



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

June 2009
Volume VI
Issue VI

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. The focus this month is on addressing tough questions about important issues that impact our students' lives.

Tough Questions



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

From the moment our students arrive at school each day, the pace is non-stop. There is very little down time, if any at all. Teachers and administrators must be masters at multi-tasking. Lesson plans, phone calls, meetings, data analysis, parent inquiries, technology applications, emails, building security, district reports, student behavior, paper grading, and the ever-present crisis of the day are just a few of the typical events that demand our attention and consume our time. It is simply the nature of the business of education that cannot be denied or ignored.

Because of this ever-demanding and often increasing necessity to deal with so many issues, we often get caught up in the day-to-day experiences of school life as we make decisions in the moment. At the end of the day, we are physically, mentally, and frequently, emotionally exhausted. We sometimes wonder if we have the wherewithal to come back tomorrow and do it all again. But we persevere.

Despite the stresses and requirements of our jobs, education can be a rewarding, and often a joyful endeavor. While we devote significant time to the many details of our job, we sometimes forget to step back and think about the big picture issues. These topics transcend the everyday challenges that we face that focus primarily on teaching and learning. With most schools in recess during the summer months, it is a good time for school leaders (and eventually all members of the school community) to think about and discuss some of the often overlooked topics that are important in the lives of our students. The **tough questions** below may provide the impetus to begin the conversations about these important issues.

Are our students safe?

According to a recent federal publication entitled "Indicators of School Crime and Safety," violence in schools across the country is on a decline. That's the good news. However, that does not necessarily mean that schools are safe places for all students. Approximately one-third of students between the ages of 12 and 18 report being bullied inside the school. The study reports, "For both students and teachers, victimization at school can have lasting effects. In addition to experiencing loneliness, depression and adjustment difficulties, victimized children are more prone to truancy, poor academic performance, dropping out of school, and violent behavior." Bullying is much more than physical threats or intimidation. Incidents of racial and/or sexual slurs are also pervasive forms of bullying. In extraordinary cases, when

victims can no longer withstand the taunts or threats, they may resort to substance abuse, and in the most extreme situations, suicide. Whatever form it takes, the issue of bullying is one that school personnel can not ignore or underplay. I have the opportunity to visit many schools in my work with teachers and administrators. In some environments, it is immediately evident that the school has addressed the issue and has a schoolwide initiative to not simply bring the topic to the attention of their students but that bullying is a behavior that will not be tolerated. In these schools, consistent messages abound in posters, on banners, and on bulletin boards. The importance of the message is clear and the results are reflected in the behavior of students and the responses of adults. In truly exceptional schools, mechanisms are in place so that students can report bullying to a trusted adult without feeling that they will be betrayed or further victimized. When we encounter fights or disruptions in schools, we act swiftly to address these issues of overt violence. We must believe that bullying has the same adverse effect on our student populations. Only when we act as expeditiously to address the problem of bullying can we say our schools are truly safe.

Are our students over-tested and under-assessed?

We have become a “test happy” society. We have come to believe that success or failure can easily be measured in a paper and pencil evaluation. We should be commended for making the transition to give more attention to student achievement data, but perhaps it’s time to think about how much our students are being tested, and, more importantly, how educators are responding to the test data. Accumulating data at a school or district level and publishing extensive reports is not the answer. Some teachers with whom I work have expressed their exasperation and frustration with the amount of time that is being consumed by mandated testing requirements. These teachers decry the fact that they often feel rushed to cover the required curriculum in order to prepare their students for the next required test. Perhaps we should be looking at student achievement data in another way. The emphasis should not be so much on testing as on assessing in the sense that teachers use the results of assessments to determine the next steps in instructional delivery. The results should not simply be tallied and accumulated but should be used to address important questions: Did students learn? Which students need more support in order to learn? How can I use the results to determine what adjustments need to be made to my instructional program? Instead of **teach-test-move on**, the emphasis should be on **teach-assess-what next?**

What would our students say about our school?

If your students were interviewed and had an opportunity to give an honest appraisal of their educational experience at your school, what would they say? Would they excitedly talk about how much they learned, how humane the adults were with whom they worked, and how they were treated as individuals rather than as just one more number in the overall school population? Would they sing the praises of specific teachers who provided exciting and interesting student-centered lessons which they felt stretched and challenged them and made their classes places they looked forward to each day? Or would they say that they had to sit passively in most of their classes trying hard to listen to the adult in the front of the room and figure out what was going on? Would they say that they not only learned, but if and when they struggled, their teachers provided the support to help them reach success, OR would they say that they were left to their own devices to figure out how to navigate the educational maze? Would they say that great efforts were made by their teachers to link their learning with the current lives instead of having content delivered in a “mind numbing” style that was difficult to relate to? Would they say that the adults in the building went to great lengths to build relationships with students so that each student felt comfortable approaching their teacher and to ask for help when it was needed, OR would they say, “I don’t think my teachers really knew me.” We have the power to create a learning environment in which all students would be able to say they learned, they grew as individuals, and they faced their futures confidently knowing that they had a memorable and positive experience. In short, they learned and felt valued as human beings.

Are we guilty of indifference?

Metaphorically speaking, many schools are like beehives. They buzz with activity and excitement, teeming with constant movement and hopefully resulting in a “honey of a product” (student learning) that all the workers can be proud of. Like humans, bees have a sophisticated and unique way of communicating and their daily lives are filled with gossip and rituals. Within the hive, some workers serve as guards to protect the hive while others act as scouts to warn of impending danger. Just as schools are facing unprecedented challenges, beehives are struggling to withstand an onslaught of problems unequaled in their prior existence. Across the world, there is a decline in the number of bees (and beehives) due to poor nutrition, illness, entrapment, mobility and environmental instabilities. Sadly, bees are struggling to survive as they face unparalleled changes in their daily lives.

Just like bees, schools are facing extraordinary demands. It is often said that schools have become the repository for all of society’s ills. Schools today must be providers of nutrition and other survival necessities, reporters of suspected abuse, watchdogs for possible illnesses, sources for lessons on good parenting, experts on legal issues impacting education, and translators of information about student learning. We have become “everything for everybody.” When an educator signs a contract today, it is with the understanding that the role has taken on a much broader definition than in past decades. With all that we are asked to do, we must rise to the challenge set before us. We cannot ignore or dismiss the many roles we are asked to play because a child’s well being may be at stake. Responding to the many needs a child or family may have can be difficult, exhausting and sometimes a thankless role. Nonetheless, indifference has no place in schools, especially for students who desperately need us. We should take pride in knowing that we have protected, fed, rescued and generally supported innocent children who, like bees, struggle to exist from day-to-day. As Washington Post reporter Jay Mathews wrote, “They are children on the margins, easy to ignore. It is good to remember that many public servants, both educators and social workers, spend their lives bringing such kids into the center of life in America. Once they have that opportunity, the chances are they will...return that favor in a big way.” In short, the workers in the school, much like their counterparts in the beehive, must continue to be guards and scouts for our students. Schools can never be places of indifference.

© 2009 Just ASK Publications & Professional Development

Permission is granted for reprinting and distribution of this newsletter for non-commercial use only. Please include the following citation on all copies:

Oliver, Bruce. “Tough Questions.” *Just for the ASKing!* June 2009. Available at www.justaskpublications.com. Reproduced with permission of Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK). © 2009 by Just ASK. All rights reserved.

To subscribe to this free monthly e-newsletter please visit: www.justaskpublications.com