Introduction

My vision for education is rooted in the desire to do what is best for children. In schools today, we tend to get caught up with the curriculum standards, test scores, budgets, and evaluation process. In other words, educators are making decisions that will ultimately benefit themselves and their self-interests, not necessarily the students. As an instructional leader, I vehemently believe in placing the students at the forefront of education. A school needs to be a safe and nurturing environment, where students feel cared for, supported, and more importantly have the belief that they can achieve success. While there are differing opinions about what type of education is the most effective, it comes down to how the children learn the best and what resources are needed to help them achieve and be successful in the future.

John Dewey noted that in traditional schooling learning is static. Content is taught as a finished product and it is assumed that the future will be like the past (1938, p.19). In reality, learning should be a continual process, in which students are always referring to their past experiences to improve in the future. Similar to Dewey's belief about learning through experiences, I believe learning should be an active and ongoing process. Students should be engaging their minds in a hands-on manner that is relatable to them. By approaching learning in an experiential manner, students are more likely going to retain information and see education as a lifelong process.

Similarly, Constructivism emphasizes the importance of students becoming actively engaged in the learning process. According to Dale Schunk (2016), "Constructivists believed that teachers should structure situations such that learners become actively involved with content through manipulation of materials and social interaction" (p.299). Students need learning

environments that are hands-on and promote collaboration. Providing enriching environments not only enhances an individual's experience but makes them lifelong learners.

Empathy and Social Emotional Learning

In today's classroom, students come from various backgrounds, including ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, history of trauma, socioeconomic status, etc. A classroom may appear uniform, but every student has their unique characteristics and learning needs. Particular to my school district, more students arrive with higher needs, especially with trauma-induced behavioral issues. With the diverse student body in schools, I believe we need to instill in the children the importance of empathy. There needs to be a mindshift in how we view students, in which they are citizens, not just academic robots. With a focus on empathy, students will become more aware of the individuals around them and cognizant of how their actions affect others.

Beyond teaching empathy, students need to have the social and emotional skills to be productive citizens. In particular, schools should provide Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), in which students learn how to self-regulate, become self-aware, and build positive relationships. In order for students to excel in school, they need to be mentally and socially prepared for their learning environment. Students who have a history of trauma need to feel secure and safe in school, as well as equipped with the necessary coping skills. Bouffard and Jones (2012) emphasize the importance of having SEL embedded into the curriculum, where daily routines like Zones of Regulation are implemented. In the Zones of Regulation, student monitor their emotions and self-regulate as needed. By integrating SEL into schools, students not only become more self-aware but learn how to build positive relationships and respect *all* individuals.

Improvement in Schools

Educators need to move away from the concept of a brick and mortar schools. Just like any profession, we need to adapt to the change in society. Technology is constantly growing and expanding, therefore, educators need to utilize it to enhance student learning. According to Ruben Puentedura's SAMR Model (2012), teachers need to implement digital tools to redefine learning and create new learning opportunities that were virtually impossible before technology. Technology can no longer be a supplement but rather needs to be seamlessly weaved into the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers need to be trained properly in instructional technology. Even though students may know how to manipulate digital tools, their teachers need to know how to use them for instruction. By weaving technology into schools, students will become digital citizens who can use digital tools in a safe and responsible manner.

In addition, the concept of STEM needs to be integrated into schools. While many believe that STEM represents just the four content areas, I believe it addresses global issues and the demand for students to be active participants in the real world.   STEM Literacy should be rooted in societal issues to educate the whole child. The acronym may be misleading, but ultimately STEM allows students to develop skills to solve complex problems, collaborate effectively, and critically think about issues. Rodger Bybee suggests that one method of implementing STEM Literacy is through the 5E Instructional Model. Within this model the five phases include: engagement, exploration, explanation, elaboration, and evaluation. While each phase is broken down to small chunks, the overall model ensures that students have a better understanding of new concepts. Some may argue that this instructional model is geared strictly for science; however, this approach to instruction can easily be adapted to meet the needs of all subject areas in an interdisciplinary approach. Students need to become competent in 21st

Century Skills and know how to apply them to what they are learning about, thus this model for instruction addresses these skills and has STEM Literacy at its core.

