

What Schools Should Be Looking At Is Beyond Measure

By Peter DeWitt on October 25, 2016 8:00 AM

Today's guest blog is written by Travis Jordan, Superintendent of Beulah Public Schools in Beulah, ND.

As I attend conferences and meetings related to education, I constantly hear about programs and practices that will close achievement gaps in our schools. We are continually asked to look at data and use that data as a driving force for instructional improvements. Our nation's schools have gone from data poor to data rich in education in just a short time. Having this data is certainly better than lacking it, but the data cannot be used alone to measure the success of students, teachers, and/or schools.

A school can choose any curriculum that it wants. It can implement a million programs, but the reality of these is that they do not come with a magic wand, that if waved, will automatically produce soundly educated students. We must focus on people first. Learning begins with a feeling of self-worth. We must focus on building relationships with our students and teachers. Relationships are the fundamental building blocks to the success of any organization.

With this we must get away from the notion that test scores and letter grades define our students. Our students are so much more than a test score. Tests do not measure creativity. They do not measure motivation or curiosity, nor do they take into account dependability, kindness, or loyalty. To go further, tests do not measure leadership ability or courage. To sum it up, tests do not measure character, and character is a large part of intelligence.

I challenge educational institutions to truly educate the whole child. In doing so, we must get away from the typical "*knowledge regurgitation*" and "*memorization*" methods of education. Today we are all instantly knowledgeable. We can get the answer to anything we want with the click of a button. The focus in education needs to shift to the application and creation of new knowledge.

This will not be possible if we don't give our students opportunities to be creative and to critically think. We need to allow them to collaborate and communicate. We must stop focusing on the product and pay more attention to the process. In doing so we need to stop putting a time-limit on learning. Right now we have it backwards. Time is constant while learning is the variable. We must change this around so that learning is the constant and time the variable. Focus on the process because the end is just another beginning.

When we do this growth can occur. Allow students to be invested in their own learning. Giving our students real-world, relevant problems to solve will increase student engagement. Begin your class by posing a question. Allow your students the autonomy to use whatever means possible to orchestrate a response or a solution. The teacher no longer needs to be the "*giver of knowledge*," rather he/she should be a guide during the learning process.

An example of this would be the presidential election. How can we get more people to vote? This would be the question posed to the class. Allow the students to use creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication to come up with a solution. Allow them to talk to experts in the polling industry. Allow them to create a video to share with the world. Simply, allow them to drive the learning. At the same time, celebrate the uniqueness of each of the students. Allow the students to exemplify their talents. Allow them to take risks and to step outside their comfort zones. Focus more on the process and less on the product. For it is on the journey where the learning will occur. Embrace failure with a fail-forward attitude. Encourage and empathize along the way.

This will ultimately lead us down a path of students feeling a sense of self-worth. When this happens achievement gaps will start to close. We will also be preparing our students to be "*life*" and "*choice*" ready when they leave our schools. We will be building the character skills that are necessary to thrive in the innovate world in which we live.

We also must not forget that one of the major indicators of a successful student is a successful teacher. School leaders must take care of teachers. They too will do better when they feel a sense of self-worth and feel appreciated. We need to allow our teachers to take risks and step-outside of their comfort zones as well. When they do this they will not only realize their full potential, but they will be modeling this behavior for their students.

Great schools dig much deeper than data. They plant the seeds for growth by focusing on relationships first. They see failure as an opportunity to grow and they celebrate the uniqueness of every individual within the building. They focus far beyond what is measureable.

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