

Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity

What works is work!

Today's Preparation Determines Tomorrow's Achievements

What does a coach do to turn around an underperforming team? There are two things that normally jump out at you when making that observation. One, they go in with a system, makes sure everyone knows their assignment and what it takes to be successful in that position – referred to as fundamentals, and two they build a belief system that says that if everyone follows the plan and takes care of their assignment, they will be successful.

While there has been a great deal of discussion about testing this last month, the focus should not be about testing or the results of testing, it should be about what we are doing to improve student learning using those two ideas.

The primary focus should be what we are doing on a daily basis to help kids learn. The whole idea of testing, accountability, is to help focus us on learning. There are times, however I think that testing has the opposite affect.

I believe that was unfortunately highlighted this past month when it was discovered that the dates for CRT testing were incorrect. That seemed to throw a great many into a tizzy, thinking they have one month less to prepare for a test. Clearly, it is an important test, but the focus in school should be about student learning – not on the test. My experience tells me that too many schools jump around the curriculum to try to add a question or two to their students' repertoire to artificially inflate their scores. By teaching our assigned curriculum, we should have been preparing our students since the beginning of the school year.

A couple of years ago, we had computation tests at the end of fourth and seventh grades to address the concerns brought forth by secondary teachers and administrators. The computation tests, clearly not all we want 4th and 7th grade students to know, were meant to place a much greater focus on the importance of students mastering basic skills. Those were done away with in favor of interim tests, tests meant to better prepare our students for the CRTs. That decision took focus off fundamental skills.

The results of the semester exams in math this year should have been staggering at half the reported fail rate, but probably would not have been. But rather than focus on the test results, we should ensure students are being taught their assigned curriculum with

instructional strategies to increase students knowledge, understanding, and application of the math they were taught in a way that creates interest and enthusiasm in the subject. We can't lose sight of that. While test preparation is important, the emphasis should be on day-to-day instruction and student performance on teacher made assessments. If half the students are earning a D or F for a grade in a class, then that should be enough to get our attention – not waiting on the results of a high stakes tests. The earlier you identify a problem, the easier it is to fix. If there is inconsistency in teacher grades and standardized tests, that too, should get our attention.

This year, we will experience for the first time the high school proficiency exam in science. Being the first administration, my guess is there will quite a bit of room for improvement. Schools will respond and scores will improve over the next few years. The test will place a great more emphasis on science, science instruction and resources to teach science – an emphasis that should already exist.

Additionally, in 2010, the high school proficiency exam in mathematics will have a dramatic facelift. I would venture to say approximately 30 to 40% of the current exam is based on middle school standards. In just over one year from now the high school proficiency in math will be solely based on high school standards. Hopefully, that won't catch us by surprise.

Unfortunately, many in education often don't focus until a test, whether it be a CRT, semester exam, proficiency exam, or college entrance exam, dictates a need for a change in focus.

It's in all of our interests, students, teachers, administrators to monitor student learning all through the year. We need to address concerns before they become problems. If teachers are experiencing high failure rates on their very first test of the year, then that is time to address instructional practices before kids become credit deficient, when there is time to involve the parents, when there is time to fix the problem.

The system is in place, we have the curriculum, benchmarks, the CEL, teacher expectancies, etc, the anxiety I feel is that some teachers and administrators really believe that they can't be successful with their students. They talk about students coming to them unprepared, not willing to work, parents that don't care, etc. Like a coach trying to turn a team around, they have to believe in the system that emphasizes that everyone fulfills their assignment and they have to develop a belief system that they, themselves and their students, can be successful.

School administrators have to believe the schools they oversee can be successful, that belief has to be conveyed to teachers and reinforced regularly, and teachers must continually remind students that if they follow their lead, they too will be successful. It's hard to turn things around without building relationships. Students are much more apt to come to school prepared, book, notebook, pencil, take notes, follow directions, and do their homework if they like and trust their teachers and believe that their teachers and school are there to help them succeed.

