

By Paula Dillon

7 Ways to Improve Professional Learning in the 21st Century

For some schools and teachers, technology is changing the way we think about education—most importantly, it’s improving the way we deliver education. But for others, technology has merely been the chance to replace pen and paper with a tablet or swap an original textbook for an online version. These schools and educators have failed to unleash the full power of technology and more often than not, it’s a lack of quality professional development to blame.

Research and reports such as the National Education Technology Plan (2016) and the Organization for Economic Development’s Youth Skills Outlook report (2015) show that technology alone is not sufficient to transform teaching and learning into the 21st-century powerhouse that they should be. It is high time for a professional development makeover. Here are seven ways educators can jump-start their professional learning program to get more teachers effectively using technology:



“A leader is not required to adopt each one of these innovative models; however, it is essential to move away from the passive delivery format of professional development to better transform instruction and learning in the school.”

1. **Sandbox environments.** When we think of a sandbox, we often think of a play area for children. But a sandbox environment in education is like a test lab, allowing teachers the opportunity to see, feel, and try various technological tools in a safe, judgment-free environment. If you have access to tech-savvy students, you can include their support and knowledge in the process, thereby demonstrating to teachers what works for the students in real life and real time.
2. **Model classrooms.** In every school, at least a few educators are leading the way to new technology. Identifying their classrooms as “model classrooms” encourages educators to open their rooms to their peers and share best practices to help make 21st-century learning more accessible and approachable. When you have several different model classrooms in the building, the school also becomes a center of leading and learning for teachers, not just students.
3. **Walk-throughs.** Teaching can be an isolating profession. It is easy for these sentinels of instruction to lose sight of what is occurring outside their localized orbit, as they focus primarily on their own students. Walk-throughs take model classrooms one step forward by making all classrooms wide-open spaces for sharing and learning. After walk-throughs, teachers can reach out to their peers for a skills demonstration on particular learning models they observed during the walk-through. This practice supports a commonality of purpose and focus of direction.
4. **Lunch and learns/Drop-in sessions.** Lunch and learns and drop-in sessions allow educators to lead the learning. After visiting a model classroom or going on a walk-through, teachers may have more specific questions. An impromptu workshop where teachers can try a tool, practice a skill, or ask questions helps efficiently move the learning forward.
5. **Unconferences/EdCamps.** Unconferences and EdCamps are unstructured sessions where teachers gather with educators of similar interests and engage in peer-to-peer learning and sharing. Typically, teachers will identify areas in which they can teach their peers as well as in which areas they are looking for professional growth. Various organizations nationwide offer Unconferences and EdCamps for leaders to attend and learn how to host their own at their school campus. The first time leaders host an Unconference can be daunting because of the lack

of a true plan and schedule; however, they are one of the most powerful and succinct delivery models for professional development. Just as technology can be personalized for students, the day becomes personalized for everyone.

6. Coaching. Job-embedded professional development is key to supporting teachers who are uncomfortable or uncertain about implementing new instructional strategies. Coaches collaborate on and plan lessons, model those lessons, and push to support and guide teachers in becoming more confident in their delivery. To ensure continuous improvement in our classrooms, critical feedback and dialog are key.

7. Microcredentialing/Badges. As teachers begin to develop confidence with 21st-century teaching and learning, the need to personalize becomes even more important. Through microcredentialing and badging, teachers will pursue learning to support their instructional needs at their own pace. This learning can occur via online professional learning portals, opportunities offered by the school, or off-campus settings. As teachers layer their skills, they are provided with a badge that illustrates their expertise. This badge helps their peers recognize who is available in the building and who can support their needs.

A leader is not required to adopt each one of these innovative models; however, it is essential to move away from the passive delivery format of professional development to better transform instruction and learning in the school. Additionally, as the budget process begins in the spring, there are practical benefits to this transition. The majority of the above solutions are either no or low-cost, as compared to a \$6,000-a-day “expert” who generally has leaders asking, “Where is the return on investment?” I believe we must accept the challenge to create a cost-effective, active, and personalized learning environment with and for teachers that redefines professional growth for this millennium. Responding to the needs of educators answers the needs of students. ■

