

When thinking of school improvement, it is vital that teachers are educated on past and current reform movements and can define their role in school improvement initiatives in order to serve as better advocates for their students. Every teacher should practice their profession based off of a few select core values. These values should not be compromised or negotiated, so it is important that thought and commitment are put into the development of these core values. In my opinion, teachers come into the profession with a set of beliefs and principles; however, a true set of values takes years of teaching practice and expertise to cultivate. Over the past twenty years of teaching I have come to the supposition that I operate in my teaching profession based on four core values.

The first core value that I teach by is to look at each student as an entire individual and to teach to the whole child. What I mean by this, is that as a special education teacher, I can't just look at the academic portion of a child. I can't force an academic initiative upon a child who doesn't have the necessary social and personal needs met first. I must be multi-faceted and teach each student looking at their academic, social, and personal realms.

The second core value that I feel is essential to successful teaching is advocacy. As a special education teacher, I am often put in the position in choosing between doing what is best for children and what is best for the school. For example, as a special education teacher, I have to implement certain benchmarks to all my students at set times of the year. Each year new benchmarks are added. The children I teach function two to four years below their grade level, but the county mandates these students to be benchmarked at their current grade level. This elicits a variety of student aftermaths which include crying, anger, and frustration. Am I really helping these students by consistently giving them benchmarks that remind them how far below grade level they really are? While I understand the need for assessment, I also understand that

excessive assessment at levels beyond the understanding of my students diminishes their self-esteem. It is my responsibility to advocate for these children and make my opinions known, even if the decision makers do not agree.

The next core value is successful technology incorporation into the curriculum. I believe that it is imperative for teachers to keep themselves abreast on the latest technology and how they can implement that technology to move their students along academically and socially. There is new software constantly being developed that targets specific academic and social needs of children. While some are effective and some are not, it is essential that teachers weed through these programs and promote the effective ones as part of their school initiatives. It is also essential that proper training be provided for teachers, if they are to be expected to use technology effectively (McKenzie, 2001).

The last core value I teach by is community involvement. I strongly believe that a teacher must involve community resources to teach to the “whole” child. In some schools that I have taught in, there often were not enough funds to implement the mandated school reform initiatives that were being put into place. To get around this obstacle, I would write grants and solicit monetary support from local community foundations as well as state and national organizations. It is permissible for teachers to admit that they cannot do everything to meet the needs of children. However, as a teacher, I feel obligatory to find the needed resources that can provide for children’s needs and work collaboratively with these resources.

When considering what should be the aims of education, one has to take several factors into consideration. The student should always be the focus of all educational decisions. We need to look at the student as an individual and develop a plan of action that meets the educational needs of the student. I believe that education should provide not only academic skills, but if

called for, also provide social skills as well. Schools should consider character education within the curriculum that can encompass prescribed social skills needed by the school population.

The most important aim of schools and teachers should be to prepare students to be productive citizens within society. I strongly believe that currently we are operating under a “one size fits all” model of education. We are preparing all of our students for advanced educations and inhibiting many artistic, musical, and mechanical talents (Robinson, 2009). I believe schools should be aiming to cultivate students’ talents and innate abilities, rather than constraining them, and help them actualize these competencies so they can apply them to their imminent role in society. This aim should not be confused with tracking students. Students should have the opportunities to experience a wealth of disciplines before narrowing in on a career path. It is up to educational systems to expose students to choices and guide them toward their strengths and interests.

School reform, in my opinion, is the implementation of effective change in a school that contributes to increasing the academic and social well being of its students. David & Cuban (2010) state school reform is shaped by ideology, guesses, and optimism. I believe that school reform takes place on two levels. The first level is the “big” school reform. These “big” models of school reform implement change on a grand level. Problems are identified and change is implemented in the expectations of eradicating the identified problems. The choice to implement big models of reform is usually made by stakeholders at the administrative, county, or state levels (Rowan, Barnes, & Camburn, 2004). Of course, there usually is some input from teachers, parents, and community members. However, the initiation and decision to implement the reform is usually made by the “higher-up” levels of stakeholders. These “big” models of change usually implore a specific philosophy of education and apply it to a targeted population of students.

Faculty members are trained on the philosophy and specific components that make up the reform.

The second type of school reform takes place on a much smaller level and often goes unnoticed. This “smaller” type of reform, yet in my opinion, the most important reform, is the changes that teachers make in their daily instructional methodologies. There are no “big” fancy names to these reforms. These small reforms often go unrecognized by stakeholders in education, with the exception of the teachers who conduct the implementation. An example of this type of reform might be a group of grade level teachers deciding to regroup students based on observed areas of reading deficits. Perhaps science teachers in a high school have identified that their students are not scoring as high as their neighboring schools on End of Course science tests and decide to implement action research to tackle this issue. These are examples of identifying a problem, thinking of ways to combat the problem, and implementing effective change or reform.

The main goal of school reform should be to provide effective change that ultimately results in more operative instructional strategies that foster students’ acquisition of desired academic and social standards. Another goal of school reform should be to involve all stakeholders in education. School reform should always be student centered, but it should also take into consideration the needs of the people responsible for fulfilling the reform. Providing professional development on specific initiatives should be a goal of school reform. Another goal of school reform that I feel is essential to success is buy-in. Parents, faculty, and administration must demonstrate a willingness to implement the reform with a positive attitude. Therefore, it is vital to have input in the selection and development stages of school reform. Otherwise it might be perceived as a change that is being forced rather than cultivated.

When considering school reform efforts, all levels of stakeholders have roles and responsibilities at some level. The federal government, state government, and local school districts are responsible for making sure adequate funds are provided to implement school reform. There should be some level of accountability to these stakeholders. They should have some type of assurance that the money they are allocating is being used effectively to benefit students. However, they should not have so much control that decisions are being made by individuals and organizations not on the front lines working with students on a daily basis.

School leadership personnel have a key responsibility in school reform. I consider this group of stakeholders the “filters” of reform. Often many initiatives are thrown at a school to implement and it is up to the administration to filter these initiatives and implement the ones that align with school improvement goals. I have worked for administrations that take on multiple initiatives at once, yet none are implemented to their fullest potential. I have also worked for administrators who “filtered” the initiatives and let through those that would have an impact on the school’s greatest areas of need.

Teachers are on the “front-lines” of school reform. They are the true implementers and can make or break school initiatives. I feel that teachers are obligated to help develop and support reform and school initiatives; however, they are also implored with providing constructive feedback and driving that reform to actualization. Parents and students are also stakeholders in school reform and often they are ignored in the reform development process. Students should always be looked at as the driving force behind reform, and if that is the case, it would make sense that the parents who raise these children are looked at in the same way. Often, key components of reform, need to be parent centered, as reform doesn’t end at the three o’clock dismissal bell. While students may be the reason for selecting a reform movement, they should

also be the deciding factor of continuing or discontinuing an initiative. They need to be assessed on a holistic scale and stakeholders need to let those assessments drive the decision making of the reform. School improvement is like a revolving door. It lets in a variety of different ideas and concepts to make schools better for children. What we need to remember is that it also lets out the ineffective concepts that stifle children and try to fit them all into one mold.

References

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