



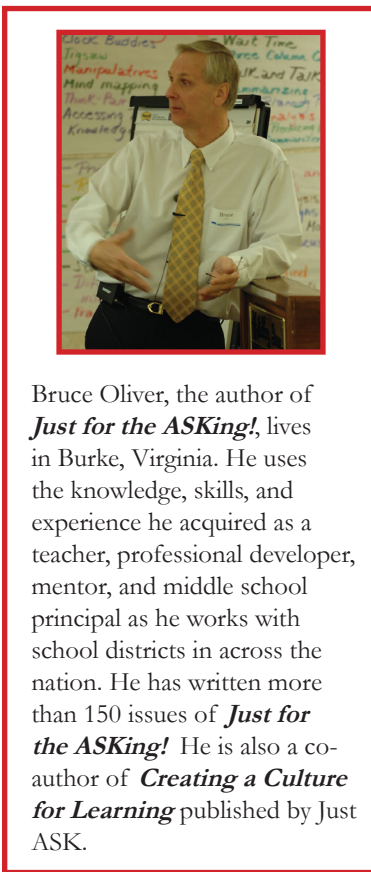
Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver



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Supporting Struggling Teachers



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning* published by Just ASK.

When people enter the field of education, they do not do so believing they will be (or wanting to be) ineffective. Once a teacher appears to be struggling, it is the ethical responsibility of teacher and administrative leaders to have honest dialogues with the individual, diagnose the situation, and provide the necessary support to move the teacher along the effectiveness continuum so that dismissal or resignation does not occur.

Many educators have experienced frustration and confusion as they attempted to provide a definition of “ineffective teacher,” a requirement of the **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**. For many educators, the necessity of including a definition of ineffective was the wrong approach. In a time when many schools and districts are experiencing a teacher shortage, it seems imprudent to focus on the negative (ineffective) and instead view the issue in a positive way (effective). Quick to label a teacher as ineffective may be premature; putting in place practices that will help struggling educators become more effective by creating systems to help teachers learn their craft is a much more productive approach.

Underperformance Approach

Sonia Gill, a specialist in supporting lead teachers and school leaders in the UK, provides insights about how to address underperformance among the teaching staff. In her article entitled “Effective Support for Teaching Staff Who Are Struggling,” she itemizes a series of steps that have the potential to lead to a necessary change. She feels that the first step is **honest feedback** by focusing on the specific behavior in an unsuccessful lesson rather than behaviors that are

too broad. The next step is to **focus on an issue** that will make the biggest difference rather than overwhelming the teacher with too much information. A third step is to have the teacher **create a picture of success**. As Gill stated, “The clearer the picture of success the far more chance that a) a person will achieve it or b) you will get the specific improvement you are looking for.” A fourth recommendation is to **support the teacher** in a variety of ways which may include team teaching, visiting another school, observing other teachers, viewing online programs or attending workshops for training. Gill stresses that it is important to **keep the conversation going** by following a regular schedule of meetings to provide feedback, check on progress, or evaluate the impact of the support being provided. Finally, **celebrate success**. Congratulate the teacher on their progress that will build personal confidence.

Successful Coaching

Providing specific support for teachers who are unsuccessful has been shown to be an effective and sensible approach. A team from Concordia University-Portland penned a blog entry titled “Four Ways to Coach a Struggling Teacher” that began this way: “Many educators and administrators have found that when schools focus primarily on the evaluation and judgment of teachers, it seems to do more harm than good. The educators’ performance suffers and student learning and performance can be adversely affected. By comparison, the more that schools and administrators focus on constructive coaching of their teachers, the more beneficial the effects. Both teacher performance and student learning improve.” The article suggest four approaches that will be beneficial to teachers who need help:

- **Avoid judgmental evaluations** – Coaches can facilitate support based on specific situations that have arisen and help teachers move incrementally in the right direction.
- **Accountability plus support**—Sometimes teachers are given improvements to make and reminded that they will be held accountable for these requirements. Without support, this approach will likely lead to frustration and failure.
- **Set clear goals for teachers** – If teachers are expected to improve, leaders must use precise language to describe potential accomplishments. As coaches provide feedback and as teachers reach their goals, they will feel a sense of empowerment and continue to improve.
- **Encourage “coachability”** – When leaders support the idea of coaching among their staff, they should publicly acknowledge its benefits so that unsuccessful teachers do not see it as threatening but instead view coaching as a way to make changes and adjustments in a non-judgmental process.

