

Bad policy, bad practice

What if the problem isn't teachers but bad policies?



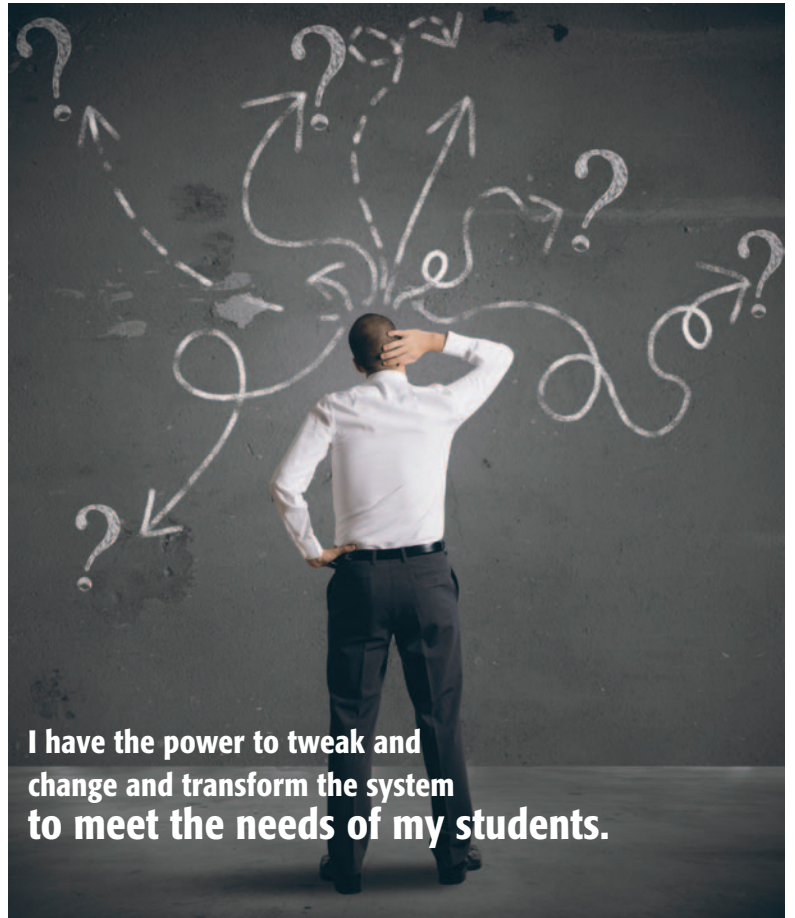
Last year, when I was a coach, I listened to district administrators lamenting the bad teaching practices they saw during walk-throughs. They wondered how the district could alter its approach to get teachers to engage in project-based learning, shift to higher-level thinking, and promote student discourse. The solutions typically revolved around more professional development, better coaching models, and new resources. But, I knew many of the teachers had the professional knowledge they needed. What they lacked were policies that supported best practices.

What if the assessment of teacher quality and teacher burn-out is all wrong? What if the real issue is a steady stream of bad policy? What if many teachers know what's best for students, but they're stuck complying with regulations and systems that work against what the district claims it wants?

Consider technology integration. Four times, my students participated in collaborative, inquiry-based projects with students in other cities. Each time, we ran into issues when the other schools blocked blogs, social media, shared documents, and email. We had the plans. We had the will. What we lacked was access to necessary tools due to fear-based technology policies.

In my classroom, I must adhere strictly to state law requiring a

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rigid four-hour ELL block with exactly one hour of grammar, one hour of oral conversation, one hour of reading, and one hour of writing. I can point to research demonstrating why this approach doesn't work. I can offer examples of how I would blend each of the four components into STEM or humanities blocks. But district and state policies limit my options.

According to district mandate, I must teach according to how it interprets gradual release of responsibility. The "I do, we do, you do" format often goes against

my constructivist, inquiry-based pedagogy. So, while I may believe students need to wrestle with a concept individually first, the lesson plan structure requires me to start with direct instruction in every single lesson, regardless of the standards I am teaching. While these policies explicitly forbid me from using my best professional judgment, the effects of bad policies are often more subtle.

