

If we are to call ourselves professionals, we are obligated to use the best practices. Anything less is unacceptable.

Highly regarded organizations such as the National Staff Development Council, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and American Association of School Administrators have called on educational leaders to develop their schools and districts as “professional” learning organizations. But what is a profession, and what can leaders do to promote professionalism? Have we used the term so loosely that it has lost its meaning?

In the past, we were able to draw sharp distinctions between amateurs and professionals. Amateurs pursued an activity as an unpaid avocation, while professionals were compensated for their efforts. For example, an Olympic athlete was an amateur, while a member of the New York Knicks or Toronto Maple Leafs was a professional. That distinction has been blurred as professional athletes compete in the Olympics and amateur athletes receive lucrative compensation for endorsements.

In the past, when an individual chose a profession, he or she selected from medicine, law, or education. Today, people in virtually every occupation — flight attendants, masseuses, bartenders — refer to themselves as professionals. What does the term mean?

One characterization describes a professional as someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who not only has pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who also is expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. According to this definition, members of a profession assume a personal responsibility to seek and implement the best practices in their field. They are not expected to embrace every new hypothesis or careen wildly from one fad or trend to the next. When, however, the field evolves to the point that there is consensus regarding best practice, the professionals within that field are expected to become familiar with and to use that practice. In fact, to disregard best practice would be considered a dereliction of their responsibilities, or unprofessional.

For example, my sister decided 15 years ago to seek

corrective eye surgery to cure her myopia and eliminate her reliance on contact lenses. Her doctor performed radial keratotomy on her left eye. While she was under heavy anesthesia, he used a razor to cut tiny slits in that eye. He then reshaped the cornea and placed a heavy bandage over the eye. Medication kept her semiconscious for two days as an antidote to the intense pain that resulted from the surgery. After several weeks, the patch was removed. Over several months as the eye healed, her vision improved, and after six months she was sufficiently recovered to repeat the procedure with her right eye.

Three years ago, I decided to have corrective eye surgery to address my own double-digit myopia that left me legally blind without corrective lenses. The Lasik surgery took less than 10 minutes. The doctor advised me to go home and sleep for the rest of the day. Within several days, I had 20-20 vision in both eyes.

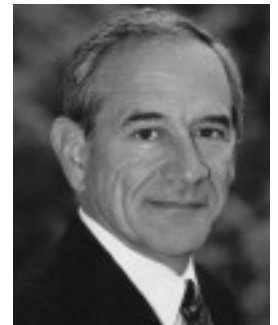
The field of eye surgery had evolved dramatically during the years that separated our surgeries. The best practice of the 1980s had given way to a far superior procedure by 2000.

Now imagine that when I went to my doctor, he opted to ignore the breakthroughs in his field and instead performed the same radial keratotomy my sister endured years earlier. He could have offered several reasons for refusing to learn and implement the procedure that was now universally regarded as best practice in his field. “Radial keratotomy has always worked for my patients in the past.” “I haven’t had time to learn the new procedures because I have been too busy slicing eyeballs.” “I have invested heavily in razor blades, and I don’t want to waste them.” I would not have considered any of those explanations a compelling argument for behavior that at best would be considered unprofessional, if not malpractice.

A PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATION

If one characteristic of a professional is to engage in a continuous process of seeking and implementing best practices in the field, it follows that educational leaders have an obligation to align the practices of their schools and districts with what we know to be the most effective strategies to achieve the fundamental purpose of our profession — high levels of learning for all students.

There is clear consensus among leading educational researchers as to the best practices for improving schools.



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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.

I also know intuitively, as well as from my own experience, that school structures and cultures that celebrate working in isolation are unlikely to result in significantly higher levels of achievement. Early in my educational career, I was one of four individuals in my school teaching U.S. history to the junior class. The only thing our courses had in common was the title. On my own, I determined what I felt was important about U.S. history and what I was interested in teaching. I decided how to sequence and pace the content to cover what I felt was important. I chose supplementary materials and determined the best instructional strategies for each lesson. I created the assessments to determine the levels of learning of my students. And when, at the end of this process, I found that students had failed to learn, I was expected to figure out what went wrong and to rectify the situation.

The problem, of course, was that on my own, it was unlikely I would find a solution. I had just taught what I thought was the most important content, in the most logical sequence, using what I felt were the best materials and instructional techniques. I had used what I considered to be a valid assessment of student mastery. If students had not learned, it was not due to a lack of effort on my part. I had done my best, and if I were simply left to my own

devices, to what I knew or did not know, there was little reason to believe that, on my own, I could help students achieve at higher levels.

This troubled me when I was teaching more than 30 years ago. What troubles me even more today is that my experience continues to characterize teaching throughout North America, despite the widespread knowledge that best practice, the best hope for helping all students learn, is to have teachers working together in a collaborative culture.

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. ■