Practicing “Best Practices”

To improve student learning, teachers need to correctly identify best practices and then replace less effective practices with the new best practice. Practices become part of a teacher’s strategies for instruction after they are repeated sufficient times to become automatic.

Repetition of a practice does not improve performance. Practicing better techniques improves performance. Better teaching techniques will improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Before better teaching techniques become part of a school culture, teachers need to consciously practice the new techniques.

Teacher Practice
We often think of coaching and practice in terms of athletes such as Tiger Woods or Derek Jeter. They may be top players in their sport. But to remain effective at what they do, they need to practice and have a coach.

In education, coaches are often associated with teachers who have less than three years of experience or who are identified by NYSED as ineffective or developing and in need of a Teacher Improvement Plan. Unlike sports, educators may not consider how to support the highly effective teacher.

The Common Core Learning Standards document for mathematics has two parts. One part is the standards that tell teachers what to teach. The other is the Mathematics Practices that tell teachers how to teach. Teachers need to integrate the Mathematics Practices into their teaching for students to be successful.

Flaws or weaknesses in teaching practice may be identified with the Nassau BOCES Data Warehouse GAP Reports. A comparison of items by teacher will indicate which teachers are stronger in which topics (Lemov, p. 62). It is often possible to pair two teachers who are each strong in a topic where the other is weak. The goal is for each teacher to learn from the other. “The person who [demonstrates a better practice] gets the opportunity to shine and to feel the respect of peers” (Lemov, p. 46). Each teacher becomes the other teacher’s coach for the topic.
A culture of shared accountability within a school takes time to develop. If the culture is shared accountability, then “teachers are invested in each other’s success and … all teachers are responsible for the teaching and learning of all children in their school, not just those students in their classroom. When they see another teacher in trouble, …[they] seek to help … instead of judge or ridicule” (Lemov, p. 164).

High performing teachers are not perfect teachers. They also have weaknesses. High performing teachers are distinguished by “how dynamic their strengths” are (Lemov, p. 45). Continuing to practice areas of strength improves instruction and encourages a positive attitude (Lemov, p. 46)

**Student Practice**

If a student goes home with ten mathematics problems to practice but repeats the same error ten times, the student has practiced incorrect mathematical thinking. The error, in this case, may be that the student thinks that all multiplication is done before division in a problem. The error may not have started with the student. The error may have been in the teaching of order of operations. Instead of teaching four steps (grouping symbols, exponents or radicals, multiplication or division, addition or subtraction), the teacher may have used a checklist approach (parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction).

Teachers can check for understanding before students are assigned homework. One tool is the exit ticket. Teachers who use exit tickets prepare a two question mini-quiz to determine if students have learned the material. Adjustments can be made to the homework assignment to provide practice that will lead to practicing good mathematical thinking.

The student practicing sloppy mathematical thinking may be compared to the aspiring basketball player practicing sloppy basketball strategies. The player who practices three hours every day in pick-up basketball may develop less than the player who practices two hours per day with good instruction and feedback (Lemov, p.21)

The value of repetitive practice is recognized in the CCLS fluency shift. If students have fluency in basic skills, then they are able to perform that skill with unconscious efficiency. This frees up the student’s mind for more complex thinking (Lemov, p. 36).

Practice and coaching may take a variety of forms for teachers and for students. Effective practice leads to improved performance for teachers and for students. The teacher is the coach for the student. Administrators, other teachers, and coaching specialists may be coaches for teachers.
