



February 6, 2017

### **One Change I would make today!**

If I was still serving as a school superintendent I would make this following change as soon as possible. I would highly recommend (encourage, reward, demand) that all classrooms have a collaborative learning environment that does not include students in desks in rows and columns. As I have been observing classrooms over the past several years helping administrators evaluate and improve teaching I have come to the conclusion that a row and column classroom is an “unengaged” classroom.

In one district I have been working in for several years the classroom furniture has totally changed. Four years ago I would estimate that 90% of the classrooms were rows and columns. This year when I was in this school district I did not find one classroom in rows and columns. As a result of the furniture change I would estimate that the student engagement has increased exponentially over this same time period. This year I did not find one classroom where the students were not intellectually engaged.

I posted a Twitter feed recently about Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in southern Lake County, Illinois. This article title “[5 big takeaways from redesigning learning spaces](#)” described how Kildeer has changed their classrooms. It reminded me of my visit to Google headquarters where there were interactive white boards on every wall of every workplace and meeting rooms.

We need to get students to do the talking and the learning. As I mentioned last week, it is not about how much the teacher knows, it is about how much the students know!

### **If You Really Want to Make a Difference in Classrooms, Concentrate on Coaching/Mentoring Teacher Evaluators**

I have been doing training for teacher evaluators for the past several years that has been some of the most impactful professional development I have ever led. Traditional professional development consists mostly of “sit and get” type of activities for a six hour time period over one day. Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) requires an application/dissemination component that aims to tie the classroom part of the training into real action in the schools. However, we all know that good training for adults (as well as students) is continued training and evaluation over time.

Several large school districts have asked me to return to their school district and actually go into classrooms with their teacher evaluators as these evaluators conduct informal, formal and post observations with teachers. In most cases the evaluator takes some of the information learned from the classroom session and is incorporating that information into their work. When I shadow the evaluator and monitor and critique their work the evaluator grows in their ability to do the work.

This growth results in better communication between the evaluator and the teacher and I believe a better system of teacher evaluation. The collection of evidence becomes more precise and useful to the discussion between the evaluator and the teacher. Trust between the evaluator and the teacher grows because the teacher becomes a partner with the evaluator in his/her efforts to improve their teaching methodology that in turn improves student performance. The teacher learns to reflect on their teaching and learns to improve their own performance.

Central office administrators, especially those evaluating principals and teacher evaluators, need to mimic the same procedure I am using as they work with their colleagues. The evaluator of principals needs to know the best methods of incorporating the evaluation system in their buildings and then work with the principal to insure compliance with these best practices.

In my opinion the most impactful behavior in a school district is improving the excellence of the teachers. Central office administrators can only evaluate the effectiveness of this system by being “Excellent” teacher evaluators themselves and then coach/mentor the teacher evaluators in the district to be excellent as well.

In districts I am working with I see evidence of teacher evaluators visiting classrooms for informal observations as many as 10 or more times per school year and I have also seen as little as one or two observations per year. In the districts in which teacher observation is expected and evaluated the probability of greater instruction is maximized.

### **Include “Excellent” Rated Teachers in the Evaluation Process**

I think it is time we (teachers and administrators, teacher unions and administrative associations) step back in time when we all belonged to the same education association. We need to think about improving instruction and student academic performance from a joint perspective.

What I mean by the above statements is that we all should be “thinking of students first.” If we think of students first each time we have difficult educational decisions to make we would improve education for all. Too often we think of adults first. When we think of adults first teacher unions protect poor teachers and administrators and boards make decisions based on finance instead of what is in the best interests of the students.

I have previously written how difficult it is for a middle or high school administrator to judge the academic competence of teachers when that administrator has little to no knowledge of the academic content. Administrators can tell if students are engaged, they can tell if good discussion is occurring, they can tell if the teacher is asking good questions, they can tell if students are asking good questions, they can tell if all students are involved in the lesson, they can tell if the teacher is differentiating the lesson, they can tell if the classroom is orderly and conducive for learning, they can tell if the teacher has stated the objective in terms of what the students are to learn vs. what they are to do, and many more objective type indicators. But, how does the administrator tell if the calculus problem is being worked correctly? Or, if the foreign language verbs are being used correctly? If the stairs being built have the correct riser? The simple answer is they probably cannot.

