

Take Back Our Schools

It has been my belief for many years, that school professionals are losing control of what is happening in our schools. Teachers are being told what to teach and how to teach. Administrators are being told how to evaluate teachers and what those evaluations will determine. Federal grants are coming down the pike in greater and greater numbers, and they are dictating policies and procedures every step of the way. One almost forgets who the education professionals are. Who are the folks who spent years studying pedagogy and curriculum and behavior management? Which are the people who went on to earn Master's degrees in Reading or doctorates in supervision? When will educators wake up and realize that all the millions of dollars which have come into our schools, either through government or through the Gates, Buffets, and Broads of the world, have not produced the hoped for improvement.

The Dec 2011/Jan 2012 issue of Education Leadership has a wonderful and brave article of an interview by Arnold Dodge of Diane Ravitch, called "Changing the Poisonous Narrative". Ravitch believes that the "Corporate Reform Movement" is undermining our education. She goes on to say that "President Obama and Secretary Duncan are pushing charter schools and the evaluation of teachers by test scores. In so many cases, political figures are shaping education policy and not trusting professionals to make professional judgments." We educators realize that we are losing control of

our very own schools, and have been for some time. Hopefully it is not too late to turn things around.

I have been an educator for my entire adult life, having retired from the Miami-Dade County Public Schools after a 40 year career as a teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and principal. My claim to fame was that I was selected Principal of the Year out of a field of over 300 principals because of the success achieved by my 1800 student body Title I middle school. Surprisingly, creating a school where all could be successful and happy, teachers as well as students, was done without interference from the corporate world or big money philanthropists. It was done through collaboration and respect and caring and shared decision-making.

Many years ago I was invited to be a presenter at a conference in Kentucky on recruiting and retaining minority teachers. Retention of effective teachers has always been an issue. So many teachers seem to leave after three or four years. This can be seen quite a bit now at charter schools, where young teachers are asked to put in long ten hour days, be on call in the evenings, spend two Saturdays a month at school, as well as several weeks in the summer. In addition to the time commitment, these teachers often feel that there is no room for their own creativity, while being asked to produce students who are “test-ready”. Quality teachers can be retained only when they are treated as professionals, and in my conference in Kentucky, that is what I talked about.

Teachers want and deserve a voice in the decisions that are being made at their schools. One does not go through four or more years of a university program, in order to start a career where they will be told what and how to do every aspect of their job. Teaching is not an assembly line job, nor is it a routine same thing day in day out job. Professional teachers need to be creative and innovative, and their inner brilliance needs an opportunity to be released. The success I alluded to earlier, which was achieved at my middle school, was accomplished through creating a positive school climate where everyone was part of a team with a goal of success for all.

Incorporating the philosophy of “ask/don’t tell”, our middle school teams collaborated on inter-disciplinary units. They worked on relevant themes for their students. They met with parents to discuss student issues. Teachers participated in hiring of new teachers. Who would know better what is needed in a math teacher than the school’s department head or math master teacher? The school’s budget was available for all to see and discuss. Do we need to spend more on teacher aides or on new computers? Is our behavior management program effective? Do we need more professional development? If so, what type best fits our needs?

How much longer can school leaders wait to take back their schools and to put into practice what they have studied and learned? Diane Ravitch waves the flag when she says “How many kids will be harmed and how many good teachers will lose hope and leave? Who will want to be a principal?” As school leaders, it is our job to create that positive, caring, and respectful

school environment so needed for student success and teacher creativity. Even small steps taken today can bring about a turn-around from despair to hope. We owe this to our school family.

Allan R. Bonilla, Ed.D

www.coaching4educators.com

abonilla1@yahoo.com