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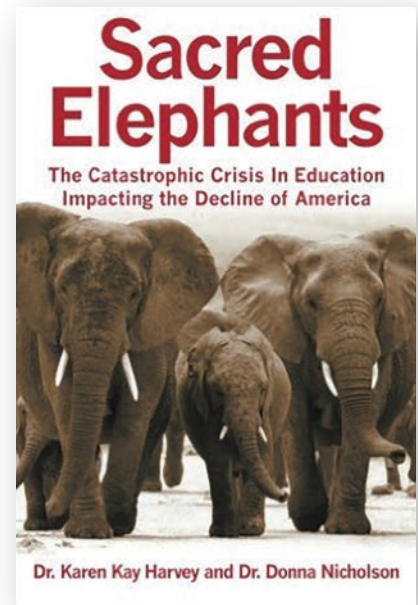
AAE-PACE Board Member Takes You Behind the Scenes of *Sacred Elephants: The Catastrophic Crisis in Education*

On a cold snowy evening in a large urban district, after experiencing the most frustrating and disappointing day of their work as consultants, Donna Nicholson and Karen Harvey looked at each other and said, “Education is truly broken.” And then they asked themselves, “Is it irrevocably broken?” The perspective that prompted this conversation came from almost 100 years of combined experience in schools across the country and observing the same issues over and over. As their conversation continued, they wondered aloud, “Could public schools be fixed and, if so, what ten things would have to be addressed immediately to fix them?” At that moment their book *Sacred Elephants: The Catastrophic Crisis in Education* was born.

As they outlined their ten critical issues, Karen and Donna realized they were not secrets at all but just ideas never seriously discussed in educational circles. They immediately thought of the idiomatic expression, the elephant in the room. The elephant in the room of course denotes something that is an open secret. They realized these areas were not discussed because they’re part of the system of protection that comes with political pressure and correctness. Thus, they decided that these elephants were absolutely sacred and untouchable in school districts and so the title *Sacred Elephants* became the best way to describe them. The ten sacred elephants they identified are as follows:

- **Leadership**, the most sacred
- **American School Boards**, the most powerful and frightening
- **Teachers**, the most essential
- **Unions**, the most deadly
- **Academic Performance**, the make-or-break elephant
- **Students**, the most fragile and at risk
- **Preparation of Teachers**, the most entrenched
- **School Finance and Facilities**, the most confusing and inequitable
- **Parents**, the most essential
- **Educational Bureaucracies**, the most frustrating and impeding

Leadership is the critical element in the success of schools and school systems. That leadership includes the superintendent, principal, and school board. If the leadership of these three entities is ineffective, it sets up a domino effect for



“We also realized these areas were not discussed because they are part of the system of protection that comes with political pressure and correctness.”

failure. That begins with the teachers who, without effective leadership, are unable to do the things they need to do for students because they lack necessary resources and the empowerment to best serve their children.

This then leaves the door wide open for unions to take advantage of systems. Often unions, in this kind of situation, assume the leadership role to the detriment of the teachers and the students they serve. All of these factors, if not functioning effectively, degrade student achievement. Students and therefore parents feel helpless and totally underserved. It doesn't help that teacher preparation programs are entrenched in old and ineffective practices. Those institutions produce certified teachers that for example, are often not prepared for even the first day of school in terms of management, organization, and behavioral issues. It is completely unacceptable to send teachers into classrooms without the best preparation possible.

Last, but not least, inequality—as is found in school finance and facilities—is one of America's most embarrassing and shameful dirty little secrets. The result of this makes the statement “Zip codes matter because they determine the quality of education” true. As if this were not enough, schools and school systems are completely hamstrung by the many strings attached, as well as the interferences by and from the educational bureaucracies found at the local, state, and federal levels.

Donna and Karen—and thousands of educators like them—believe this must all be changed immediately. They also believe just as strongly that it can only be changed from the bottom up; i.e., teachers and staff in schools across our country. If we wait for this critical systemic change to happen from the top down, we are truly doomed. However, Donna and Karen have faith that educators—like you—will respond to their call to action.

Sacred Elephants is available on Amazon.com. ■



Dr. Donna Nicholson has been an educator for almost fifty years. She has served as a teacher, a principal at both elementary and high school levels, associate director of an educational service center, assistant superintendent, superintendent, and adjunct professor. Dr. Nicholson was named the Key Communicator for the state of Texas in 1992 for being the person who made the greatest impact on education.



