

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

STRAIGHT Talk is a publication of Northside ISD (San Antonio, TX) that contains one of a continuing series of articles that is meant to enlighten the public and staff about a variety of issues. STRAIGHT Talk content is either written by NISD or copied with permission from other sources.

For more information, write info@nisd.net.

Don't quash knowledge, skill, and creativity with "rewards" disguised as reforms

April 13, 2016

**By Brian T. Woods, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Northside ISD**

Like many of you, I read Daniel Pink's newest book "Drive" with great interest. Pink is a bestselling author of business-focused books and "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" is particularly well done. You may have also seen the TED Talk on this topic. Pink looks at the science of human motivation. He lays out a clear argument that our traditional system of incentivizing to increase productivity only works in certain circumstances - and this is not new knowledge. Says Pink, "...it's not an aberration."

This has been replicated over and over again for nearly 40 years. These contingent motivators - if you do this, then you get that - work in some circumstances but for a lot of tasks they either don't work or, often, they do harm. In other words, extrinsic motivators only work in some circumstances and those occurrences where they do work are few in our modern experience. Pink goes on to say, "That's actually fine for many kinds of 20th century tasks. But for 21st century tasks, that mechanistic, reward and punishment approach... doesn't work."

It turns out that rewards narrow our focus which is why they work for simple tasks where there is a clear path to take and not many intervening variables. In an attempt to relate this to education, I ask, does that sound like teaching and learning to you? It sure doesn't to me.

So, when I think about our current testing and accountability

continued





system, including the notion of rating schools with a letter grade or the idea of teacher incentive pay, those concepts are clearly designed with old science at its core. These so called “reforms” are classic examples of the reward and punishment form of motivation that Pink’s meta-analysis shows actually harms motivation and performance when tasks are complex and the answer is not easy to find or is different in every case – the exact kinds of problems we wrestle with every day as educators and, I’m sure, in your business as well. Pink concludes, “There’s a mismatch between what science knows and what business does.”

Pink calls for a “new operating system” around intrinsic motivation that will improve satisfaction and productivity, “around the desire to do things because they matter, because we like it, because they’re interesting or part of something important.” Pink defines the components of this new operating system as autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Autonomy is explained as the urge to direct our own lives. Mastery is the desire to get better and better at something that matters and purpose is the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

That sounds pretty reasonable to me and is consistent with the attitudes of many great educators and leaders in other fields I know. This new way of thinking about both business and education also is not mutually exclusive with the notion of accountability.

Just like the businesses model Pink criticizes, our education system is seemingly headed in a direction focused on the wrong things – the state test as a means to an end; using student test scores to rate and then rank teachers, principals, and schools; incentive pay to motivate better performance. These are just the types of things that Pink’s research proves don’t work.

In Northside ISD, we work to create a positive atmosphere for all of our employees so that they can lift our students to new heights of knowledge, skill, and creativity. We believe that giving the finest, most committed educators autonomy, the ability and means to work toward mastery, and a sense of purpose, is the key to a world class education.