

Best

Help Teachers Be Their

Sow the seeds for duplicating
teacher excellence.

By Todd Whitaker





There seems to be an endless number of “magic solutions” to improve education and schools today. Whether it is pay for performance, charter schools, an expanded school day, new teacher evaluations, or a myriad of programs with varying acronyms, it seems as though “this” is the answer for which we have all been searching. At least that’s what we are being told.

Another oft-repeated solution is that schools should operate more like businesses. But there are many failing businesses, so we do not want to head in that direction. Rather than ask why schools can't be more like businesses, the more realistic, and perhaps even more important, question is: Why can't all schools be like the best schools?

As we know, there are many factors that contribute to the success of a school: student population, budget, central office leadership, and, of course, the quality of the principal and teachers. So rather than focusing on the broader issue that we may not be able to influence, how about issuing this question as a challenge to each principal: Why can't all of my teachers be like my best teachers?

Take On the Challenge

Principals have more influence within their schools—and on teaching—than they do on outside variables. If all teachers could be more like the best teachers, then we would have dramatic improvement in every school—public, private, or charter; rural, urban, or suburban; and large, medium, or small.

There are dramatic differences in the quality of teachers and teaching in every school, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the students. Each school has special teachers who connect with every student and consistently engage them

We have two primary ways to improve our schools—hire better teachers and improve the ones we have.

in learning. These are the teachers who have classrooms students love to walk into. So what can principals do to get all teachers to be like the best teachers? Here are some first steps principals can take to begin narrowing the gap and moving their teachers' instruction to a higher level of expertise.

Start Out Correctly

Have you ever noticed the difference in student teachers depending on the teacher with whom they are working? When the best teachers in your school get a student teacher, by the end of their placement, the student teachers start acting like the teachers with whom they are placed. Their instructional methodology, their tone and manner, and sometimes even their body language emulates those of that positive role model.

Unfortunately the same is also often true when someone student-teaches with a less effective teacher. Because the supervising teacher's instructional approaches are not effective, the tone and manner of the student teacher can turn negative, and his or her body language can quickly sour. We could blame the student teacher or the university that individual attends; however, the teacher he or she was assigned to work with potentially has a greater impact than everything the student teacher had learned up until that point.

Not only is it important for the future of education to make sure student teachers are placed with successful role models, we must do the same with new teachers in our schools. It is essential to put great thought into who new teachers have as mentors. Rather than worry about choosing someone who teaches the same grade level or subject, is located near the new teachers' classroom, or shares the same planning time, it is more critical that new teachers work with someone who

is highly effective. Often these informal relationships can greatly affect the morale and attitude of new staff members (as well as other veterans).

Teach, Don't Tell

Effective principals understand that their primary role is to teach the staff, not to teach the students. If we do not improve the behavior of the adults, we can never improve the behavior of the students.

For example, if you deal with bus discipline, it does not take long to realize that some of the drivers lack the skills to effectively manage students (which, by the way, is much harder to do while driving a bus with 66 students behind you than it is while teaching with 25 students in front of you). As a principal, you can continue to react to these write-ups and reports or you can increase the skill level of the drivers.

During my first year as a principal, I started getting on every bus each morning and asking the drivers how things were going. One less-effective driver responded, "That Johnny Tucker ... I don't know what to do with him." I replied, "I see where you are coming from. I found him a little bit challenging, too."

I then mentioned that I had seen Johnny behaving appropriately in his classroom, and explained to the driver how the teacher used a seating chart to assign seats based on where students would be the least distracted and distracting. I asked the driver if he would mind if I got on his bus and assigned all the kids seats just to see how it works.

My point is to make sure we approach people with great care when we teach them. Not only did the driver learn what a seating chart was, but by watching me assign seats to students, he understood how to strategize and also got to witness the



tone and manner we should use when interacting with students.

In this situation, the bus driver felt like he and I were learning together, and that is always a safer approach. It also potentially allowed for future conversations to occur more comfortably.

When working with teachers, it may be beneficial to say things such as, “One time I saw someone doing...” or “Once someone suggested to me that...” rather than, “Here is something you should try...” or “One thing that worked for me is...” A softer approach might yield better results.

Teachers Need to Visit Other Classrooms

Student teachers who are matched with exemplary teachers have a great advantage because they have a chance to observe at least one method that works. If future educators do not student-teach with a highly effective educator, they may be on their own to figure things out. We cannot afford this in our schools; the students are too valuable.

If we can get teachers into each other's classrooms, then all the teachers have a chance to be like our very best staff members. Consider the following methods to accomplish this.

Start with your new teachers and your best teachers. These are the points of least resistance.

Do a mutual exchange at the beginning of this process. Rather than have only the new teachers learn from the “master teachers” (which might cause discomfort to your most talented veterans when you are starting this process), have the teachers do a swap and go into each other's classrooms. Your new teachers will definitely learn from your best teachers.

Have teachers go on walkthroughs. Teachers can go with you as you visit classrooms on a daily basis, or a small number of teachers can visit classrooms together. The group can brainstorm ideas, and it may be more comfortable for teachers visiting

other rooms if they are with peers. This is especially true when beginning this process.

Use Technology to Support Sharing

Teachers can observe their colleagues' teaching by watching recorded lessons and using virtual tools. For example, when staff members use flipped classrooms with their students, have them share with other teachers the instructional piece they prepared for students. If teachers in your school record lessons for self-directed development, edit portions of the recording to show particular instructional practices that would benefit others.

These approaches allow you to archive particular practices that can then be shared with many teachers over time. Virtual sharing may be a richer way to have teachers observe others than randomly doing drop-in or walkthrough observations. Not only can this approach work with current staff, but it also provides excellent resources to use with new teachers for years to come.

You Cannot Mandate Effectiveness

Do not feel the need to “mandate” these practices, especially at the start. In most settings, there are at least a couple of staff members who would love to ruin any idea—especially if they feel scared or threatened. Rather than forcing them at the onset and potentially having the entire concept melt down, make sure the process works well at the beginning and then invite and nudge others to be a part of it. The hardest person to convince is the first one, not the last one.

By now you have realized that there is no “magic solution” to school improvement. My guess is that you already knew that. However, it is essential that school leaders remember to focus on the factors we can most influence rather than putting too much energy into those factors we least influence.

Always keep in mind that we have two primary ways to improve our schools—hire better teachers and improve the ones we have. When we have an opportunity to add a new staff member, we need to hire the best. But, in the meantime, it is essential that we help staff members to be the best they can be. We do not need to invent a magic solution. Our best teachers are doing that in their classrooms every day. ■

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