
Software Programs

School districts can also explore lots of creative, cash generating avenues such as…Sponsor credit cards
Google™ AdSense ads on the School District's Website

Selling ad space on the inside (deplorable), and outside of school busses
Leasing meeting space, auditorium space, and facilities use during the evening and weekends
Selling services

Finder's Fees
Sponsorship of School functions by local business such as newsletters, event programs, and report cards

Lease busses to outside groups
Sponsor paid excursions and tours of the nearby local area for tourists

Create local programming for cable community events and access
School districts can save money on "cash hog" programs, i.e., programs that don't pay off in increased student achievement by dumping these programs. (Note: this does not mean dumping the people who manage and operate these programs. Move the people to money-producing activities.)

School districts can also transfer unused inventory from campus to campus, or to nearby school districts.SidebarThe amount of "waste" in terms of stored supplies can be staggering.Of course, there must be some incentive for district staff to turn in supplies. One approach might be a "finder's fee" of 10%, or a "materials swap" credit system.If the school district cannot bring themselves to provide a personal reward to teachers, then perhaps the teacher can earn credits for their campus.What not to DoSome strategies that school districts should choose not to do are:

Drop, outplace, "send the the glue factory" experienced staff in favor of "cheaper to keep" Newbies

Cut working and non-working programs an equal percentage, across the board

Keep investing funds where the direct connection to measurable instruction, learning and achievement has a negative correlation (Programs where there is no connection to real learning)

Collect fees for placing soft drink and snack food vending machines in school cafeteriasThe Real "Scary" Truth about Patron Support

The truth about what school district decision-makers can do is that patrons will support any reasonable "cost-cutting" or "revenue enhancing" methods if the district demonstrates a track record of building student achievement.

What is "scary" about this level of patron support is that, in order to earn and maintain such support, the district must…Operate in a transparent manner

Operate in a scientific, research-based manner

Measure and document improving achievement for every student

Treat student achievement as its first priority

Treat all students with caring, love and respect

Treat teacher improvement, with corresponding levels of support, as its second priority

Treat all teachers with caring, love and respect

Find the leadership that radiates "Success and Wealth Consciousness"It is a legitimate business expense for a school district to hire a non-educator chief executive, even at double or triple current salaries, who will bring increased revenues to the district

It may be necessary to search outside the education field for such an individual, since school district experience, earned while under the spell of poverty consciousness, will have "soured" the typical leader and biased this person's thinking in favor of "restriction, scarce resources and lack"

A chief executive who brings in ten, twenty, hundreds of times their salaries, in the form of new revenue streams, is worth every penny of their salaryThe good will of teachers, students, parents and patrons is easy to develop. All that is needed is to treat everyone with kindness, caring and respect

Existing, "no-can do" supervisors and decision-makers will become so uncomfortable in an open, transparent, caring organization that they will either change for the better, or leave to find another stagnant school district where the Philip of lack meshes with their limited world view

Be sure to replace "money misery and woe" thinking people with "can do" people that exude the attributes of success

and wealth consciousness

And what are the attributes of success and wealth consciousness?

The answer is that the right people will view and treat students and teachers as precious commodities. Success and wealth conscious leaders will show that students and teachers are more important than money. The paradox is that this attitude of success will bring in lots more money, and the people that are already in place, will be worth lots more because…

Of their cooperation with the new, dynamic leadership

Of their heightened morale

They become intrinsically motivated to live up to the high levels of esteem that success and wealth conscious leaders place in them

Of course, when viewed through the lenses of Poverty Consciousness, teachers and students are viewed as "costs" and teachers are viewed as "economic liabilities."

If students and teachers are more important than money, it is important to show them by spending money on them.

Success and Wealth Consciousness

Other people, companies, foundations, entrepreneurs, business leaders, celebrities will give school districts money if the district operates "above board" and if the school district can demonstrate a track record of success.

The state of the economy has nothing to do with this. Success consciousness and Wealth consciousness just attract like-minded people.

Success and wealth conscious are contagious.

Let's how that you catch some of the joy and some of the "can do" attitude in the district where you work.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Thursday, May 31, 2007

Short Article

Beware the "Computer Lab" Solution School administrators and parents pressure teachers to "integrate technology," and teachers have resigned themselves to the pervasiveness of this demand. But, it is folly to expect that the school district will provide the necessary computer and peripheral equipment to make this integration feasible.

One scheme that teacher will be presented with to accomplish this technology integration goal is the employment of a computer lab. What is a Computer Lab? A computer lab is a room with a lot of computers, preferably one computer for each student, or one computer for each two students. The computers are connected to the Internet, and to the school district's network.

That's it. Now, schedule your students, integrate technology and increase test scores!

But, what happens is that there are too few labs provided for the campus, maybe one per campus, one per grade level, one per department…never enough.

Here are the problems: Some teacher hog the lab

The time between scheduled access is too long

The amount of time in the lab is too short

Unless each student has an individual account and a home directory, ensuring that each student uses the same computer that they used the last time is a hassle

Students may not be allowed to plug in USB drives (virus concern), save to the local hard drive (space concern), insert a floppy disk (virus concern, new computer systems don't even come with floppy drives), etc. What is the Computer Lab Used For?

Because of scheduling limitations, the operation of these computer labs devolve to three general functions…

Word Processing

Internet Research

Creation of Computer Presentations There are a lot of other learning options that would be possible if… The students had more time

The right software was installed

The students could store files from anywhere in the district (even from home), and access them from the lab

The students had individual portfolios on the network

The teacher didn't have to be in the lab to supervise students

All students didn't have to receive the same briefing about the assignment or project before the students could start on the project. Labs, an Obsolete Strategy? We probably shouldn't want to build and support labs as an instructional alternative, anyway.

Long-standing research demonstrates that students made better gains in classrooms where teachers had several computers (four or five). Of course, the key was that teachers with computers in the classrooms needed to change their teaching style and instructional delivery.

Of course, one lab is a "cheaper" alternative to four or five computers in every classroom.

But, the lab problem contains problems that have "teacher components," that can't be blamed on the effect of a stingy IT budget. Teacher Issues The inherent flaw of using computer labs is the philosophy behind deploying them.

These labs are the result of Industrial Age, i.e., "factory-floor" thinking. Thinking that is out of place in modern education.

The problem is that the computer labs lend themselves to the industrial age strategies such as... Every student working on the same assignment, at the same time

Uniform assignments (so that grading is fair)

Project scheduling (and thinking about the project) maybe once a week during the lab time

Teacher does not have time to answer all students' questions at once

Project steps are slowed down to the lowest common denominator of student computer skill, where if the teacher is lucky, the computer interface can be demonstrated using a projection device

Individual student conferences (even mini conferences) are difficult to fit into the lab schedule

All project work stops when the class must exit the lab

The project work breaks the lesson cycle

Peer tutoring decreases because the "go-to, peer trainers are not available since they have to complete their own projects. We have a Lab Climate: What's a Teacher to Do? Understanding is the best strategy for "flying under the radar."

Avoid drawing any negative attention to yourself. Maintain the proper appearance to avoid "snooping" by Campus management. (In campus management, appearances often count more than substance.)

Knowing the limitations of computer labs allows you to look like you are using them to the maximum, allows you to look like you are supporting the campus computer initiative and allows you to look like you are making good use of the money that the campus (or district) wasted in installing the lab.

A few suggestions are to: Schedule your class(es) as much as possible

Prepare you class(es) for the lab visit just like you would prepare them for a field trip (that's what this lab visit is)
Use the lab time as a portion of a collaborative group project rather than as an individual typing assignment
Prepare rubrics, and prepare your class(es) before arriving at the lab
Provide all instructions about the assignment before arriving at the lab
Develop an online presence of your own, and allows students to access the project resources from home
Test the lab and work through the processes first, alone
Plan on reusing the same rules, rubrics, strategy, or project method for every lab visit for the year
Make the original assignment generic
Build the assignment or project in a modular fashion
Train students at every step of the project
Check each student to ensure that they know what to do before you arrive at the lab
Assign helpers, partners, buddies for each student. These are the first line helpers that students will turn to before seeking their teacher's help. Plan on a strategy where every student is doing something different while your class is using the lab.
If you plan ahead, you will be able to make the best out of a bad situation, such as school district administrators and parents expecting that you will be able to "integrate technology" by means of a computer lab.
Know the obstacles. By thinking ahead, you just might pull it off.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Monday, April 30, 2007

Short Article

What does it Take to Replicate a Pilot or Model Program?

