

LeNOIWTA: “Let’s Not Overdo it With the Acronyms,” and Other Secrets to Teacher Buy-in and Retention



Roxanna Elden speaks at the NewSchools Summit 2011 in Burlingame, California

Roxanna Elden, public school teacher and author of the book *See Me After Class: Advice for Teachers by Teachers*, entertained and inspired Summit participants during her discussion on what it’s like for the teachers “downstream” from the reform movement: “We see how things play out, and it is not always as intended.” She shared some of the lessons she has learned as a teacher on the front lines, and emphasized that information needs to also flow back the other direction in order to inform policy and decision making.

During her session, Roxanna shared the following insights with the audience:

1) When schools don't have the resources to comply with regulations, they find ways to comply on paper. The results aren't always pretty. Many schools don’t actually have the space or staff to make changes like reduced class size happen—instead, they figure out how to make it work on paper, such as having two teachers "team teaching" but one is actually fulfilling an entirely separate position for their budget-conscious school. Having one teacher that is the gradebook manager in the main office and never sees the kids or their work at all is fake and destructive, says Roxanna.

2) As stakes attached to data get higher, the more they affect instruction rather than reflect instruction. Principals often want teachers to prepare kids with “test-like” materials and strategies, rather than learning the subjects that are being tested—e.g, applying mnemonic devices or practicing keywords and process of elimination strategies. The higher the testing stakes, the more time is devoted to “crunch time,” Roxanna said. The danger inherent in this reality is ending up with a generation of kids whose only experience with reading is test preparation, that have never read a book for enjoyment. Teaching test prep strategies isn’t wrong, but it takes valuable time.

3) Teaching undeserved students is a personal decision, not a data-based decision. Treating it as a data-based decision misses important nuances. Fifty percent of teachers at low-income schools quit by the end of their third year. There are plenty of good teachers who don't think they can teach well under these conditions. While politicians say demographics don't determine destiny, teachers know that demographics—combined with behavior, health, safety, family life, etc.—does significantly impact a child’s destiny, and don't want to be judged without taking those factors into account. Experienced teachers don't want to bet their careers on a classroom where they know there are going to be a lot of behavior problems.

4) Consult with teachers. Make sure that as you put things like incentive systems into places, they don’t mess with the informal systems already at play within schools. Also be careful that incentives don't discourage teachers from working together.

5) Where should people go to hear the voice of teachers beyond unions? Both the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the Center for Teacher Quality are options, Roxanna told audience members. The National Board has studied a lot of the questions that are coming up in education reform currently and approach problem solving from a “teacher-friendly” perspective.