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Teachers or administrators, who's the real problem?

Posted By [Jordan Shapiro](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 6:00 am In [Digital Education,K-12,News](#) | [32 Comments](#)

You've probably heard all the buzzwords: inquiry- or project-based learning, blended classrooms, gamification, play, etc. Whether the cheerleaders shout "21st Century Skills," "Character Education," or "Entrepreneurship," it is clear that we want children to have a school experience that is not only about facts and content, but also about empowering thoughtful individuals.

School administrators and teachers are mostly in agreement about these intentions and objectives. After all, they are browsing the same education blogs, reading the same books, and listening to the same speakers. I should know; I regularly give keynote talks at education conferences, and presentations to principals, superintendents, legislators, education technology developers and classroom teachers. I usually talk about how game-based learning blends content with context, so that students learn not only facts, but also how to use those facts in relationship with other individuals and with the world around them. I emphasize how new technologies can help teachers leverage the power of play and creativity.



[1]

The principal of Madison Crossing, Martha D'Amico, explains how to grade student writing, while teacher Lela Hester looks on. (Photo: Jackie Mader)

Afterwards, both teachers and administrators always approach me to share their enthusiasm for experimenting with new tools and teaching methods. The trouble is, each one seems to identify the other as an obstacle. Administrators want teachers to adopt new trendy methods, but they feel that teachers are resistant to change. Teachers yearn to be more creative, but feel it is impossible

to do so within a rigid bureaucracy. Both blame the other, creating a gridlock that seems to obstruct innovation.

The problem may be that teachers and administrators don't have a dependable shared language with which to communicate. While the landscape of educational innovation is big on trendy concepts and buzzwords, it is short on specifics. The same term may mean different things to different ears. This lack of shared definitions makes it difficult to evaluate success rates and convey accomplishments.

Jessica Millstone is a researcher and educational professional development expert who serves as the director of engagement at BrainPOP, a popular website full of animations and video games for learning. She told me that teachers and administrators aren't even clear on the definitions of new technologies. For example, "while many teachers say they are using digital games in the classroom, a lot of the time they just mean interactive activities or worksheets." Millstone suspects that this is why "so much of the research around games and learning shows high levels of adoption, but there are still relatively few teachers or environments to show off as examples."

For example, a recent study from A-GAMES, a research collaboration between New York University and the University of Michigan, last year surveyed 488 K-12 teachers, and found that "more than half of teachers (57 percent) use digital games weekly or more often in teaching." That's a pretty high adoption rate. But according to Millstone, "the most frequently used 'games' aren't really games at all." Teachers seem to label any interactive activity that happens on a laptop or a tablet a 'game.' The categories are unclear. To which activity does each buzzword refer? What counts as blended learning? What's the difference between game-based learning and gamification?

At the end of a semester, labels and definitions may not matter as much as demonstrable learning gains. But the A-GAMES study shows that innovative classroom tools add other important values, as well. Teachers are using video games and other interactive digital platforms in the same way they have always used classroom tools: for formative assessment (a fancy term for monitoring and evaluating student performance on a daily basis). Teachers are watching over students' shoulders as they interact with technology, and making teaching decisions for each individual accordingly. There's no simple way to slap a sticker on such an experience and file a memo so that administrators see the positive impact. Even if there were, what's the best term to use? What's trendy this week? Which language will appeal to administrators?

Clear definitions and methods of classification are the fundamental building blocks of good communication. Without a shared language, Millstone explains, administrators struggle to know how to "identify and reward teachers for finding and integrating innovative tools into their curriculum." Lacking good ways to incentivize teachers to try new things, administrators appear not to be providing the kind of support that teachers deserve. Millstone guesses that this communication breakdown causes some teachers to use lack of professional development as the go-to excuse.

Absent a foundation for good communication, the professional culture around education technology and innovative pedagogy sounds like a dysfunctional marriage where both spouses want more romance and affection but each blames the other for an uninspired sex life. With the exception of a few schools and districts, the relationship between teachers and administrators is hindered by a giant communication gap. Like a bad cliché of family therapy, they both want the same thing but don't know how to say it.

Perhaps, if they listened more attentively to one another, they might discover they are more aligned than they imagine.