The idea is great. Build a program that works, then clone the program. Let someone else shoulder the burden of thrashing out, fleshing out, tweaking a program; then grab their working model and "run with it." Once the kinks are worked out of a pilot or model program, we just make carbon copies and avoid start-up stress, avoid the confusion of pioneering, and avoid start-up costs. A copycat project should be a model of efficiency.

Great scheme! How come it just doesn't work? Unique, One of a Kind Programs: Local Issues Trump Uniformity Programs don't stamp out in replicas like auto body fenders, just like it students don't clone into uniform grade-level-month-achievement-levels.

So, once you have a package that someone else developed, what do you have? The Rest of the Story! The old saw, "the devil is in the details" applies to the implementing a pilot or model program. This "wise caution" applies when it seems like a "gremlin" sabotaged the program the second you began to implement it.

You expected to just plug in the package, "pop in your individual particulars" and skate on a "smooth-sailing," downhill slide to success and glory.

What you encounter as you implement the program is the "redacted" lessons-learned, and the unstated, "real-story" best-practices.

You have just been "Zapped!" by the best-face-forward documentation and the it's-easy-when-you-know-how" instruction pack.

Not that anyone from the pilot project wanted to deceive. They just wanted to keep their jobs. Maybe they didn't want to give the grant money back to the donor organization. They didn't want to embarrass their bosses, or lay the blame for project miscues where it belonged, on their supervisors.

An organization's stakeholders meddle in projects, and these decision-makers place obstacles and barriers to the smooth development of a project. Then, when staff works extra-hard to overcome the hurdles that the stakeholders placed on the playing field, those same supervisors frolic in the limelight and sop up the success accolades.

But, it is a career-stifling move to tell the world what happened to snag, delay and hamper the project when those lag-producing drags upon the project derived from internal pressures. Key Factors for Project Implementation The keys to a successful project implementation are...

Teamwork among the Principals (Maybe the Principals, too)

Contingency Plans (that head off trouble)

Formative Assessments (that identify what is going askew)

Rapid Response (with corrective actions) What the project team needs is a clear vision of what issues really impacted the pilot or model program. A public relations rendition of best-practices and lessons-learned serves no one except the "high-level, guilty."

Recipients and implementers of follow-on programs based upon the pilot or model program need to be informed about the "going-haywire-happenings" involved in the foibles, shortcomings or outright sabotage of the pilot program stakeholders.

Why expose such dirty underwear? Aren't the guilty best served by status-quo silence?

Absolutely not! The best information that implementers of the "copycat" program can have is a chronicle of how stakeholders from the pilot project "goofed" up the original project.

Armed with this information, the folks that implement the copycat program have the strongest repellent possible to ward off the meddling and depredations of current stakeholders. All they would have to do is refer to the documentation to show that such "bone-head" decisions during the pilot project were responsible for delay, diminished progress, squandered opportunities and accelerated cost overruns.

Real Copycat Project Requirements Real-world projects are unique, and must adapt to local issues, local concerns, differences between the pilot venue and the copycat site.

But, projects do need similar environments. Environments where... Upper level executive management commits to adequate funding

A clear vision of what will be accomplished

Competent staffing

A clear vision of the benefits that the program will produce for all concerned

Buy-in from the low-level staff that will actually implement the program

A realistic timeframe

Measurable milestones that are time-and-outcome specific

A realistic contingency plan There are more items that prove to be the pulse of a project, but these provide a clue as to the reason that pilot projects seldom "get off the ground" the way that copycat supporters imagine. Easy success for copycating a project is as rare as an airplane that flies without fuel. To Discover the Truth If you want to discover the truth about a project, ask the engineers.

This bit of wisdom was discovered by researcher, Scott Adams. One of the many truisms from the world of Dilbert is that engineers are like Vulcans, they cannot tell a lie. They will happily contradict their company's marketing hype, usually without even the slightest provocation, telling you: What their product does well What their product does poorly* What they wish their product could do

Source: Strange Connections
http://argus-acia.com/strange_connections/current_article.html

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Saturday, March 31, 2007

Short Article

Homework: Some Suggestions for Solving a Recalcitrant, Intractable Problem

Research fails to support homework as a strategy for improving instruction.

Of course, Classroom Toolkit has a unique slant on the practice of assigning homework. What is the problem with homework? Rhetorical Answer: What's wrong with a practice that… Students don't like

Adds to the teacher's workload

Adds stress to family life

Decreases children's play time

Fails to demonstrate that learning is increased in meaningful ways

Often seems like a punishment for working slowly (even meticulously) in school

Alienates teachers in the minds of students

Often is at the "frustration level" of the student, rather than the "independent level" Homework Hot Potato Here are some (honest, but less than politically adoptable) slants on homework...

Suggestion #1.) Teachers should not have to take so much work home, either.

Pay teachers overtime for any training, paper-grading and lesson planning that they can't complete during the school day.

Suggestion #2.) If students can't learn enough in the regular school day, provide tutoring with qualified staff for every one of these students.

Sidebar The lack of tutoring is where No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is "backward." Instead of an "impersonal, data-collection-from-afar, punitive, unfunded-mandate" that can never work, let's provide an immediate, up-close-and-personal, hands-on solution that will work (individual tutoring for every child).

Provide as much individual tutoring as each child that is "behind" needs.

Of course our sarcastic comment is that, if school districts were "forced" to provide individual tutoring for every student that is "behind;" then school districts would find creative ways to measure students and find them "caught up"...in ways similar to how so many school leavers (drop outs) fail to show up on school district and state tracking lists. Why? School districts can't deliver tutoring "on the cheap."

Suggestion #3.) Extend the school day

If the school day is not long enough for students to complete their work, then extend the school day and increase teachers' salaries proportionally.

And, don't just add more of the same hollow test-prep and lifeless, mindless, drill to the school day.

Add art, music, drama, dance, sports, chess, debate and other missing ingredients of today's sterile, high-stakes testing environment.

Suggestion #4.) Remove any requirement for homework, and let children bring in anything that they choose to do for "extra credit." Then, give the children credit for their work, no matter how banal or how creative.

Sidebar (Note: This is the suggestion that you can easily do. Follow this suggestion and you will add delight to your school day.

Remember: When you punish students for failing to complete homework assignments, you are "classically conditioning" students to react to learning with negative feelings and emotions.

In "operant conditioning," that which is rewarded increases, that which is punished is avoided.

When assessment is "polluted with punishment," grading reflects compliance with work assignments, rather than progress toward testable learning targets. Punitive grading because homework was not completed confounds the reporting of actual student learning.

There is no limit to the amount of data that children could collect… fodder for meaningful math problems, charting and graphing..when they are at school.

There is no limit to how many creative ideas that children can devise, and no limit to their motivation to express themselves if someone listens to them.

And, there is a need for teachers to understand what the daily lives of our children are like. Thought Stoppers? The reason that thought and discussion of the curriculum stops at the classroom door is that the "work" often is boring, irrelevant, and insulated from students' experience. Sometimes this is because the content is lacking, sometimes this is because the presentation is lacking. Learning for the sake of achieving a high score on a test motivates only the same minority of students who willingly do their homework.

Children flourish when we start with their world and help them expand their thoughts and perceptions. Children stagnate when we shoehorn their thinking into lockstep and force them to trudge through benchmark and high-stakes testing ruts.

Children learn by play and laughter. Memory connects best with joy and fun, and almost not at all with stress. Our schools would be delightful places if they were designed for children. But, our current factory-based school design doesn't allow for the messy, ad hoc, spur of the moment, catch a firefly, serendipity that typifies a real learning environment.

Our schools are too big and unmanageable. Immediacy and intimacy are structured out of the school day.

An Anachronistic Practice Geared for the Convenience of the Factory School

There are a minority of children that like academic work and are eager to complete homework assignments. For these students, the best thing that teachers can advise is, "Get a life!"

The reason that homework is for the convenience of the school is that it seeks to keep students in the grade-level, lockstep…supporting the fiction of "uniform, homogenized learning" and the "school-year, adequate-progress-month."

If children have to call a hotline, the homework is too difficult.

If family stress increases because the parents have to coerce their child to "do their homework," than the student has the wrong assignment.

But imagine the logistics and "grading nightmare" that the shop overseer (I mean teacher) faces if all students have different assignments.

How could such a flexible, built-on-student-choice-of-assignments, highly motivating, strategy demonstrate that all students are on track to meet the year-month-grade targets? Keep Workable Suggestions Under WrapsBut keep the suggestion about individual tutoring to yourself.

