

EDUCATION MATTERS

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

By Dr. Donna Nicholson &
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Three Years Is Not Enough...Even for the Denver Broncos

With a combined 100 years of experience from the classroom to the boardroom, we decided to take an in-depth look at the similarities between a national sports team's operational processes and that of schools. After all, our nation's favorite pastime is found in the stadium and we call it football. It reigns supreme on Friday nights in most small towns in America where it defines the community's social structure. And it fills our TV screens blocking out all other programming in the fall of the year.

One thing is very obvious—Americans are deadly serious about their sports. As we observe this we are compelled to wonder just where would we be educationally in the United States if we could get these same rabid sports fans, many of whom are also parents, to become this committed and excited about their children's education and thus their future.

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We offer the following as a state of the state assessment of the likenesses and differences between one of our most popular national football teams, the Denver Broncos, and our public schools. After hiring Peyton Manning as the quarterback for the Denver Broncos, John Elway (CEO for the Broncos) was asked a very critical question by a reporter. He was asked if the restructuring of the team would be completed in a year to position the team as a potential contender in the Super Bowl. Elway indicated it would take him longer than a year and more like three to restructure his team for success. The reporter nodded his agreement vigorously.

If that same reporter had been interviewing a superintendent of a school district with failing schools and asked him or her the same question he asked Elway, we can assure you that reporter would not have accepted the answer as docilely as he did Elway's answer. For you see, the public is much more lenient of a football team taking three years to restructure than it is of the public schools needing more time to correct failing schools. As educational leaders, we find it interesting that it is acceptable for a sports team to require three years to restructure but schools/districts in the mandated improvement process are expected to accomplish the same in a much shorter time frame. While the long-term impact for the Broncos was a Super Bowl win, for the schools it is the economic health of a nation based on the success of the children. And to that end it should be obvious that we are in deep trouble.

There are very good reasons why sports teams are able to restructure within three years and school districts struggle to create successful schools in a similar time frame.



We have thought long and hard about why this disparity exists. We call many of the issues that prevent schools from doing what, for example, the Denver Broncos are doing to ensure that they have the best players and a winning game plan, sacred elephants.

“A sacred elephant” in this context refers to the phrase “elephant in the room” to indicate what is in the world of education an open secret. The fact that these elephants in the room are considered sacred refers to their protection at all costs. They enjoy protection because to do otherwise would upset the status quo, and in so doing political realities would encounter troubled waters. We have become a nation who would rather deal with the educational devils we know than make the substantive change represented by dealing effectively with the sacred elephants, which are contributing to our nation's decline.

Perhaps the most critical sacred elephant in education is leadership and how we select educational leaders as well as how we protect

teachers who have demonstrated over and over again that they are not competent. Sports teams and school districts have much in common when searching for the best talent and leadership. However, the disparities between the selection of school leaders and player selections are light years removed from each other. Consider that both schools and football teams are people-driven organizations and that is the most important factor in achieving success for either a football team or a school.

For example, sports teams are able to recruit and retain the best and brightest in the field through individually negotiated contracts, and they provide the monetary incentives to retain the players. By contrast, school districts have limited resources to recruit and retain. And, in most cases, school districts, unlike sports organizations, fail to understand that since education is a people-driven system, funds must be used in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest education has to offer. In far too many school districts, contracts are universal and

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the unions do not permit payment outside the salary schedule. There is no differentiation of payment tied to performance in most schools as there is on the playing field.

In other words, in education one size fits all regardless of the quality of contributions, everyone is paid the same according to where they are on the salary schedule. If educational institutions were not limited by these factors, improvement would be swift and sustainable.

A closely related issue deals with the removal of educators whose performance is unsatisfactory. In most cases, teachers who are non-probationary are protected by legal restrictions and further insulated by teacher unions. Unlike sports organizations that routinely cut players who do not contribute to the success of the game and that reward outstanding individuals, schools reward staff based on longevity and ability to complete additional coursework. In addition, sports organizations fill positions based on the skill set of the individual while districts fill positions to ensure that staff remains employed due to “property rights” attached to their jobs.

