

# **COMMON SENSE EDUCATION**

## **Instructional Leadership: A Collaboration Between School Districts, the Legislature, and Wyoming People**

*--By Cindy Hill--*

When it comes to education, as a state and as an educational system in general, we have lost our focus. An unintended effect of the Wyoming Supreme Court's equity mandate was to divert our attention away from classroom instruction and on to building new schools. In response to the Court's equity mandate, education became about meeting the funding requirements of the mandate and administering that mandate instead of why school buildings exist. At the same time the equity mandate turned attention away from the classroom, "No Child Left Behind" and the related assessment movement further diverted focus away from learning. During the assessment movement, the attention inside schools became about how we measure the progress of kids, rather than whether kids were actually learning.

As a state, we must come together to recognize that everything not related to instruction is secondary, and get back to a focus on what education was always about—teaching and learning (instruction). The purpose of education is to educate the child, not to build new school buildings, not only to come up with the best test, and not to lead in administrator salaries. Instruction. This has been the emphasis of my campaign from the outset, deriving from my career long focus on school improvement and instructional leadership.

In the sections that follow, I simply seek to have a conversation with you and will share a few of my ideas for improving education in Wyoming. The title of this article and its four part series: "A Collaboration Between School Districts, the Legislature, and Wyoming People" should not be interpreted narrowly. The title is a reference to teachers, administrators, school board members, and legislators, with public participation and ultimate buy-in by the public, in collaboration on what needs to happen in education.

## **A Four Step Approach**

### **Part One**

#### **Local Control Through Fiscal Responsibility and Accountability**

We all want local control of our schools. I advocate not only local control, but meaningful local control. By giving school boards the information they need to effectively manage what is happening in their schools, we will preserve local control by being able to appreciate the results of those efforts coming from the classrooms.

Under the block grant system, each school district gets to decide how their resources will be spent and I do not recommend changing that. Let me be clear: **I do not support altering the block grant system.** I do recommend utilizing four simple tools (pieces of information) to **collaborate with** (not mandate to) school boards and communities on how dollars are spent in their school districts to achieve better educational outcomes:

- ***Best Practices: Funding/Spending.*** School boards must have a brief summary, provided at least annually, showing what the funding model provides for compared to how the dollars are actually being spent in their district. This summary, in an easy to understand format, would be published in each community so that members of the community would be able to converse with school board members on how the dollars are being spent. This is the purest and most meaningful form of local control—one where members of the community and the elected school board are equipped with the information to know (1) best practices leading to educational outcomes; (2) what the funding model seeks to accomplish (realizing that the funding model is based upon best practices research), and (3) how the dollars are actually being spent.

Class size really does matter, and attention to this aspect of the funding model is important. When a teacher is dedicated to teaching to the child, instead of to the class, the size of the class matters.

- ***Assessment Tools.*** Timely and useful assessment tools (ones that minimize the amount of time taken from instruction) would be used, on a real-time basis, to assess where students are and what they need. Part Two of my plan addresses assessment tools.
- ***Stakeholder Feedback.*** The school board and members of the community must have access to a review process for what is happening inside of school buildings that provides the assurance of confidentiality. We must have meaningful information from and to the stakeholders on what is happening inside of the buildings: from parents, students, and teachers on how well the building is running and whether the principal(s) (administrators) are serving as instructional leaders. Schools must not be insular. They must be open and transparent. The schools belong to the parents, and administrators serve them and their children, not the other way around. As such, there must be an

assessment of their performance in response to questions posed by local school boards as local school boards deem appropriate.

How will this be done? Right now teachers and parents are afraid of providing meaningful comment because they are worried about their comments being traced back to their computer accounts, with the fear of retribution for speaking up. To answer this concern, the Wyoming Department of Education could serve as the clearinghouse of this information, assuring that the source of the information is not revealed, but that the feedback is given to school boards and communities to better understand what is happening inside the buildings.

- ***Collaboration.*** With school boards equipped with this information, the Superintendent of Public Instruction would work collaboratively with school board members and local educators to find the best, common sense, approaches to improve educational outcomes in school districts. This is not an approach of telling school districts what to do; it is a process of figuring out what makes the most sense for each community and joining together to find solutions. The solutions must be identified by the community. I do not favor a system of punishing school districts. I see it as a matter of collaboration and leadership: we can work together to find solutions and to set the focus where it needs to be set—on instruction.

# A Four Step Approach

## Part Two

### Assessments, or “Testing”

Assessments have always existed in education in one form or another. They are an essential ingredient for accountability, and no one seriously disputes that we must have accountability in education. What we must have, however, are assessment tools that are **timely, useful, and reduce the amount of time spent away from instruction**. Testing is merely a tool—not the end to be served. Stated differently, tests should serve us, we should not be serving the tests.

The people of Wyoming want accountability, but they want a measure that they can trust. Teachers are asking for assessments that are timely and useful, and ones that can be used to positively impact instruction. It is obvious that the public has lost trust in PAWS, and so it is time to move into an era that gets beyond PAWS and to re-building trust in assessments.

