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The Problem-Solving Power of Teachers

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The best solutions to problems in education may just come from those closest to students.

I entered teaching about 10 years ago, eager to change the way the school experience was constructed for young people. At that time, I could hardly have imagined the constant spin of changes that would take hold of schools and my chosen profession. Now the U.S. public education system seems to have become a veritable smorgasbord of education experiments.

Risk takers of all kinds have joined the effort to find new and better ways to structure nearly every aspect of teaching and learning. Some of the experiments I'm seeing in schools are positive—more teacher teams, for example—and others trouble me—like giving strong teachers dramatically larger classes.

I know we need to be willing to try new things to find out what does and doesn't work. But sadly, most of the experiments in education reform come from the imaginations of people who don't actually teach children. The Common Core State Standards Initiative may be the biggest and most obvious current example of this. A team of 50 writers that included just one teacher designed what has been called "the most far-reaching experiment in American educational history" (Hacker & Dreifus, 2013).¹ It's hard not to feel the implicit message when such a huge endeavor was decided on with only token teacher input.

All feelings aside, top-down experiments often end up being out of sync with the realities of both teachers and students. As teachers well know, the details matter; a great idea on paper can easily be rolled out ineffectively. Although teachers understand the value of learning from mistakes, we've seen so many mistakes lately that it's hard not to conclude that it's time to start taking risks on teachers and their problem-solving abilities. Let us solve some of the problems that have such an effect on our classrooms! It's what we do every day; we just work from a limited domain.

Let me illustrate the problem-solving power of teachers by recounting a story from my school in which a grade-level team of teachers turned a small-scale dysfunctional policy into a system that improved both struggling students' academic performance and teacher efficacy.

A Harmless Policy in Theory ...

For the last few years, my school has had what seemed like a reasonable policy about missing homework: If a student missed two homework assignments in a single week, the student was required to serve an after-school detention. The dean of students organized and maintained detention sessions, which were held on Wednesday afternoons. (This was fitting, because Wednesday was our school's official "no homework" day.) The teacher simply

needed to notify the parent of the date of the detention, receive confirmation, and place the student's name on a list.

Sounds clear and easy, right? In theory.

As a teacher, I remember thinking, OK, I'll probably need to put in a lot of work at the beginning of the year assigning detention to all the students who don't turn in homework, but the investment will be worth it when the students develop the habit of doing their homework on time. Not having to hold detention in my own classroom seemed like a good perk.

But a Messy Policy in Practice

In practice, teachers ended up spending hours on Friday afternoons e-mailing or calling the families of the numerous students who had missed two or more homework assignments that week. Phone conversations could get lengthy, so a generic e-mail template seemed like a better bet.

Even then, the hours started to add up when we began to receive reply messages from parents. These included questions about the specifics of the assignments, claims that parents saw their child working on the assignment and requests that the student be able to turn it in the following day, interest from parents in overseeing their child doing the assignment at home, requests from parents to contact them whenever their child did not turn in homework, and requests to reschedule the detention because of scheduling conflicts. It wasn't that we didn't want to have conversations with parents about their child's work in class. It's just that assigning detention didn't create a positive entry point into such a conversation.

The process was overwhelming, and correspondences easily dragged from Friday, across the weekend, all the way through the Wednesday of the actual detention. Moreover, because teachers weren't present during detention periods, there was no guarantee that students would even work on the assignments they'd missed. And if a student had avoided homework because he or she didn't understand the assignment, detention wasn't structured to offer that help.

The result of the clunky policy was that some teachers continued to put in an inordinate amount of time assigning homework detention, and others just took matters into their own hands, circumventing the system.

In my class, for example, the homework is typically to read, and students must keep up with a pacing calendar. By the time students served detention, however, they were often even more behind schedule, and one hour of detention wasn't going to be enough for them to catch up. What I needed was support from parents in ensuring that students read outside class.

I started to simply contact the parents of students who were more than a day or two behind the pacing calendar. I would do this by e-mail or in a phone call on my way home. This communication with parents seemed more effective than calling them about detention, because it began a dialogue; it made parents my allies, rather than putting them on the spot.

