

How to Prepare for the Unknown

By: Jane Kennedy

During a recent conversation with a school superintendent, I was told, “My biggest fear is that we just don’t know what is coming next. With the next election we might see new standards or new assessments. My population is changing—I don’t know the needs of these new students. And, technology alters everything! Without knowing what is coming next, I can’t plan for the future. I feel like I spend my time swaying back and forth between initiatives. My faculty tells me ‘this too shall pass’. I’m not certain where I should invest my resources. Help.”

I thought about what he said. He was correct, we don’t know what changes the future will bring. And education has a reputation of swaying back and forth. But this doesn’t mean that we can’t plan what is best for our students. As the owner of an educational consulting company, how would I address the constantly changing educational world? How would I help my friend from swaying? What would I tell him to invest in?

The answer lies in teachers—investing in them to ensure we are laying the strongest foundation. Too often we invest in products and programs that come with expiration dates. We must invest in making sure all students receive the best, first instruction. Don’t sway from this.

Regardless of future changes (in standards, textbooks, assessment, whatever) delivering the best, first instruction is something we can confidently stand firm on. Remember, our goal is to ensure that each student reaches their highest academic success.

This can’t happen without best, first instruction.

So, what aspects of best, first instruction do we invest in and stand firm on? We must invest in teachers so that they have the knowledge, skills, and support to ensure that:

All student learning is driven by a standards-based curriculum with measurable and achievable objectives. If we define standards as the skills and knowledge students need to be successful postgraduation, we can continue to guarantee that our curriculum is standards driven. Regardless of how standards change (and they will), students still need to learn, master, apply, and transfer a specific set of skills and knowledge. This won’t change.



Thus, if new standards come, we will not sway.

All student learning is being driven by highly engaging, effective, and efficient instructional practices. If we define instructional practices as those strategies that best ensure our students learn the skill or knowledge the first time, we can continue to guarantee that our teachers are decision-makers, and are selecting the best practices based on outcome and student need. Regardless of the instructional “flavor of the month” (be it direct instruction, cooperative groups, inquiry method, etc.), teachers still need to make certain instruction is guided by the learning practices that garner results. This won’t change.

Thus, if new instructional initiatives are introduced, we will not sway.

All student learning is being driven by regular assessment that guides instructional decision making. If we define assessment as knowing what each of our students can and can’t do at any given time in order to drive decision making, we can continue to guarantee that we are checking for understanding as often as necessary. Regardless of the type of assessment, we will continue to ensure that every lesson is being driven by on-going assessments that monitor student understanding and that teachers continually adjust instruction accordingly. This won’t change.

Thus, if new assessments are introduced or mandated, we will not sway.

All student learning is being driven by a positive academic climate. If we define climate as an atmosphere of mutual respect, cooperation, and academic risk-taking, we can continue to guarantee that every student takes ownership of their own learning. Regardless of receiving new students, new teachers, or new administrators, we will maintain a culture that values all learners and creates a collaborative environment that promotes student learning. This won’t change.

Thus, if curriculum, instruction, or assessment change, when it comes to climate and culture, we will not sway.

When districts are investing in teachers to ensure they are laying the strongest foundation—one grounded in best, first instruction—they cannot be swayed.