This is when we need other expert teachers to provide input for teacher evaluation purposes. Teachers who have been rated “excellent” could provide input, not evaluation, into the content presentation of the teacher being evaluated. This is an extremely important part of teacher evaluation and it must be done correctly.

## **Part II – Fit to Lead**

This is the second of a three-part series on the topic “Taking Care of You.” You may recall that I have advocated that school administrators take better care of themselves by healthy eating, exercising regularly, spending quality time with family, taking time for friends and, in general, taking a break from your hectic life as a school administrator to “smell the roses.”

In the book, Fit to Lead by Neck, Mitchell, Manz, and Thompson, the authors recommend setting fitness goals. As school administrators, we all know how important it is to set goals and physical fitness goals are valuable also. These goals should be attainable, realistic and time specific, just like your district's goals. Some examples may be goals to lose five pounds over the next month, to walk 30 minutes per day at least five days per week, to avoid fast food, to eat three servings of fruits and vegetables per day, etc. Another important concept is to reward yourself when you have met your goal. Let's say that your goal was to lose five pounds in the next month and you reached that goal. Reward yourself with a special dinner.

The book recommends creating a “fit to lead” plan that consists of seven steps.

1. **Look in the mirror** – “Understand your current situation, what you want, and forgive yourself for your past.” The book's authors recommend taking a self-assessment of your current fitness level and eating habits before you start on this new “you.” Make notes about those activities that will not jive with your goals, such as eating fast food, eating too much when dining out, not getting enough exercise, not finding the time to exercise, etc.

2. **Set a date** – “Set a date to begin (and notify others of your intention) your fitness and self-leadership efforts.” This will lock you into improving or you will have to face those whom you told you were going to lose weight, start exercising, etc. Perhaps, ask a friend to join you.
3. **Choose your tracking and scheduling method** – “Record and track your progress with a journal, day planner, computer program or website.” I use an Apple smart watch. Each step I take while running, walking, or doing any physical activity is recorded. My daughter and wife also have Apple watches. My daughter, who just recently qualified for the Boston Marathon, is in contact with me daily about who has run the furthest, who has burned the most calories, etc. This information is communicated directly to your “friend” by the technology. Just yesterday she called me to ask how I had burned so many calories because I had “beaten” her by over 1,000.
4. **Customize your plan** – “Your ability to stick with new habits involves wrapping those habits tightly around your unique lifestyle, personality, and current health.” As school administrators, you are very busy people. As written in last week’s update, you need to designate a time for physical fitness. I work out each day very early in the morning, as I know there are no excuses except my own ability to get out of bed. This has been successful for me for over 30 years and the habit to get up when the alarm goes off has developed. Establish your own routine and stick to it.
5. **Get started** – “At the risk of using a worn-out, motivational phrase, “Just do it!” I love this Nike phrase! There is no better time than the present to get fit and eat better.
6. **Assess your progress** – “Once you begin your Total Life Makeover, you’ll continually perform Steps 6 and 7. They will help you stay on track and remain satisfied with your progress and results.” The key to any weight loss or fitness program is the concept of staying with the plan. We all have known individuals who go on diets only to gain all the weight back within a short amount of time or who join gyms to start working out only to not use their membership for months on end. The key to continuing is your goal setting process, then assessing your attainment of those goals and finally adjusting your program based on the results.
7. **Adjust your program** – “Implement needed changes to optimize your ‘Fit to Lead’ program.” If you make a goal to lose weight and start walking, after realizing these goals you may want to adjust your program to lose more weight and maybe start to make running and weight lifting part of your exercise program.

### **Tip of the Week**

When writing emails, consider the following:

1. Remember that emails sent in your capacity as superintendents are “public records” and can be accessed by the public via a Freedom of Information Request.
2. When writing an email on a controversial subject or when you are angry, postpone sending the email for 24 hours. After that time, read it again and then decide whether to send it. Nine times out of ten when I followed this process, I did not send the email.
3. Be objective, do not exaggerate, and choose your text carefully.
4. Double-check the recipient list before sending the email. I once sent an email to the teacher association’s president instead of my wife. They both had the same first name.