#### *My Leadership Approach*

Before we make those decisions, the people on the front lines (teachers, parents, school boards, administrators, and students) must have an opportunity to weigh in on these significant decisions. I have held a series of meetings around the state to gain the perspectives of those on the front lines. The perspectives of those dealing with the assessments, and the practical consequences of the tests, is critical. One of these meetings was captured in an informative video that can be found on my website at [www.hill4education.com](http://www.hill4education.com). The teachers who participated in the Riverton meeting spoke about their many insights into the problems and solutions related to PAWS. In the video, you will hear their thoughts relating to the time in the year that PAWS is administered as well as how much testing is being done. Shawn Peck, an outstanding and thoughtful fourth grade teacher from Riverton spoke to the issue of the time of the year PAWS is being administered. In her view, by testing in March, the children (and teachers) are tested on only a partial year’s worth of learning and teaching. Randy Tucker, one of the leaders in Wyoming in technology, spoke to the number of years (yes, years) of instruction time lost in the lives of each child created by redundant batteries of tests.

#### *A Comprehensive Examination*

A complete understanding of what is happening inside our school buildings when it comes to testing reveals that it is not just PAWS that is contributing to reduced

instruction time. As such, I will undertake a comprehensive examination of all tests in Wyoming to eliminate the redundancy and duplication in tests. Again, this is part of my view of education: Common Sense Education focused on instruction.

Duplication in testing is a problem that those on the front lines can help eliminate. We must surgically cut away that which is duplicative and not useful, and retain that which is useful and timely to the classroom teacher in assessing the development and progress of the child and structuring interventions to meet the child's educational needs. In eliminating the redundancy and duplication, we will return the child to classroom instruction and immediately yield better educational outcomes. After all, it is not testing that makes the child more knowledgeable and more proficient, it is instruction time.

In a related vein, we must de-clutter the lives of teachers so that they can do what we want them to do, i.e., teach. This means reducing the amount of time students are testing instead of learning and reducing the amount of time teachers are administering tests. In addition, as Superintendent, I will also be meeting with teachers and administrators around the state to determine what paper work and other bureaucratic requirements can be eliminated or greatly streamlined while still meeting the goals of accountability.

## **Part Three**

### **Instructional Leadership**

Instruction. This has been the emphasis of my campaign from the outset, deriving from my career long focus on school improvement and instructional leadership.

#### ***Instructional Leadership Defined***

Instructional leadership is a term well-defined in educational literature. Taken from the research, and from my personal experience, the phrase “instructional leadership” can be used first to describe the necessary leadership and the leadership’s focus in each building, and second, to describe the culture of the school and the personal commitment of each person connected to the learning environment. A central theme of instructional leadership is that educators have a great moral and ethical obligation to create vibrant and focused learning environments. Central to that mission (and yes, it is not a job, it is a mission) are the principals and leaders (administrators) in the school building who must set the tone and act as instructional leaders: resource providers, learning culture builders, interventions advocates, communicators, collaborators on meeting differing learning styles and needs, and a visible presence in the classroom to inspire, not to sanction.

Principals have a leading role in education: they can set a tone of complacency and lack of personal commitment to children—and thereby send the message throughout the building that mediocrity is acceptable; or, they can create a culture of commitment and an expectation that everyone in the building will take a personal stake in the growth of each child. Just as the leader of a business is critical to the success of the business organization, the quality of leaders in our school buildings is critical. To assess that leadership, as an illustration of what I am describing in terms of leadership in the building, we should be asking the following kind of questions to assess the leadership qualities of the person in charge of the building:

- Do teachers have the resources they need for their students, and are teachers aware of the resources available for their students?
- Is instruction the focus of the building, or are needless distractions allowed to reduce time spent on instruction?
- Is there a culture of learning in the school for both children and adults?
- Are we progress monitoring the growth of each child?

- Are teachers and other professionals encouraged and supported in identifying students' needs and developing resources and interventions for students?
- Is there an understanding and appreciation of differing learning styles of both children and adults in the building?
- Is the leader of the building visibly present in classrooms inspiring learning?
- Is the culture of the building focused on respect, and one in which bullying finds no place?
- Are we responding to each and every child in the school as though they were our own child?

But under this model of instructional leadership, it is not the principal who is the only leader in the building. It is the teacher, and the parent, and the student, and those working in the cafeteria and support services, and the principal, who must be equally concerned about the well-being of the children. In short, the entire building must be fully committed to the growth of each child. As shorthand for this concept, I referred to the children attending Carey Jr. High in Cheyenne as “Carey kids,” indicating that we all had a stake in what happened to each child.

