Harnessing Science to Improve Learning

I think what’s compelling about the evidence-based practices movement is just engaging people in a conversation about how they think they know what they know. How do they know that what they’re doing in schools is the most effective thing they can be doing right now?

— Lisa Towne, National Academies of Science

How do we know that what we are doing in our school is the best possible thing we could be doing? How do we satisfy ourselves that we really know it is the best thing we could be doing? How do we become more objective? These are questions that principals all over the country are asking each other.

Today they are being urged—in fact, required—to be more objective in making educational decisions, and that is a good thing because objectivity in education means consistently looking at what will work better for our kids. But objectivity is not easy for busy school principals. Putting what is true into the day-to-day practice of teachers is even more challenging. What they must do is to turn to science.

Let’s say you’re being prepped for surgery and you ask your doctor, “Has the surgical procedure you’ll be using been proved effective? Is there evidence that it is better than any other way of treating me?” And let’s say your doctor replies, “Well, no, but this is the way I learned from old Doc Jones when I first became a surgeon and I like doing it this way.” I don’t know about you, but I’m out of there!

The fundamental principle of science, whether in medicine or education, is objectivity. Modern science is an intellectual system that school leaders can use to more objectively understand what works better and—if you’ll pardon the grammar—what works less better. It is a system based on open and free challenges to accepted beliefs. It requires a moral commitment.

Trust and Credibility

Michael Hawkins, the veteran principal of Hamilton Elementary School in Memphis, Tennessee, has made that commitment.

Hamilton is a K–5 school with 600 children, all of them black and almost all of them receiving free or reduced-cost lunch. But although 92 percent of Hawkins’ students read at or above proficiency levels and 79 percent are proficient or above in math, that is not good enough for Hawkins, his students, or their parents. I’m betting that until all of his students go to Harvard, Hawkins will consider the school’s efforts a work in progress. That is why he, like a good doctor, looks to science to help him and his teachers improve the effectiveness of their practice.

“What you have in medicine are people who do the research and try to come up with better ways to treat different illnesses,” says Hawkins, who points out that the doctors who examine you or perform surgery on you use those discoveries to improve their performance.

If science is to improve student outcomes, Hawkins believes that turning educational research into useful ideas, programs, materials, and assessments that teachers can use is the crucial step. Today, that task falls mostly on the shoulders of school principals.

“It’s pretty hit or miss, finding the best science,” Hawkins says. When asked if he likes the idea of the district saying: “We’ve done the research, and we found that this program is best. Now you use it in your school,” Hawkins demurs. “I could say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to that. It depends on trust and credibility.”

One place where Hawkins does find trust and a shared knowledge of what works is with a small group of other district principals. “We have a collegial network where we can discuss topics and solve problems. Usually that’s where I get my good, solid information. If we have a problem or we’re curious about something, we work together to do the research.”

Making a scientific approach to education useful depends on our willingness to be objective, giving credence both to the evidence and to our own experience. Having objective conversations about what discoveries will work in an actual school building are a mark of educational wisdom. Let’s keep talking!

Cheryl G. Riggins is NAESP’s associate executive director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances. Her e-mail address is criggins@naesp.org.
New Pricing! Due to overwhelming support from our customers we are able to reduce our prices!

1-800-829-6096
Info: www.car-ridersign.com