Otherwise, the "behind" that will be left behind will be yours…because there is no room in a school district's political establishment for anyone who suggests an expensive solution to educating our children. The school district bureaucracy can't count on your loyalty if it spins the "nothing is too good for our kids" mantra, but you suggest a solution that the bureaucracy can't deliver, cheaply."

So, pretend that homework is important, secretly assign the right kind of homework where students think, create, gather data, dance, sing, act out, write, design…think. Assign the right kind of homework where students always succeed…homework that always brings their grades up.

Look at homework as the contents of a cafeteria tray, and don't insist that every student finishes everything.

A few changes on your part will transform homework from a divisive issue into meaningful learning.

"Backing off" on homework is the quickest strategy to making headway in learning.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

Short Article

The Role of Technology in Technology Integration: It's not what "They (IT Departments) Think"

Technology "integration into the curriculum" has been thrust upon teachers for the past dozen years or so. But, what does the integration of technology mean, and why should teachers care? In fact, few teachers care as much as they should; and few teachers take sufficient advantage of the opportunities that using various technologies present. The reason: School districts approach the "technology integration" process "backwards." What's Wrong with the Technology Integration Process? Issues with the integrating technology into the curriculum go beyond the ordinary culprits, i.e. …

Teachers often don't have up-to-date, reliable, working equipment

Teachers are expected to purchase their own equipment (and software) so that they can work at home without pay

Training is often after school or on weekends without compensation, release time or some system to make up for the teacher's investment

Subsidized personal computer purchase plans and employer-sponsored deep discounts are generally unavailable

There is a lot of stress in managing the logistics of cycling access for all students for the use of the limited equipment

Non-teachers purchase the technology without understanding curriculum and learning needs

Taking advantage of the "spur of the moment" student interest as it blossoms (or erupts) is difficult when you can't get to the equipment "on demand"

Teachers are "under the high-stakes-test-score microscope", and can't risk being labeled by their supervisors as anything other than being "test-score-power-productive" not computer power users

Teacher observations are "dog-and-pony-shows" where the variable of "unpredictable" equipment cannot be left to the

"chance that it will be working" What is Backwards What is backwards is that the technology integration efforts start outside of teaching (such as in IT Departments or state departments of education., of from the "Purveyors of Pork and Unfunded Mandates" in DC Fantasy Land) … Sidebar Has anyone else noticed that "Pork Barrel Projects" never seem earmarked for local, public education?

Perhaps this is because … Teachers don't have sufficient disposable income to contribute to political campaigns, and teachers' political action committees either lack sufficient "influence-bidding-lucre", or, they support the other party

Teachers express disdain for alcohol, gambling, tobacco, cattle grazing, timber cutting and oil drilling (on public lands), price supports for pharmaceutical companies and a myriad of other lucrative sources of campaign funding for our politicians

The politicians are saving your money until they can pass a solid "Voucher System" that will engineer a "spirit of competition" against our lackluster public schools and force those lazy, no-account teachers to get off their collective back bumpers and teach (for a change)

There is the tradition of "local control of schools" which means that politicians will find local officials "weaseling" them out of credit for any inadvertent benefits that ensue from the pork project

The "Beltway Bunglers" fear that they may actually achieve a level of influence in our schools, and then be "tagged" and held accountable for their inept performance

Note: Just look at all the damage that only a nine percent federal "contribution-with-strings-attached" stake has upon public education (as evidenced by the NCLB mess). Imagine the catastrophe for public education if federal meddling increased. We would fare better turning public education over to the officers of the Titanic than we would by allowing our politicians to pilot our public schools.

These technology integration efforts are replete with … Non-instructional goals

Minimal assessment of what students and teachers really need

The belief that it is the teachers job to "do whatever it takes" to make these initiative successful

Minimal training, and sometimes minimal access to the software

No (legal) access to the software at home (where they do most of their planning work)

No budget to make this happen

Little concern for providing the equipment, software or training that is required

Limited (if any) financial incentives (expect, possibly negative ones such as threats)

Limited understanding of what it takes to change habits of instruction Worse, the proponents of integrating technology failed to "do their homework" and cannot point to any definitive connection between technology and Students' learning

Test-score improvement

Any other observable, measurable, countable connection

Curriculum goals for student performance The vague goal for the integration of technology, at least for teachers, seems to be to appease employers who complain that high school graduates fail to live up to the "requirements of employability."

Sidebar See our article, Workforce Readiness: The Tripe Behind the Hype A Vision for Curriculum If technology

integration initiatives are to be successful, they must be build upon a vision for curriculum, teaching and learning, first and foremost.

The logic of: Students will graduate, sooner or later (maybe later, or maybe they'll drop out)

Most jobs (except maybe teaching) require the use of computer technology Therefore:

Teachers must integrate technology into classroom instruction (or students will be less employable than they are now) & fails to hold water. And by buying into arguments such as, "We don't know the technology, so we better let the 'experts' (technologists) decide", teachers have been complicit in allowing this backwards process to proliferate.

What every project manager knows is that the goals and objectives for successful projects must be framed, visioned, written, designed in business (or in our case) educational terms.

This means that "All educational technology projects need educational, instructional, student outcome goals

All goals and objectives must have student outcome measures

All educational technology projects must start from the needs of teachers and students

Technology considerations are secondary to instructional considerations

All equipment projects require: A software component

A training component

A programming infrastructure component

A guarantee of uptime and reliability
Sidebar In technology jargon, this guarantee of uptime is referred to as a "Service Level Agreement" (SLA)

Note: Meeting the requirement of a service level agreement is evaluated by the end user, never by technology. (Letting a technology department evaluate a service level agreement would be like allowing the fox to maintain an inventory of the chickens in the hen house.)
The True "Balance of Power"

Since successful technology integration initiatives in education need to substantiate an "educational case for launching the project," the place that these projects must start is with teachers.

It is the job of teachers to develop the requirements and specifications for instructional outcomes. Teachers should never prescribe technology, and the district's IT Department should never prescribe instructional outcomes.

Once instructional outcomes (as measured in observable student improvement targets) are developed, the instructional requirements and specifications are turned over to the IT Department for & Equipment, Software, Training, Infrastructure and Back-End Programming Specifications

The cost of the Equipment, Software, Training, Infrastructure and Back-End Programming for the project

A feasibility study and timeline

A detailed project plan

An estimate of the increased IT staff that are required to support the project
Note: "Service Level Agreements" and "Back-End Programming" are two "secrets" that most IT Departments "shield" from the eyes of & Teachers and Instructional Staff

Curriculum Staff

Training Staff

School District Administration
The reason given is that: Teachers and Curriculum Staff would not be able to understand the "complexities" of the technical issues

Administrators (even if they were "in the know") would never fund the project because "doing it right" would be too expensive and the project would never be approved
Of course, "doing the project right" is what has been missing from technology integration projects all along.
Sidebar Back-End programming and adequate technical support is crucial to the success of any technology integration project, but probably these required components are part of less than one percent of a typical IT project

The reason, (hidden from the view of Instruction and Curriculum), that Back-End Programming is not even suggested in most school district IT projects is that & The programmers with the skills required to convert Instructional and Curricular goals into "one click", usable packages are expensive. These programmers earn more than school principals, and even more than the superintendents of small school districts.

Almost all school district IT Departments are under staffed. And, this "under staffing" is in the range of a 50% to 66% shortfall at the technician levels, 80% shortfall at the levels of software and infrastructure engineers and database administrators, and at the 95% to 100% level for application and database programmers. It is more "convenient" for IT Departments to leave the complexity of the integration project "unstated" than to suggest that the district employ someone whose salary costs (is worth more) than the superintendent earns.

It is politically more expedient to claim that the failure of technology integration projects is caused by teachers (and maybe Curriculum staff) because they didn't fully support the technology; than to reveal that only, hardware and software; the easy parts of the project, were funded. What is left unstated in the project plan is that the parts of the project that would have "made it work" (and made it workable) were too expensive to garner administrative approval and backing.

Note: Since school districts will not or cannot fund technology integration projects at the appropriate level to guarantee instructional success, technology integration should probably not be done. Or, at any rate, responsibility for success should not be strapped (like targets) to the backs of teachers until the funding is available to do the project right.
School district administrator should just explain their constituents that they don't want to continue & Launching under

funded projects

Spinning "straw" results into "gilded, sounds like we administrators did a great job" tapestries of fantasy and self-importance

Blaming teachers (who are "innocent bystanders") in the failure of technology integration process
SidebarNote: The problem was created because teachers were only bystanders, not drivers of these technology integration projects. National Recognition (Of Sorts) of the Failed Technology Integration Problem Our federal, executive branch seems to recognize, although they don't come out and say it, that technology integration in public schools is "doomed." Evidence of this is the fact that, for the last several years, budgets sent to Congress have "gutted Ed Tech" funding. Congress, on the other hand, restored Ed Tech funding, but only to the level of "demonstration projects" that support state grants.

