

# Good Teachers Don't Need Research-based Programs



**M**ore different than alike, good teachers defy most attempts at generalization. Still we try hard, filling journal after journal with research on what constitutes good teaching. Predictably, the findings of one body of research capture our attention for a time, only to be found lacking by the findings of subsequent research. In the quest for the good teacher, the words, “research says,” are words we have learned to interpret with caution.

But here’s the problem: programs that attempt to mold teachers into whatever research says at the moment. These programs step forth confidently, enjoy their hour in the sun, and then recede into history as newer, more promising research creates a demand for teachers to change in newer ways. As teachers try to conform to each successive change, they lose more of the one trait identified with good teachers—self-reliance and a resolve to find their own way.

Good teachers often chronicle their years by the number of new programs they have survived. But those outside the classroom who choose programs for teachers don’t tend to look back at past programs. They barely speak of their cost, their initial promise, their concluding disappointment, and, of course, the wear and tear on teachers and students.

Inspired by the latest research, they just move on to the next program.

## What Good Teachers Need

What good teachers really need is space to try new things, space to give form to the unique qualities that are their gift to teaching. Teachers need monitoring, but it is best done by those able to put teachers before programs. When teaching is viewed as a process for which teachers must take responsibility, the good teachers come forward and the pretenders fall by the wayside.

While teachers are pretty much on their own, those aspiring to be good teachers know how to find help. Usually they begin by identifying other good teachers. Then begins the process of watching and listening, sorting out, and trying to find the right fit. Emerging

good teachers keep at the process until they find what works.

Schools would do well to give such teachers more time to find the right fit—time to interact with other teachers, to develop independently, and to be in control of what they become. But time is something most teachers lack—time to read, to think, to experiment, or to do any of the work required to build a personal approach to teaching.

The lack of time, combined with the demands of accountability, make programs derived from research an attractive alternative. They offer hope, promising sure fixes for schools willing to invest in them. And if a program fails, there is always the hope of the next new program inspired by the next new research.

But who is served by the steady succession of teaching programs? Is it the student, who, if learning nothing else, learns how to transition from one program to another? Is it the public, so overwhelmed by continuing change that it fails to recognize its impact? Is it the teacher, who finally gives up on finding his or her way? These are questions of more than passing interest for all principals.

## What Principals Can Do

What can principals do to support good teaching? Fortunately, quite a bit. The process begins with principals trusting their teachers and themselves. Then begins the slow and careful work of giving teachers the breathing room they need to develop independently. Here are some suggestions:

**Help teachers reconnect to their purpose.** Devote a part of several faculty meetings to discuss why teachers teach. Encourage teachers to think about what led them into teaching. What hopes did they have? What accomplishments did they anticipate? What fulfillments did they expect? Encourage them to pledge each week to find one way to further their connection with their goals.

**Encourage reflection and community among teachers.** Stimulate ideas and discussion by presenting teachers with a “problem of the week.” Post the problems in the lounge for teachers to think

about and discuss with colleagues. The flow of diverse ideas among teachers lends perspective to problems and builds a basis for wholesome and productive relationships.

**Promote individual expertise.** Teachers grow as they develop specialties of their own choosing. Whatever is of help will work—a particular learning technique, a special instructional challenge, or a promising method of behavior management are all possibilities. Teachers can then share their expertise by serving as consultants to fellow teachers.

**Allow teachers to negotiate for what they need.** Do you have teachers who need time to work on a project that will enhance insight and performance in the classroom? Why not give these teachers permission to substitute a portion of your regularly scheduled inservice for the project?


**Urge teachers to build lives outside the classroom.** Good principals recognize that a fulfilling life is fundamental to successful teaching, so they make it a point to know their teachers and to find ways to encourage and support them as people, not just as instruments for accomplishing school goals.

Look for ways to promote friendships and personal interests among teachers. Informal groups centered on a wide variety of hobbies and interests, created spontaneously by teachers themselves, are helpful. A good principal is always looking for ways to include the whole teacher in the school community.

**Give teachers time to talk.** Schedule informal talk sessions with teachers in charge and watch good things happen. Participation should be voluntary, although inservice credit can be offered as a bonus. Topics should include themes of broad appeal, such as how to work with disruptive students, how to better manage time, or how to motivate the under-motivated.

Good teaching is too diverse to be captured in prescribed programs, no matter what the research may say. A better alternative is to give teachers the time and resources to find their own way. Principals assist the process by

widening choices for teachers and by fostering a community in which teachers learn from one another.

It all begins with principals trusting teachers enough to release them from the lock step of programs inspired by the latest research. 

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## HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

Are your teachers locked in to research-based programs? Are the programs effective? Do you believe classroom instruction would improve if teachers were allowed to use their own methods? How do you define good teaching?

Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on "Speaking Out."



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