

July 18, 2007

Letter:

Who Is the Royal ‘We’ in Reform Prescriptions?

To the Editor:

Mike Schmoker and Richard Allington’s Commentary “The Gift of Bleak Research” (May 16, 2007) made me think of the old joke about the Lone Ranger and his sidekick Tonto. Inevitably, the masked hero’s plans for doing away with bad guys began, “Tonto, first we must ...” But in the joke, Tonto’s response was: “What’s this ‘we,’ Kemosabe?”

Messrs. Schmoker and Allington, adopting the Lone Ranger’s “we,” propose an “urgent question”: “Why do we create strategic plans that interfere with effective teaching, make no arrangements for teachers to work in teams to improve their lessons, and fail to ensure that instruction is at least occasionally monitored, so that we can celebrate progress and identify areas for further improvement?” They then reveal with another question what we need to do to answer it: “[W]ill we take the simple, direct actions sure to make schools vastly better, and more relevant and engaging for tens of millions of children?”

Moreover, in suggesting why such questions aren’t being asked in the first place, the Commentary notes that, at the core, we have “incredibly limited visions of what good teaching looks like.”

What’s missing here? The authors are asking the right questions. But, unfortunately, they have left a critical hole in the proposed answers. In each case, they suggest that we have to build each of those processes into every classroom’s instructional process.

But who is that “we”? What person in schooling is accountable for responding to that all-inclusive scope and nature, and also has the power to envision and support “good teaching”? What “simple, direct actions” can he or she take to “make schools vastly better, and more relevant and engaging”?

Now those are questions for which there are “answers” out there. There are school systems creating sustainable districtwide processes that support a simple model of effective learning and teaching at scale.

But there’s still a “we” problem: how to get the “we’s” focusing on systemic reform, to start asking some different “right questions,” so that they can find systemic answers that are already out there.

Lewis A. Rhodes
Silver Spring, Md.