Supporting Instructional Innovation: An Interview with John Kuhn

Dr. Don Beach and Mr. John Kuhn

John Kuhn is superintendent of the Perrin-Whitt ISD, northwest of Fort Worth and has been a vocal advocate for public education. His “Alamo Letter” and YouTube videos of his 2011 speech at a Save Texas Schools rally went viral, as did his 2012 essay, “The Exhaustion of the American Teacher.” After John graduated from Perrin-Whitt High School, he came to Tarleton State University on a Dick Smith Scholarship, and during his freshman year, was interviewed by the JTAC as the youngest student on campus. When he completed his bachelor’s degree with teacher certification, he was only 20 and so he worked with his church in Peru for two years. When he returned, he began his teaching career in Graford, Texas and in 2004, he completed his Master’s degree in Educational Leadership from Tarleton State University and obtained his principal certification and a job as an assistant principal. In 2007 he became principal of Mineral Wells High School and in 2010, he became superintendent of Perrin-Whitt.

In addition to his famous “Alamo Letter,” John Kuhn has written two books. The first, Test and Punish describes how schools are made to over-test students, hamstring teachers, and penalizes everyone according to student test scores. In his book, he tells how a series of court cases and legislative actions concerning unequal school funding led Texas to adopt an accountability system based on high-stakes testing. That system became the state’s measure of an “adequate” education while discounting financial disparities among school districts, and through an alliance of business leaders, legislators, think tanks, and foundations, an entire industry grew up around developing tests and associated products in Texas and other states.

His newest book, Fear and Learning in America: Bad Data, Good Teachers, and the Attack on Public Education, was published by Teachers College Press with the foreword by Diane Ravitch. In this powerful new book John conveys a deeply held passion for the mission and promise of public education through his own experience as a teacher and administrator. His book requires us to question whether the current education crisis will be judged by history as a legitimate national emergency or an agenda-driven panic, spurred on by a media that is, for the most part, uninterested in anything but useless soundbites. Perhaps the greatest acknowledgement of the importance of his book came from Diane Ravitch who said, “John Kuhn’s book is packed with more wisdom than any 10 books that I have read about American education. It is the wisdom of born of experience. It is the wisdom of a man who cares about children, families, and community.”

When asked about why he took such a vocal stance about public education and educational reform, he said, “I came to realize that there was something better for all of our kids and that we were being sold out for something less. What worries me most, as both a dad and an educator, is the outsized influence of test-makers, statisticians, and economists on modern educational decision-making. Unfortunately, our wizards of data are not wizards of humanity, and they have foolishly elevated impersonal forces as the drivers of education. The education of children is above all a human endeavor. We aren’t programming answers into computers; we are inspiring and encouraging and challenging and coaxing and pushing and pulling and hoping and praying and hugging and wiping tears and watching ball games and telling them how nice they look in their prom dresses.”

Don: What prompted you to write the “Alamo Letter”? What was the response of your colleagues?

John: I wrote that letter after listening to a Texas state senator describe $5.4 billion in education budget cuts as inevitable in one breath and then, in the next, label a new multi-million dollar standardized testing regime - one that included 15 end-of-course exams - as “non-negotiable.” I felt that she was very interested in protecting the testing contractor’s bottom line but not the least bit interested in protecting teachers’ livelihoods or defending classrooms and students from the adverse effects of cuts to local school funding. The response from my colleagues was resoundingly positive. I received hundreds of emails, calls, and letters in support of my point of view, plus invitations to speak around the country. I was even asked to interview for the job of superintendent in the third-largest city in a Northern state.

Don: As a school leader, what obstacles do districts, campuses, and teachers face when trying to implement instructional innovations/changes? What have you done/experienced as an administrator that has helped you over
come these obstacles?

John: The first and most difficult obstacle is funding. For more school districts than people realize, funding is insufficient for the purposes of public education espoused by our state leaders, enshrined in our state constitution, and required by decades of case law. Texas politicians talk a big game when it comes to academic rigor and high expectations, but they aren’t honestly willing to invest the money it takes to bring that big talk to life. They’re all hat and no cattle; all rigor and no resources. In addition, the state takes these insufficient education dollars and distributes them very, very unequally among the state’s schools. Schools that get lower-than-average funding amounts are really over a barrel—they face strict accountability to meet high standards while enjoying half to one-third the funding of the most-generously supported school districts in the state. It is unjust and counterproductive on its face, and it’s the reason that Representative Hochberg found a $1000 per-pupil funding difference between exemplary Texas schools and academically unacceptable ones. You get what you pay for.

Various other obstacles exist. First, a growing poverty rate and growing income inequality ensure that the teacher’s job is harder than ever. Second, the political climate and our politicians’ gleeful tendency to pander to the most extreme and antisocial voices in the electorate guarantee that public servants and public institutions are routinely misrepresented as inefficient and wasteful, even when they are continuously “doing more with less,” as the tired saying goes.