SidebarDoing Ed Tech "right" would require hundreds of billions of dollars each year instead of the "paltry" hundreds of millions that actually get appropriated and authorized. Strategic Technology Integration The biggest and most important focus of technology integration should be on the management and delivery of instruction. Other efforts in the education arena should be toward streamlining of business processes and support services so that all the materials, equipment and support that teachers need is delivered on time, set up immediately, is tested and operational. [Business and support services often forget that their mission (while important and crucial) is secondary to the support that they must deliver to teachers.] Students, teachers and instruction define education…budgets, business processes and administrative overhead exist only to support students, teachers and instruction.

A technology integration project begins with instruction (teachers), principals, curriculum leaders…rather with the IT Department ordering the "best" computers that the budget allows.

These groups (teachers, principals, curriculum leaders) must create the requirements and specifications as measured in terms of receiving ample instructional and administrative support, and in terms of receiving ample funding In fact, we might consider any technology integration project a failure if the IT Departments expects that just dropping some computers into a school is all that is required.

In fact, we can say that most technology integration projects have been "failures."

Here are the facts that "prove" that the integration of technology has been a "failure?" Most of these "efforts:" Were under funded

Originated from outside Instruction and Curriculum

Failed to contain the Back-End programming required to make implementation "One Click Easy"

Contained a training component as an after thought, if a training component was addressed at all

Were expected to operate by employing one third to one half of the technology support staff that were needed to keep the equipment upgraded, updated and working

Explanations for the integration projects' failures focused upon a lack of teacher "commitment" to the initiatives instead of asking why teachers were not driving the initiative with goals and students' instructional outcomes in the first place. What this dismal record and lack of an educational case for technology integration really means is that those technology integration efforts failed to achieve critical mass and teacher "buy in." The Technology Integration "Movement" focused upon technology reasons for making instructional changes. This is backwards because instructional goals drive need to drive technology projects and change.

What any project manager will tell you is that you must create a "Business Case" (or in our arena, an "Educational Case") for a project. This is a major reason that the integration of technology achieved such a dismal track record when compared to the amount of funding that was authorized. And, this is a major reason that technology was such an easy target for budget cutting as school district revenues contracted. Technology failed to provide a clear, measurable, educational connection…from technology spending to student achievement outcomes.

And, don't fall for the ploy that technology will save money by moving to Open Source (free) software projects.

School districts are in business to spend the money to educate children. School districts have never been commissioned to educate children "halfway, on-the-cheap, with as little cost as we can get away with"; so the Open Source argument doesn't hold water.

The next time that someone suggests that schools can save money by converting to Open Source software, ask this question, "What educational goals and what instructional objectives are driving this project proposal?"

All these are indicators demonstrate that Technology failed to do the job of delivering benefits for students and teachers, particularly in direct, measurable gains in student performance outcomes. Technology integration projects will succeed when technology departments can deliver on educational goals and when technology departments can provide educational mission critical applications.

"One Click" ease of use is not too much to ask. "One Click" applications, made possible by backend programming, is an instructional requirement, not a wished-for luxury.

Be sure that "One Click" requirements are in the specifications that drive your next technology integration project. And be sure that teachers are proposing that project.

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Short Article

Budget and Finance for School Folks who Love Children School district budgets are controlled by the folks at the top who have specialized training in the management of large, static sums of money. Might our school districts be better off if we hired executive types who know how to get more money, instead of "tightwad" types who howl and groan as though every penny spent on our children is extracted from their wallet with a stun gun and crowbar?

Would our school districts would be better off if we managed our budgets with the common sense of the staff who were two or three rungs down the "chain of command" ladder.

In fact, if you want to learn "where money is being wasted" on a campus, ask the custodian. The Money Savers The people in charge of school district budgets take pride in "saving money". But getting rid of the "Scrooge Mentality" of top school district management seems like a positive strategy if our goal is to improve the fiscal management of our schools where maximum benefits accrue to our children.

An analogy in business illustrates this point.

During a recession, the company that lays off its sales force, dies. The company that survives is the one where, not only do the salesmen keep their jobs, but everyone else in the company assumes a sales roll, too.

Yet the strategy of "going out and getting more money" seems to escape many of our top school district leaders. Budget Myths School district folks will tell you a lot about their budgets. They spend an inordinate amount of time calculating "the Budget" and they are proud of their acumen. But, their stories are more like mythology than gospel. Here are some budget myths … Myth: There is a shortage of money Fact: There is always plenty of money for the pet projects of the highest paid executives.

Fact: The school district has to keep a lot of money in reserve

Fact: Failing to hold enough funds in reserve to meet "the payroll" is the ultimate budget sin, far worse than

squandering money Myth: The amount of money is fixed Fact: There would be a lot more money if the folks at the district knew how to go about getting more of it.

Opinion: A "Fixed Income" mentality seems to be ingrained in many school district executives

Fact: For school districts with lots of low-income and minority students (the districts that complain the most about their lack of funds), the money that could be brought in is almost unlimited because agencies and organizations are willing to fund project that deliver results for these populations Myth: It is a conflict of interest to have teachers involved in the budget process Fact: Teachers are the only ones that know how the money can be used to improve education

Fact: Prohibitions keeping teachers from becoming active members of the school board stem from the "old days" where the town elders had to keep the one school teacher from offering themselves a \$1.00 raise per year

Fact: These were also the days when a school teacher could not get married (then become pregnant!) because they would ask for more money. Myth: The main goal of the budget is to save money Fact: The main goal is to juggle the money, so … Fact: There is plenty of money until the end of the year

Fact: The money is "all used up" by the end of the year

Fact: The amount of money for this year must not be "overspent" because this will come out of next year's budget

Fact: The amount of next year's budget must be bigger than this year's budget

Fact: The amount of money for next year will be cut if the money is not spent this year Myth: Expenditures are deliberate and wise Fact: Funds sometimes roll in (especially from the Federal Government) that have to be "spent in a week"

Fact: This leads to the "We have half a million dollars to spend by Monday" syndrome Myth: Schools are focused upon delivering a quality education Fact: School districts are focused upon delivering the highest quality education that they can purchase cheaply

Fact: Education bureaucracy, like other bureaucracies, are fueled by "mediocre madness". This is also called "Spin."

The strategy here is to reach at least the mediocre level of performance outcomes, but then talk up the features of the program as though the program was a "high payoff success" The "Caring about Learning" Alternative The people who

manage a school district budget need a vision of love, caring, support and encouragement; just like children receive from the professionals that teach them...sort of like how a devoted mom would advocate for her children.

But teaching professionals can't get what they need, when they need it to teach their classes. That is the reason that our school teachers spend an estimated \$1 billion a year of their own money to provide supplies and learning materials for their classrooms. Reward Factors Education higher-ups care about children and they have a vision for improving the lives of all students. But, their rewards are different than the rewards that teacher receive.

Teachers are rewarded by the smiles, hugs, excitement, enthusiasm and spark that they see in the children that they teach.

High level school executives are rewarded when school board members look at budget printouts and say, "Well done. Test scores are up, and the amount of money spent to achieve that goal is less than last year!"

This motivates the district's fiscal managers to reign in spending still further. Squeezing the Budget for All its Worth The

"tight-grip-on-the-wallet" folks choke the life and spark out of education, and crush teachers and staff under their thumbs. "Pinching pennies" is a kind name for the process of squelching the fire and energy that sings, dances, draws, paints and plays through the real treasures and assets of a school district, its students.

In fact, music, art and other "frills" (even physical education(PE) are the first programs cut when there are signs of a "we might have a shortfall" budget scare.

Next, expenditures are delayed. For example, computers that should be replaced after three years (because they are too old and slow) are kept running until they are six years old. Busses that should be replaced when they are 15 years old are kept running until they are 30 year old. Building repairs that should be completed now are left to fester until the entire building rots. Some repairs never get done. The Human Connection School district leaders will point out that 80% of a school district's budget is for personnel costs. (Notice that this is not considered an investment in human capital!) Listen carefully to this, because this is important. This fact is what separates the "common sense" of budgets that mere mortals (like us) understand from the the "Mt. Olympus view" of school district executive from high altitudes.

This reflects the "Law of Large Numbers" that clouds the minds of those at the summit when it comes to providing frills to the children at the foot of the holy mountain.

