

Student Well-being: A Collective Responsibility

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What Works Best

JOHN ALMARODE: For years, the philosophy behind teaching and learning was, if it works for me, and everybody's happy, then let me do it, and leave me alone. And it produced some side effects. And we talked about side effects before. It produced some side effects that we didn't count on. The first one is, if it didn't work, but it worked last year, then it must be the student's fault. And the other side effect was, we had some classrooms that did very, very well, and other classrooms that didn't do so well. Where it even became more complicated was when two classrooms did the same thing, and one classroom found success, and the other didn't. And so it made us rethink what we mean when we say, "What works best?" And so, recently, within the last 15 to 20 years, there have been some major contributions from researchers like Robert Marzano and John Hattie addressing the question of what works and what works best. We've moved beyond what works. Lots of things work. Lots of strategies, lots of techniques, lots of programs have research behind them that show that, you know what? They do work for the sample of students that were in the study. But what if we looked at the whole student body across the entire world? Is there, or are there strategies-- is there a set of strategies that works for everybody? And are there some strategies that work better than others? And that's really the work behind meta analysis, and the compilation of meta analyses to see which strategies work, which work a little bit, which work a lot, and which ones should we go to on a regular basis? So, now in education, we don't just ask what works. We now focus on what works best. Let me give you an example. Earthquakes. There are some earthquakes that no one feels. The US Geological Survey or Canadian scientists quickly recognize that there is some seismic activity, but no one else feels it. Then there are some earthquakes where some people feel it, not a lot, and it doesn't cause major damage. Then there are some earthquakes that everybody feels, and it has a major impact. Turns out, strategies and interventions in the classroom follow the same pattern. There are some things we do in classrooms that show a positive effect, but it's such a small positive effect, no one notices it. Students don't get worse. It doesn't cause harm. But the effect is so small that it's unrecognizable. And then there are some strategies that we use, they have some impact, and some people recognize them, and some people notice them, but it's not systemic. It's not a major impact. And then there are those strategies that change the trajectory of student learning. It gives them growth beyond one year's worth of academic growth, and these are the strategies that are high impact. And so, they don't just work, they work best. And we find this out through things like meta analysis and research, and putting all the studies together in one big pile. And so, the focus now needs to be not just on what works in our classrooms, but what works best. One of the big findings from John Hattie's work, and Robert Marzano found very similar findings, but on a larger scale

now, John Hattie has put together these meta analyses and identified that strategies such as feedback, formative evaluation, formative assessment, student-teacher relationships, classroom discussion, reciprocal teaching, student expectations, these are things that have effects or influences on student learning that move them beyond one year's worth of growth. And so, if we're trying to close achievement gaps, if we're trying to move students beyond expectations, it's those strategies that do it. The problem is, is that we have to make sure it's not treated as a checklist. So, I cannot walk into my mathematics classroom, I cannot walk into my humanities classroom, pull out the list of strategies that are above the cut-off point, the major earthquake strategies, and just go down the list and check them off. What these strategies have in common, which is really fascinating, is that the strategies that make the cut, the ones that are well above the threshold for high impact, they have one thing in common. They force students to take ownership of their learning and see themselves as their own teacher. And so what we find is when we take some of the control from us, as the teachers, and hand it off to the students, those strategies naturally show up in our classrooms, and the impact follows.