



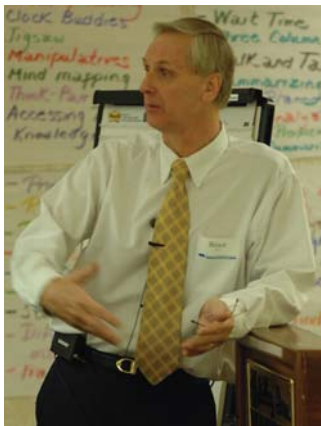
# Just for the ASKing!

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's *Just for the ASKing!* examines the messages seen recently in a series of signs, and how they relate to the mission of educators.

## Signs of the Times: Are You Paying Attention?



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Traveling by air today requires a great deal of careful pre-planning. By necessity, the traveler has to leave plenty of time to anticipate long lines at check-in or delays at the security check points. Since it is difficult to predict how much time will be required to successfully navigate all of an airport's requirements, I have adopted the practice of building lots of extra time into my travel plans. As I wait for my flight, I often find myself engaged in "people watching" or catching up on reading. On one recent trip, however, I became intrigued by signs posted around the airport. The signs typically are there to promote products or services, highlight airport improvements, or to help travelers locate appropriate resources. Yet, as a lifelong educator, I began to see educational implications in the words of the signs I read. Below are the signs I spotted and the connections their messages made to the important work of today's educator.

The first sign I spotted said:

**Planning as if the future mattered**

The sign referred to the ongoing renovation of the airport and the ultimate improvement in services future travelers could anticipate. Nonetheless, the sign made a connection to the work of today's educator. It seems so self-evident that the role of the teacher is to prepare our students for the world they will face and lead in the future. Hence, how a teacher plans impacts how and what a student will learn, and it matters a great deal. Every educator worth his or her weight **MUST** plan with great deliberation and precision to help students connect to the world beyond themselves, and to train the human mind to think critically. What a waste of time it would be for someone to plan as if the future did not matter.

Next, an airline placard said:

**We will be pleased to help any customer that needs assistance.**

This sign reminded me of what the mission of every educator should be. Every teacher should believe that it is his or her ultimate responsibility to provide consistent support to each and every student. This support

can come in many forms: clear teacher presentations and explanations, specific and timely feedback on student work, one-on-one instruction when necessary, and multiple opportunities for students to show what they have learned. When teachers provide reinforcement for student learning in a congenial and sincere manner, students are much more willing to ask for help, and thus, are more likely to learn.

Then, I saw a notice that said:

### Oversized Baggage

So many students arrive at school each day toting a myriad of problems beyond their control. Our students are impacted by a magnitude of personal issues including poverty, language barriers, lack of adult guidance, peer pressure, mixed messages from the media, and learning difficulties. This extra baggage that students bring into our classrooms is not often readily evident, and, in fact, is often kept concealed by the students out of embarrassment or insecurity. It is the wise and patient teacher who will not rush to judgment but who will take the time to “sort through the baggage” by looking beyond the student behavior or defensiveness to discover the true person that is waiting to learn. The importance of displaying a sense of empathy and a willingness to show each student care and attention cannot be underestimated.

Another educational connection came from an airport banner that said:

### International Arrivals/Domestic Arrivals

This brought to mind the many students who arrive at our schools each day from different countries, speaking little or no English. I also thought of the English-speaking students whose families struggle to survive, who are often displaced from their homes, and who must start again at a new school. In both cases, the students are fearful, unsure of their new environment and often “lost” both logistically and academically. As we work with these new arrivals, we have important choices. We can either conduct our classes with a “business as usual” attitude or we can become determined to be the catalyst that will make a difference in the lives of these students. They are children and they should be treated with kindness and respect.

As many people in the airport moved toward their various locations, I saw a reminder that said:

### Traveler Checkpoint

It made me think about all the day-to-day teacher practices that were important to student learning. When teachers **frame the learning**, they prepare students for the upcoming lessons that will follow so that what the teacher is doing connects with the students in logical and sequential ways. Throughout any lesson, a teacher should pause periodically and allow the students to “**make meaning**” of the teaching that has just transpired. Students may verbally process with a partner or in a small group or simply jot down their ideas related to the content under study. Another important practice is for teachers to routinely **check for student understanding**. These checks can take a variety of forms but should always let the teacher know whether students are making connections to the lesson content. Finally, a vital checkpoint in learning is for the teacher to build in opportunities at the end of each lesson for students to **summarize** their thoughts related to the subject.

Then, an advertising billboard slogan caught my attention. It said:

### Progress or Merely Change

It brought to mind a recent conversation I had with a young teacher who expressed his frustration that his

district seemed to embrace every new program or initiative as the solution to all its current problems. As he spoke with great passion, he noted that the decision makers rarely evaluated the effectiveness of the current approach before embarking on another new endeavor. His words reminded me of similar sentiments expressed by other teachers with whom I have spoken in the past. It is important for leaders to continually ask themselves: “Am I simply jumping on the bandwagon of the moment without intense scrutiny of programs that are already in place?” “As I search for answers to our learning problems, am I embracing change without considering whether we are truly making progress?” And finally; “Is my decision making in the best interest of student learning as well as the investment of the time and talent of the current teaching staff?” It must be remembered that change is not synonymous with progress.

I was intrigued by a large banner that especially captured my attention. It said:

**On the 10,000<sup>th</sup> try, there was light**

Next to these words was a picture of Thomas Edison. It called to mind how indispensable it is for today’s educator to have high expectations for student learning, and to never give up on a student’s potential to achieve. When a teacher enters a classroom each day with great enthusiasm and conveys a “you-can-do-it” attitude to the class, a student may become inspired to reach greater heights. Conversely, in a classroom where a teacher’s expectations for student achievement is minimal or seemingly non-existent, students may simply be putting in seat time and waiting for the class to be over. Throughout my career I have known countless teachers who fully understand the influence they bring to their classes each day through their ability to enliven each class with stimulating learning experiences. I am proud to say that I have seen lights go on again and again and again.

Before I returned to my gate, one more sign in an airport bookstore featured the cover of a book with a quote from Winston Churchill. The quote, which spoke to me loudly and clearly about the importance of the job of an educator, said:

**“We make a living by what we get but we make a life by what we give.”**

As you begin the next school year, you might find yourself thinking about some of the indirect or subtle messages that are part of your everyday experiences. Hopefully, they will remind you again and again how indispensable you are in the lives of children.

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