Third, teachers are leaving the profession because of the meanness and distrust embodied in our accountability and teacher evaluation policies. Teachers and administrators are presumed incompetent, and our policies are built not on appreciation and support for these great folks, but rather on the assumption that lots of them are terrible and need to be identified and shamed into leaving. Fourth, a surprising percentage of our students experience physical and sexual abuse, and people outside our schools don’t realize it. In the end, because our society does so little to ensure that our children have a safe, stable and healthy life, education kind of slips down the priority list for many. Kids are hungry, but not only for food. Many of them starve for affection and limits and hope, and our teachers are sometimes chasing their tails trying to attend to the tough demands of the accountability movement—all serious academics, all the time—while also trying to fill those non-academic gaps that suck the hope out of our students.

Another obstacle is “the way we’ve always done it.” Sometimes it’s hard to change when approaches are ingrained in a campus’s history. I have watched teachers overcome these obstacles by pouring themselves into this career. They spend their own money on supplies that parents don’t provide and the state doesn’t cover and they stay late and agonize over lesson plans, hoping to find a key to overcome kids’ hurts and get through to them. They grit their teeth in the face of political attacks on their profession. They take the time to love kids, despite calls to spend every instructional minute cramming for the STAAR test. Overcoming the obstacles is ultimately, in my opinion, a question of loving the children who are the future of this state enough to do the right thing.

Don: What instructional innovation(s)/changes have you supported or implemented as an educational leader?

John: The most radical thing I do is I let instructional innovations come from the teachers and campus leaders, rather than me dictating from the central office what they should be doing.

This may be heresy, but I don’t see myself as the instructional leader—that implies that teachers who have been doing this since I was in diapers are my followers. I don’t think so!

I’m more of an instructional cheerleader and facilitator. My thinking is this: teachers, get together and then tell me what you want to do, and what you need to make it happen. Let me support your creativity and let me operate from a place that assumes the best: that you know how to teach, and you truly want to make a positive difference. They don’t need me to tell them how to teach. They need me to give them time to plan, to listen to the solutions they discover, to provide needed resources, and to get out of the way.

There are so many ideas and fads that come through, and like most educators I’ve spent much of my career being expected to adopt one trend after another, and then I’ve watched most of them eventually fade into obscurity. Too many district leaders feel pressure to jump on the latest bandwagon and do what neighboring schools are doing, and then their teachers end up getting tasked with learning and implementing one program on top of another on top of another, as different administrators come and go and advance their particular agendas.

Even when programs forced from the top down are good - and there are tons of good idea the layering
of program atop program (combined with disempowerment when teachers don’t have a say) often ends up being counterproductive and driving teachers crazy, or out of the district. I’m not the kind of leader who will list a suite of programs or innovations that I swear by—I honestly don’t care how we get results as long as it’s ethical and research-based and treats kids right. I do reserve the right to weigh in when a campus leader presents an idea or program that they and their teachers have decided they want to implement, but I think ownership is a big chunk of what makes any innovation work for kids, and letting the teachers and principals drive innovation, to me, is more effective than me going out and trying to pick the very best approach for this or that. That’s not to say that I won’t be a part of the process; if a principal asks me to help find a solution to a problem they are confronting on their campus, I’ll gladly find resources and approaches and present them for discussion.

Innovation should be fun and exciting and highly participatory. We administrators err badly when we recast it as something mandatory, top-down, and compliance-centered.

Don: What advice would you give teachers about implementing instructional change or innovation in their classrooms?

John: Own it. Identify areas in need of improvement by assessing your kids appropriately and seriously, and by reviewing their results without bias or preconceived notions. Also, don’t be thin-skinned when it comes to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your current instructional approach or your students’ results. When you know where a weakness is among your pupils, be a strong enough person to discuss it openly and professionally with peers and campus leaders. Get into the meat of things, without fear of retribution. Trust your peers to support you and help you find solutions. In these discussions, you may find that the issues that you are confronting are universal on your campus. Enlist help by asking others if they have done anything or heard about anything that can make an impact. When you find an approach that you’re excited about, visit with your peers and campus leaders to get support for trying it. And then go for it! Next, get feedback. Ask for a walkthrough. Talk it over honestly. One difference between the best and the rest when it comes to teachers is this: professional courage to accept honest critique. We only get better when we truly accept what we can improve upon. Finally, share the results of your instructional innovation—if students show improvement, take the evidence of that improvement to the principal and colleagues. Share tools that work with your teammates, so others can see if those tools might be of help to them as well. We are all on the same team, and we are all about the same work. Kids are depending on us.

One other thing: don’t innovate just for the sake of innovating, or just for the sake of doing something different. Find and do what works, and throw everything else overboard.

About the Authors:

Dr. Don M. Beach is a Regents Professor at Tarleton State University in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. For the past 35 years, Dr. Beach has been professor of Educational Administration at Tar-

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Mr. John Kuhn came to Tarleton State University and completed his bachelor’s degree in English with teacher certification. He began his teaching career in Graford ISD. In 2002 he moved to Mineral Wells ISD where he served as a teacher, assistant principal and high school principal. In 2010 he accepted the position of Superintendent of Perrin-Whitt CISD. He is currently a doctoral student at Texas A & M University—Commerce.