Inconsistent and Confusing

When teachers took matters into their own hands, students began to receive mixed messages across classes about consequences. School leaders couldn't get an accurate idea of any individual student's homework completion rate or track the habits of the larger group. They couldn't be sure that teachers were contacting parents or following up on students who missed assignments. Most teachers, myself included, had weeks during which we failed to follow up on missing homework altogether (because of exhaustion or other demands on our time). Meanwhile, some of these students were falling through the cracks, and parents were often under the impression that everything was fine.

From the teachers' side, it was frustrating, because typically the same students failed to submit homework over and over again—and these same students often didn't complete class work or projects either. The problem was deeper than homework detentions could fix.

Teachers Devise a Solution

Teachers at my school meet twice each month in grade-level teams. During this time, we coordinate our advisory program, discuss student progress, and strategize in response to student needs. In addition to teaching 8th grade English language arts, I lead my grade-level team. The homework detention issue had come up in the past, but we hadn't been able to envision a solution that seemed worthy of proposing to our principal—until recently.

This year, an improved schoolwide schedule provides us with time at the end of the official school day, which we didn't have in the past. We teachers now offer daily "office hours" in our classrooms for students looking for extra help on assignments. In a team meeting a few months ago, we were discussing the issue that the students who took advantage of office hours were not always the ones we thought needed the most help.

In response, we all started encouraging those students who routinely were not completing assignments to attend office hours. We also began talking to their parents, who supported the idea. A new micro-problem arose when we all encouraged the same students to attend our individual office hours on the same day—we were asking the students to be in several places at once.

That's when it hit us. "Why don't we hold 8th grade office hours in one place, and teachers can go to that location to work with students?" one teacher suggested. The wheels began to turn.

"Could we assign certain students to be in office hours every day, until further notice?" another teacher added.

"We could stop assigning homework detention for 8th graders, and just make mandatory office hours for the students who need it," someone else said. "Anyone could come to that location for office hours, but it would be mandatory for some."

We made a list of all the students who regularly missed assignments in more than one class. Most of these students also had failing grades in more than one class. The list came to around 12 students out of the 107 8th graders. Our reading teacher volunteered her room, which was large and had nice beanbag chairs and a rug. We planned to have advisors contact the parents of their advisees who were on the list and arrange for the students to attend mandatory office hours daily (except Thursdays, when teachers have meetings) for six weeks. We would then check in on each student's progress and determine next steps.

Principal Support

I brought our plan to our principal, who supported our effort and helped me think through how to communicate the changes to those outside our team. As with any change, it took some troubleshooting to develop a fully functional system. We had to create a rotation of teachers who would be there each day, always having at least two 8th grade teachers present. More teachers would probably stop by to check in with students, but at least two would stay the whole hour. We had to create a system for taking attendance and following up. The deans lent support in the cases of students who skipped mandatory office hours.

Real-Time Results

At first, students pushed back on our expectations, wanting to use the time to play around. Fairly quickly, however, they began to break old habits and use the time to finish their work and get help from their teachers. It became a positive space, where students helped one another as much as we helped them. There were still a few students who were assigned to attend but usually didn't. But the new system allowed us to isolate these cases and focus on getting to the root of the problem.

A few months later, we could really see the positive effect of this system on our students' grades—almost all the students who attended office hours passed their classes. More students joined the group, and a few changed their homework habits so much that we allowed them to stop attending. The 7th grade team also adopted our system.

Teachers no longer spend hours chasing after students and their families over homework detention—or feeling guilty for not doing so. More students get the help they need, even if that help is nothing more than a time and place to do their homework.

Two Lessons About Teacher-Driven Reform

The first lesson we can learn from this experience is that a teacher-driven solution is often far better suited to a problem than a top-down one. Nothing was inherently wrong with the original homework detention policy; it just didn't work very well. It was difficult to see this from the outside, though. Teachers were the ones implementing the system, and we were the only ones who could see both our students and the problem clearly enough to imagine a solution. We took responsibility for fixing the problem because doing so helped us do our jobs better. There are many problems that teachers are the most capable professionals to solve.

