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Old dogs can teach new tricks

- *Schools designed around new curriculum theories can push some teachers beyond their comfort zone. When teachers are included in the design process, they become more receptive to change.*

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The theory of multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, constructivist learning environments, integrated curriculums, team teaching, academies — these and many other learning and curriculum theories are currently being considered by educational administrators, educational planners and architects as they plan and design schools.

Much research has been conducted on how students learn and the best way to convey information to them. In response to this research, educational leaders are rethinking how they present information to students.

What is common in most approaches is that the teacher no longer imparts information to students in the form of lectures and rote exercises, but acts as more of a coach for students, facilitating their learning in a variety of ways. This includes group and individual projects, computer-based projects, real-life simulations and many more. These activities occur both inside the classroom and in shared spaces observed from classrooms.

The problem is that no one seems to have told the teachers about these new and better ways to teach, or at least the teachers were not involved in the decision to adopt these new approaches.

The reason this matters is that teachers must embrace new curricula and teaching models for them to be successful. Teachers need to be trained in new techniques and informed about new curriculum structures to adopt them enthusiastically. If they are not informed, the schools we create will not be used efficiently, or worse yet, will hinder effective teaching.

A new high school I toured illustrates the problem. The high school was designed to require the use of several new curriculum ideas and teaching approaches. Students would have a lot of flexibility in using the school, but would also need to act independently, courteously and responsibly.

During the official tour, teachers were not around, and the philosophy of the school was made very clear. The school was clearly a bold attempt to change the direction of high school education in a very significant way.

Instead of classrooms, operable walls allowed very flexible divisions of space. Enclosed areas were limited to a lecture hall in each wing. The science lab was very large, but with a minimum of fixed equipment to allow for maximum



Photo by Steve Keating, courtesy of Northwest Architectural Co.

Designers worked closely with teachers and administrators on a remodeling and addition project at Stanwood Middle School. The foyer they developed connects the old building to the new addition, and gives students a place they can call their own.

flexibility. Teachers had no desks in their teaching areas, but had a large shared office area. Computers were everywhere, and so not always in easily observed locations.

Later, I took a self-guided tour where I was able to talk to a number of teachers. The teachers were very critical of the school, citing discipline problems, acoustic issues and insufficient specialized equipment. They felt the school building negatively affected their ability to teach.

It is often the case that teachers seem less informed about the research behind these new organizational approaches than the educational administrators who adopt them.

Teachers are dedicated individuals with a commitment to their profession that far exceeds their level of compensation. Nevertheless many teachers, when confronted with a new curriculum approach, resist it.

They typically tell us they would prefer to have a larger classroom in which to create an environment they can completely control. We often see classrooms with interior windows covered over with paper so that the teacher can completely control the attention of students. Teachers may be acting as facilitators inside these classrooms, but are not teaming with their colleagues to deliver an integrated curriculum.

There could be many reasons for this. For example, there is little incentive for teachers with well-developed lesson plans to revamp them, particularly because teachers are generally not given the planning time to do so.

Another reason has to do with discipline. Many of the new curriculum models have students acting more independently, working in small groups outside of the classroom. Teachers cite the inability to supervise students in this situation as a reason they can not embrace this alternative approach.

Still another reason is class size. Often classrooms in schools are made smaller to provide for group space outside of classrooms. When this occurs, teachers are still asked to fit the same number of students in their classrooms during the times that their entire class is together. The crowded conditions that result can create discipline problems.

Personalities also come into play in embracing new curriculum models. Teachers asked to team with their peers need to be compatible. A "neat" teacher will resist teaming with a "sloppy" one, and a teacher with a quiet approach may resist teaming with a teacher with a more domineering personality.

Distinctions at various grade levels are also cited for reasons to resist new curriculum models. At the elementary level, students tend to stay with a single teacher they get to know and rely upon. Teachers feel that students at this level are not ready for the independent and integrated activities some of the models suggest.

At the middle school and junior high levels, students reaching adolescence can be more of a discipline challenge. Teachers think such students will not respond well to independent learning situations and so resist this kind of change.

At the high school level, subject material becomes more comprehensive and specialized. Though an elementary teacher may teach math, social studies and language arts, teachers at the high school level are specialists because the material they are teaching is more complex. Teachers cite this as a reason why integrated subjects are difficult to accomplish.

All of these reasons are valid but can be managed if teachers are sufficiently informed and involved in the process that creates the school.

This information process can not occur all at once, but must be a systematic effort to show teachers the benefits of the change that is proposed. If it is not confronted until planning the school starts, it will be very difficult to get teachers to embrace the change.

It is important to get teachers thinking about the future and how students can learn better than they can today. New technologies and the increasingly complicated world make it a certainty that education will change, and teachers are on the front line of that change.

Teachers with a passion for how they teach are eager to craft a space that facilitates their efforts.

A good example of such a success is the modernizations and additions to Stanwood Middle School. In the late '80s, before teaming and integration were as common as they are today, the staff and administration of Stanwood Middle School had a vision for how they wanted to teach in a modernized school.

We worked closely with the teachers and administrators in the re-creation of the school. Classrooms, the library, and common spaces were all placed and designed to facilitate their vision. For example, it was important to their concept of the school that the students have a place to gather that they could call their own.

We created this space out of left over space between the old building and the new addition. This light-filled foyer connects the commons to the classroom wings and becomes a nexus for student activity. Our close cooperation with the staff and administration allowed us to create a school they could not only be proud of, but one they enthusiastically embraced because it furthered their approach to teaching.

In conclusion, school administrators need to do a better job of informing and training teachers in alternative curriculum approaches, and the design process needs to include teachers in a meaningful way. The result will simply be schools that are better for students.

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