As long as districts are hampered by the constraints of legislation and unions that protect unsatisfactory performance, the quality of education in the United States will continue to decline. Our own experiences working as consultants in districts across the country with multiple failing schools

confirmed the impact of these issues. The federal regulations for the School Improvement grants that support school turnaround mandate that 50 percent of the staff in these failing schools must be replaced. To address this requirement, one district we worked with chose to replace 50 percent of the teachers with teachers from other failing schools and exacerbated the problem by not providing an opportunity for the receiving schools to determine fit and ability of those assigned. The district fulfilled the letter of the law but completely missed the spirit and intent of introducing new blood with demonstrably competent teachers.

Leadership in sports organizations is most often drawn from the pool of individuals who have already established success as players in the sport and are swiftly removed if the statistical data documents poor performance. It is a pervasive practice in the field of education to assign leadership positions to those with proper licensure whether they have proven their leadership ability. To compound this problem, the administrative positions are often assigned based on political pressure from the community or based on longevity. As long as these practices continue, failing schools will continue to fail and student achievement will be limited.

The organizational structure of sports teams and school districts are similar in that both owner(s) and school board members set

policy, hire and fire the day-to-day manager (superintendent/manager), and set the direction for the organization. Where this structure differs substantially is that the owner(s) are not elected or appointed and therefore not beholden to any special interest groups that frequently work to influence school boards. By contrast, school board members, since they are elected, have a constituency to which they must answer. These constituents have a great deal of influence on the operations, personnel, and the longevity of the superintendent.

This kind of control of the superintendent’s contract curtails his or her ability to make substantive and sustainable change. This directly impacts failing schools in that constant change in leadership due to the political nature of the board disrupts forward movement of the district, which, in turn, shifts programs and priorities. It creates an environment that is particularly disruptive in rescuing failing





schools. Staff develops an attitude of “this too shall pass” or “hunker down and stay under the radar,” which diminishes the effort of the staff to stay the course. In addition, staff working under these tenuous conditions revert to the status quo that created the failing schools in the first place.

Assessment is a critical component of winning. This is true of both schools and sports teams. However, the difference between how the assessment is carried out between these two entities is vastly different because their mindsets are different. Sports teams focus on growth and developing players as individual members of the team. Education focuses on meeting arbitrary targets set at the state and federal levels where the ultimate control resides, which we may or may not accept as indicative of our students’ success. The format for sports team assessment is authentic and replicates the work that players are hired to perform.

A major contrast between the two entities when assessing performance is one of practicality. While sports teams are engaging in practical application, which means they play the game, educators are required to focus on sets of standards, which ultimately lead to a state-level exam, the results of which determine the funding for schools that are failing. This kind of testing limits the practical application of what students learn daily that is relevant to the real

world. For example, a student may perform at an advanced level on the concepts assessed on a state assessment but be unable to apply these skills to real world problems.

Finally, consider the contrast between a sports team and schools when it comes to all-out no-holds-barred support. It would be unthinkable to imagine a winning sports team playing to an empty stadium or one sparsely occupied. This just never occurs in America. In contrast, it is the norm in failing or successful schools when we “play our games” (meetings for parents/guardians) to play either to an empty room or a sparsely attended audience. And this does not create much concern in the public eye. The conclusion we have reached is that the stakeholders we desperately need to be involved in education deem a sports event more critical than the education of our children. This disturbs us greatly. The apathy we see when it comes to supporting schools places our “Nation at Risk.”

In summary, the sacred elephants of leadership selection, union interference, teacher recruitment, selection and retention as well as the ability to remove incompetent teachers and to pay more for those teachers who regularly move their students to their highest potential represents major roadblocks to restructuring schools. They also account for schools that are not serving students in the best and highest ways possible. As we have shown, if the Denver Broncos had those same impediments to

their restructuring plan, they would produce a failing team.

