



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

Holding colleagues accountable

I was hanging around the digital “workroom” at the Teacher Leaders Network (www.teacherleaders.org) when Renee Moore — a virtual friend from Mississippi — raised a topic that we all tend to avoid in education: Holding colleagues accountable for responsible professional behaviors.

She wrote, “The scary part is that we as educators usually have no way of calling attention to questionable classroom practices — our own professional code of ethics, for example. It should be standard practice among us to address such integral issues at the collegial level. Isn’t that what professionals do?”

Renee’s thoughts have been rumbling around in my head ever since. Education’s (poorly kept) secret is that the quality of instruction across classrooms in the same building varies greatly. Class placement can often have as much to do with academic success as personal ability or parental support. While some students are engaged in activities that promote higher order thinking and are exposed to the entire scope of the intended curriculum, others spend their days finishing endless piles of worksheets.

Having spent 14 years as a teacher, I have wrestled with this reality more than once. Confronted with colleagues who were ineffective at best and incompetent at worst, I turned a blind eye on what I knew were bad situations. Something about approaching another teacher about poor instructional practices just plain seemed wrong. Besides, educators are notoriously territorial and I knew I’d hear a lot about “different styles” of teaching being a good thing and that



“what works for you won’t work for me.”

This common perception that “there’s no one right way to teach” is a result of our lack of agreed upon “pictures” of what good teaching looks like. Unlike other professions that work to build a common body of knowledge about effective practice on which all members draw when making decisions — and that all practitioners add to with experience — we have few clear definitions of what works best. We hesitate to approach ineffective colleagues without concrete evidence to use as levers for change.

We also struggle against a culture of isolation that continues to plague schools. Our interactions with peers are limited to passing comments about difficult students or upcoming activities. Colleagues are seen as competitors and professional transparency is rare. Opportunities for collaborative work are left to chance — and to the personal initiative of teachers determined to learn from one another. As a result, we seldom possess the full complement of dialogue skills or confidence necessary to work through difficult conversations — and questioning teaching practices definitely leads to difficult conversations!

By failing to delineate and defend standards of teaching excellence, we have been pushed aside as the instructional leaders of our schools. To reestablish ourselves as professionals, we bear a responsibility for identifying effective instruction and then holding colleagues accountable for their work. When we willingly ignore those who struggle, we cheapen our expertise — and overlook our responsibility to protect every child in our schools. ♦

Join the conversation with Bill by visiting www.nsd.org/blog/ and offering your opinion. Bill posts his provocative ideas frequently — be sure to return often.