



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. This month, Bruce reflects on what he sees as the belief systems we should use to guide our decisions and actions and asks leaders to step back and reflect on their own core values and how those impact their practice and the practice of their colleagues.

We Hold These Truths



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

Our founding fathers set the stage for our democratic way of life through multiple documents. One of those was the Declaration of Independence. The opening words of that resolution, “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” caused me to pause and think about how that phrase applies to the field of education. I asked myself, “Are there certain ‘truths’ that we embrace to guide our practice?” In contemplating possible education “truths,” I pictured and heard the voices of outstanding students, teachers, and administrators; I concentrated on the belief systems that they espoused and used to guide their work in teaching, learning, and leading. The tenets they advocate and routinely follow led to the education truths are described in this issue.

Truth 1: We must believe that every child can and will learn.

For some children, learning is a facile process and school is a joyful place. Conversely, there are students for whom learning is a difficult and sometimes painful process. It is these children who require our most sincere dedication, patience, and tenacity. In *The Skillful Teacher*, Jon Saphier lists three key messages of expectations that we need to send to all students:

- This is important.
- You can do it.
- I won’t give up on you.

Teachers must not only believe in every child’s ability to learn but establish in every child a sense of self-analysis, self-efficacy, and self-fulfillment. All children have talents and insightful educators work unceasingly to bring out these talents in all of their students.

Truth 2: We want every child to experience a “senior moment” (aka graduation).

No children enter kindergarten believing that they will fail in school and eventually be a dropout. They typically begin with a sense of wonder, an eagerness to achieve, and a feeling of excitement. Somewhere along the way, some of our students become frustrated and dismayed, and unless there are caring and dedicated adults who help them face and overcome their struggles, they can fall by the wayside and become another statistic. Ensuring that all children have the requisite skills and knowledge to move to the next grade or subject is a daunting responsibility. As any educator knows, this is easier said (or written) than done. But early-grade educators must accept this formidable undertaking despite the fact that it may be arduous, exacting, and demanding. At the other end of the education spectrum, we can follow the lead of newly-appointed superintendent in Fairfax County, Virginia, Dr. Karen Garza,

who, as superintendent of Lubbock ISD, Texas, worked with hundreds of volunteers in a door-to-door campaign to convince students who had dropped out to return to their classrooms and complete their schooling. When our students “walk” during their graduation ceremony, they will have learned important life lessons that transcend the curriculum: Diligence has its rewards; they can face their future with greater confidence because dedicated educators cared about them and made a difference in their lives.

Truth 3: We want all our children to be thinkers and problem solvers.

If we want our students to engage in deeper thinking, we must do the same ourselves. We must rise above asking mundane, fact-based questions and challenge our students to immerse themselves in the content in creative and stimulating ways. Our classrooms should not be an exercise in trivial pursuit characterized by a series of sound bites and snapshots. An approach from Harvard University’s Project Zero Visible Thinking Program is being used by teachers across the country. It promotes artful thinking through the use of reasoning, questioning and investigating, observing and describing, comparing and connecting, finding complexity, and exploring viewpoints. Through this process, students are taught to make careful observations and thoughtful interpretations as they participate in the **See-Think-Wonder** routine of exploring new ideas by responding to the questions:

- What do you **see**?
- What do you **think** about that?
- What does it make you **wonder**?

To make this “truth” a reality, we can no longer tell students what to think; we must use methodologies that engross our students in learning that is imaginative, exhilarating, and inspiring. Only then will they continue to grow and make a difference in the world as adults.

Truth 4: We want our children to know that we care about and respect them as individuals.

A mental image of successful teachers includes the vision of the friendly and enthusiastic greeting they give their students as they enter their classrooms. With kind words, ever-present smiles, and bits of laughter, there can be no greater way to set the stage for what will occur once the lessons begin. The nurturing educator understands that if students feel like a number or just another nameless entity among the masses, learning will be minimal, if at all. Establishing meaningful and purposeful bonds with students will enable teachers to break through the veneer that can separate student and teacher when the student does not have the maturity or level of development to reach out to the adults who are overseeing their learning. At the end of the day, there can be no greater joy for a professional educator than to hear a student say, “I really feel safe in your room,” “Thank you for being patient with me,” and “I’ll always remember you,” because the adult has had the wherewithal to understand that relationship building is paramount to successful learning.

Truth 5: We understand that as professionals, we must be lifelong learners.

As I was walking through an airport recently, I heard a line from a nearby television broadcast that caught my attention. I did not know its context but the thought stuck inside my head. The announcer said, “We cannot create the future by clinging to the past.” As I thought about the line, I made a connection to the field of education. Each of us has not only a responsibility but an unspoken mandate from our students to constantly be seeking the best way to capture student attention, stimulate their thinking, and provoke different interpretations and conclusions about the content. To make this goal a reality, we must be readers, we must be seekers, we must be sharers. Because the world of our students is ever changing, we, too, must continue to evolve in thought and action. On our very last day of teaching, we want to be able to say, “I’m going to try something new with my students today.”

Truth 6: We want every child to learn, everyday.

One important question to ask in a reflective conference after a classroom observation is, “How do you know if and what every child learned today?” It is an extremely difficult question to answer and is not meant to put the teacher on the spot, but is meant to serve as a reminder of the daily challenge each educator should undertake. For far too long, some teachers have felt that it is their responsibility to simply present content and then periodically administer an assessment to see which students “got it.” What an injustice to the youngsters

we instruct if we foster this misguided approach to our jobs. When lessons are designed well, when students are captivated by our delivery, and when we employ strategies and practices that help both student and teacher determine what has been learned that day, then we have done our job and we can end the day with a strong sense of certitude and satisfaction. One confident teacher said, “I want to be held accountable by my students. I want them to feel like they can grade me because I can’t separate student success and teacher success.”

