

## Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That?



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***“Things that matter most must never be at the mercy  
of things that matter least.”***

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Would it kill you to stop doing that?” Did anyone besides me ever hear this from their parents during their childhood years? As I recall, I was never engaged in any kind of outlandish behaviour. Most often, it was a rather innocuous activity—drumming my fingers on the table, tapping a pencil on a desk, whistling a soft tune to myself—that grated on my parents’ nerves.

If we are not careful, school improvement can affect our teachers in much the same fashion—it can frustrate them. A misconception exists among many leaders that teachers are opposed to change. I simply do not believe that to be the case. The vast majority of teachers want to do what is best for kids. They desire to narrow achievement gaps, and they lose sleep over those children who do not succeed at high levels. Teachers are not resistant to change. What exasperates them is being engaged in programs and activities that have little impact on student achievement.

If the truth were known, most schools suffer from initiative fatigue, the tendency of leaders “...to mandate policies, procedures, and practices...with insufficient consideration of the time, resources, and emotional energy required to begin and sustain the initiatives” (Reeves, *Finding Your Leadership Focus*, page 1). Simply put, we place too much on teachers’ plates. Because we lack focus, “...the quantity of initiatives creates a ‘crowding out’ effect that inhibits the effectiveness of even the best programs” (Reeves, *Finding Your Leadership Focus*, page 4).

This is exactly what Hattie discovered in his research. Because we have no defined standards upon which to determine success or failure in education, we chase solutions to the student achievement gap problem. As a result, we launch initiative after initiative in hopes that we will stumble across a solution. Before long we are trying to do everything in reform when, in fact, we are doing nothing. “Instead of asking, ‘What works?’, we should be asking, ‘What works best?’, as the answers to these two questions are quite different” (Hattie, page 18).



***“Getting to the highest levels of implementation of one initiative requires saying no to many other initiatives.”  
—Douglas Reeves***

So what is the answer? In the words of Nancy Reagan, “Just say no!” Do not jump on every bandwagon that comes down the pike. Abandon practices and programs that have served their time or never had the impact that was promised. Reduce the scope of school improvement efforts. As long as we try to implement everything, we will never narrow achievement gaps. “Getting to the highest levels of implementation of one initiative requires saying no to many other initiatives” (Reeves, *From Leading to Succeeding*, page 34). Focus on a handful of high leverage, high yield strategies—like cooperative learning—and put support systems in place to ensure implementation is occurring with fidelity. When that transpires, student learning will be positively impacted.

“Would it kill you to stop doing that?” My parents were right. It didn’t kill me to stop, and it won’t kill us to dissolve programs that sound good, look good, but don’t help us close achievement gaps. I realise this may mean giving up initiatives that may be near and dear to our hearts. However, “...the greatest gains in achievement happen only at the greatest levels of implementation” (Reeves, *From Leading to Succeeding*, page 32). We can no longer spread teachers too thin. “When it comes to change, less is more” (Fullan, page 16). When we focus on what is truly best, teachers will be happier, and student achievement gaps will narrow.

### **Further Reading**

Fullan, M. (2016). *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Reeves, D. (2011). *Finding Your Leadership Focus: What Matters Most for Student Results*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Reeves, D. (2016). *From Leading to Succeeding: The Seven Elements of Effective Leadership in Education*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.