The Best Practices Are Good Human Practices

We live in a most amazing time. In fact, we live in a revolutionary time. Our unprecedented capacity to communicate at the speed of light with almost everyone everywhere has expanded our learning community to an unfathomable degree. With computers we can keep track of nearly everything. And with the extended intelligence that computers give us, we have begun to ask the questions we’ve always wanted to ask but couldn’t hope to answer, such as “What really works to improve things?” Today we can begin to get answers to those questions as a result of what I call the “better practices movement.”

In hospitals, clinics, factories, and schools worldwide, people are stepping back from their habitual ways of doing things, consulting others in similar situations, and employing the objectivity of data to help them build better cars, healthier people, and more engaged students. Since this edition of Principal takes a look at best practices, to be objective about improvement I decided to consult two exceptional educational leaders on this subject. I wanted to learn what better practices they were employing to improve children’s lives.

Edward Newsome has been improving children’s lives for more than 30 years. Today he holds an important position as one of three directors of school performance for the Montgomery County, Maryland, school district. This is a region where, as Newsome says, “data is king,” and where administrators, teachers, and students are taught how to improve themselves with data.

Eric Brown has been in education for 12 years. He is principal of a 600-student elementary school in Columbia, South Carolina. What brought Brown to my attention was his recent presentation about his interesting new book, My Soul Looks Back – Empowering African American Children for Success, a kind of prescription for better ways to support black children in school.

Although each of these men employs somewhat different strategies in their particular situations, both have the same fundamental message: To improve students’ achievement and to increase their engagement, we must find new and more powerful ways to make already good teachers even better. Both men embrace their roles as leaders committed to helping and supporting teachers in their personal and collective efforts to improve themselves.

In Montgomery County, improvement through data begins with establishing targets for every aspect of teaching and learning. As Newsome points out, how can we get somewhere if we don’t know where that is? For him, that “somewhere” is the 21st century in a world where people will “engage in much more sophisticated conversations, think critically, and seek out relevance.”

To Newsome, a society requiring the skills to succeed in such a world demands schools that use those very skills every day, in every classroom. That, he argues, requires teachers whose targets are to teach these skills to their students. It also requires leaders who ensure that teachers are held accountable for reaching those targets. As Newsome points out, accountability is not a four-letter word. It is a method for self-improvement, and self-improvement is important to us as human beings.

For Brown, too, good teaching is, and always has been, the best practice. Good teaching must begin with good relationships—that human glue that binds us to one another and without which we can’t hope to reach our “targets,” he says. Brown suggests that a leader is accountable for creating a community of effort and keeping it moving forward. Thus, to Brown, the best practices are those that augment and expand upon our best human practices: community, communications, vision, caring, and learning together to improve our collective and personal efforts.

As you undoubtedly know, everything about education is becoming more and more sophisticated because of our revolutionary new capacity to know so much more than we’ve ever been able to know before. But after talking with these two distinguished educators recently, both practitioners of this new sophistication, I was brought back to a less sophisticated truth: that it is human beings who teach other human beings to learn. Education is a very human business, one that requires the most important human skills to accomplish. I appreciate the effort to achieve the best practices because it will improve upon those human skills. Or at least there is the hope, the belief, that it will.

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