This story was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#) ^[2], a nonprofit, independent news website focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about [Digital Education](#) ^[3].

32 Comments To "Teachers or administrators, who's the real problem?"

#1 Comment By [Kim](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 8:58 am

The real blame is federal government intrusion into education. States should be in complete control of education.

#2 Comment By [Robert](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 9:48 am

I agree with Kim. I was an administrator for one year before I decided to go back and teach. Administrators are scrutinized by district administrators just like teachers are. District administrators are scrutinized by state administrators. At the end of the line is the federal government and their threat to cut off your funding. But you do bad and they throw more money at you. Weird. Whatever. I just go back to my classroom and try to teach these kids to the best of my ability. Not just content, but life skills, citizenship, and other things that they aren't taught at home. In 55 minutes, 30 kids at a time.

#3 Comment By [Dave Gibbs](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 9:58 am

Once again, Boards of Education get off the hook along with the Parents and the many kids who CAN do the work but WON'T!

#4 Comment By [Art F](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 10:29 am

This report raises the issue of teachers and admin speaking a different language- a problem that is often not addressed when discussing ed reform. However, the problem is even deeper- teachers and admin, although working within the same building, have very different goals. Without honestly addressing those difference, the issue of speaking a different language will not improve.

#5 Comment By [Ben](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 10:46 am

I come from a corporate environment, so I know that people will disagree with me. Especially teachers and administrators..

Our schools need to run like a corporation with more experienced personnel leading the departments and school boards. Need to have highly skilled professionals running the school board and not people that have nothing better to do or have their own agenda in making up the rules as they go. The "Administrators" should not have a teaching background - same as the school board. Administrator's are usually former teachers that have no real life / corporate experience, the need for real life and corporate experience is needed to be successful.

If the student doesn't want to learn then don't waste the systems valuable time.

#6 Comment By [Sally](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 11:00 am

It's neither the teacher nor the administrators, it's the PARENTS!

#7 Comment By [Ken stevens](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 11:24 am

The major problem is with administrators who have taught in the classroom little, if any. Administrators should teach a minimum of five years in the classroom before being considered to lead a group of teachers. Putting an administrator in charge who has perhaps 1-3 yrs of teaching experience is akin to putting a first year lawyer in charge of a law firm with 50-100 lawyers . It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever!

#8 Comment By [Chris](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 11:33 am

The problem I have, as a teacher, is the lack of available technology in my school. Sure we have BYOT, but the signal in my classroom is so poor that students have a hard time accessing it. And, not all of my students have a device to bring in. This, coupled with the fact that I have a principal that wants all kinds of technology integration but cannot relate how to use it in the classroom because he taught PE/driver's ed., so he is out of touch with how to successfully utilize it within an academic curriculum. Plus, he can't mentor me in it because he doesn't know how to use it himself. Our inservice time is spent on all kinds of stuff, but we as teachers never get time to explore some of the great programs and apps out there so that we can develop something for meaningful classroom use.

#9 Comment By [Ed Dzedzic](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 12:08 pm

The Real blame should go to Boards of Education and "CEOs" who don't know anything about education yet force both teachers and administrators to follow idiotic policies dreamed up by people who have never taught. Oh, and Arne Duncan, who is a buffoon.

#10 Comment By [Fisherman's Blues](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 12:08 pm

Spot on Kim. We started to go down hill educationally as soon as the Department of Education was establish back in the mid 70's. It was a political pay back from Jimmy Carter for the teacher's support of his campaign. What a mistake. Our Country is still paying for that mistake and will continue too until the that worthless waste of taxpayer dollars is shut down.

#11 Comment By [Richard Patel](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 12:17 pm

I think this article brings up a key point about bad communication, but I think it goes much deeper.

For one, at the same time the federal/state governments are demanding more and more of teachers in terms of paperwork/busywork, they also demand more and more of them in terms of "do new things". There simply is no time, and many administrators, frustrated over the lack of change, blame entrenched teachers.