The second lesson is about school leadership. We were able to create a better system because we had the time, autonomy, and support to do so. My school's administrators trust teachers to use our meeting time to serve our students, and they don't micromanage us with top-down agendas.

Everyone benefits when teachers have space for collaborative problem solving. The new "office hours" policy wasn't my idea, although I contributed to the conversation. Rather, I like to think it arose from the conditions that my school and I have created so that members of the team feel comfortable sharing ideas and are confident they'll be heard. If we had believed that our principal would shoot the idea down, it's doubtful we would have spent time devising the structure. But previous experience told us we had this kind of autonomy and opportunity, and it turned out we were right. My principal took a risk on our idea and supported us in putting it into practice.

A Broader Domain for Problem Solving

Teams of teachers across the United States are coming up with great ideas to improve their schools—and even more teachers could do so. So far, though, the problems that education leaders tend to trust practicing teachers to solve don't extend much beyond the realm of homework detention and other small-scale, school-based initiatives. Too many areas of education—from assessment of student learning to teacher compensation to teacher preparation—have yet to truly benefit from teachers' ideas. Instead, they often suffer from the same mismatch we saw in the

seemingly sound homework detention policy.

Although leadership opportunities for teachers seem to abound, we're often relegated to being a mouthpiece for someone else's ideas or a token teacher in a plan that really doesn't use our input. I wrote about this in an article that appeared not long ago in *Education Week* (Sacks, 2012); it got so much response from educators that it was clear I'd struck a chord.

What would it take to get practicing teachers to solve larger-scale problems in education? We would need time as well as a willingness on the part of education leaders to take a risk on teachers' ideas.

The Center for Teaching Quality has been incubating teachers' ideas on major policy issues for years. Teachers have tackled such issues as performance pay and teacher preparation (Center for Teaching Quality, 2007, 2013). More recently, the center is funding the work of [teacherpreneurs](#)—practicing teachers who have half-time release from teaching duties to solve problems both inside and outside their schools.²

Don't Shut Out Teacher Thinking

Even the best of teacher ideas—mine included—need to be troubleshot and assessed by teachers along the way. Consider this example. I've just written a book on a student-centered method for teaching novels that I call *whole novels*. The whole-novel method is based on a single, radical idea: Students must read an entire literary work before analyzing it formally. The book mostly addresses the ways I've found to engage diverse groups of students in this process.

If all goes well, people will love the book and be inspired to try out the ideas. If it's really successful, perhaps someone in a position of power will decide that the whole-novel approach is a good way to change how we teach literature. Then this person might call on me to help make this happen. Suddenly I'll be in a position of power; I'll have the opportunity to make decisions for a large group of teachers—but this could easily shut out teacher thinking. Even though I wholeheartedly believe this approach is best for learners, I also know it doesn't work without the critical-thinking power of the teachers using it. Packaged as a top-down directive, my idea will become "just another mandate" for teachers to withstand. The most principled teachers will take matters into their own hands and do whatever they think their students need, despite directives from above. And guess what? Then I'll become the mismatch.

If I hope to make change in classrooms beyond my own, even I need to be open to teachers' ideas every step of the way. The role of a leader in education—whether that person is a teacher at heart, a teacherpreneur, or never was a teacher—must be to inspire and give space to teachers' problem-solving ability. This is a risk worth taking in education today.

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Endnotes

¹ Correction: The statement that the Common Core State Standards were designed by "a team of 50 writers that included just one teacher" is no longer accurate. It was based on a [2009 press release](#) from the National Governors Association (NGA). According to a [more recent document from the NGA](#), by 2010, the "work teams" had 101 members, 5 or 6 of whom were practicing teachers, and the "feedback groups" had 34 members, 2 of whom were practicing teachers.

² For more ideas on how teachers can be integral to the change process, see the book I coauthored with 12 other teachers, *Teaching 2030: What We Must Do for Our Public Schools—Now and In the Future* (Teachers College Press, 2011).

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