Here is how this works…

If a superintendent gets a raise of \$20,000 USD, this budget expense is affordable because the total cost is \$20 K ("chump change" that hardly shows up on the budget).

But, other administrative staff, counselors, principals, assistant principals, directors, grant writers and coordinators want their raises. So, \$2,000.00 for 100 people costs an additional \$200,000.

If teachers also get a raise of \$1,000 USD, the budget starts to become unaffordable because all 500 teachers expect the raise. This is already 1/2 million dollars, and is not "chicken feed."

But that is not all! Next, all the electricians, technicians, air conditioning specialists, plumbers, painters, mechanics, secretaries want their share, so 200 of these employees get \$500 each or another \$100,000.00.

Then, all the clerks, custodians, maids, cafeteria workers and building and grounds workers want their raises, and so 400 more of these employees get \$300.00, for another \$120,000.

And finally, the 75 bus drivers want their raise of \$100, for another \$7,500/00.

So, while a raise of \$20,000 USD is a paltry budget sum, the cost of providing all the other raises in this scenario ducks in at just under the million dollar ceiling.

So, if the superintendent threatens to leave to get more money, we better pay up.

But, if a teacher asks for more money, just let them go, because we can always replace them with a "Newbie" teacher who comes more cheaply.

It is this "Law of Large Budget Numbers" that makes school finance unintelligible to normal mortals.

But, the solution is always the same. Require that your school district's top money managers "go out and scrape up more money."

If your school district finds a person that can bring in the dollars, pay them whatever they want so you can keep them. They will be worth the budget expense.

Keeping these folks working for your district is like spending \$200,000 for their salaries and receiving multiple millions each year. They are a great investment.

School executives who bring in vast sums of money may not need the "heart of gold" that teachers have to have. But, they will have the room to look generous when teachers make requests for programs and projects that benefit children. We should focus upon providing every benefit for our children that we can. We may have to accept a lack of funds today, but we don't have to accept that scenario forever.

If you have a choice, opt for the executive who knows how to "spend money to make money."

Our students deserve nothing less.

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Short Article

Learned Helplessness: A Habit we Don't Want for Ourselves (or Our Students)

Situations exist. How we interpret situations determines our reaction to these situations. Our interpretation also determines our mood, and long-term, determines our beliefs. Learned helplessness refers to what happens when, after countless attempts, people come to believe that their work, strategies, techniques and efforts "get them nowhere, provide no positive payoff."

If a teacher comes to believe that a situation is hopeless, and the results of their work and effort are uncontrollable, a number of outcomes (all negative) are possible. This pattern exists for students, and teachers must remain alert to identifying the pattern.

This pattern can be one of the insidious side effects of the "test or crash and burn" No Child Left Behind Act policy. The "sin of test-benchmark failure," teaches guilt and shame. Unreasonable expectations (by students, teachers, counselors, or district administrators) for unattainable test mastery targets, and the resulting sense of failure; can create (especially for new teachers) a pattern of learned helplessness. Focusing upon Failure The patterns of thought and behavior resulting from focusing upon failure are manipulated by: Unreasonable Expectations

Over Ambitious Objectives

Inadequate Preparation

Substandard Tools

Scarce Resources

Inept Leadership

Under Funding

Malfunctioning Technology

Bureaucratic Meddling These are danger signs, so be alert to these issues and stop a "downhill slide" before it avalanches out of control.

In other words, take action to head off catastrophe.

Drowning and the Floatation Device is Just Out of Reach!

Teachers can give up hope when they interpret a situation as uncontrollable (or at least outside their control).

This can cause a teacher to stop striving, cause a teacher's energy to plummet, and cause a teacher to feel worthless and defective.

Worse still, the same events can cause similar feelings in students.

Long-term simmering in this "stew of self-dissatisfaction" can look like depression.

Some feelings and moods associated with the long-term "smackdown" of expectation and belief in a chronic deficiency in reaching goals (unrealistic or attainable, it doesn't matter) include: Sadness

Frustration, Irritability, Grouchiness, Moodiness

Tiredness, Limited Energy

Mood Swings

Difficulty in Keeping Thinking Focused

Insomnia and Sleeplessness, or Oversleeping and Still Feeling Tired

Loss of Appetite, or Overeating

A Sense of Doom, or a Fear of Being Fired, or a Fear of Being Placed on a Growth Plan

Anxiety, Worry, Fear or Dread

Over Argumentative Responses to Normal Situation

Outbursts of Anger, Retaliating against Others (even students)

Burnout Get Help, Now! If notice these signs of learned helplessness, anxiety or frustration; your only immediate response is to get help for yourself (or for the student who exhibits this pattern of behavior).

Some things are more important than high-stakes test scores, and the emotional and mental health of teachers and students is one of those more important things.

To subvert a parable: "What good is gaining acclaim for 100% student mastery on the high-stakes test if by doing so you loose the students to stress, loose the students to unreliable coping mechanisms such as sex, alcohol and drugs, and loose the caring and respect of your students?" How much worse if you loose yourself to these moods and feelings.

If you need help, get help. And get that help now.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Thursday, November 30, 2006

Short Article

Creative Thinking: An Undervalued Teacher Resource?

Creative thinking is a top ability that teachers and their employers often overlook.

Teachers overlook their need to create and express novel ideas because they are busy, stressed and overworked. The people that employ teachers overlook the need for teachers to create and express novel ideas because they both "feel and deal in stress", and because the bureaucracies that they work for cherish a complaint-free, no-risk environment.

Of course, new ideas involve risk. Therefore, new ideas are considered to be disruptive, risky, anti-harmony, anti-authority, "anti-my-way" forces that need to be squelched by some folks who are in charge. If Teachers don't Protect their Creative Freedom, Who Will? Teachers must advocate for themselves if they wish to protect their creative freedom.

Yes, unfortunately, this sometimes means relocating to another campus or school district. Some bureaucratic jurisdictions are so restrictive that teachers cannot, in good conscience, remain working there. Children in some campuses and districts are so poorly served that just drawing a paycheck becomes untenable.

Fortunately, in most employment venues, teachers are free to create and express, as long as they remain under the "complaint-driven" radar. Creative Principles Here are some strategies for developing an "all that you can be" creative, self-expressive environment; Do what is important, and find a way to defer urgent (but unimportant) tasks

Teachers need "stress-free" time to think in higher-order ways, incubate ideas, and reexamine possibilities

The "never-stop the action" daily routines that teachers face are poor environments for thinking and innovation. Motivate yourself to find your passion and desire, your personal stamp of self-expression. See each step (especially the steps that collapse under your feet) as learning opportunities and stepping stones. Communicate your successes (in subtle ways) to your supervisors to gain their confidence in your creative ideas.

Balance your ideas with the ideas of others. Creativity is kind and caring. Empathy and understanding improves most creative expression, while different viewpoints and vantage points enhance most creative ideas. Learn to view ideas as dependent, independent and interdependent on other ideas. Ideas do not flourish in a vacuum, but neither do ideas blossom in an overly compressed environment.

Relationships are important, associations, branches, Webs spawn other associations, branches and more Webs.

Cross pollination, cross fertilization, planning and accident, meticulous structure and mutation, control and serendipity; what surprises most about creativity is the unpredictability of the outcome.

Why didn't I think of that "simple solution" is as much a hallmark of creativity as an "earth-shaking, cutting-edge breakthrough in avant-garde technology." Self-Care: Caring for Students. Teachers who take care of themselves enjoy the most favorable position for helping their students.

Setting the stage for creative planning and creative problem solving requires the same timing, requires the same props, and requires the same direction and mind set as taking care of yourself.

Students learn better, more, faster, more thoroughly in the same stress-free environment that enhances memory and increases creativity.

Of course your students deserve the advantage of your creative ideas; applied to your instruction and applied to your life.

Create the space where creative ideas flourish and learning just about takes care of itself.

Your creative potential is vast, never over-tapped, always replenishing, and your greatest resource.

Praise yourself for all the creative ideas you have generated so far, and ever more remarkable ideas will bubble up, even erupt geyser-like, to benefit everyone.

Be ready!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Short Article

Parents: Political Allies or a Subversive, Detrimental Force in Education? You choose!

Almost all parents send their children to school.

Most parents cart or ship their kids off to school each morning because lots of positive benefits accrue to their children throughout their children's lives, and throughout their children's world-of-work careers. More than a few parents also send children to school because the schools provide free babysitting, and often, free meals.

Some parents send their children to school because doing so is the law.

