

If We Are to Call Ourselves Professionals, We Are Obligated to Use Best Practices

By Richard DuFour

There is clear consensus among leading educational researchers as to the best practices for improving schools. When staff work together as a professional learning community--when they work together to clarify purpose and priorities, establish and contribute to collaborative teams, participate in continuous improvement cycles of gathering data on student achievement, identify areas of concern, generate strategies for improving student performance, support each other as they implement those strategies, and gather new data to assess the impact of their collective efforts--and when they are relentless in their efforts to improve achievement for all students, they increase the likelihood of sustained, substantive school improvement. The research is clear and compelling on this point. In fact, I am unaware of any credible research that suggests the best strategy for school improvement is to ensure each teacher works in isolation.

Educational leaders have a professional obligation to align the practices of their school with the best thinking in the field, and there is virtually no justification for not fulfilling this obligation. We should be just as intolerant of educators' inattention to best practices as we would be of the eye surgeon.

Those who argue that a professional operates with a minimum of supervision, enjoys a high degree of autonomy, and exercises judgment based on the situation are correct. Powerful concepts such as teacher empowerment, academic freedom, and site-based management are based on the premise that professionals need and benefit from a degree of discretion in carrying out their duties. But advocating autonomy for individual teachers and schools should not extend to ignoring what we know about what works when it comes to student learning. School leaders who align the workings of their schools and classrooms with the knowledge base regarding best practice enhance their profession. Those who allow misalignment to go unaddressed diminish the profession.

It is time for school leaders to stop making excuses for their failure to implement what we know about improving schools. Superintendents are not justified in giving schools the autonomy to continue bad practice in the name of site-based management. Principals are not justified in allowing teachers to work in isolation in the guise of teacher empowerment. Teachers are not justified in going it alone under the pretext of academic freedom. Either we are a profession, or we are not.