The tragedy is of epic proportions when you consider that the only thing at stake if sports teams do not do well is money as the bottom line. However, failing schools threaten our very way of life because, as Thomas Jefferson warned us long ago, “the best hedge against tyranny is an educated citizenry.” And most of all, the loss of the most precious resource our country has—its children—is greatly at risk. ■



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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.

Early Childhood Special Education Class Enhanced By AAE Grant

Early childhood educator Joanna Hasty has a unique classroom with unique needs. Not only does she work with young students, but she also teaches in a special education classroom where the majority of students have some sort of sensory difficulty. These difficulties make it hard for her students to engage in educational activities and participate in the types of activities that you would find in any other early childhood classroom.

Ms. Hasty's students can easily become overwhelmed by sensory overload or anxiety. Seeking to try and calm themselves, students could end up trying to lay in shelving units or cabinets. They also may have difficulty with fine motor skills or self-regulation.

Ms. Hasty is an excellent educator, who has taught early childhood special education since 2010. During that time, she has dedicated herself to her career, and has sought out multiple ways to improve her knowledge and her classroom. As a result, she's received her district's Superintendent's Gold Star Award in Education, and is well on her way to earning her National Board Certification.

Working in an environment with multiple challenges, Ms. Hasty sought a classroom grant from AAE last fall. Awarded twice a year, AAE classroom grants provide teachers across the country with needed supplies and materials. Ms. Hasty applied for, and received, funds to purchase supplies that were designed especially for students like hers.

Among the items she purchased were a cozy castle, a sensory pea pod, and an inflatable seating and balance cushion. Ms. Hasty and the other teachers in her building have been impressed with the materials. Ms. Hasty reports that the new materials have helped her students to "more readily participate in academic tasks and be more active in the curriculum."

Speaking about the program, Ms. Hasty praised the experience for allowing her to provide a much-needed sensory-based environment for her students. She says, "I cannot wait to apply again in two years. I speak about this experience to any other educator I possibly can. Thank you so much for offering this program."

AAE is proud that we're able to support excellent educators like Joanna Hasty through our National Classroom Grant and Teacher Scholarship program. This program awards passionate educators like Ms. Hasty with up to \$500 awards each. These teachers are chosen through a rigorous process that involves input from AAE members and staff.

We encourage all of our members to become involved in this important program. Members wishing to provide input on submissions can email profdev@aaeteachers.org, while members seeking a grant or scholarship can do so by filling out an application on our website. Our next deadline is October 1, 2017, so don't miss out! ■

SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT APPLICATIONS DUE OCTOBER 1!

The AAE Foundation's National Teacher Scholarships and Classroom Grants competition is held twice a year in the fall and spring. Its purpose is to help innovative teachers like Joanna. The deadlines are March 1 and October 1 of every year. For more information, visit aaeteachers.org/awards.



Teaching Core Values

Bailey Thomson was a TFA teacher at the original Rocketship school in the Bay Area. When two MBAs from South Africa visited in 2012, Thomson introduced herself. When she learned that they were planning the first blended learning model in South Africa to “provide quality education at a cost that the country can afford” Thomson didn’t wait for an offer. She told them she was joining them for the school launch in Johannesburg.

Five years later, Bailey Thomson is director of school operations for SPARK schools with eleven schools (and plans to expand again in 2018) in South Africa. She gave a talk at TEDxJohannesburg in November about the significance of teaching core values to students.

“Here’s our secret: we teach core values as deliberately as we teach algebra or reading comprehension,” Thomson said. “We believe that what students learn to value will drive their behavior through and beyond school, propelling them to globally engaged citizenship well into adulthood. And with the right values internalized, students will achieve as a result of their strength of character, not develop character as an afterthought when time allows in the final weeks before school ends each summer.

Core values are so integral to the identity of SPARK that its name is actually an acronym of the five core values the school focuses on teaching students:

“And with the right values internalized, students will achieve as a result of their strength of character, not develop character as an afterthought when time allows in the final weeks before school ends each summer.”

