

Bringing Teacher Voice to the Table

I've always said that nobody knows what the students in my classroom need mathematically better than I do. Not the other math teachers at my school, most who have been here for less than a month. Not my former, English teacher principal, who always wants a math person to answer her math questions. Not the Curriculum and Instruction directors over at the district office, who make it into my room about once a semester. This is why I'm currently hiding out teaching the highest level of math classes.

Yes, I said hiding. My district recently adopted a new textbook for Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, and with it came a forced, district-wide implementation, all in the name of "increased rigor." Teachers were given the books, which contain pre-planned daily lessons, and told to use them.

Administrators will conduct regular walkthroughs to ensure compliance, and teachers are required to administer the assessments that are embedded within the textbook, as well as three blind assessments throughout the year that are aligned to the book.

So I hide—the last defense I have to retain my authority over my own classroom; the last defense I have to stop people who have never met my kids from making decisions for my kids— specifically about how we teach and how fast we cover each and every one of the Common Core State Standards.

And in the meantime, I watch the results of other people's decisions unfold.

Teachers struggle to implement such a rigid curriculum. They feel it is not well

suiting to the kids, and many are unsure how to make it well suited to our students in the time frame provided. When they express these concerns, they are labeled as “fixed mindset” teachers who do not believe in the abilities of our students. In the meantime, teachers have to make a decision to either cover only half the material, or cover all the material, but at a pace that leaves half the students behind.

As a result, math teacher retainment is at an all time low. We had four out of seven math teachers leave the school last year, with another switching to teach three sections of computer science. I attempted to heavily recruit from one of our local teacher preparation programs, one of the best in the country—every single candidate turned us down. When I ran into one of them at a conference over the summer, she told me she loved my school, but she didn’t understand how I could work for a district with that much testing and that many mandates. While we did manage to fill all of our openings by the first day of school, three days into the school year one of our new hires resigned.

The rationale behind the textbook adoption was to increase mathematical rigor among students across the district. Most teachers at my school and I will all agree that this is something that needs to be done. But forcing the book on teachers was not the way to do it. There is too much of a gap between where our students are and where this textbook is for the majority of our teachers to be able to handle effectively within the constraints they are given.

The textbook won’t be implemented well until you have good teachers teaching it. But the reality is, talented teachers don’t sign up to be told what to do and most of the teachers who get recruited aren’t staying on long enough to become good at teaching the book. The teachers who have the ability to take a textbook like that and skillfully adapt it to suit high-needs kids are going to take a job where they have autonomy in their own classrooms. And, God forbid, if my admin tried to force me to take a job with a lack of autonomy, I would leave.

And I think that’s what we have to remember about education. If we keep taking decisions and autonomy and power away from teachers, our talented teachers, the ones we need in classrooms the most, are going to leave. Alternatively, if we give them outlets for their opinions and voices to be heard, we’ll be improving education in a way that has meaningful teacher buy-in and is therefore more likely to be enacted successfully. In the meantime; however, those of us in the

classroom will try to exert the little influence we currently have.

When I meet with teachers in my department, I encourage them to do supplemental activities they find from outside the textbook, if they feel that is what is best for their students. Teach from the textbook, reinforce from outside. Evaluations are based on if you are a good teacher by the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, not on if you are using the right textbook, and I am constantly reminding them of this. If they're doing what they feel is right for their kids, and are at least somewhat within the boundaries set by the district, they won't be punished for that.

Maybe someday, I'll have the opportunity to express my concerns to my principal. On many past issues, she has been willing to listen to the opinions of teachers, although she has been particularly adamant about the textbook implementation thus far, hence my hesitance.

Right now, in my district, teachers don't have much say in the world outside of their classroom door, and many days, even within it. But if we can take small steps to regain ownership of our schools, maybe someday we'll be primary voices in the decision making process.