The Days of Playing Hunches Are Over

I’m one of those people who feels like any major purchase requires consulting Consumer Reports or some other reliable source to make sure I’m not about to buy a clunker. When I shop on the Internet, I find myself reading the reviews of what other customers thought of a book or a coffeemaker or a vacation hotel.

We live in a world where feedback is all around us, and not just for savvy consumers. It’s a world that principals work in, too. If getting results for more and more students is the name of the game (and it is), then finding and using strategies, materials, and techniques with proven records of success is the way to get there. When you start looking, it’s amazing the amount of research that exists on what works in education.

Every principal should know how to find, read, understand, and explain this research. The days when decisions could be made around curriculum, interventions, or any aspect of teaching and learning without a complete analysis of pertinent research are long gone.

Seeking the Research

We’re encouraging principals to get in the habit of seeking out research that’s relevant to the school improvement themes in their building and their district. The message is: Don’t just rely on Google; dig in and do your homework. The problem with simple Internet searches is that they produce a lot of hits—good, bad, and sometimes ugly. Today’s principals need to be capable of far more than accessing a search engine, and NAESP is now partnering with Educational Research Service to provide a new resource on our Web site designed to help principals get reliable research on a variety of topics.

We need leaders who know how to look at a research report and decide whether it comes from a reliable, independent source; whether its results reflect a solid sampling of data over a long period of time; and whether other research agrees with its findings. Our recent national and state-level workshops on data-based decision-making have attempted to help principals gain some of this expertise.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act uses the term “scientifically based research” throughout, and building programs based on research and best practice is the issue of the day. While people may still debate whether education is an art or a science, policy-makers, business leaders, and the public look to education leaders to make decisions that promise the strongest possible results.

Redefining Professional Judgment

A resource that might help principals evaluate and understand research is a recent report by the American Institutes for Research’s Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. In November, the group offered an analysis of some 800 studies of 22 of the best-known comprehensive school reform models. The CSRQ Center Report on Elementary School Comprehensive School Reform Models is available online at www.csrq.org/reports.asp and reading it is a good way for principals to start thinking more critically about research. It is also a good resource for considering how to explain findings and research issues to teachers, parents, and the public.

Principals need to be a leading voice in making this important transition in professional judgment. In the past, educators relied on their training and experience to decide the best course of action. In other words, they played hunches. Today, professional judgment means understanding and acting on what researchers have found in exploring the education landscape for techniques and programs that work in different settings and with different groups of students. In the age of electronics, their findings are within easy reach and there is no excuse not to use them in your decision-making.

As principals increasingly focus on research and helping others understand its implications, they should also be diligent in analyzing the data generated in their classrooms and schools, using it to spot strengths and weaknesses, and to inform discussions about improvement strategies. Researchers will tell you that every school produces telling data every day, week, and month, and it is this data that can help principals get beyond guessing and playing hunches, and guide them to the research that can answer their questions.
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