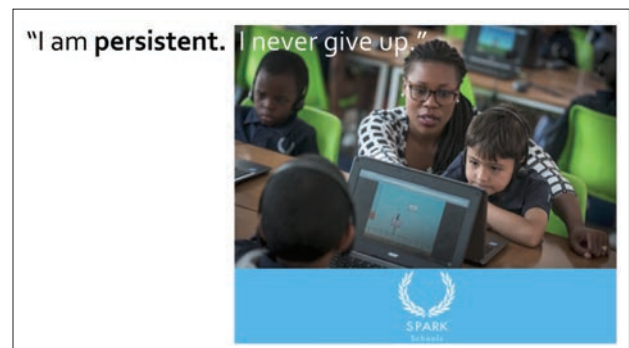
Service

“During our daily community gathering, our scholars pledge to serve their classmates, community, and country. They participate in meaningful service projects, including cleaning up local parks, collecting and distributing water during the drought, and volunteering at local orphanages. They assist struggling classmates. They learn about and commit to bettering South African society. Each year on Heritage Day, our students wear their family’s cultural dress and share food and traditions with their peers, recognizing that service to country often begins with recognition of the beauty of diversity.”



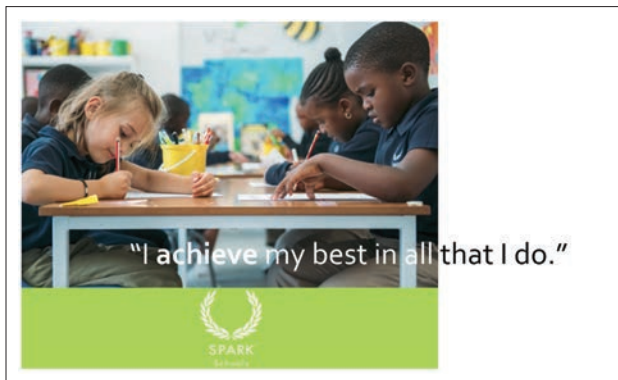
Persistence

“We buy into the value of grit in both our staff and our students. This, we believe, is the key to achievement. Our blended learning model, in which we integrate technology into traditional teaching, employs software that emphasizes failing a certain amount of times before succeeding. Our educators are recruited on their track record of persistence through challenge, both personally and professionally.”



Achievement

“In our daily creed, our students promise to achieve their best in all that they do. Each year, we celebrate Youth Day as University Day in our schools, and our students spend that day visualizing their path to tertiary education and careers of their choice and hearing from community members about the unique and exciting jobs they have chosen. Our students also have great examples in our staff members who are selected from thousands of applicants annually and who work unbelievably hard to drive student achievement.”



Kindness

“Nothing soft about it. Our students aren’t simply nice. They treat all their peers with respect and dignity. They believe in the worth of their peers, no matter their socio-economic background or the color of their skin.”



“As blended learning models are springing up in SA, I think we’ve finally identified our culture and values as our differentiator, which, in turn, facilitates the success of our model and achievement of our students.” ■

This piece was originally published July 17, 2017, on gettingsmart.com

Responsibility

“This value strikes me as especially important given the state of politics in South Africa, in my home country, and across the world at this time. Imagine a generation of students who had promised each morning of their school career to be responsible for their actions and who were encouraged to hold themselves, their peers, and their teachers to account on that point. Our students are well-versed in tools for conflict resolution and are as capable of using their words to speak their minds as they are in using their words to apologize.”



Tom Vander Ark is author of *Smart Parents, Smart Cities and Getting Smart*. He is co-founder of Getting Smart and Learn Capital and serves on the boards of 4.0 Schools, edInnovation, Digital Learning Institute, Imagine Foundation, Charter Board Partners, and Bloomboard. Follow Tom on Twitter, @tvanderark

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Mindfulness in the Classroom

Stress and anxiety often result from too much going on and not enough time to process and reflect. Among other things, stress causes increase in blood pressure and heart rate, slow-down of the digestive process, increase in brain cortisol and adrenaline, headaches, loss of sleep, and muscle tension. We can feel that in ourselves when we're stressed and we see it in our students. It affects our ability to teach and the students' ability to learn.

