

WHAT ACTIONS WOULD TAKE YOUR DISTRICT IN A BETTER DIRECTION?

What consequences occur because of actions you've taken in your professional life? How will students be affected by the choices you make this week and this year? How will the work in your organization change because of your decisions?

I thought all of this recently as I read *All the King's Men*, the classic Robert Penn Warren novel about the rise and fall of Willie Stark, a politician reputedly modeled after Louisiana's Huey Long. A key figure in the book is Jack Burden, a newspaperman who turns his gift for research to ferreting out the dirty secrets of Stark's opponents. He participates in Stark's sordid shenanigans for his own amusement, not out of any commitment to a particular cause. He doesn't believe that anything he does will make a difference anyway, an attitude that leads to his theory of life, which he labels "the Great Twitch."

According to the Great Twitch, events in life are entirely unconnected, and actors in a given situation have little or no effect on the actions of others. Believing in the Great Twitch would relieve a man of any sense that his actions might impact someone else's life. If your actions make no difference, then you bear no responsibility to consider the effect of what you do. Such an attitude allows you to be as amoral as you want.

By the end of the book, Burden discovers that no action can be isolated — each has consequences. The impact may take years to play out. But there will be an impact.

CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR DECISIONS

In my work as director of publications for NSDC, the consequences of my actions are quite clear. The consequences of my inactions are even clearer. If I miss a deadline for an article in one of our newsletters, someone else in the production process has to make up the difference so the newsletter is delivered on time.

But, in the world of professional learning, the links between actions and consequences are often less clear. Connecting the dots between what adults learn and what students learn is never quite as direct as the link between

JOAN RICHARDSON is director of publications for the National Staff Development Council. You can contact her at 1128 Nottingham Road, Grosse Pointe Park, MI 48230, 313-824-5061, fax 313-824-5062, e-mail: joan.richardson@nsdc.org.

my tardy article and a newsletter that arrives late in your mailbox.

And yet examples abound of educators who have made the link. They are the educators who act on the belief that investing in professional learning will produce changes in student learning.

Years ago, Brazosport (Texas) Independent School District put itself on the map when the superintendent began changing how teachers approached their work. The board had challenged the superintendent to improve the learning of all students. The superintendent assigned one of his deputies to the task. She combed through reams of testing data — this was well before computers made this task easy — and discovered an elementary teacher whose students consistently achieved higher results than students of other teachers, even though her students were from the lowest economic quarter in the district. The deputy learned that this teacher studied the data about her students' learning and then crafted a response to address individual learning differences. Ultimately, central office administrators decided that they wanted her to teach her data-driven process to other teachers. Eventually, the entire district embraced what came to be known as the Eight-Step Process. Student learning in the district soared. The Eight-Step Process has been used by schools and districts throughout the United States, often with the same results.

In Brazosport, the superintendent believed teachers could improve student learning if they learned how to examine student data and change their instruction based on what they learned. His action based on his belief had clear consequences that the district was able to measure.

In the mid-1990s, Mason City Schools near Cincinnati, Ohio, began experiencing rapid growth that continues to this day. An area that had once been rich farmland suddenly began building new homes and filling them with young families. In the 1992-93 school year, Mason had 2,866 students; by 2012, it's expected to have 12,000 students. Rapid growth also meant rapid hiring. For several years, that meant Mason had a majority of teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience.

Worried that so much reliance on inexperienced teachers would threaten the quality of instruction, Mason created a cadre of curriculum leaders to ensure these new teachers would get up to speed quickly and provide the same



In each issue of *JSD*, Joan Richardson writes about the relationship between professional learning and student learning. All of her articles and columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

quality instruction as other teachers. They started with two curriculum leaders and eventually expanded to 12. The investment in the curriculum leaders is substantial — about \$1.2 million a year — and money could easily be diverted from those staff development positions to hire more teachers and decrease class size. Instead, Superintendent Kevin Bright continues to urge the school board to stay the course, and the board sticks with his plan. Why? Because it works. Mason achievement continues to soar even in the face of rapid growth and while relying on a workforce of young teachers.

In Mason City, the superintendent believed that investing in staff development in the form of curriculum leaders would infuse consistent quality of instruction throughout the rapidly growing district. His belief led him to take actions that led to clear consequences for student learning.

In Boulder, Colo., a study of student data revealed that Latino and gay students faced struggles that the majority white community did not perceive. Initially, district leaders focused on the achievement gap between Latino and white students. But after probing the data further, educators learned that Latino and gay students also were at higher risk of suicide and drug and alcohol abuse.

Instead of blaming the children and their families, teachers, principals, and counselors did some deep self-examination. Educators believed that they had to tackle the gap by addressing teachers' and principals' beliefs and attitudes at the same time that they worked on instructional changes. One of the district's goals is to ensure that every school and every workplace is bias-free and that every student graduates bias-free.

In Boulder, educators believe that if they increase their awareness of their beliefs and attitudes, they will change how they interact with students, that students will feel more welcome in school, and students will learn more as a result of those changes. Boulder educators believe that examining their attitudes will lead them to change their actions, and that those changed actions will result in improved student learning for all students.

The Northern Lights School Division No. 69 in northeastern Alberta, Canada is well off the beaten track but, because of Superintendent Ed Wittchen's devotion to professional learning, it's on everybody's map of school districts to watch.

Northern Lights has enrolled more than 40 teachers and principals in the NSDC Academy, an in-depth, 2^{1/2}-year professional development seminar aimed at building leaders. No other district can match that record. Wittchen's goal is to have one person in every school who understands and can talk knowledgeably about staff development.

Northern Lights teachers estimate that they spend 15 to 20 hours a month in professional learning. Teachers meet in school-based teams and administrators meet in their own teams. A homegrown Leadership Academy modeled after the NSDC Academy enables dozens of other educators to participate in a similar learning experience. The district supports an extensive new teacher induction program, promotes a highly regarded Early Literacy Cadre, and enables all teachers to work in school-based teams.

The superintendent's belief in the value of staff development means that educators from one end of the massive district to the other understand what kind of professional development they should seek for themselves, and they know how to ensure that they get what they need. School board members are equally savvy about the difference that professional learning makes for their students and support it through their budgeting process. The superintendent's willingness to stay committed to these actions means student learning is improving throughout the division.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

When we know that the teacher makes the biggest difference in a child's achievement in school, it's unconscionable to avoid doing all we can to improve the quality of teaching. Improving the quality of teaching means focusing on providing the kind of professional development that will make a difference. Relying on a tired workshop approach to adult learning is probably not going to improve teaching quality in your district. What actions would take your district in a better direction?

Our inactions are decisions as well, decisions with consequences. Is it amoral for educators not to take action that would make a difference? Is it amoral when:

- The superintendent knows that a better route to professional development exists, but does not pursue it?
- A board of education knows the district spends thousands of dollars every fall to pay a motivational speaker who makes no difference at all in student learning?
- A principal stands by quietly while teachers fritter away hard-won team time rather than focus on work that would make a difference to student learning?

Fortunately, we have many examples of schools, districts, and leaders who learned more and then acted upon their learning so it would benefit others.

Jack Burden may have salvaged himself with his Great Twitch theory, but I don't buy it. Our actions have consequences, whether those actions are in our personal or our professional lives. The actions we take every day determine the results that we get. If we aren't happy with the results we're getting, we need to change our actions. ■