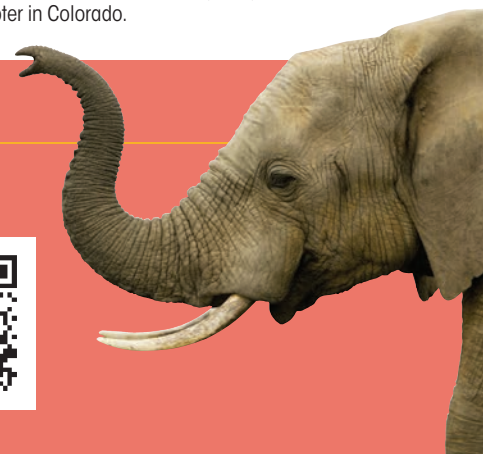
Dr. Karen Kay Harvey retired from public education after 37 years having served as a teacher, principal, Assistant/Associate Superintendent, Executive Director of Instructional Services, adjunct professor, NAEP Coordinator, and Assistant Secretary of Education for Quality Assurance and Systems Integration at the state level. She currently serves on the board of directors for the Professional Association of Colorado Educators (PACE), AAE's state chapter in Colorado.

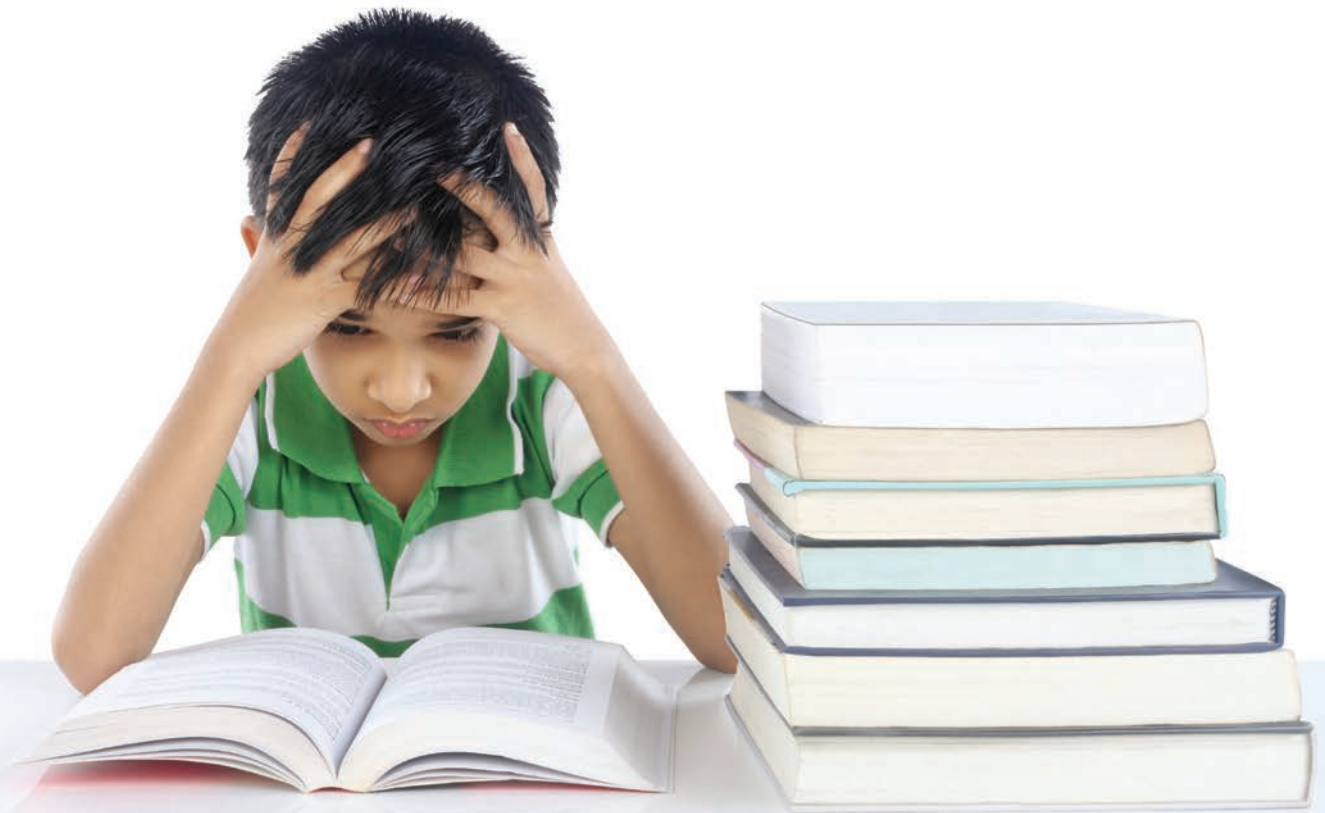
AAE Teacher Survey of the Month

Which elephant do you think needs to be tackled first?

