Do Our Policymakers Know How to Lead Change?

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on August 18, 2013 7:40 AM | 1 Comment

What if the critics are wrong? What if the tests are sound, the Common Core Standards make our students stronger and smarter thinkers, and the new evaluation system does improve teacher and principal performance? As summer days draw to a close, we think both backward and forward. We endured a tough year last year and now the results have been reported. We prepare to begin again. In this moment, we pause to question ourselves. It is good reflective practice so we try to model it. We ask ourselves questions.

While pushing back against these forced changes, what have we offering in return? Have we become so consumed by opposition that we absorb ourselves of the obligation for leaders to improve the system? If they are wrong, what is better? Or do we hold that these reforms are right, but the process and the timeline are wrong? Have we been clear?

We are the ones who will generate the data to determine the answers to these questions. We will implement the Common Core, complete the new evaluations, explain away the results of the first round of tests, take our lumps as they are handed out when the State publishes our results and hang on until this all passes. Maybe the Common Core Standards aren't perfect. Our implementation might not be either. We have the capacity and the knowledge of our own communities and the talents that exist in our schools. We have the expansive opportunity to make it work. Why wouldn't we want to do this? How is it not an improvement to teach children the way to solve a problem using mathematical thinking? How is it not an improvement to teach children the reason we invert and multiply when dividing fractions? How is it not an improvement to use digital resources in which children can interact with information and make sense of things themselves and with others? How is it not an improvement that all teachers, system wide teach academic vocabulary, not as a list to be memorized, but as part of each new learning opportunity on every level in every subject. How is it not an improvement to systematically introduce more complex texts and to use science and social studies resources in order to improve students' capacity to read non-fiction material? The Common Core is a step forward.

So, what is wrong? Our speculation is the policy leaders and agency leaders do not know how to lead change and that they have become impatient with us, rather than examine themselves.

The push-back we hear in this present moment has to do with the horrid decline in the scores for our students that have been recently released. What we are really frustrated by is the forked tongue conversation going on about how we are failing while we all know that these tests measure skills we have hardly had the opportunity to learn and teach. The policy makers have decided to fail the children, the teachers and school leaders as a way of motivating us into action. This is an unfathomably bad strategy but, for those who believe change must be forced upon people, perhaps it is understandable. We may rise up and prove we can do what they are asking so that the failure imposing bullies will stop their aggression. But in so doing, we will have proved them right. We can also stand on higher ground and offer something more.

Laws and regulations exist to either give or limit rights and opportunities for our citizens. Changes in laws and regulations push and pull at the boundaries of what we are permitted to do. At one time, women did not have the right to vote. Law changed that. In one moment women were not permitted to vote and in the next, they were. This current change thrust upon us and is not about rights or limits, but about human behavior. This is a different kind of change, especially when it calls for so many human beings to participate in the effort. Calling for change without understanding the change process is possibly the most egregious failing of any good change effort. We must change what happens in nearly every classroom. We must change the way we evaluate our students' progress and the success of our teachers and principals. We must dismantle our schedules to create more space and reinvent our budgets to find flexibility. We are taking apart a system in which some are deeply invested, while simultaneously creating the new system and function without interruption so the children can't fall through the cracks of the transition. It calls for the heads, hands and hearts of skilled change leaders at the local level, even if it has not been present at higher levels.

Why haven't they thought about this? This is an important moment. The call out to regulatory leaders, filled with anger and dismay, must consider what they don't know. We have said they don't know what it's like on the ground but really, they don't know change leadership. They must be awakened to their failing in this process. However, we won't label them failures; we will, with compassion, show them how to lead. In the end, they may not learn and they may not acknowledge how it could have been better. That cannot be our purpose. We simply will make the difference and let them learn if they choose.

We can imagine that our federal and state level leaders can conjure a rationale that they created a sense of urgency, created a guiding coalition, developed a vision and strategy and communicated the vision. They left us out! A colossal misunderstanding of the process! They formulated their sense of urgency among themselves, created the coalition of “them,” delivered “their” vision and strategy, and communicated it with explosive threats of failure. We urge them to learn from change experts to learn and rethink their strategy.
However, here we are, a bit bruised but healing from last year and determined not to live another one like it. Now, we know the lay of the land. More choices are in our hands. Let us not make the same mistakes they have. Let’s remember what we know about human beings and change processes and coalesce powerful local energy to lead education and children out of the 20th century into this one. Leading change is not easily done. Let us not do to our schools and districts, what our politicians have done to us. Let us step in and step up, take the bull by the horns and do it right. We have schools to lead. No matter the mistakes of our leaders, let us succeed at making the changes, and leading our schools and our children into a prosperous and fulfilling future. While we are hard at work, let’s hope they learn an important lesson about how to lead change, from us.

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