Policy and Leadership

Education policy and leadership needs to be a reciprocal relationship, in which policy makers and school leaders work hand-in-hand to make decisions that are best for the students. While education policy comes from the state and national departments of education, school districts need to ensure that the policies adapt to their students. According to Rodger Bybee, "the education system has an extremely powerful immune system with antibodies that quickly neutralize, inhibit the growth, and destroy innovations" (2016, p.24). In other words, education reform tends to be thwarted by resistance from stakeholders in education. Despite this resistance, policy makers and leaders need to continue pushing towards reform that will positively impact students.

In the instance of STEM literacy, policymakers and education leaders should develop an action plan for integrating this initiative despite a pushback from others. While many believe that STEM is trend in education, schools have been trying to incorporate it since the Sputnik Era. Even though the acronym or name for it has evolved over the years, the principles behind STEM have remained. School district leaders need to develop a vision and mission that encompasses STEM and unifies these four unique content areas. Furthermore, policymakers need to develop reasonable programs for implementing STEM into schools; ones that are cost-effective and reep beneficial results for their students.

For other elements, such as Social Emotional Learning, school leaders need to provide the data that reflects the critical need for SEL and provide strategies for integrating it into schools effectively. While many school districts are starting to become more aware of the need

for SEL, the government needs to address this and provide more funding and resources for integrating it into schools.

Instruction

How do students learn best?

Determining how students learn best is an open-ended question. One cannot make generalizations about one student based on a collection of data or past studies. In reality, students have different strengths and forms of intelligences. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences stresses the idea that students possess different ways that they process information. Therefore, students should be able to have different options for learning and have time to collaborate with one another. Strauss emphasizes the importance of "teach each person in ways that they find comfortable and learn effectively [and]...teach important materials in several ways, not just one" (Strauss, 2013). By customizing learning experiences, students' individual needs are met.

As stated previously, students need authentic and hands-on learning experiences that are engaging and challenges them to think. Since student are not one-size-fits-all, it is critical for educators to adapt instruction to their needs and ensure that the learning environment best fits the students, not vice versa. I think that providing students with option is critical but also allowing them to see the real world. In particular, virtual field trips and excursions outside of school are essential for an enriching school experience. With technology and the development of virtual reality programs, students can experience new places. In addition, having students visit local places in their community will help foster civic responsibility and build an awareness of their surroundings.

What should the curriculum look like?

In the 21st Century, a curriculum should go beyond the core subjects and integrate life skills that will prepare students for the workplace. Educators need to provide the learning opportunities that allow students to engage in real world issues and allow them to discover solutions to problems relevant to their lives. Even at the primary grade levels, I am an advocate for teaching our students how to be productive citizens. While the core subjects are important and provide a foundation for the future, social emotional skills and the ability to independently think is just as important. A curriculum should be transdisciplinary with a strong emphasis on developing 21st Century Skills and STEM Literacy. While a mathematics curriculum may address specific topics, such as geometry or algebra, it should also promote problem solving and critical thinking. Educators should create units that incorporate all subject areas and are directly tied to real-world problems.

Moreover, I believe that a curriculum should be less focused on breadth and more on depth. Rather than covering standards, teachers need to focus on themes that are rooted in real world issues, and then allow students to delve deep and explore the theme across disciplines. Over the course of a student's schooling, every year should be vertically aligned, where concepts are correlated to one another and the transition to new topics is seamless. With standardized assessments, teachers are becoming focused on preparing students for the test rather than developing competencies and life skills.

How should student success be measured or demonstrated?

Students need to be measured in a holistic manner, rather than with a multiple-choice assessment. Direct observation, self-reflection, and project rubrics are just a few examples of how students can be assessed. Educators need to transition away from textbooks and paper-pencil tests. Universal Design for Learning is a concept that I vehemently believe should be a

standard for teaching and assessing students. According to Dave Edyburn, Universal Design for Learning allows learners alternatives means for demonstrating what they know. While some students may excel with presentations, others may prefer to demonstrate their knowledge with a written report. Regardless of a student's academic ability, Universal Design for Learning provides students with a choice, personalizes the learning experience, and highlights students' strengths.

Conclusion

After spending two years in a high poverty school district, I realized how a school is not only a place for learning but should be a safe haven for students. Despite one's homelife or individual differences, schools should be the platform for success. All students deserve a high-quality education where they learn to become innovative thinkers. In a perfect school, I believe that educators should provide a nurturing learning environment that fosters Social and Emotional well-being and 21st Century Skills. Learning should be rooted in real-world issues, integrate STEM Literacy, and the approach to learning should be inquiry-based. As our society is always evolving, education needs to also adapt to students. It is no longer acceptable to continue settle for mediocrity when it comes to education.