And a few parents begrudge any time that their children spend at school. Some take their loathing, fear, or religious fervor so far as to keep their children home and going through the motions of "providing an education" at home, i.e., "Home Schooling." (Question: "Homeschooling" Oxymoron or not?) Sidebar The reason that parents are doing a disservice to their children by sheltering them with home schooling is fodder for exploration in another newsletter article. But briefly, the reason that most home-schooled children "loose out" is the same reason that studying a "foreign" language only from books and CDs is nowhere near as effective as studying with real people. Case in point: All the Japanese who study "American" (They think it is English). What they discover is that a mispronounced vocabulary serves up only "culture shock" when they arrive on our shores. The reason: "American" is a "culture," not a language. Support to Loose!

But, for most parents, the support for their children's teachers is "for the teacher to loose." Teachers normally inherit trust and respect when a child enrolls in their classroom.

Teachers, however, can destroy this natural good will.

Keeping in parents' good graces is tremendously easier than earning it back again!

An analogy: Imagine how many folks return to a used car lot (or even another store of any type), Website, laundromat, or even a public park...if their initial experience is negative. Grudge-carrying people return to venues associated with "bad" experiences only when they have no choice.

Grudge-carrying parents send their children to the schools after being aversively conditioned (generally by less-than-diplomatic teacher), too. But, these children now carry a "License to Wreck Havoc", granted by the disgruntled parent. Unlike the cheated, insulted, outraged used car buyer, the children are captive of their classrooms, and each day festers additional negative emotion and negative self-talk.

Disgruntled parents only send their children back to an antagonistic teacher's classroom because they have no choice. (Hint: The current school is often the only realistic choice, and many campuses refuse to transfer students to another classroom without an educational rationale.) Few parents have the resources to relocate their children to another school.

Captive "customers" simmer in ill will and an antagonistic mood. Teachers held "Over a Barrel"? Actually, no.

Diplomatic skills exhibited by teachers does not mean a "The Patron is Always Right" doormat policy.

Rather, the frame of mind of diplomatic teachers needs to be, "The partner (parent) is always worth listening to and negotiating with..."

Teachers who only deal with members of the teacher's "fan club" and ignore the rest miss a great opportunity.

Teachers who view their opportunity to communicate with, negotiate with, and correspond with parents...as one of the best resources in the education of their students...win out. These teachers win over most of the parents of their children.

The "80 / 20 Rule" applies in dealing with parents.

Normal communication efforts and a little effort (the 20%) is sufficient positive public relations for 80% of your students' parents. But, this is not "good enough."

Positive relationships with only 80% of your students' parents is Poorly Performing Schools In poorly performing schools, or in schools where the teacher fails to manage classroom discipline correctly, the parents perform the majority of the teaching that occurs for their child (children) in the guise of "homework." Sidebar One of the few occasions when drill and practice homework (for "reinforcement" is justified is when there is an ineffective teacher. There are so many productive activities that creative teachers can assign instead. Assignments that engage and energize students, not bore them with repetition.

Come to think of it, maybe assigning lots of "skill and reinforcement drill" may be a leading indicator of an ineffective teacher.

Comments anyone? Leadership Skills Teachers need to invite parents to become members of their children's "Teaching Team." And, teachers need to mean this, believe this, "psych" themselves if they have to until this becomes true.

If time and effort were money that a teacher invested, the highest payoff and return on this investment would be made by investing in partnering with parents. Partnering with parents builds sweat equity in a "Mutual Fund" of lifelong benefits for your students.

Saturday, September 30, 2006

Short Article

For Students of the Television Generation: Pitch your Content Area "Production" Knowledge for its own sake?

For your students, the "joy-of-learning-just-to-learn" concept went out with Welfare, the Social Safety Net, and universal health care. Today's students (of video game carpal thumb, television trance and Internet fame) are trained from toddler-hood to hold a ten second mental focus. This is about the longest amount of time before the television image changes. Some people think that this generation's attention span is "short". In reality, their attention span is "fast-paced and dynamic."

So what's a stodgy, over-twenty-nine-ish codger/ dowager-of-a-teacher to do?

Compete, that's what.

New "Lesson Cycle" Rules Replace your academic, facts-first, the-truth-behind-the-rest-of-the-story approach with instructional delivery that "rocks."

Even though you think that your words of wisdom are pearly-delights, your students find ordinarily lesson drivel to be lifeless, tasteless, boring and irrelevant to their lives.

And, students have heard so much about the "high-stakes-test" that "fear of the test" offers only "ho-hum" incentive or motivation for them.

But, get off the couch-potato side of the tube, and merge with your onscreen personality. Pitch your product so that your students' attention is captivated.

The Pitchman Cometh Notice that high-budget movies come out with a bang, not a pop, crackle, snap or sizzle. The flashy promo is called a "trailer."

No, you can't go "mano a mano" with the scantily-clad pretty people in the movies...well, maybe you can, but your job tenure will be shorter than your outfit.

Instead, train a dynamic voice, grab your students' attention with tasteful (but vibrant and exciting) mental images. Pique your students' curiosity about the upcoming lesson...it is a to-be-continued serial lesson, isn't it? If your lesson isn't a "To be continued" lesson, it needs to be. (Or maximum student attention "Will be not upon thee.")

Your lessons can be exciting and relevant if you are sensitive (i.e., listen between the lines); and if you emote with empathy with your students and the challenges of their daily lives. Soap Operas are popular because they mirror the drama of people's lives. Students can identify with your lessons if your lessons mimic a soap opera.

Tell a Story Any lesson can be enhanced, spiced up, pitched...if you add human interest and drama.

This does not take more work. If you don't know enough facts to create "docu-drama," create fiction.

Let's take a boring, lifeless formula in a math or science class as an example.

You could write the formula on the board and order the students to memorize it because the formula will be on the chapter test, or more irrelevantly, on the high-stakes test.

Or, you could describe a the life of the scientist who discovered or solved this formula, spicing up the details about his "pathetic little life" or the intrigue worked against him by his enemies or competitors (docu-drama).

Or, you could make up a story about how a private detective, cop or wrongly-accused suspect solves the case with the simple knowledge of this formula (fiction).

Use Dialog Using dialog during lesson delivery covers any number of students' attention sins caused by lagging, late in the day energy and excitement. Your morning's live-wire energy looses voltage, your spark runs out, and reception for your message fades. But, bring dialog into your instructional delivery production to perform a dramatic rescue.

Dialog does not have to be accent-laden, does not have to be voice and gender perfect and does not have to be an actor-quality rendition of reality. You can achieve riveting results by just stepping from one side to the other or turning one way and the other to simulate both speakers...while slightly altering your voice. Or, you can get a student to ad lib one part of the dialog with you.

Even better, each time you change character, position, speaking voice or the pace of the performance...you increase your students' memory and recall of the information.

A Little Sugar (or Spice) goes a Long Way If you make the "trailer" for your lesson a multimedia, over-the-top, Tony-winning production; what will you do to deliver the same (or better) performance for the real lesson?

Meeting expectations is key to your fame and key to the success of your on-stage approach to teaching. In fact, like in business, you have to over deliver, i.e., exceed expectations, just to stay in the game.

You over deliver by using only enough spice to keep your students attention riveted and focused upon your lesson. You can't top "over the top" very often. And, if you get carried away with this, you can train students so that instead of just wanting "salty", they will demand "salacious."

So, leave a lot to your students' imaginations. Spice up your instructional productions, but spice with a light touch. Use a "pinch" of excitement, not a spoon or a scoop. Make each teaching production a "moment to treasure", a bright-spot

memorable dot on the screens of your students' imaginations.
On with the show!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Thursday, August 31, 2006

Short Article

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Nine Ways to Recognize a "Learning Classroom"

Test scores are not the only way to tell if a your classroom offers a rich learning environment for your students. In fact, test scores are possibly one of the poorest ways to gauge how learning is progressing, and these test scores darken your classroom door too late in the school year to do much about learning that's gone awry, anyway.

Here are authentic indicators of instruction that is going right in your classroom:

Students ask each other a lot of questions

The best indicator that instruction is meaningful and "sticking" in the minds of your students is found in the hallway, cafeteria and playground; not derived from the weekly test.

When you hear students talking about the lesson, asking questions of each other, and questioning information that you presented because they found logical or factual discrepancies; then you know that instruction is on the right track

Students are listening to each other

Students listening to each other means that a teamwork atmosphere has been established, and that everyone is respected for their contributions.

