

Embracing Assessment, Erasing Failure

Benjamin Franklin, that most essential American, kept a diary in which he recorded, with blunt honesty, his failures to meet the high standards he had set for himself. Taking a cool, objective look at himself, Franklin believed, was his path to improvement. And for Franklin, improvement meant *self-improvement*. You might say Old Ben embraced assessment.

In schools around the country, progressive educators are embracing the spirit of Ben Franklin, because good education begins with an objective assessment and accurate diagnosis of specific “deficiencies”—which in reality are temporary gaps between where we are and where we want to be. Transforming assessment from a system of primarily external judgments made by others to a system driven primarily by self-correction is the new frontier for instructional leaders. Educators need to balance what Rick Stiggins of the Assessment Training Institute calls “assessments *of* learning” with “assessments *for* learning.”

Giving Students Greater Control

Tereatha Chisley began this transformation when she was principal of Lee Hill Elementary School in Monroe, Louisiana. She found that giving students greater control over their own learning really worked! Lee Hill went from one of the worst schools in the district to one of the best.

“I think if we use assessment right, it can be student-centered,” Chisley says. “Children really can learn to learn on their own. We got to the point where children were able to assess their own choices about where they were in the classroom.” Having students assess themselves “was another way to make them independent learners,” she says.

Chisley’s experience shows that children know themselves and their own needs better than we might allow. Harnessing the American drive for self-improvement in our students may turn out to be the engine that will drive real, sustained improvement in learning—and test scores! But first, we need to prove to our students that failure is only a stepping-stone on the path to success.

In a recent interview, Stiggins said:



It feels good to succeed. When the human brain experiences success, it feels good and we’re wired to want more. The mirror image of that is when we experience the humiliation of failure, which will cause the brain to lock itself down in self-defense and make learning impossible. You know, in the schools that we grew up in, a low level of performance was called “failure.” There was humiliation associated with it and it caused a lot of us to give up in hopelessness. What we’re trying to get to here is a place where people understand that when you first start to learn something, you’re probably not very good at it. It’s not that students shouldn’t be held accountable; they should. But while they’re learning, it’s got to be OK not to be good at it at first. We don’t want the word “failure” coming into play. It has nothing to do with the grade book.

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Helping Students Improve

According to Stiggins, there are three things students need to help them improve:

- Accessible models of what good work looks like;
- Honest appraisal of how their work compares with these models; and
- Help to understand how they can close the gap between the models and where they are now.

“We’re constantly working with students right at the edge of their capabilities,” Stiggins says. “We’re helping them take the next step. It’s this kind of interaction that turns out to be critical.”

What we need to take advantage of our students’ intrinsic love of self-improvement is to give them a scaffold they can ascend, step by step. To take these steps, they need the kind of explicit curriculum that Chisley insists on, one that describes what is to be known and to what standard, with frequent assessments of their progress. Finally, they need what Chisley preaches: teachers willing to relinquish total control of their classroom.

I think Ben Franklin would approve. ■

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