Truth 7: We must instill in our students a love for reading.

Most of us can recall those early days when we first became independent readers. With great anticipation and excitement, we reveled in the ability to read as it served as the gateway to ideas, spectacles, and surprises. But for some students, reading became a chore and their desire to read waned or stopped almost entirely to the point where they faked their way through their schooling. Leaders in the field of reading point to potential reasons that cause students to become discouraged and choose to eschew reading. The reasons include the following:

- the inability to understand what they are asked to read
- the lack of background knowledge to provide a context for what they are reading
- the requirement to read, almost exclusively, material that they have no interest in or desire to read

Reading experts likewise have identified practices that may result in a greater desire to continue reading as well as help students become better readers. Recommended practices include the following:

- providing a balance of reading options between teacher and student interests
- having students interact with their peers by talking about what they are reading
- using free web annotation tools and virtual post-its during reading assignments
- having students read independently every day
- providing access to books and magazines which are high interest to students
- finding joy in reading by allowing students to have a greater choice in what they read
- expanding both vocabulary clarification and prior knowledge before reading is assigned
- teaching students to not only analyze what the reading explicitly says but also to make inferences about what is *not* said

A 2008 study showed that 56% of unenthusiastic readers did not have a teacher who shared a love for reading. On the other hand, 64% of enthusiastic readers did have such a teacher. As Nancy Atwell wrote, “The job of adults who care about reading is to move heaven and earth to put that book into a child’s hands.”

Truth 8: We believe that teaching is an art that must be refined over time.

It is interesting to note that many people feel that practically anybody can be a teacher; they have all been to school and seen what teachers do and it just does not seem that complicated. This naïve and unrealistic view of teaching could not be further from the truth. Art is defined as any endeavor that includes human creative skill and imagination, and like any other artistic undertaking, teaching is complex and multi-layered. Just as the choreographer must work out detailed dance movements, so a teacher must plan the steps in a successful lesson so that it flows with precision and even grace. Just as an artist must transfer a concept from the mind to the canvas, so must the teacher bring complicated concepts to life by painting word pictures for students. Just as the author must capture the imagination of his reader with his wordsmithing, so does the teacher have to carefully choose the words which will attract and maintain student attention so they become engrossed in the planned lesson. Just as the musician must practice and practice until he is confident that his upcoming recital will be well received by his audience, so must a teacher mentally rehearse the upcoming lesson to make sure it contains the right inflections, the right pauses, and the right crescendos so that students stay immersed in the content for a designated time period. Just as anyone who calls herself an artist must study, take risks, experience ups and downs, and seek inspiration from many sources, so must the teacher take chances, learn from her peers, and rebound when all does not go as planned. Yes, teaching is indeed an art that must be developed over time.

Truth 9: We believe that education is the great equalizer.

We have all heard the American dream characterized by the phrase, “When you grow up, you can be anything you want to be.” These words might be completely vacuous and without merit or credence were it not for the

fact that for many, many children, the words are what they cling to as they grow up. For some students, the path to a successful adult life is well laid out with all the necessary resources and supports to make it happen, and acquiring the proper education is just one piece of the success puzzle. For others, it is only through our education system that a better life can be attained. A 2011 study showed that nearly 16 million children live in poverty, and in households headed by single females, 47.6% are at the poverty level. For these children, their primary hope is that their schooling will provide the foundation that will lead them out of the quagmire in which they find themselves trapped. Today's educators have to fully understand the extraordinary responsibility that comes with their job; that responsibility includes the need to supply the support, the encouragement, the skill development, and the unrelenting motivation to help all children understand that it is through education, they can have a better tomorrow.

Truth 10: We understand that the key to a successful school is a strong and healthy school culture.

There is no one criteria that can cause a school to be unsuccessful and possibly dysfunctional than a toxic school culture. In unhealthy cultures, people become complainers instead of problem solvers, blame others for unachieved goals and, as educational consultant Anthony Muhammad noted, "They create covert alliances with people experiencing similar struggles." On the flip side of the coin is the healthy school environment where all personnel work together for the collective good by focusing their attention on achievable goals that are realistic and manageable. It should come as no surprise that the one individual who is pivotal to the creation and maintenance of a powerful and capable school culture is the principal. Equally unsurprising is the fact that successful principals are the ones who are highly visible throughout the building, who avoid playing favorites among the staff, who provide on-going and relevant feedback to teachers, who believe in the use of their people power instead of their position power, and who instill confidence in the teaching staffs by delivering pep talks that are encouraging and specific and not empty or vapid. They see teachers as individuals with gifts and they see as their charge the development of these gifts so that students will have exceptional learning experiences. Healthy cultures exist when leaders find ways to avoid the revolving door syndrome where teachers regularly leave to look for greener pastures resulting in an unstable environment. Astute principals create loyalty, community, and unity by providing their staff with growth opportunities and a sense of empowerment. As a result, people want to stay; there is a strong sense of commitment and a sense of pride in the school and its collective achievements. There is no better place to work!

One of the great truths that is endemic to our way of life is our freedom to form our own conclusions. This list enumerates and explores some of the truths I feel are most important. The challenge to you is this: Think deeply about the job we do and determine, from your perspective, what beliefs we stand for, what truths are "self-evident," and what actions these truths lead us to take as we execute this awe-inspiring responsibility we have been given.

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