

Apple Core

March 2010

I remember the first time I was in front of a first grade class as an adult. I was a guest reader for my son's class. I picked out an appropriate reading book for a first grade class about dinosaurs and their many tails. I practiced reading the book aloud to myself to make sure I knew where to stop and ask questions—because I knew that was what elementary teachers did. I came up with questions about the pictures and inference questions about what the students think is going to happen next in the story.

My son introduced me to his class and told them that I was an administrator at the high school. My son said that I just kicked kids out of school all day. One of the first graders raised his hand and asked if I kicked his sister out of school last week because she was bad. I said that wasn't my only job, but that I really wanted to share with them this awesome book about dinosaurs. Another boy said that his brother hates the principal at his school. I asked how many kids liked dinosaurs. A little girl in the back raised her hand and blurted out that her dad had found a dinosaur bone once. This started a flurry of stories about all the different bones the students had found in their yards and fields. The teacher stepped in and got everyone focused again. I read the first two pages about how one dinosaur was made fun of because his tail wasn't like the others. I stopped and asked the kids how they feel when someone makes fun of them. Words like sad, angry, and scared came flooding back at me. A little girl raised her hand and told me that her dog's tail got broken, turned black and started to stink this winter. Another student blurted out that his sister got her belly-button pierced and it turned black and started to stink. I just started reading the next page. I got to the end of the next section about how all the dinosaurs with the same kinds of tails were bullying the dinosaur with the funny looking tail. I asked the kids about what a bully is. Phrases like "mean people" and "jerks" came out at me. A student blurted out "my dog had his tail cut off when he was a puppy!" Another yelled that her dog's tail hurts when it hits her in the leg. Finally, a girl said that her puppy got hit by the garbage truck and only has three legs now. Again I started reading. This time I read to the end of the book without taking questions. I explained to the kids what the moral of the story was without asking them what they thought, thanked them for letting me read to them, and grabbed my coat to leave. When the teacher thanked me for coming, I wanted to hug her and tell her how much I appreciated the incredible amount of patience she had with all these Attention Deficit Disordered first graders. I wondered how one class could have been filled with so many ADD kids? Later, once I was able to visit the world of elementary education more often, I found that my son's first grade class was very typical of all first grade classes—amazing!

The education profession is much like the attention deficit disorder first grade class I just described. With every new year there seems to come a new "program". On a weekly basis I receive between five and ten emails from educational research companies trying to sell our district the best solution to education since the invention of chalk. All of these companies guarantee that their product will increase student achievement. These companies prey on educators' insecurities and fears that what they are doing just isn't enough—"just look at these test scores...." The bottom line is that the education profession is disconnected, disjointed, and lacks clear direction precisely because of our reliance on the next new program to solve the problem of student academic stagnation. Michael Fullan, expert on

educational change, states that one of the most critical problems our schools face is “not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical and uncoordinated acceptance of too many different innovations.” I believe that it’s safe to say that the education profession certainly suffers from ADD. It’s important that education leaders understand that technology and programs are tools that teachers need to understand and use to help children, but the programs can’t replace great teaching, or remediate poor teaching. It doesn’t matter how many great Tier 2 interventions we have for struggling students if our Tier 1 instruction is ineffectual.

The bottom line is that it is people, not programs that make a great school. Instructional technology is taking huge leaps in its effectiveness for diagnosing learning problems and developing interventions to remediate those problems. Just like what has happened in the medical field over the past fifty years with medical technology, educational technology is now offering educators tools that we have never had in order to more clearly diagnose and intervene with students in a much more immediate manner. However, it is important to remember that those programs and technologies are only as good as the people implementing them. We must stay focused on the fact that these programs can’t replace solid, Tier 1 classroom teaching for all students. Great teachers use these programs to enhance their teaching. Great teachers use this new technology to better diagnose student deficiencies. Great teachers use all the tools available to them to track student progress and intervene with student deficits. Great teachers also collaborate with their peers in order to find the best ways possible to serve their students’ needs.

When educators can collaborate on the enormous amounts of data we are given from these new technologies and focus our collective knowledge on narrowing that data and making sense of it, we can then ensure that the educational decisions we make are truly data driven. If we are not working collaboratively about our students and student data, those children fall through the cracks. We cannot achieve greatness in education individually, by relying on the next program, by waiting for this to pass, or by sticking our heads in the sand. As a district, we are moving in a good direction; focused on student learning. If we stay the course, I have faith that we will see incredible student progress.