My school district adopted PLTs about 8 years ago, about 3 year after creating weekly late starts for collaboration. This was a good change. About 3 years ago, our administration began usurping collaboration time to begin the process of preparing for common core and NGSS (which we are all in agreement will not be around in 4-5 years). The result: no actual collaboration time. I teach two preps with two different teachers. Conservatively, we have talked a grand total of 3 hours each this past semester (and this in an era when teachers teaching together is a big push). It has been very frustrating to meet with a colleague once a week, and be forbidden to talk to them about teaching or students (two of my colleagues were verbally reprimanded when the principal popped in to make sure we were working on NGSS, and caught them talking about a test they were preparing to give.

The end result: teachers feel like they are wasting massive amount of time (and tax payer dollars) to work on a project that ultimately will not survive, and we are losing critical time to improve our courses.

#12 Comment By [Amadeus Jones](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 12:41 pm

My experience as a teacher was to see that there are some teachers out there that are just plain ineffective in the classroom. Unfortunately, I also saw most of them get higher degrees so they could become principals and superintendents. Some, in the different role, performed well while most were simply as ineffective as administrators as they were as teachers.

#13 Comment By [Nick](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 12:54 pm

The culprits are:

- 1) the government (with a never ending list of new mandates)
- 2) the government (trying to follow the agendas of rich donors to their campaigns – think Koch brothers and Bill Gates)
- 3) the government (Have they ever thought of asking RESPECTED educators and researchers in the field about learning? Instead they assign the task to the Arne Duncans, John Kings, and Michelle Rhee of the world.)

But guess what? Who do you think the government will be blaming 20 years from now for the faults they're responsible for RIGHT NOW? LOL...you guessed it. BUT NOT THEMSELVES!

#14 Comment By [Carl DalBon](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 1:07 pm

I agree that the Federal Government is partly to blame for giving money for adopting Common Core. That is distressing. However, I worked for incompetent administrators and can assure you that the problem with ineffective teachers lies with principals and superintendents. They forget that most(not all) were in the classroom. There is a loss of empathy and collegial interaction.

We had (still do) an 87 year old superintendent. The superintendent is an anachronism, refuses to move forward and is mired in the past.

The principal is a retread (once retired) who's in it for the money.

It basically describes a no-win situation for staff and students.

people cry for accountability from teachers yet they and the Boards of Education give the administration a pass. In 36 years I could never evaluate myself, yet the administration can and does.

what better way to throw teachers under the bus??? This is not to say there are ineffective teacher, There are plenty. But it always starts at the top.

#15 Comment By [Keith Rispin](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 1:19 pm

There is certainly some validity to your thesis but I think there are other bigger problems that impede the implementation of new teaching methods, tools and curriculum.

Keep in mind I am looking at this from a technology perspective and I am just going to rattle off issues I see and hear about every day.

Dependable hardware to use, wifi that works, budgets to pay for it all, time for teachers to digitize their curriculum, funds to pay for digital subscriptions, in class support for integration of technology, meaningful professional development, support for children who can't afford the technology...

I have spoken to dozens of teachers who would love to move forward with their teaching practice but it all costs Time and Money and unless their schools are going to pay for it, it isn't going to happen

#16 Comment By [Bruce](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 1:37 pm

All that teacher/administrator stuff is just window-dressing that obscures the real basis of the problem, which is that the USA has a long and ugly history of anti-intellectualism.

We do not like or trust educated people or their "book-learning." The smartest person in American popular culture is Hannibal Lecter. We have never associated education with success or prosperity. This is a country where successful people were those who forged out into the wilderness and made their fortunes. You were not expected to need an effete education for that.

#17 Comment By [Ed Moscovitch](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 2:41 pm

The problem is more than language. The principal has to have a broad vision of what kind of rigorous instruction she is looking for. She needs to be in classrooms all the time. If she doesn't see what she's looking for, she should make specific suggestions – preferably only one or two steps at a time. Then – very important – she should ask “what help do you need from me?”

The principal needs to give the teacher some room to work it out in her own way. And also to make clear that it's OK if the teacher tries something new that doesn't work out well at first – that the principal admires a teacher who takes risks and experiments – and understands that sometimes the experiments don't work.

Finally, the school should have a teacher coach, who the principal can send in to model for the teacher and help her work out new instructional strategies – and who NEVER evaluates the teacher!!

