

Nevada Public Education News



Superintendent of Community

Or Schools?

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Is it possible to hire a new superintendent whose primary goal and complete focus would be on teaching and learning?

Too many superintendents of larger school systems want to play “hotshot” in the business community. They get involved in the rubber chicken dinner circuit, do a lot of public speaking about the things they want to accomplish but never seem to realize that all the time they spend away from the district discussing their initiatives is time they are not working to achieve them.

What I have come to discover is that these people actually begin to believe their “plans” are actually in practice. Listening to the former superintendent talking about experiences in Colorado prompted me to call two different school districts a little over a year ago. It was enlightening. I asked state department people, central school district administrators, and building principals about their “inclusiveness” of special needs students in college bound classes. They all sang the same tune – special education students were successfully completing courses in classes like second year algebra.

I then spoke to a couple of department chairs at local high schools. They sang the same song initially. As one became more comfortable knowing he was speaking to a colleague in the math world, I told him I found it hard to believe that special education students in Colorado were smarter than special education students in Nevada. He asked what I meant. When I told him that everyone, including himself, told me these students were successful in Algebra II, he laughed and said that the kids were in the class but were not doing the same work – differentiated instruction redefined. The point, I bet all the people I spoke with believed their own hype that these students were actually learning how to derive the equation of a parabola, and were able to find the vertex, focus, directrix and know the properties of parabolas that are used in flashlights, amphitheatres, satellite dishes, etc.

These “reforms”, that some say they want to continue, actually harm students. Struggling students are left holding the bag because they are not getting the assistance they need since they were deliberately misplaced so schools could earn “stars” in the failed accountability system; the students who are taking the class because they want to go to college are not getting the full explanations they need because their teachers are continually off task taking care of the needs of the misplaced students. If the trustees don’t do away with this “reform”, then they will need to

adopt another reform – buy teachers a six-pack of beer to just get through lunch dealing with the full spectrum of issues caused by student misplacement. You have to love a system where there are no winners. Struggling students not getting assistance, good students not getting the depth of education they need to be successful, parents frustrated, teachers driven to drink, and taxpayers getting to foot the bill. You gotta love a good reform!

We need to get real. Not everyone is going to college. We also need to stop taking away time from hardworking students the opportunity to interact and get help with their teachers just so leaders can be politically correct.

Here's a newsflash. Parents send their kids to school to learn: math, science, English, history, geography, etc.... The community pays for this because they feel these things are important. So, let's focus on these. I know it's not sexy, it's just hard work. Teachers have to know their content, know how to deliver that content in the most effective and efficient way possible so students understand it, they have to have time and resources so students can practice and build automaticity, and the teachers have to continually monitor student progress and learn how to assess student learning.

There should also be consequences when students decide to waste our tax dollars by not paying attention, disturbing or distracting others from receiving a good education, or if they outright fail because they chose not to study. If students don't want to study for tests and fail, then they should have to come in after school to do some "old fashioned" studying. I'm just a little bit tired of students going into classes late, not paying attention, sleeping, or goofing off with little or no consequence.

If parents told their own children to do something and they did not do it satisfactorily, parents would send their kids back to redo it until it was done correctly. I don't see anything wrong with that practice. Can you imagine parents just telling their kids the job they did was a D- or F and that was it? Most kids would say thank you and go on about their business. My point, consequences are important!

I'm betting if you were driving down a freeway and saw a highway patrol officer, you'd immediately go to cover brake. Now, as an adult, you know you are not supposed to speed, but you do anyway. So, knowing there might be a consequence, you immediately slow down when you see an officer of the law – consequences work.

When Brian Cram was superintendent, a popular national reform suggested students no longer needed to memorize their basic math facts and procedures because of the "new" technology. He saw the results of that interpretation on tests, so he instituted K-12 math audits to get schools back on track. When Walt Rulffes took over as superintendent, he quickly realized the "algebra for all by 8th grade" reform he inherited resulted in watered down algebra classes, he launched district-wide semester exams to ensure the curriculum was taught and to measure what was learned. Both of these superintendents recognized a problem and did something to fix it. Nothing fancy, not called a reform - just common sense. Both these men clearly understood that consequences matter.

School administrators also have to re-examine their role. If students are not in class or if they walk by a room and see students off task, they need to go into that room, pull that student aside and explain very firmly that this community, this school, takes education seriously and we don't intend to waste tax dollars on students who are not going to take full advantage of it. Either they can pay attention, come in after school, or go home. They will not be allowed to waste our time and money and or distract others from receiving a good education.

Communication through letters, phone calls and personal visits must be made to parents to ensure they understand that business as usual is over. In Clark County, students come to school to learn. Nothing short of that is acceptable.

The business community needs to realize something they already know, as you can never make up an hour lost, you can only spend a dollar once. That translates to supporting “get tough” measures and staying out of the way so everyone in the public school system is focused on answering one question: “What are *we* doing to help *your* child learn?” And if that means letting parents leave work to come to school to address their students' needs, then that has to happen. Businesses are paying taxes to educate our children, they should have expectations that their tax contributions are not wasted.

There's a great deal of talk about “reforms” across the country. There are charter schools, autonomy schools, schools taken-over by private contractors – are these schools outperforming public schools? The simple answer is no. Except, of course, when they are awarded more funding, get to pick their students, get to toss out students who don't perform, then they do better – like private schools.

Big deals have been made of teacher tenure, teacher and administrator evaluations, class size, common core standards, technology, guns on campus, privatization, charter schools, autonomy schools, empowerment, vouchers, testing, parental engagement, growth models, giving schools letter grades, meeting the non-educational needs of students, and the list goes on, and on, and on. I do not doubt these are important issues, but they certainly take time away from teaching and learning. I can not imagine faith based private schools being taken off task and getting tied up with these issues, they are too busy making sure their students are learning. Now, there's a thought worth pursuing – concentrating on teaching and learning.

What schools need is a message, called a curriculum, the community wants delivered. That has been defined in math and ELA as the common core state standards. We need to be sure those standards can be taught to mastery within the timeframes identified. We need teachers to teach those standards, they also have to have resources to ensure students have time for understanding and practice. The standards themselves have to be evaluated after we have seen how students perform on these tests based on these standards – this is not complicated if we use common sense.

Superintendents of larger districts and their assistant superintendents need to follow the examples of superintendents of smaller districts. That is, stop visiting schools. These fly-bys are nothing more than public relations stunts so they can tell the community how many schools they have been in – who cares? It is time they sit in classes, actually evaluate teaching and learning, so

when they go back to discuss all these grand reforms, they might begin to have a sense about what they are actually talking about. Oh, what a reform!

And, wouldn't be nice if the trustees actually talked about teaching and learning? You know – actual classroom education stuff. The last two trustees I actually saw attend a professional development activity so they knew about the training/direction teachers and administrators were receiving were Larry Mason and Terri Janison. I don't find it humorous the trustees can always find time for celebrity or moneyed constituents but do not have time to find out for themselves what is actually happening in the schools.

Reformers always talk about how their reforms *will* work, but never seem to be around when the roof comes crashing down. This nation has gone through some type of reform movement almost every decade since the fifties, can't we just admit we don't need all the posturing which is often political in nature and actually spend time teaching what we expect our students to know, recognize and be able to do. Many of these reforms are like listening to children explaining to parents they don't have time to do something, but if you timed their complaining, they could have got the job done twice.

Hard work does not make headlines, but taking a no-nonsense, common sense approach to teaching and learning will result in increased student performance in the classroom and achievement. Let's focus! You don't get to be number one by talking about the work, you do it by doing the work. The results will speak for themselves.