The combination of WAGS (worry, anxiety, guilt, stress) creates turbulence and, at times, an inability to think clearly, process information, and navigate our daily demands. These minor issues overriding the major ones is the tail wagging the dog, causing our thoughts to take over and tell us stories that are just not true.

Mindfulness, in its most simple form, is paying attention to the present moment, and acknowledging we are not our thoughts. Our thoughts are stories that are created by our very active, creative minds. Researchers tell us

that we have upwards of 50,000 thoughts a day, so we obviously have a lot to attend to! It's easy to get led astray by our thoughts, believe our thoughts, and get carried away from the present moment.

As educators, we can help our students find a little peace in their lives and help them focus on learning. Several Mindfulness activities can be part of your daily classroom environment, yet two in particular can be seamlessly worked into your daily life.

Breath Counting

Mindful breathing has a direct, positive impact on the parasympathetic nervous system causing the WAGS to be reduced and minimized. Deliberate breathing helps to calm and relax, slow down the heart rate, and to generally create space between the stimulus (our thoughts) and whether we react or respond.

“I am not smart enough.”

“This is too difficult for me.”

“I can't do this.”

“What if I don't do well?”



An easy activity at the beginning of each class is to have your students do a bit of breath counting. In a comfortable sitting position (back straight, feet on the floor, hands quietly resting in the lap, eyes closed), have each student slowly, deeply breathe, silently counting to 5 on the in-breath, and to 7 on the out-breath. Slowly, deeply, relaxed. Have them breathe this way for a few moments... and then begin your lesson.

Breath counting (mindful breathing) helps to create a bit of grounding and centering before an activity begins.

The parasympathetic nervous system

regulates unconscious actions such as breathing and digestion that happen while the body is at rest. It is complementary to the sympathetic nervous system that regulates our fight-or-flight response.

Circles of Attention

Our thoughts can be in three places: the past, present, or future. If Mindfulness is being aware of the present moment, then we need to be aware of when we aren't or when our thoughts are focused on the past or the future. This is very much putting a stop to the "thinking auto-pilot" where we unconsciously get carried away by our thoughts.

It's helpful to think of three circles, called the Circles of Attention:

First Circle thoughts are those associated with the past (things that happened, didn't happen, should have happened, etc.) and feelings of doubt and guilt ("I wish I would have..." "I should have...").

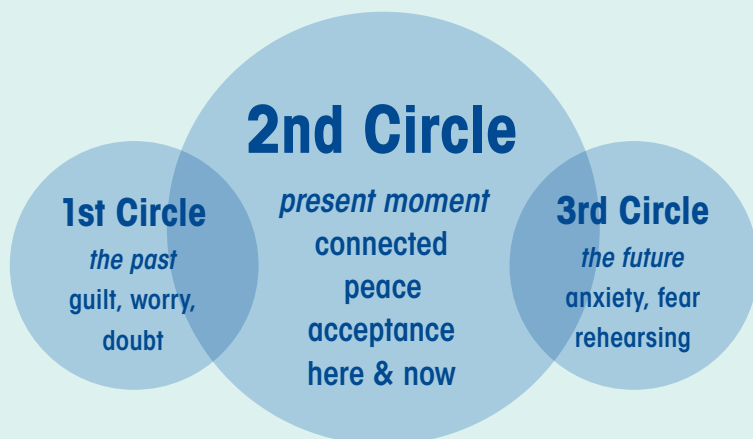
Second Circle thoughts are those focused in the present moment: being aware, being grateful. Acknowledging what is happening right now.

Third Circle thoughts are those associated with the future. Those events/situations that haven't happened yet but still cause feelings of fear and anxiety. "What if" is a common Third Circle refrain.

