

Leadership and learning

Raising achievement, creating change, and closing gaps

Douglas Reeves, Ph.D., founder of The Leadership and Learning Center and author of numerous books and articles on organizational effectiveness, believes that staying focused at the classroom level is key for successful school leaders. Dr. Reeves explored this idea and findings from recent research when he was in Santa Rosa on November 27. He was the third presenter in the year-long Leadership Series that SCOE is hosting this year.

Reeves remains involved in the classroom through an ongoing commitment to teach every Friday in K-12 schools. By getting out of the ivory tower of universities and district offices, he's been able to see firsthand how schools are implementing leadership ideas and instructional strategies—and how those strategies are impacting student learning.

Creating change in schools

One key message that Reeves presented to Sonoma County educators is that leadership and teaching decisions have an enormous influence on closing the equity gaps that continue to challenge schools today. Rather than blame influences that are beyond our control, he suggests that school leaders become advocates for social justice in the realm of education and that, by doing so, equity gaps can be closed. Recent data shows that inequity is lessened when teachers and administrators commit to closing the gap and changing the school practices that support it.

But change doesn't happen by announcing new policies, giving lectures, buying new programs, or studying change theories, Reeves says. Change occurs when teachers and administrators are guided by what happens in the classroom. These four essential questions should inform classroom-focused change efforts:

- What do students need to learn?
- How do we know that they've learned it?
- What are the most effective teaching and learning strategies?
- How do we know that our schools and systems are effectively supporting learning?

Dr. Reeves reminds us that much research has been done by Robert Marzano and others to determine which teaching strategies are the most effective. For example, we know that students need to be able to summarize and take notes, analyze content, and make connections between subjects. We know that teachers must actively engage students and challenge them to discuss ideas and think at higher levels. And yet, Reeves asks, are our schools really doing all of this so that it's truly impactful?

Research available in 2007 provides evidence suggesting that *deep implementation* of effective instructional practices is what's needed. In fact, deep implementation of a few key instructional strategies has been shown to be more effective than superficial implementation of a wide variety of strategies. Schools that are implementing many strategies sporadically—in one or two classrooms or on some days but not others—will never see the degree of improvement that these strategies can yield.

This new research about what Reeves calls the “non-linear path of school improvement” supports the premise that schools are struggling with a knowing-doing gap—they know what works, but aren't necessarily doing it (or doing it deeply). “In the real world of the classroom, it's critical mass that matters,” says Reeves. “That's the central message today. The good news is that there are no new ideas about effective instruction; we already know what to do. The bad news is that effective instruction isn't going to make a difference unless 90 percent of the faculty are doing it.”

Establishing a culture of achievement

This same type of knowing-doing gap exists for administrators. They, too, know what to do but face an entrenched school culture and conditions that can curtail change efforts. Dr. Reeves maintains that changing school culture is a priority that can immediately impact student achievement. “The culture of the school will respond to what you choose to value,” he says.

As an example, Reeves cites that fact that many school hallways are lined with trophies celebrating the achievement of athletes. Why can't those same trophy cases be used to recognize the *academic* achievement of students? This can make a tremendous difference in how achievement is viewed by the entire school community.

As further evidence of the impact that school culture has on learning, one recent study looked at the relationship between student popularity and achievement. In grades 2-6, students emulate peers who have top grades. By middle school, the opposite is true. There, the most highly regarded students are the academic underachievers, especially among minority students. Reeves implores educators to recognize and nurture the academic champions, not just the athletic ones, by creating a “culture of achievement” in our schools.

“The culture of a school is not *their* culture; it's *our* culture,” he says. We've created it and we can, and must, change it.

Overcoming the 'change-killers'

Dr. Reeves cites three conditions that can put the brakes on school efforts to change: toxic feedback, hierarchy, and blame.

The worst offender is toxic feedback. Toxic feedback—to students and teachers—can stifle any hope of improvement. For students, change-killing feedback comes in the form of grading practices. When students face a single test or overriding project on which their entire semester grade hinges or get zeros for missing work, they often give up. Recognizing this, Reeves suggests an alternative grading policy that can alter students' perspective on learning. It's based on the words of Larry the Cable Guy, “Just get 'er done!” In other words, students can't miss assignments; they are required to do them. For example, students can stay after school until

missed assignments are finished, which provides an avenue for them to complete the work that will help them succeed.

Reeves also suggests that teachers evaluate students' best work rather than using the mean average of a string of assignments, which can discourage and penalize students who need extra time to "get it."

A second change-killer is hierarchical communication. A better way to approach communication in schools is through the use of existing networks. In this system, a person who is well connected within the social network of teachers is key. Convince that person of the value of an initiative and the word will spread to others.

School leaders can also move initiatives forward by targeting the teachers who are most willing to adapt. In these cases, professional development can be differentiated by conducting a 4-3-2-1 analysis. The 4s are teachers who can lead the initiative and teach their colleagues. The 3s are teachers who will model the strategy in their classrooms, but aren't comfortable leading. The 2s are willing to learn about it, but may not implement it. The 1s are just not interested. By focusing on building capacity with the 4s and 3s, change is more likely to occur.

Blame is the final change-killer that Dr. Reeves discussed. If educators blame factors outside of their control, such as student socio-economic status, they will never take ownership of closing the achievement gap and never effect a positive outcome. In 2006 and 2007, studies of more than 300,000 schools showed that educators who believe they influence student achievement have higher percentages of proficient students—the point being that attitude effects outcome when it comes to school change.

This summary of Dr. Reeves' presentation was prepared by Annette Murray, coordinator of the North Coast AVID Regional Center.