### ***The Practice of Instructional Leadership***

My entire career, as an administrator (principal) and originally as a teacher, has been devoted to the concept of instructional leadership. For 24 years, my focus has been on improving educational outcomes for students through instructional leadership. Listening to teachers, parents, and students, with the greatest respect for those on the front lines, my focus has always been on best practices and actively leading school improvement. My interactions with teachers have been as a mentor, as an instructional guide, resource provider, one identifying children in need of assistance and in providing effective interventions, as communicator, as collaborator, as one understanding differing learning styles and needs, and as one visibly present in the classroom working alongside teachers. I always was committed to growing teachers, and in the process, growing students and schools. At Carey Jr. High, we achieved Adequate Yearly Progress, and school distinction, by empowering the teachers to do what they do best—i.e., teach.

### ***Setting Expectations of Leadership***

We must agree as a state in each of our communities, and as school districts, that we need leadership in the buildings committed to instruction (instructional leadership). We must agree upon what instructional leadership means in each community and school district. Then we must set the expectation for instructional leadership and instructional quality, and measure it. In business, that which gets measured gets done. From my experience, I can tell you that the same is true in education. The expectations for

instructional leadership also impact who is hired as an administrator within a building (i.e., how we recruit for administrators and what hiring teams are looking for) and what is expected of them once they are hired. As in the case of teachers who refuse to live up to expectations, administrators who do not live up to our expectations should be asked to leave. When we focus on these expectations, and set agenda items and reporting structures relating to these expectations, then we will see true instructional leadership. Just as teachers are evaluated, we must have meaningful evaluations of administrators that, in the end, establish an expectation that each building will be focused on instruction.

One must not underestimate the importance of the principal in the buildings: not only do they set the learning culture of the building, but they play the leading role in the hiring of teachers. They have the ability to hire teachers personally committed to each child and who will define themselves by the values of instructional leadership, or they can hire teachers who simply skate by. But as much as we expect of administrators, and of teachers, we must set expectations with students and parents. In short, we must all hold each other accountable and not compromise when it comes to educational outcomes. These efforts cannot be taken through legislation. They must be thoughtfully implemented through collaboration with school boards supported by community members (parents, business people, and other community members) and the Wyoming Department of Education to firmly place the focus where it must be—on instruction

# **A Four Step Approach**

## **Part Four**

### **The Personal Commitment To The Child**

Everyone coming in contact with the child and making decisions relating to education must have a personal commitment to the child. My approach at Carey Junior High was to instill in the school that every last child coming to Carey was a, “Carey kid.” That meant that we all had a personal stake in what happened to that child, and took personal responsibility for what happened to that child. From my experience, this represents a shift of thinking and culture in some of our schools.

#### ***The Impact of Personal Commitment On Instruction***

The central theme of every part of my plan, and on my campaign from the outset, has been on instruction. Instruction becomes lack luster and ineffective if there is not a personal commitment to each child. The best teachers have it; the worst teachers don't. Personal commitment must inform our decisions on how well teachers and administrators are doing and whether they should continue to be trusted.

#### ***Personal Commitment Informs Everything In Education***

Personal Commitment is mentioned last in my four part series because it impacts everything in education and I wanted you to see that as you considered the first three parts of the discussion. Taking the parts of my plan in order, Part I of the plan focused on local control through fiscal responsibility and accountability. Obviously, if we are not all personally committed to the child, we might not utilize the full number of teachers specified in the funding model (based upon best practices), and might come to the decision that a higher student to teacher ratio is permissible. If there is a legitimate, evidence-based (best practice), instructionally important reason for this decision, then fine. If there is not, then we must go back to consider whether we are more committed to the apparatus of education rather than a personal commitment to the child. Part II of my plan talked about assessments. As the situation now stands in Wyoming, in my view, a personal commitment to each child requires us to eliminate the duplication in testing, making the tests timely and useful, and minimize the amount of time that the child spends away from instruction. Instruction time is the key to better outcomes. Teachers want it; kids need it. Part III of my plan introduced the concept of instructional leadership into the campaign dialogue. Instructional leadership and personal commitment go hand-in-hand. There can be no instructional leadership in our school buildings without personal commitment (see part III of my plan to see how many times personal commitment comes up in the discussion of instructional leadership). So, as you see, personal commitment is at the center of everything in education. The child is the first to know if it is lacking.

Personal commitment must be a value that guides us when we are at risk of losing our way.

### ***The Positive Impact of Personal Commitment On Our Communities***

Although there are several causes of the high drop-out rate in Wyoming, I am convinced that a diminishing sense of personal connection is a significant explanation. Even in the largest communities in Wyoming, Wyoming is still small enough that we ought to be able to carefully monitor and support each of our students, and as a community, and as schools, throw our arms around each of those kids and provide them with guidance, encouragement, and the necessary resources. As a community, we must focus on each child, every step, if we truly intend for each to be economically viable later in life (either through vocational education of which I am a big supporter, or through a college track). In doing this, we will have a generational impact on each family.

Personal commitment cannot be legislated. But it can be expected by our local school boards, and can be expected by teachers of their administrators and of administrators of teachers. It can, and should be expected of the voters in who they select to serve on school boards and who they select to serve (yes, I said serve) as Superintendent of Public Instruction. In short, we all must hold each other accountable. The conversation on this important topic must begin in earnest.