The results of bad policy

I am sitting at an all-day professional development session, grip-



ping a graph of my benchmark data. Instead of feeling relieved by the achievement growth, I feel anxious about whether the growth is sustainable. I also question whether my approach to the standards will lead to the right test scores because those scores will be used in my evaluations.

As we shift into collaborative project planning time, a teacher speaks up. “I’m not going to do any projects. I just can’t. My data was good last quarter, but I’m worried this quarter. I just can’t risk it.”

“So, you’re just going to abandon the projects?” I ask.

“Yeah, I am. Not just the projects, either. I’m ready to get rid of writer’s workshop. My students are doing well in class with peer editing and blogging. They’re sharing documents and leaving comments. I’ve taught them how to research and find facts. But their writing scores were low, and I got reamed for it. They couldn’t sit still for two hours going through the whole process. I was told that they didn’t have any test endurance,” she explains.

“Did they tell you to get rid of the writer’s workshop?”

She shakes her head. “No, they didn’t. Not directly. But I can feel it. And honestly, I don’t know what else to do,” she says.

All of us are dealing with the same conflicting ideas about what we believe is best for children and what we’re asked to do.

We don’t have policies that explicitly forbid project-based learning. Many of us have heard coaches and administrators suggest that we should move toward a project-based framework. She has the permission. What she lacks are the policies to support the decision to go project-based. Even when the district provides professional development and clarifies best practices, many teachers will still teach to the test. Their contracts depend on test scores.

In other cases, the issue isn’t fear as much as distraction. In a mad dash to increase test scores, teachers are adding new test prep,

taking away class time for computerized interventions, changing up their whiteboard configurations, adding dots to data charts, and filling out forms documenting student interventions. Simply staying compliant crowds out the important in an ongoing effort to keep up with policy demands.

Hacking the system

I leave the conversation feeling guilty. Teachers are supposed to love their jobs. We’re supposed to be grateful for summers off and our chance to affect the lives of youth. We’re supposed to follow the rules and avoid the complaining “lounge lizards.” However, why does advocacy have to be a negative thing? If I truly care about what’s best for children, shouldn’t I speak out against bad policy? Isn’t that ultimately a positive thing?

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So I’m taking a hacker’s approach to policy and practice, jail-breaking the system, subtly shifting away from factory settings. I tweak things, find loopholes, and ultimately push the practical side of policy toward something that’s closer to a more constructivist pedagogy.

Take the lesson plan format. I might not be allowed to deviate from the standards or the rigid “I do, we do, you do” format. But I can invite students to help develop the objects and choose the lesson activities. I can engage students in a conversation during direct instruction, and I can limit the time spent on guided practice.

When I find that the overly specific, inflexible curriculum map chops up reading into small weeklong skills, I document

those skills while also reviewing past reading skills. Students can choose their own reading based on their own inquiry questions because the curriculum map specifies one reading passage, but doesn’t explicitly forbid additional resources — nor does it say a text must be a physical, paper-based resource. So, while I follow every detail of the curriculum map, I find a way to push critical thinking, project-based learning, and student choice into the spaces that the curriculum map never addresses.

I may disagree with the behaviorist discipline program that the school follows. However, I can avoid writing referrals and fail to send students to time out and instead focus on preventive measures, such as clear procedures and engaging lessons, while treating discipline as a learning opportunity and a chance for personal reflection. I have yet to meet an administrator who looks at a well-behaved class and says, “I wish you were sending more students to my office.”

I might have to stick to the four-hour ELL block. But I can use oral language and vocabulary to develop experiments for science. I can tie grammar lessons directly into writing, so students don’t learn the rules in isolation. Here, grammar becomes a place to plan, revise, and edit student blogs. Often, these two subjects are integrated into a larger reading and social studies project. However, I still have every item available on the district and state compliance checklists.

The greatest barriers I face involve bad policies. Like the teacher at the training, I often feel angry and afraid. But, ultimately, I recognize that I am the adult with the greatest influence within my own classroom walls. In the day-to-day, practical implementation of policy, I have the power to tweak and change and transform the system to meet the needs of my students. I may not be allowed to think outside the box. But I can repurpose the box through tiny tweaks and procedural loopholes. 