Besides mirroring the real world-of-work that students will one day enter, 80% of the time, team thinking will prove that many brains produce richer results than individual, "go it alone," thinking

Teacher and Students Explain their Thinking

The thought process is transparent in a learning classroom, and everyone feels free to share not only their ideas, but their thinking

Debate can be lively, but, the atmosphere has to be one of tolerance for others' ideas and acceptance that give-and-take idea exchanges are healthy, stimulating and refreshing

Students have access to relevant, accurate and intellectually stimulating information

Information resources are similar to minerals and organic fertilizer in the soil. An abundant crop of ideas flourishes if nourished with knowledge, facts, concepts, ideas, images, sounds, graphs, charts and other idea-communicating media.

Students understand how the ideas and concepts connect to their world and relate to each other

The ability to chunk information into categories and manipulate meaning elevates learning above the burden of processing multitudes of discrete facts to a strategy of collecting related and understandable concepts

Students use communication shortcuts and code-words of shared understanding

Using communication shortcuts and code-words demonstrates that learning has reached a meta-level.

Educational jargon is an example of these communication shortcuts, "if only teachers from over yonder really knew what the term means...like we do."

A small group, such as a learning classroom, develops a local meaning for its own jargon.

One "gotcha" exists for teachers who teach the same class more than once a day. It is easy for the teacher to confuse the shared understandings of the second class by introducing derivations of meaning developed by the first class.

The solution for this trap is to ensure that all classes of the same subject that you are teaching are communicating with each other through a variety of means

Teacher and students take learning seriously

Everyone accepts responsibility for learning, and everyone keeps track of learning progress in tangible ways. Everyone helps everyone else to learn.

The distribution of accountability for learning resides with students as well as teachers; and students become responsible for helping the teacher to learn, too.

Disagreements are addressed in a transparent, open and civil manner

Everyone learns when differences of opinion are acknowledged and debated.

Theories, opinions, hypotheses, and contradictory facts are accepted in stride

Pride of ownership in a learning classroom is similar to copyright; i.e., the form of unique expression can be copyrighted, but ideas cannot be owned. Ideas are "community property"

The teacher and students are motivated by learning and external rewards are incidental

The teacher and students become so involved in the learning process that working for rewards is ignored

Students are so involved in learning that punishments designed to force them to comply are unnecessary

Everyone's innate desire for mastery and achievement is constantly fulfilled, and learning for the sake of learning is exhilarating enough to sustain itself

When you have established a learning classroom; you, your students, and everybody else, knows it.

Blog Export: Classroom Toolkit Newsletter, <http://classroomtoolkit.net/serendipity/>

Adapted from Ellsberry, James. 10 Ways to Recognize a Learning Organization. District Administrator, November, 2004. P. - 87)

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Monday, July 31, 2006

Short Article

Change Equals Stress: Adjusting to your New Job

Preparing physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually for new job can limit the stress that is associated with the change. Change, even positive, exciting, beneficial, seizing-a-great-opportunity change creates an environment of stress.

And, if there were storm clouds brewing, alligator-filled swamps boiling, backstabbing cutthroats plotting, or don't get it bosses at the old site; the "nervousness" might be stronger than if the last job experience had been happy.

Making Change Profitable

The key to a smooth transition, or a "hit the ground running" strategy is preparation.

Here are some things that you can do...

Set new habits quickly

One stressor is making adjustments

Set new routines and stick to them, even if "tweaking" might be more efficient

The new routines can be streamlined later, once you settle in to your new environment

Learn all you can about the new job situation

Talk to the new "boss"

Visit with colleagues and neighbors

Explore by walking around, even aimlessly

Familiarizing, not memorizing is the key

Your internal mental processing will organize and develop internal maps more quickly if you provide lots of sensory information (that you acquire by exploring)

Find a friend/ buddy/ mentor

Grab "insider information" because this is the "fast track" to

But, learn who you can trust

Trust your intuition

If you feel, sense, intuit that you should not trust someone, keep a clear path away from them

Keep in touch with friends, neighbors and colleagues from the last job or neighborhood

Talk to your New Boss

Your job here is to establish rapport

This does not mean "impressing" your new boss, unless you want to impress your boss with your listening skills

Pay conscious attention to what your boss says and does, but your job is really to acquire unconscious information that will help you in the supervisory relationship over the long run

Make the First Move in Making Friends

Most people you meet are glad to help

Most people don't want to seem to be pushy or meddlesome

You overcome their

Volunteer for something that will keep you in touch with your new colleagues or new neighbors

Make the new environment as "homey" as possible

Pictures, posters, old bulletin boards are all soothing at the unconscious level

Unless the old situation was really terrible, bring a few mementoes to the new location

Feel free to ask for help during your transition to your new job, and you will find lots of new friends and colleagues who

are happy to help.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Friday, June 30, 2006

Short Article

Sharing Can be Electronic, Too

Have you ever wanted to create an online course.

I mean a real course. Real Teacher/ Learner Resources

What if you were able to use these resources for your course?

Text Pages

Simple pages written using plain text

You could apply a number of built-in formatting types to turn your plain text into nice-looking Web pages

HTML Pages

Easy to develop Web pages

Each page would be stored in the database, not as a file, so you wouldn't have to keep track of them

Files and Web Pages

You could add live links to active Internet Web pages

You could also upload files and make these files available to participants who are studying your course

These files could include MP3 files (sound recordings), movies, and Flash animations

Your content could be displayed in windows, pop up windows, or frames

Directory

You could display a whole directory (and its subdirectories) of course files. Students could browse and view all those files

Labels

You could create Labels and embed text and images among the other links on the course page

Real Tools (All Built In)

Would your online course make use of these tools if they were built in to the course software?

Built in tools (all structured as re-usable modules) include:

Assignments

You can list learning assignments and learning activities

Chat

Course participants can communicate with each other

Glossary

You can build a running record of specific technical terms and tailor-make the selection of these terms to your course

Forums

Course participants can interact with the course presenter and other participants

Journal

Participants can make use of online journals to keep a learning log or running record of their explorations into your course content

Lessons

You can structure your presentation

Quizzes

Quizzes can be a learning and memory aide, rather than a grade-extracting tool

Surveys

You can set up online questionnaires for participants

Wikis

You can set up a presenter or participant interactive dictionary/ encyclopedia. This is interactive because one or more people can edit or add to the text of the definitions and explanations

Workshops

These are hands-on/ learning lab assignments

All this built-in capacity is available with the Open Source product, Moodle

What does All this Learning Power Cost?

Surprise, you can have all this power at your fingertips for free, or almost/ nearly free.

If you have an old computer that you can use, the cost is free.

If you want to place your course on a course exchange, the cost is free

Here is one Moodle Exchange

Strategic Open Source of Texas Moodle Exchange

If you want to place your course on a dedicated Moodle site, the cost is \$4.95 per month

SiteGround.com Moodle hosting site

Classroom Toolkit is building a tutorial site with a hosting plan that costs \$3.95 per month.

Note: The GoDadd.com hosting does not support Moodle, however PHP and MYSQL are supported, so the installation of Moodle is not that difficult.

Classroom Toolkit Tutorial Site

What Classroom Toolkit Tutorials will do is illustrate the concepts, methods and skills required for teachers to create, edit and adapt our unique materials.

Automated Management

Building online courses is time consuming...labor intensive. Fortunately, Moodle(TM) handles (almost hides) the behind-the-scenes technology/ processes, allowing instructors to focus on course content.

Another advantage to the Moodle software learning and course management system is the entire Web is a learning playground for course participants.

You can pick and choose activities and materials and include these in your course as links. In this way, you support copyright and intellectual property rights of learning resource creators, while augmenting your course with the best that the Web World has to offer.

A Flexible Course Development Process

You can install the Moodle Course Management System on a server, on an old computer, or even on your desktop (or laptop) computer.

Then, you have a "build-as-you-go" course management system

You can develop and post online in a "build as you go" process (such as the Classroom Toolkit Tutorial project, or you can develop the entire course on your desktop computer and export the entire course in one operation.

Courses that are built on one computer can be copied to/ exported to an other computer that runs the Moodle Course Management System.

True computer platform (Windows; Macintosh; or Linux;) independence!

Completely Portable Learning

The Moodle software system contains a "pack and go" capacity.

This means that you can export your entire course, and copy/ send the course to any other Moodle system.

This is how a Moodle Exchange operates.

This is also how school districts can build an in-house collection of courses, because, once the course is imported, it can be customized, added-to or re-designed

An entire course can be used as a template for a more advanced course...or a template for another course.

Online Tutorials and Examples

Online tutorials are available for learning how to install and configure the Moodle Course Management System.