#18 Comment By [Sam Taylor, Jr.](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 4:57 pm

The reason why teachers are resistant to trendy new ideas is that we have seen them come and go, and until you have some actual data to back up your trendy new idea, you probably shouldn't be treating kids as your guinea pigs...

#19 Comment By [Ted Geisel](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 5:55 pm

Great points by Richard. So true. Also there are so many terrible administrators these days. Much of the reason is because they have only spent a few years in the classroom. Unfortunate for all involved.

#20 Comment By [Dale](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 6:10 pm

Administrators and school board members are at fault .. There is a “standard operating procedures or by laws they have to follow. The superintendent is about doing what is best for the school system, the education of the children and responsible to the Board of Education and they to him/her. But when you get a school board who's main objective is a power struggle and a superintendent who is about him/herself. Who dictate to teachers and selects teachers not on performance but who belongs to what group or organization they belong to. Yes the Government also interferes but if you look into it a school system is its own entity and can do what ever they want . Including refusing funds from the government so they can teach kids their own way and not themselves be dictated to do.

#21 Comment By [mke](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 6:21 pm

The students are to blame,, how did it go,, chump don't want no help, chump don't get no help..... You have to want it and you have to practice it at home... Mom and Dad have to take an active part.... And that does not mean bad mouthing teachers in front of their children... The students have to be held accountable not just passed on like a train rolls by billboards...

#22 Comment By [Ron Poirier](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 8:54 pm

The Youtube gaming show “Extra Credits” has some great episodes on using games in education, for anyone who is interested in that sort of thing.

Here's a playlist:

[4]

#23 Comment By [Janette](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 10:15 pm

Having been in the trenches, I believe the real problem is parents. They do not want their children to be challenged, because that might psychologically damage them. They want special benefits for their children (I'm not talking kids with special needs) because they're unique and above the others. Their children simply don't have time to do homework, got to tutoring, or study. Their children should not be responsible for any work they missed while absent, even if that absence was due to a ski trip rather than illness. They see nothing wrong with doing their children's assignments or copying them from the internet and then don't understand when their children do not know the material. But of course, teachers are just too hard or boring or uninspiring, too strict or have not control over their classrooms or any other complaint parents can come up with to blame anyone but their child. They want their children to have the good grades to get into college, but don't care if they actually get an education along the way. Parents also are insistent that their children who are in sports get a passing grade so they can play for the scouts, who don't care about whether or not an athlete is scholarly when awarding those "scholarships." Parents will go to any ends to get their demands met, when they could be spending that energy making their child go to school, behave, do their assignments and study for tests, like generations of students have done. In other words, you earn an education, instead of being handed a piece of paper that essentially means you sat in a desk for 4 years.

#24 Comment By [Drew](#) On December 24, 2014 @ 10:26 pm

I agree that the political aspect of education is the big culprit of the downfall of education in this country. People making up rules, regulations, and theories who have never ever spent a day in a classroom. Teachers are spending more time doing busywork to satisfy the powers to be than working with students. As per usual the ones losing the most from this silly nonsense are the students. I am all for technology and changes in teaching – but mandating (and that is the key issue) everyone does the same thing at the same time the same way – even using the same language – tells me Education is out of control in America.

Teachers are now being held accountable for students who don't come to school or just plain don't want to learn. The Powers to Be have forgotten that as humans – we all have the freedom of choice – at least that's what I understand. Some students just are not interested in education. This could be maturity, need, parental support, but the fact is teachers cannot now or ever control students to that point and trying to do so is a big lesson in futility.

Common language maybe a problem but it is far from being the main problem – once politics and greed are removed from education – maybe education can be saved and our children will get the education they deserve.

#25 Comment By [JayDee](#) On December 25, 2014 @ 2:11 am

As I sit in the glow of my computer screen on Christmas Eve writing pretest questions for the coming semester of high school Spanish, I have to say it's the parents' and politicians' fault for pushing testing and impossible curriculum standards on our students, causing students to put more stock in a grade than learning for learning's sake. It's sad really. I don't get to teach, I get to "test prep." But it's my fault if kids fail. Hmm.

#26 Comment By [Drage](#) On December 25, 2014 @ 2:36 am

In a market economy, it's all about the money. Just double the national budget share on education; thus will ensure better quality of teachers' recruitment based on higher initial salaries.