I have the Circles of Attention framed in my classroom, and it is my introduction to Mindfulness. I remind my students (and myself) that we have thousands of thoughts a day. When we are aware of our thoughts, and catch ourselves in First or Third Circle, all we have to do is acknowledge where our thoughts have wandered and gently guide them back to Second Circle.

A last piece to Mindfulness is eradicating judgment. Our minds will wander and our thoughts will create stories for us. Rather than criticizing our inability to stay in Second Circle, or to beat ourselves up for "failing" and then quitting, like any new skill we learn (learning a new sport, playing a new instrument), we can exercise patience, forgiveness, and keep practicing! ■

Circles of Attention



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Peter Franklin is an AAE member and an English teacher at Swampscott High School (Swampscott, MA), and also spearheads the school's Mindfulness initiative. Peter is

certified in both the Mindfulness in Schools Project's (MISP) .b curriculum, as well as the Mindful Schools curriculum. Additionally, Peter is the Mindful Educator (MindfulEducator.net) offering coaching, consulting, and professional development to school districts nationwide.

New NCTQ Analysis of Landmark Performance Pay Law Finds Almost No Buy-In from School Districts

As a growing number of states across the nation look for ways to recognize and reward excellent teachers, a new study from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reveals at least one large pocket of resistance for providing additional compensation to star teachers. Examining the impact of the 2011 Florida law that mandates that Florida school districts provide the highest salary awards available to teachers who are rated Highly Effective, this study finds little evidence of district buy-in.

The study, *Backing the Wrong Horse: The Story of One State's Ambitious but Disheartening Foray into Performance Pay*, shows how sixteen out of a sample of eighteen Florida districts are continuing to pay higher salary awards to teachers who earn graduate degrees than to teachers whose performance stands out. On average the reward for a master's degree in these districts is four times greater than the reward for being found Highly Effective.

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“...the number of states that are attempting to link teacher bonuses or salary increases to a measure of classroom performance has more than doubled since 2011, climbing from seven to seventeen.”

These results demonstrate a clear disconnect between the law’s intent and its implementation. Districts appear to skirt the law with unanticipated distinctions made between those rewards paid out for performance and other kinds of salary rewards. Furthermore, compliance with the law is complicated by districts continuing to rate 98 percent of all teachers as Effective or Highly Effective (with 44 percent of teachers earning Highly Effective), which may result in suppression of the size of performance rewards absent significant reductions in other ways teachers qualify for raises.

Most of this study’s districts have opted to stick with the traditional trigger for a teacher salary award, which is to earn a graduate degree, in spite of conclusive research spanning 50 years demonstrating that teachers with master’s degrees are generally no more effective than teachers without one.

“Schools should be investing in what matters most, teachers who day in and day out, year in and year out, pull off miracle wins with kids,” commented Kate Walsh, President of NCTQ. “Instead, districts are forcing teachers to spend precious time and dollars to earn degrees that rarely add value and distract from the job of teaching. This is a lost opportunity for Florida’s school districts, teachers, and students.”

Two bright spots in the study, Hillsborough and Duval, both reward teachers more for performance than earning graduate degrees. Hillsborough does not pay its teachers anything extra for completing any kind of advanced degree. Meanwhile, Duval pays its teachers who are rated Highly Effective substantially more than its teachers who earn master’s degrees.

Conversely, the disproportionate size of the salary awards in the Florida districts was so high that a teacher in St. Lucie County Public Schools would need to earn the Highly Effective rating every year for nearly nineteen years to achieve the amount granted in a single year to a teacher with a master’s degree. And a teacher in Escambia County Public Schools would need to earn an Effective rating every year for more than twelve years to achieve the award granted in a single year to a teacher who earned a master’s degree.



The study is timely given that the number of states that are attempting to link teacher bonuses or salary increases to a measure of classroom performance has more than doubled since 2011, climbing from seven to seventeen.

“We hope to alert all states even those contemplating a shift to new teacher compensation systems,” continued Walsh. “Not only do they need to evaluate the fidelity of any implementation effort but also to learn how to mitigate against the obstacles inevitably imposed to prevent long overdue reforms.” ■

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