Key Points

- It is very difficult to identify the impact of teaching and schooling initiatives on students' educational outcomes.

- Our major sources of evidence for the majority of initiatives in place are either anecdotal or very incomplete.

- There is a need to take a more systematic approach to examining the practices and initiatives that are occurring in our schools, and measure the impact of these practices.

- We need to find ways to collect information on what is happening in our classrooms and schools without using what we learn to unfairly evaluate teachers.

Finding the Educational Practices and Policies that Make a Difference

One of the biggest challenges for educational researchers is to identify teaching practices and policies that can impact students' learning and achievement. Certainly there are many such practices promoted as being potentially important to effectively support increased student achievement. However, there is a real challenge to determine if these practices and policies are in place, are being implemented correctly and are making a difference to students' learning.

Research conducted for the eastern region of Ontario exploring the implementation of the School Effective Framework and the factors associated with differences in student achievement illustrates our challenge to solve this important educational problem. The administrators and teachers interviewed as part of the research project all identified teaching, school and board initiatives intended to address specific learning needs of students. Initiatives included Professional Learning communities, new assessment practices, focused reading and writing strategies or the increased use of smart goals. These educators identified increased collegiality and positive changes in the learning climate in the classroom or school; however they could not yet identify specific differences in student achievement.

1

The research team conducted further analyses to identify student and school factors associated with differences in student achievement. However they did not have access to any formal information describing teaching or schooling practices and policies occurring across schools in the region. Hence they were unable to determine if the plethora of recently implemented initiatives were actually making a difference.

Our Challenge as Educators and Researchers

While anecdotal evidence is important, it is not sufficient if we are to truly help our students. As educators we are all familiar with the "Bandwagons" that have been promoted as being the key to ensuring our students' success. Unless we begin to collect and record accurate information about the implementation of practices and policies that are occurring in our schools we well be destined to implement new initiatives with little evidence that they will best support our students. Our challenge is to find ways to systematically identify the implementation of various initiatives and to determine their impact without threatening teachers' autonomy by using the information to unfairly evaluate teachers. Once we can more fully collect such information, we will have much more success directing future efforts and avoiding the "Bandwagons" that so often frustrate our teachers.

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Questions Raised

- What evidence are you using to support the initiatives that you are implementing?

- What are the sources providing the evidence for new initiatives?

- How do we create an educational culture that will enable us to collect information on the various practices and policies being implemented in our schools?

- What steps are you taking to encourage the creation of such an educational culture?