

When the Students Aren't Here...

When I started in this position, my first goal was to be able to successfully drive to each of the school buildings without getting lost in the beautiful city of Platteville. Once that was accomplished, I began to focus in on what my goals for the next week, months, and year were going to be. I narrowed it down to three initial goals: First, improving student achievement, second, fiscal responsibility and transparency, and lastly, sustaining an educational environment where students, staff, and families feel valued. All three are clearly on-going and continue into future years. I plan to address all three over the next commentaries, starting with improving student achievement.

Over the years, I have had many conversations with my own children about why I had to go to work when school was off for the day. I think in their young minds, every aspect of education ceased to exist when students were not in the school. As they grew older, they just thought I was unlucky for having to work when they were off for the day and could do what they wanted. What I tried to explain to them is that educators need time to work together, learn from each other, and become better at what they do. My children were always intrigued with the concept of teachers having to go to school and went so far as to act out hilarious versions of what that might look like.

I have been in most of the roles that come along with school professional days. I have been a student enjoying my freedom for the day. I have been a parent scrambling for daycare on days where I needed to go to work. I have been the teacher sitting in on presentations that were outstanding and others that were a waste of my time. As a principal, I have been the recipient of both praise and of criticism for the various days that had been planned. Through the years and the various roles, I have come to understand that oftentimes, the best professional development opportunities did not include pricey experts, cutting edge topics, or a "follow these 10 steps to the results you are looking for" manual. The best professional development activities allowed for me and my colleagues to spend time working together with a focus on improving instruction.

That is at the core of what I want to achieve...working together to improve instruction. It requires not only improving "what" is taught, but also improving "how" it is taught. I have asked that those involved in instruction in the Platteville School District begin the process of collaboratively developing answers to 4 questions: What do we want our students to know and be able to do? How will we know that they have learned these concepts and have acquired these skills? What will we do for the students who have not learned these concepts and acquired these skills during the initial classroom instruction? What will we do if they have learned and acquired these skills before the majority of the students in the class are ready to move on?

The key word in all of these questions is the word "we." It cannot be done in the individual classroom. In order to improve overall student achievement, we need to have an outstanding preK-12 program, not just stand-out classrooms here and there. The only way to do that is for grade-level teachers to combine their expertise and agree that it shouldn't matter which classroom a student is in, all teachers of that grade are teaching these same concepts and skills and are using the same measures to figure out

what has been learned by the individual students. The same is true for teachers that teach a specific course, such as Algebra or 7th grade Language Arts.

The word “we” also comes into play across grade levels. Third grade teachers need to work with second grade teachers and 4th grade teachers. Biology teachers need to work with 8th grade Science teachers and Chemistry teachers and so on and so on...

As difficult as it is to schedule meetings with 4 or 5 different people at a time outside of the work day, imagine doing it for many people across multiple buildings. The most efficient and effective way of doing that is to actually schedule a time within the work day to engage in improving student achievement. The first opportunity in the 2011-12 school year to collaboratively work on this goal will be during the afternoon of October 12th, when we have an early-release day planned. I recognize that these days or afternoons can be inconvenient for working families, but I assure you the time will be well spent.