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Creating a Culture of Inquiry on the School Campus

It is not enough to ask just one question; as concerned educators we must work to see the big picture, to know the whole story.

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Educators are busier than ever before. In fact, the ever-expanding list of responsibilities for principals is getting more challenging every day. Few administrators have time to add another role to the job description. Yet, because of the very complexity of education today, we must add at least one new role: inquirer. In fact, as educators, we cannot do our jobs properly unless we become inquirers with the goal of fostering a culture of inquiry throughout the entire campus. The following six types of questions will lead to a campus where inquiry becomes the norm.

1. Ask *I Wonder* Questions for Discovery

When questions become a natural part of the education process, dilemmas can be seen as opportunities for discovery rather than barriers to progress. Rather than letting school problems overwhelm us, our curiosity must lead us to see these challenges as opportunities for discovering important information. After all, discovery is merely seeing—from a different perspective—what is already there. This insight gives us new understandings.

For example, most early explorers did not set out on their journeys to discover specific lands; rather, most began by asking the question, “I wonder if there is a quicker way to sail to...?” By seeking the answer to that question, they discovered new lands and new routes to those lands.

As administrators, the initial questions to ask when we receive a report of test scores are *I wonder* questions: “I wonder how we did? I wonder how many passed? I wonder if we met AYP?” These questions allow discovery to occur. Asking *I wonder* questions is the first step to building a culture of inquiry on a campus.

2. Ask the Right Questions

Asking the right questions is a state of mind that we obtain after discovering that the answer to one question leads us to more questions, which ultimately provide deeper and richer discoveries. Inquiry rarely results in finding the right answer to a problem; instead, the process of asking the right question can help us to understand a problem in its entirety. In other words, asking the right questions is about problem understanding. This challenge to understand more completely is a key component to developing a culture of inquiry.

Consider the following problem. Personnel in a school district were concerned about the quality of the gifted and talented (GT) program. The *I wonder* question, about the number of GT students who passed the state-mandated test, led them to discover that 98 percent had passed. Great news! However, was this the right question to ask, considering that these were high-ability students expected to have high scores?

They decided to ask a different question: How many GT students were achieving at a higher benchmark, the Commended level (an approximate score of 95 percent or higher)? According to the data, only 28 percent of seventh graders achieved the Commended level in math and only 38.5 percent did so in reading. When these data were compared with statewide results, there were even greater concerns, because for almost every test the school had lower percentages of students obtaining the Commended level than in comparable districts. In this case, asking the right questions led these educators to explore the quality of their GT program.

3. Ask Self-Reflective Questions

It is not enough to ask questions just about numbers (“How many passed the test?”), nor is it enough to ask the right question (“What does this tell us about the program?”). Before we can ask questions that will lead to equitable and rigorous learning environments, we must begin by understanding ourselves better. As educators, we must look reflectively at our own beliefs and our own motivations.

Although few educators consider themselves to be biased or prejudiced, we all have biases and we all act with prejudice at times, both as individuals and as organizations. In the previous example about the middle school’s GT students, the educators examined the student characteristics and found discrepancies. Nearly all of the students in the GT program were white, although the student population of the district was quite diverse. Why were educators either unaware or not working to seek a more equitable representation of diverse students in the program? Perhaps bias was one factor. Educators need to be self-reflective, continuing to explore and acknowledge their biases. Awareness and inquiry can lead to effective change.

4. Ask Questions That Explore Diversity

Diversity is reflected in the changing demographics of our schools. It includes ethnicity, race, age, language, gender, and socioeconomic status. After considering the data, educators must then collectively consider the experiences of diverse groups in the school. Are students from various demographic groups on the campus achieving at the same rate? Is the passing rate on state-mandated tests different for children of poverty? When we compare Hispanic, black, and white students, is there a difference in academic achievement? When we initially explore diversity, we begin with *how many*-type questions. Then, we should look more closely at how many by groups.

Asking questions that go deeper than the initial *how many* questions leads us to inquire why these inequities exist. In this way, our questions lead to new questions such as, “What can we do to better support a diverse student population in academic achievement?” It is unlikely that we would consider these questions if we had not become aware of our own biases and those that exist within our institutions.

5. Ask *Why* Questions to Develop Deep Understandings

In order to develop deep understandings, we must continue our inquiry by asking, “Why is this happening?” To answer *why* questions, we need to collect information by talking with students, parents, and teachers. Such inquiry also involves listen-

ing. Every number in the data we collect represents a student. When we hear students’ stories and listen to their struggles and successes, deeper understandings unlock ways that we can better educate them.

Staff in the middle school with the low rates of Commended performers began to discuss the data, looking for patterns and seeking to understand the possible causes. Were teachers not monitoring these high-ability students? Was the GT curriculum not sufficiently rigorous? What were the motivation levels of these students? To answer these and other questions, a committee of teachers was formed to investigate the issues. They reviewed records and talked with students and their parents to learn why some of these students were not achieving higher scores on tests that measured the general education curriculum.

6. Ask *What If* Questions to Determine Direction

Asking *what if* questions can lead to possible solutions to the problems we face. No longer is problem-solving conducted with a hit-or-miss approach. Instead, decisions are chosen based on the data gathered from the questions we have asked. In the example of the middle school concerned about its GT students, in-depth information was gathered about the students, the teachers, and the curriculum. For example, committee members asked questions such as “What if we changed the schedule?” or “What if we had a higher standard for students?” or “What if we revised our GT admission criteria and guidelines?” These questions and answers led to policy changes that resulted in a restructured GT schedule, revised admission

guidelines, and strategies to differentiate instruction for high-ability students.

Conclusion

Considering the six types of questions presented, how do busy administrators and teachers find time for inquiry? Here are some suggestions:

- At faculty meetings, provide data for small groups to explore and analyze;
- Hold a “Data Day” to help faculty members understand numbers, inquiry, and analysis;
- Present data to parents at meetings or other interactive functions;
- Put a “*What questions should we be asking?*” box in the faculty workroom;
- Occasionally substitute weekly lesson plans with written reflections in which teachers consider their instruction and student performance;
- Invite faculty members to submit reflective comments on occurrences at school;

“Every number in the data we collect represents a student.”

- Challenge faculty members to develop innovative ways to help students; and
- Partner with university personnel for assistance with data collection, inquiry, and analysis.

Answers and solutions to problems are rarely easy. Trust is needed to develop a climate of inquiry. Courage is needed to explore difficult questions. Persistence is needed to find effective solutions.

Educators who want to create a culture of inquiry on their campus should do the following:

- Ask *I wonder* questions for discovery. (“I wonder how many passed the test?”)
- Ask the right questions to understand more. (“How can we use this information to know more about the program?”)
- Ask reflective questions to understand themselves. (“What biases do I have regarding this issue?”)
- Ask questions that explore diversity in our institutions. (“What are the experiences of diverse groups regarding this issue?”)

- Ask *why* questions and listen to the voices of students and parents to develop deep understandings. (“Why is this happening?”)
- Ask *what if* questions to determine direction. (“What if we did this or that to help?”)

It is not enough to ask just one question; as concerned educators we must work to see the big picture, to know the whole story. The culture of inquiry and the level of understanding that result depend on the kinds of questions we ask.

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