Significant Advances

Instead of wrestling with the negativity of what teachers are not doing, leaders (both teachers and administrators) can seek out and share resources and updated information for their staffs. In an article entitled “Teaching Versus Teachers as a Lever for Change: Comparing a Japanese and a U.S. Perspective on Improving Instruction,” researchers James Hiebert and James Stigler present important findings that can help teachers make significant advancements in their pedagogy. The authors are critical of the attempt to measure effectiveness through test scores; they view efforts to “fix” individual teachers to be the wrong approach, and instead they conclude that educators should concentrate their efforts on viewing teaching as a “system.” They point out that teaching and learning has seen a steady improvement in the last 50 years in Japan since teachers spend time focusing on “small components” of lesson design and implementation. Hiebert and Stigler emphasize that teaching will improve when educators work collaboratively in the following areas:

- Student learning goals should be stated in precise language, be defined in yearly terms, and be shared among all practitioners. They write, “When common learning goals are shared among teachers, it naturally creates curiosity about what’s working,” and the demand for successful approaches increases across the system.
- Teachers should continually experiment with improvements by observing one another in action, seeking ways to tweak individual lessons, and sharing the results with one another.
- When teachers observe one another, they should watch for evidence of student learning in real time, and make connections to the teacher actions which lead to the successful outcomes.
- Professional development should be driven by lesson study; new teachers should be introduced to the process as early as possible.
- When teachers concentrate on lesson design, they are able to analyze the teaching approaches in detail and make revisions that improve the instructional delivery.

The researchers conclude that when the Japanese teachers focus on a single lesson, it makes them more



effective on all subsequent lessons. They also have noted that putting the Japanese approach into practice requires a cultural change, and is not a quick fix.

ASK Construct

Another way of thinking about how to support unsuccessful teachers is the use of a construct that has been a part of Just ASK workshops for decades. In *The 21st Century Mentor's Handbook*, Paula Rutherford writes about the **ASK Construct** in the following way: “We make decisions about how to proceed in our personal and professional lives based on our **attitudes, skills and knowledge (ASK)**. The three variables cause us to move forward with, procrastinate about, or even avoid certain tasks. What appears to be an attitude problem can in fact be a lack of knowledge or lack of skillfulness in using acquired knowledge. Mastering the content we are to teach, using **learning theory**, and building a **repertoire** of strategies for connecting students with the content are the areas in which teachers must attain knowledge and build skillfulness.” A teacher’s apparent ineffectiveness may be addressed by an administrator by using the **ASK Construct** to analyze a teacher’s behavior and then determine how best to provide support to move the individual in the right direction. Paula further writes in *Leading the Learning*, “...supervisors, coaches, and mentors need to develop skills at uncovering the real issues. The more closely we identify whether an issue is rooted in knowledge, skills, or attitudes, the better we can plan our interactions,” and get at the root of the ineffectiveness.

Innovative Thinking

As the difficulty in determining ineffective continues, several publications took a different tack by focusing on what leads to an effective performance in the classroom. **Teacherthought**, a website dedicated to supporting educators with innovative thinking, published an article describing attributes of a highly effective learning environment. Among their suggestions are the following ideas:

- Teachers should emphasize curiosity among their students encouraging the importance of asking good questions.
- In the same vein, practitioners can place value on helping students learn how to ask the best questions instead of simply supplying the best answers.
- In addition to direct instruction, teachers should incorporate into their practice a variety of approaches including inquiry-based learning, the flipped classroom, project-based learning, and peer-to-peer learning.
- The focus should be on establishing assessments that are “persistent, authentic, transparent, and never punitive.”
- Teachers should consistently clarify and communicate what success will look like and sound like.
- Student achievement will increase when practitioners model the characteristics of good learning habits such as persistence, collaboration, revision, flexibility and creativity.
- When “**Bloom’s Taxonomy** is constantly traveled up and down, from the simple to the complex,” the opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding increases.

When a person enters the field of education, they do not do so believing they will be ineffective. Once they appear to be struggling, it is the ethical responsibility of teacher and administrative leaders to have honest dialogues with the individual, diagnose the situation, and provide the necessary support to move the teacher along on the effectiveness continuum so that dismissal or even resignations do not occur.

We need all the effective teachers we can get!



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