



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

"The Practitioner's Best Friend"
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Can You Help Me?

The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.
Carl Rogers

In my first year as a principal I realized that I had a struggling teacher. I was diligent in my assessments and was direct about my concerns with the teacher. It did not take long before the situation became difficult. The teachers' union was now involved and the working relationship between the two of us was strained and not conducive to success. A couple of months went by and the situation was grim. The teacher walked into my office and at first I thought another difficult conversation was about to happen. The teacher looked at me, and said, "I know what you are asking but I don't know how to do it. Can you help me?"

The working relationship between the teacher and I changed immediately. Months of building walls and frustration evaporated immediately. The teacher's willingness to be so vulnerable in such a dire situation immediately made me reassess my role towards him. He was a person who woke up every morning wanting to do a good job for the kids he worked with. I had found myself losing objectivity. I realized that I needed to learn how to be a better administrator so that I was open and supportive of teachers who struggled.

Imagine where we would be today if people did not say, "I don't know what I am doing" or "Can you help me?" I am sure that these were two questions asked by Lewis and Clark when they were looking for the Northwest Passage. That worked out pretty well for us living in the Northwest. However in education, these terms seem so rare whether you are a student, teacher or administrator.

I experienced this first hand in my high school junior math class. Instead of expressing my vulnerability and asking for help, I pretended to know what I was doing, raising my hand when everybody else raised their hand and faked it throughout the year. However I could not hide from the reality of the final assessments, which reiterated what I already knew, which was I could not do it. Why didn't I ask for help? The bottom line was that I did not feel safe in that classroom to get the help that I needed. It takes a lot of courage to admit weakness in front of teachers and peers. It has to be the right environment to do so.

Twenty-five years later, this math class still teaches me valuable lessons. I have seen examples similar to mine many times in the classroom. Students who remain silent in class hoping that their teacher does not expose them for their lack of understanding. Teachers who try to put on a brave face but are struggling with a particular class. Principals who have left the profession because the pressure of improving student learning became an overwhelming task. In all cases, the problem stems back to the same thing. 'I am overwhelmed by the task

expected of me and I don't know what to do. However, I cannot admit to my peers that I do not know what to do because I am supposed to know.

There are so many things to learn in education today that it is impossible to be successful at everything. Common Core, TPEP, Student Growth Goals and Smarter Balanced are the latest that all educators need to tackle. While all serve a great purpose, it is a substantial amount to take on as an individual. Why is it not OK to say "I don't know how to do all of this?" We go to conferences as a way to learn more about these programs but often what educators experience are a one size fits all and so the specific questions and concerns are not always met.

The problem is that in education we are stuck in a situation where we are constantly reminded at all education levels and in the media that nothing short of excellent teaching will put our kids in great peril. Teachers and administrators don't want to admit they are struggling for fear that they will be seen as failing the kids that they care so much about. How difficult a situation this puts our educators in?

If we are to be successful in the future we must focus on learning environments where "I don't know" and "Can you help me" are phrases that are encouraged, accepted and supported. This will help create a safe haven where we can eliminate the loneliness that comes with not knowing how to complete a task. "I don't know" statements can be transformed into group problems of practice. Strategies can be developed around the "I don't know" so that practical solutions can be developed that meet the needs of the struggling learner.

"Is the world of education truly ready to accept, "I don't know" as part of the vocabulary for our educators?" Is it OK if we are not masters of all areas? Are teachers and principals safe to admit weaknesses in their practice and be able to find solutions in a safe learning environment? If we truly want to make change in education than this must be the first step.

If you are an administrator, what is your first response when you hear that a teacher is struggling? Do you provide a safe harbor to allow a teacher to acknowledge their struggle? Do you encourage them to take risks and support them if they fail? Is "I don't know," allowed in your school?

It would only be fair to the readers of this article that I practice what I preach. I have been a principal for ten years and I still have more questions than answers. I would appreciate your help in my problems of practice for the 2014-15 school year. There is many times where I have said, "I don't know" to the following.

1. Supporting teachers to develop and assess quality Student Growth Goals
2. Building a positive learning relationship with the Hispanic Community
3. Closing the achievement gap for Hispanic and Special Education students

When times are tough in education, it is easy for students, staff and administrators to isolate themselves and try to deal with the problems that they are encountering alone. It often leaves the individual lonely and more frustrated which impacts them and those around them. Now, more than ever it is time to support each other so that we can reach out for help, get the support that we need to help us achieve our goals.

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