

Schools on a diet: What Weight Watchers can teach us about school improvement



[Jim Brandenburg](#), principal of Alachua Elementary School in [Alachua, Florida](#) visited our class on Teacher Learning and Professional Development last night to tell us how he has been working to build a culture of [teacher inquiry](#) in his school.

Jim comes across as a simple man working in a rural school serving a diverse range of students. Florida schools are subject to accountability standards set by the governor that assigns grades or marks to schools based on student performance on the [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test](#) (FCAT) and demonstrable gains by students who score in the lowest percent in previous iterations of the test. It's a punitive system that monetarily rewards schools that do well and punishes/humiliates schools that perform poorly (that makes sense, no?).

Jim came right out and said he could give a *flip* about test scores. Instead, he talked about comparing school improvement initiatives to [Weight Watchers](#). Yes, that's right: **Weight Watchers** – a worldwide organization of helping people lose weight.

Jim engaged the class in a discussion around what makes Weight Watchers successful:

Weight Watchers is an organization/model built on helping individuals make the positive changes required to lose weight. It guides and supports individuals in making positive behavioral changes in their life. It provides inspiration in supporting the belief that individuals have the power to succeed and it provides motivation every step of the way.



Weight Watchers is successful because it is built on the notion of sustainability and realistic expectations. It uses sound principles of nutrition that focuses on a balanced lifestyle and an individual's health and well being. Participants in the program share a common goal (losing weight via adopting a healthy lifestyle) and there is a mutually supporting social network of people and technology that is non-judgmental.

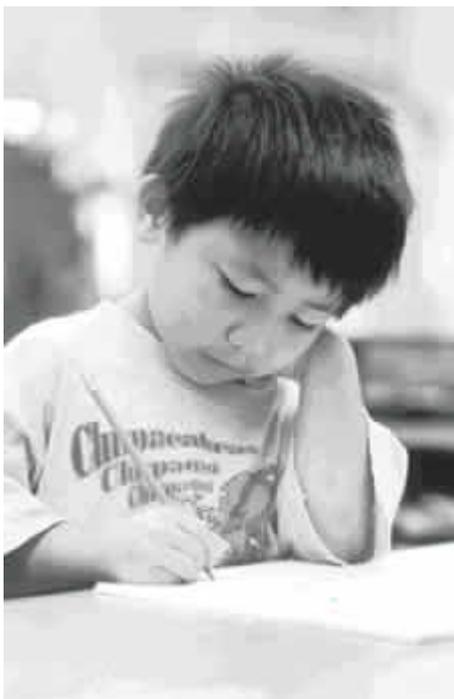
Similarly, Jim suggested school improvement plans and activities should be structured the same way, i.e., as a systematic, intentional effort based on increasing student engagement through

- *a shared focus*
- *a shared pedagogy*
- and *a shared inquiry* - a desire to examine the work of teaching and learning and improve upon it.

This sense of inquiry is more than action research, more than a “fad diet,” - it is a philosophical stance or a way of thinking about how the issues and problems within teaching and learning environments are framed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999). An inquiry stance can be likened to a professional curiosity that fosters a sense of wondering about how we engage learners. An inquiry stance provides a shared focus for a school that builds on an intentional examination of pedagogy. By taking such a stance, Jim (and others) believes that his school is able to address status quo thinking that drains creativity and innovation from teaching and learning. In Jim’s mind, school improvement is really about creating a healthy academic diet (or *live it* as [Richard Simmons](#) would say).

Given an inquiry approach that examines the genuine problems teachers face, Jim suggests that the following topics need to be clearly addressed:

- **Leadership support** - school improvement needs to be important to school administration. School leaders can work out logistical issues, provide focus, and clear organizational roadblocks.
- **A willingness to experiment** - by both leaders and practitioners. Inquiry into improving student engagement requires a willingness to make mistakes and (hopefully) learn from them. This is not necessarily easy to do given the way most of us were raised.
- **Trust** - trust is clearly necessary between teachers and administrators. Trust involves building sound relationships with individuals in the school; it is also a way to deal with the various toxic elements that threaten change for the better.
- **Congeniality** - you cannot foster school improvement without participants willing to playing nice in the sandbox. Without it, there is little ability to share and cooperate.
- **Collegiality** - after congeniality comes collegiality. Collegiality leads to opportunities for sharing, for collective reflection, for thinking aloud, for participants to be able to talk to each other and potentially collaborate in an organic sense.



What strikes you most about listening to Jim’s approach to improving his school’s teaching and learning conditions is that very little of what he offers is book-learned. His advice comes

through experience and partnering with people who possess a theoretical understanding of change and change management.

For Jim, creating a climate of inquiry is like a *leap of faith*. His interest is in designing non-punitive opportunities for teachers to continuously expand their capacity to learn, to care, to help each other, and to teach effectively.

Will adopting such a stance make his students' test scores go up? Well, like a Weight Watchers plan, results do not happen overnight, but the impact of a healthy diet over a sustained period of time can lead to marked improvement. It's like losing a half-pound a week for 50 weeks versus dropping thirty pounds in three weeks. The secret is in finding a balance that works for the people involved in light of sound, healthy principles.

Jim's story was inspirational on many levels. His school's focus on the needs of each child clearly trumped the carrots and sticks mentality of the state. Jim's mantra is simply do the right things for the right reasons. Test scores are not the goal, learning is. He remarked how the teachers in his school use test scores as one indicator among many to gauge the effectiveness of instructional strategies; they are only a means and not the end.



Whether you consider Jim's work a leap of faith or the results of sound practice is certainly up for debate. While he didn't talk about a points system commonly associated with a Weight Watcher's program, this idea would be worth thinking about in terms of rewarding teachers for their work. Yet, I must admit I worry about models that proffer rewards. (However, this might be the type of token economy that works well in certain settings.) His school provides an example of how an inquiry stance and action research model provides a measurable means for improving student engagement. Now if I can just get him to start blogging!

Reference:

Cochran-Smith, M. and S. L. Lytle (1999). "Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities." *Review of Educational Research in Education* 24: 249-305.

Author: Christopher D. Sessums

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