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The Wrong Education Problems Are Being Solved

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Beyond the field of education, history provides numerous reminders that relatively high rates of failure often accompany the improvement of performance. Ty Cobb, who holds the record for the highest batting average in baseball history, ended his career with a .367 average and thus failed in nearly two-thirds of his career attempts. One can only imagine the number of flawed dishes that world-class chef Julia Child prepared before naming her boeuf bourguignon one of her signature recipes. Even Ernest Hemingway, one of America's most beloved authors, rewrote the finale of his masterpiece *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times before submitting it for publication.

Each of these individuals serves as an example of how disciplined improvement entails both the commencement and termination of actions. In addition to modifications and improvements, successful professionals identify the detrimental practices or behaviors they must extinguish. For instance, batters may abandon the habit of opening their hips early in their swing, chefs may remove what was previously thought of as an essential ingredient from a cherished recipe, and authors may curtail their use of the passive voice. In each scenario, the elimination of a self-inflicted impediment contributes significantly to the improvement of overall performance.

In contrast, the rhetorical association of failure with the performance of education professionals is considered taboo, something teachers and administrators avoid at all costs. Subsequently, discussions and debates about the best means to improve school performance and student achievement dominate the discourse of educators, policymakers, and researchers. Although improvement strategies might indeed yield tangible benefits for students and schools, they can also obscure the learning that occurs through the purposeful examination of failure. Specifically, efforts focused solely on improvement may fail to eliminate the unnecessary and avoidable operations that preclude classroom and school improvements.

Even the most talented educators fail on a daily basis. Meticulously planned lessons focusing on the Battle of Normandy may not engage students. The well-executed chemistry experiment may produce more of a dud than a bang. Pressure to cover a course's entire scope and sequence in a given grading period may in fact promote disgruntled and disrespectful outbursts from students, rather than excited celebrations of "aha moments." Failures such as these should be framed as teachable moments, situations from which educators can learn and improve.

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Professionals must learn from their mistakes through the analysis of their failures, thus devising and adapting strategies that can improve or augment their craft. Yet, the field of education's bias against failure often prevents educators from adhering to a philosophy that frames failed actions as a critical component of professional learning. Instead, we continually scour the data searching for ways to improve faltering performances, while infrequently investigating the behaviors and actions that may have contributed to the unintended results.

The current focus on turning around persistently low-achieving schools epitomizes the lack of disciplined learning in education. When considering interventions targeting school improvement, too many stakeholders assume unacceptable levels of student performance resulted from the absence of improvement efforts, strategies, or initiatives in persistently low-achieving schools. This dangerous assumption, combined with the abbreviated timetable expected of school turnarounds, often compels education reformers to add more initiatives and responsibilities, rather than revoke ineffective policies and procedures. The pressure to turn around persistently low-achieving schools, when coupled with inaccurate assumptions and increased financial resources, contributes to a situation in which well-meaning educators diligently expend their efforts and resources solving the wrong problems.

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Consider the plight and context of many historically low-achieving schools. In addition to poor results on state assessments of literacy and numeracy, these schools often report higher-than-average rates of absenteeism, discipline referrals, and inexperienced educators. Although adding instructors and instructional time could potentially improve testing results, such initiatives in isolation may not curtail the challenges that impede effective teaching and learning. In addition, when supplemental funding and assistance provided by state and federal governments expires, turnaround leaders perceived as successful may not have actually cultivated the organizational capacity necessary to continue or even sustain hard-earned improvements.

Instead of simply adding more resources and initiatives, school leaders must determine which interventions could prevent or discontinue detrimental behavior and decisions, as well as build the internal capacity of the school. For instance, the daily schedule of teachers could be adjusted to increase instructional-planning time. Instead of principals' burdening teachers with a heavily administrative agenda, perhaps leaders could find creative ways to communicate such information. By discontinuing the administrative takeover of instructional-planning time, master teachers would be provided with more time to mentor their inexperienced or struggling peers. In another example, school leaders might concentrate resources to diminish the causes or triggers of disciplinary infractions. By analyzing student-discipline referrals, administrators may identify certain times of the day as particularly problematic. The leaders could then reduce disruptive behaviors by eliminating flawed procedures during peak referral times, such as class transitions and lunch periods. This discontinuation of unsound policies could potentially curtail disorderly behaviors, decrease discipline referrals, and actually increase the amount of time students spend within a classroom.

Perhaps the common ingredient to the successes of Ty Cobb, Julia Child, and Ernest Hemingway was their ability to discontinue poor practices, as well as make necessary improvements. Obviously, how any educator achieves success in the classroom is far more critical to our

society than what may have led to a base hit, tasty dish, or literary masterpiece. Unfortunately, this means that educational failure is also more costly. Stakeholders interested in the improvement of public education can no longer afford to avoid difficult discussions about failure. If educators can begin embracing the meaningful learning that occurs through the disciplined analysis of failure, we can equip ourselves with empirically informed insights, and apply our diligence and expertise to solving the right problems.

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