Examples include:

Lots of How-to install and configure Moodle information

Strategic Open Source of Texas Moodle;

More how to configure a Moodle server

Texas Computer Educator's Association (TCEA)

Free Open Source Software Site that focuses upon Moodle;

K12 Open Source - Free Open Source Software Moodle;

Online tutorials also show you how to build and manage the courses themselves.

Examples of these include:

The official Moodle site that shows what a teacher can do with the software

The Moodle Demonstration Site

Extensive instructions on how to build Moodle courses

Melbourne University Moodle; How-to

A how-to guide for developing and managing a Moodle course

Earlham College Moodle; How-To Guide

Tutorials on how to implement the Classroom Toolkit strategy

Classroom Toolkit Tutorials

A Special Note

Search the Internet for "Moodle How-to" and "Moodle courses". When you find course information that looks useful, login as "guest." Many Moodle courses are available for audit, and any guest can look them over without charge.

You will be amazed at what you can learn.

A Super-Special Offer

Ken Task, a retired Texas educator, has a special offer for any school district that wants to take him up on it.

Ken will travel to your school district and configure a Moodle server and teach your district's IT staff as he goes along.

The only cost: Ken's travel expenses.

You can contact Ken at:

Mail: Ken Task at K12 Open Source - Free Open Source Software

Mail: Ken Task at Strategic Open Source of Texas

Mail: Ken Task at Educational Service Center, Region 3, Texas

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Wednesday, May 31, 2006

Short Article

Tips for Interviewing your Prospective Employer: Questions for Choosing the Right District

This article coaches you on how to interview your prospective school district or campus. While, most articles reveal how to excel at a job interview, this article shares strategies to ensure that you don't choose the wrong school district or campus to work at.

If you live in a rural area, and there is only one choice, then study Classroom Toolkit to find ways of saving time while being more effective.

However, if you have choices of where to work, you are in a position to interview your prospective employer to learn what working in each organization is really like.

One strategy is to talk to people in the district's technology and maintenance departments. Technical staff members tell the truth, and as Scott Adams of Dilbert fame points quips, engineers are like Vulcans, and cannot lie.

If you cannot obtain permission to visit the Technology or Maintenance Departments, be wary. And, redouble your efforts during the interview to discover how the organization treats staff members.

Here are some questions:

How does a teacher communicate classroom needs, and what is the timeline for providing for these needs (in full)?

What is the tutoring program for every student, and if there is ever a delay in providing needed help, what is the length of that delay?

What process is in place to ensure a delay in providing needed help to every student does not happen again?

What administrative support keeps teacher morale high?

What tools does the workplace environment provide for staff and team collaboration?

What awards, recognition and commendations has the campus or district received for delivering outstanding learning opportunities to all students?

How does the school or district respond to changes in student demographics, federal law, and technical innovation?

What distinguishes this district or campus in the delivery of exemplary learning opportunities for students and teachers?

What specific professional development initiatives of this district or campus target teacher creativity, collaboration and self-expression?

Accepting a job is cause for celebration, but, if you have a choice, pick the district or campus that matches the kind of answers that you want to hear when you ask questions similar to these.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Sunday, April 30, 2006

Short Article

NCLB and High-stakes Tests: "We Spit on You"
(Please excuse the gross language)

News Item:

Spit Test Spots Child's Stress -- Could children's saliva hold clues to their anxieties about relationships with parents or teachers?

Fri Apr 28, 11:53 PM ET

FRIDAY, April 28 (HealthDay News) This article notes that a simple saliva test could provide clues about children's anxieties. The article notes that... "a stress-linked enzyme, alpha amylase, is a marker for the sympathetic nervous system's (SNS) "fight or flight" response." <http://tinyurl.com/enx23>

One quote in particular should have raised red flags about what we are doing to our children with the emphasis upon high-stakes testing.

"Examples of social stressors used in the research included babies being gently restrained by a stranger and older children being asked to complete a frustrating task or being evaluated."

<http://tinyurl.com/enx23>

So, high-stakes tests appear to be a double-whammy for our students, i.e., 1.) a frustrating task and 2.) an evaluation.

"Being able to monitor alpha amylase via a salivary test may open new opportunities to characterize individual differences in response to stress that we weren't able to see before. We think that these differences could prove to be meaningful in understanding behavior," Dr. Douglas A. Granger, associate professor of biobehavioral health and human development and family studies at Penn State University, said in a prepared statement."

<http://tinyurl.com/enx23>

Perhaps our elected officials and bureaucratic decision-makers can't see the handwriting on the wall, but they could find the evidence of the error of their test-crazed ways on the floor and in bathroom sinks through enzyme markers in the spit of our over-stressed students.

We have toyed with the idea of a Web site and a SpitonNCLB movement, but have not decided whether we want to be associated with such a gross campaign.

Basically, everyone could send a 3"x5" card with the name, age, city and state of each student that is stressed by the excesses of the high-stakes test movement to their senators, congressional representative. A card to Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, and to President Bush might also be useful.

If we could trust this process, and believed that such cards wouldn't spread a Bird Flu (or another pandemic), we might move forward with the idea. Each card could contain a sample of spittle from each stressed student (allowed to dry, of course). But such cards might endanger postal workers and congressional staff workers, without ever being seen by our representatives.

Perhaps, instead, we could create a virtual SpitonNCLB movement, where symbolic stress-level E-mail messages are delivered to our lawmakers.

Our politicians have to be out-of-touch when on one hand, they build a high-stress environment for our children and their teachers; then, on the other hand, bemoan that their stressed victims are getting fat.

Although NCLB-inflicted stress is not the sole cause of stress in our schools, its negative effects are pervasive and detrimental.

Ridding our schools of a bad law will leave a vacuum in vision that can be filled by the leadership of teachers, not politicians.

A law that began as a backdoor method to provide vouchers for private schools has subverted educational common sense. Our students don't need the added stress of this high-stakes testing mania, testing that would not be justified, even if the NCLB law stood a "snowball's chance" of improving education.

Let's see how the SpitonNCLB movement evolves in the next few weeks.

Any ideas?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Friday, March 31. 2006

Short Article

Looping: What the (Minimal) Research Says

If someone Recruits you for a Looping Class Assignment...Duck out and Run for Cover!

Looping is the practice of keeping students with the same teacher for more than one year, particularly during the first elementary school grades.

Some district administrators have touted this practice as a new method for increasing learning outcomes.

But, did anyone stop to test the practice?

A faculty member at Penn State's College of Education just did.

The results: No testable improvement:

"The researchers found that, after the two-year period, looping did not have any significant effect on the students' reading and math achievement, learning behaviors, or attendance rates." <http://www.ed.psu.edu/news/looping.asp>

Of course, advocates will say that this controlled study was too small. Only one set of matched class.

But, we're not surprised.

Manipulating teacher assignment variables, but not changing the correct independent variable...improved instructional strategies and increased funding support for teachers.

Looping is in effect, providing the same instruction but spinning the rhetoric about the program as though something really was different, i.e., better.

Here is what the study's lead investigator had to say.

"With federal legislation such as NCLB, school districts are under substantial pressure to show improvement in their students' academic functioning," she said. "Not surprisingly, many are adopting new programs to address this need. Unfortunately, many of the programs selected have failed to demonstrate sufficient empirical evidence to support their use." Dr. Barbara Schaefer, Associate Professor of Educational & School

Psychology <http://www.ed.psu.edu/news/looping.asp>

This seems to be similar to the Benchmarking Craze that we identified in a previous newsletter. "The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing - Vol. 1, No. 3

You can find this article on our reprint page:

<http://www.classroomtoolkit.com/benchmark-testing-falacies.html>

The easy road to school district administration is to implement a fad initiative, then, when that fad fizzles; start a new initiative.

The real road to school improvement is to begin supporting teachers and to set processes in place that help teacher improve instruction.

The problem is that fad initiatives are cheap while real improvements cost time, money and effort (Lots of each). And, real programs have the nasty habit of bringing the "fiasco factor" of administrators' past decisions to light.

Our recommendation: If someone tries to market this fad to you or tries to convince you to sign up to teach in one of these programs. find a graceful way to decline.

The first thing that will happen is that the decision-makers will increase their expectations about what you will accomplish. Then, when you don't deliver on those unrealistic expectations, in a couple of years, they will blame you.

The second thing that can happen (worse) is that you will feel the pressure to deliver on those unrealistic expectations, and you will find yourself working every weekend and holiday (maybe every waking hour) chasing this performance mirage.

Let us know if these predictions prove to be correct.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00