

Turning the Tables on Accountability

When I first started teaching and leading, I did so from a firm foundation of certainty. Our children came from more or less stable homes. There was an understanding that the world was divided between those destined to succeed and those who would not. We subscribed to the certainty that, as well as we might present instruction, there was a deep and natural divide between what we taught and what our children would learn. We taught, they listened, and we could only pray that some of what we wanted to get through to them would. There seemed to be a kind of natural order that decreed that, as hard as we might work, “What will, will be.”

Today, of course, there exists a new level of accountability for what will be. Or, better said, what should be. The new “shoulds” include adequate yearly progress for *all* students and their better-than-proficiency in reading and comprehending texts, ability to understand and use mathematics, and ability to think so that they will become men and women empowered with everlasting knowledge.

Transforming Stress to Progress

But being responsible for what occurs in our classrooms and on our test scores introduces us to stresses that none of us signed up for. However, in recent conversations with two truly resilient educators, I’ve come to see that, by turning the tables on accountability, stress can be transformed into progress, despite the tremendous pressures under which principals operate.

According to Edward Wiggins, principal of Warren Central Intermediate School in Vicksburg, Mississippi, “We can do something” about that once-inevitable gap between what we taught and what they learn. We can now do something that I could only dream of back in the day: We can actually measure our instructional effect on our students and, most important, we can now do something about it despite the all-too-difficult realities of urban education.

Embracing Accountability

For Wiggins, the tools used to hold him accountable are the same tools he uses to fulfill his new and more exacting responsibility—to reach the minds of all his students. Wiggins argues that by embracing accountability, instructional leaders need not be tossed into the maelstrom of the new world order; they can now become true managers



of instruction. Being managers puts us in control and I know of no better antidote to frustration and stress than being in control.

Of course, in the old days we tested. But, as Wiggins told me recently, “We weren’t challenged to use the data from these tests. We didn’t know how to infuse this knowledge into our instruction and use this to move our students from A to B. We went through the motions of talking to the parents but we didn’t have the ability to follow through,” to make the changes thought to be necessary.

Working Smarter, Not Harder

“Today,” he continued, “with accountability knocking at everyone’s door, we can now analyze this data and say, ‘Here is what we really need to do.’ We’ve come full circle from when I began in 1972. We knew at that time that we needed to target where our students were and teach them at that level to move them forward. Now we can actually do that. Our data points out that what we’re doing with our children is working. Not perfectly, but it is working. We see ongoing changes with our students and faculty. We can see success. And we’re working smarter, not harder.” “Smarter” and “success” are both antidotes to stress.

Fidelia Sturtevant, principal of the Wahlstrom Academy in East Orange, New Jersey, told me the other day that the professional embrace of the culture of improvement through accountability “allows me to fulfill my deepest values as an educator. It gives me the tools I need to help.”

As educators, helping is our deepest source of strength and the deepest source of our resilience. Knowing more allows us to help in ways I could never have dreamed of when I began my career. I’m glad, really glad, that today, “We can do something about it.”

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Cheryl G. Riggins is NAESP’s associate executive director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances. Her e-mail address is criggins@naesp.org.

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