- ▶ Take the survey at tinyurl.com/aaeApr16Survey today and be entered to win an AAE prize pack with your very own copy of *Sacred Elephants!*—just for letting us know.

You can also scan the QR code to take this survey on your phone!





Literacy by the Numbers

Decision-making should be data-driven. Armed with the facts, educators are more likely to behave in ways that achieve results. Accordingly, let's focus on literacy research and ways to leverage statistics. Stats are more than numbers; they should improve decision-making in classrooms and at home.

Attend Class

Missing 10 days of school equates to 94% attendance and is the same as missing 60 lessons.

On average, students attend school 180 days each year. In the graphic, we see a relationship between class attendance and school days missed. The take-home message is that attendance matters. The number of class days missed is directly related to academic performance.

As students miss additional class days, potential for success drops. Children experience added challenges with each missed lesson. What's worse, those already experiencing challenges are likely to give in and quit.

Are there times when children have to miss school? Absolutely. Unavoidable causes include illness and the passing of loved ones. Avoidable causes include behavior issues and dress code violations. No matter the cause, adults can mitigate the impact of missed learning by planning ahead and taking corrective action. If a child misses a lesson, try these suggestions.

- Discuss missed objectives and activities.
- Share relevant resources to reinforce learning objectives during missed days.
- Encourage lots of reading during down times.

Sacrifice now

Students who do not achieve grade level literacy by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than those who do.

Our choices during early years set the tone for each student's future. It's challenging to express the importance of decisions made prior to third grade regarding reading, writing, and speaking. We can encourage or discourage development of higher level skills, instill self-governing behaviors or cede to children's whims, model positive attitudes about reading or shake our calling to promote student success.

Research tells us that performance in third grade serves as a predictor of many important aspects of academic and personal growth throughout a child's lifetime. In particular, those who do not read on grade level by the end of third

HOW MUCH LEARNING HAVE YOU MISSED?



Attendance during one school year	Equates to days absent	Which is approximately	Which means the numbers of lessons missed
94%	10 days	2 weeks	60 lessons
90%	19 days	4 weeks	120 lessons
85%	29 days	6 weeks	180 lessons
80%	38 days	8 weeks	240 lessons
75%	48 days	10 weeks	300 lessons
70%	57 days	11.5 weeks	345 lessons
65%	67 days	13.5 weeks	405 lessons

grade are likely to struggle as they progress in school. What's more, struggling readers don't just struggle in reading. Math performance is affected. Science grades are affected. This domino effect happens because reading is fundamental to demonstrating understanding and skills. Students have to read homework, textbooks, and tests independently as early as kindergarten.

Whether students achieve grade level literacy by grade three also influences high school graduation rates. Third graders reading on grade level are four times more likely to graduate. Given that there are few viable employment options without an undergraduate degree and even fewer options without a high school diploma, it's imperative that we sacrifice now to develop strong readers.

Consider tomorrow

Surveys of Fortune 500 companies in 1978, 1985, and 1995 revealed trends in the evaluation of resumes. Compared to earlier years, the later survey found more emphasis on grammar and spelling than previously.

Speaking of employment opportunity, companies are taking steps to weed out illiterate applicants which raises the stakes for building strong readers. Experts cite our nation's academic performance when warning of the consequences of obtaining jobs in the future. It doesn't have to be this way. We can sacrifice now by filling our respective roles as involved educators. ■

Jillian Smart, M.Ed. is an AAE member and educator. She manages a blog, je411.blogspot.com, a small consulting business, je411.com, and has authored a book *Parent Support: 30 Ways to Support Your Child's Education*.



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I finally found an education association I'm proud to be a part of. But I also save over \$400 every year from what I paid in union dues by joining AAE. Plus I get great insurance and legal protection! Membership in this organization just makes good economic sense.

—Sandra Lastra, 1995 Outstanding New Mexico Teacher of the Year

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