#27 Comment By [MrDeadman](#) On December 25, 2014 @ 9:51 am

The real problem... the parents. Parents that don't teach their kids respect.

#28 Comment By [AceTucker](#) On December 25, 2014 @ 4:19 pm

This article is nothing more than a self promotion of this writer's money making game strategy lecture circuit. It gives no insight into the title about the problem in education being it teacher or administrator. Let me know when you want to publish an article that is honest to its title and actually addresses educational issues, not promote just one of the thousands of curricular plans in education.

#29 Comment By [Bradley](#) On December 26, 2014 @ 10:26 am

Top-down directives from those with no classroom experience, or no recent experience is an insane method of determining what will work in an actual classroom.

These top-level administrators know nothing about how their theories will work in a functioning room filled with all the challenges the average teacher faces. Nor do they care. They only want to appear to be "doing something" about education. Whether their theories are sound or implemented well matters not one whit. It's the classroom teacher who is the scapegoat in the end.

#30 Comment By [Southpaw](#) On December 29, 2014 @ 4:11 pm

Ben you are so far off. You may know the corporate world, but you have no concept of public education. What solidified my opinion was your last statement, "If the student doesn't want to learn, then don't waste the systems valuable time." That is a pretty nieve statement.

First of all, in the corporate world you begin with "raw materials" all meeting the same standard. If it doesn't you either send it back or scrap it. Public education has neither of these options when we start with the children they come to us a all different "quality grades." So, if a student is not up to their peers, we have to actually spend more of our time and resources to try to bring them to the baseline standard.

However, this substandard beginning is not taken into account when judging schools on their test scores. Many times these students, especially is they are special education students never catch up to their peers, but we are still expected to educate them at a high percentage of our resources than regular Ed. Students.

Secondly, most states have laws that you have to educated students until they are 16...even if they don't want to be educated. Yep...that's the law tough guy...you can't just set them loose at 10. Even if we could set them loose at 10 for non-performance, what we do with the Ben? Let them run the streets? Wait until they are 18 and they can go on welfare? Hmmm...looks like you really haven't thought this thing through.

So, let me put this into a corporate Senerio that you might understand. Judging educators on how students perform on a one day test is like judging your dentist on how many cavities and root canals that his patients have. There are many things outside of the classroom/dentist office that influence the outcome including good genetics, work done at home, parental influence and level of priority.

I would much rather see schools measured like a dentist...by the evaluations of families (customers) in the community and administrators. By the way, the administrators should be educators. You wouldn't send a general into battle that had no real military experience. You need someone to see the big picture. Otherwise, you would end up with someone like you Ben. We'd all be paying more in welfare to support all those ten year olds you would cut loose. Sounds like a bad business model to me!

#31 Comment By [Nancy Navarro Agustj](#) On January 2, 2015 @ 3:32 pm

I suggest administrators listen more to teachers instead of their managers. NO ONE else could possibly know a child better than the teacher!
Administrators MUST provide teachers sufficient time to collaborate to design instructional strategies and approaches to help mitigate individual student deficiency. Administrators must provide the necessary resources, time, and materials THEN LEAVE the teachers alone! Expectations must be crystal clear and teachers must be made accountable for results!
Administrators must lead NOT MANAGE.

#32 Comment By [John Morrison](#) On January 2, 2015 @ 6:21 pm

I am amused by this notion that states are doing such a great job on education. I think we need consistent national standards like every other industrialized country has. Many states, especially those in the Southeast hide the consummate inferiority of their schools by establishing abysmally low standards.

States, districts, and schools should have a big say about implementation. But I do not see any reason why mathematics standards should be different in Ann Arbor, MI and El Paso, TX.

We need national standards so we can compare how well the various states and localities are doing. The opacity of the current system is an egregious mess.

We live in a highly mobile country, and kids who move from one state to another are often in for a jarring transition. Multiply this by millions of times, and you see a lot of lost productivity.

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[3] Digital Education:

http://hechingerreport.org/category/special_reports/digital_education/

[4] : http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhyKYa0YJ_5BIUqSDPmfBuKjTN2QBv9wI

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