

supe's corner

Lessons that last and matter

In my 20th year as a school superintendent, I have been reflecting on lessons that last and matter. Dr. Robert N. Fortenberry aka "RNF" aka "Bob" as I refer to him now 31 years after I first met him, taught those of us who worked for him some important lessons. He was, in 1981, a leader well ahead of his times. Eighteen years as Superintendent of the diverse 33,000-student Jackson, Miss., Public Schools, RNF in his self-deprecating and southern manner, passed on the following jewels worth remembering as we practice our trade as educators:

All children can learn. It's not enough to believe this. It's only sufficient when we act on it. (It was literally our district's mission or what each of us as employees was charged to do, i.e., to make sure that all children did learn. It was a simple charge. It was a powerful one. It was well before No-Child-Left-Behind.)



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A common body of knowledge is that which we must teach all students, not just some. If we want all students to learn, then we must teach all students the intended curriculum. (Jackson's K-12 Common Body of Knowledge or "CBOK" was nationally renowned in the 1980s for putting forth the knowledge and skills that all were to master long before states mandated such. It was "CBOK or see Bob" we often mused. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer when it came to teaching the kids quality content at every grade level!)

Teaching is bringing about change in the learner. It's not enough to present material, test it, and move on despite who learned it and who didn't. "I taught it and you didn't get it" is not teaching at all he would say. In RNF's schools, failure was not an option.

What gets measured gets done. And, what gets measured with feedback, gets done well. Accountability requires some form of measuring stick he insisted. Learning, on the other hand, requires feedback from the measurement. The results from homework and tests must be known to students for mid-course corrections to occur. (Jackson implemented districtwide "CBOK" tests — "unit" tests covering one to three weeks in duration — for every grade in reading, math, social studies, and science.)

If a child cannot read, then teach him. As simplistic as this seemed, it was nonetheless profound.

In schools, he would say, reading and language tend to dominate. Find ways to teach Johnny to read before school, during school, or after school and don't let him off the hook until he does. This should happen before the end of second grade. But, if not, still teach him to read!

We will produce better results when we teach ourselves to do a better job. When it came to teaching and learning in Jackson's schools, it was "what we did"— teachers, administrators, support staff and students. Teachers and administrators, especially, were expected to form "school improvement teams"

Wherein we learned from each other. The superintendent learned from the teacher, the teacher learned from the principal, and we all learned from each other and others. (The staff development program, which required so many credits of professional develop-

ment around CBOK and its delivery, won an American Association of School Administrators award for quality.)

"Technology is an essential tool for learning." This was 1981 and it was about "their" future, not "ours." Students always came first. The Jackson schools placed IBM computers in every school and office and promoted the training across employee groups so that they and students would profit. (Jackson's computerized Instructional Management System—or IMS—provided for extensive and ongoing monitoring of student performance on the CBOK or unit tests. It was a marvel throughout the hinterland. Never had I seen so much visitation to one school district. Nor have I since.)

"Effective schools require a clear instructional focus, high expectations for all learners, a principal who is an instructional leader, a safe and orderly

environment, and frequent monitoring of student academic performance." One of the early practitioners of the "effective schools" research, RNF brought the likes of Wilbur Brookover, Ron Edmonds, and Larry Lezotte to our schools. I promise you that they learned as much from Bob as he did from them. They did the research. He put it into practice.

Retired now in Sandy Hook, Mississippi, Bob Fortenberry has provided those of us who worked for him, and the thousands with whom he has had contact, with a powerful legacy inclusive of educational lessons that last and matter. Just take any one of the lessons above. Which is more important than the other?

He was one heckuva Superintendent!

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