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The Answer Sheet

A School Survival Guide for Parents (And Everyone Else)

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Why schools should try things not "research-based"

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In the national quest to reform our K-12 school system, a buzz phrase in schools across the country has been "research-based best practices."

For education leaders, there's good reason to implement best practices. After all, who can argue against what seems to be working in the best schools in the country – and what has been proven to work in the past? With pressure to meet AYP, to use data at every turn, to help meet the needs of *every* child – and to do all of this on the taxpayer's dime – schools feel the pressure to show proof that their techniques deliver results.

But if we want to see real change in our schools and move the needle on closing the achievement gap, we need to try some things that aren't "proven." We need to experiment with practices we intuitively think are good ideas and can deliver results but haven't been subject to exhaustive research yet.

Education leaders insist that they want their schools to be innovative, yet if a teacher offers a new idea, a common response is: "That sounds like a good idea, but where is the data that proves it will work?"

Introducing truly novel ideas means considering something so new that it has not been proven to work. Critics will say we shouldn't be experimenting on our young people, and I'm not suggesting we ditch our best practices and research-based strategies. Hard data is an important component in the school-improvement process. But if the current system isn't working, then we should do what innovators and entrepreneurs have done since the dawn of humanity — try something different. Any educator knows that some



of the latest research-based best practices come out of a 20th century classroom. Most of them are textbook driven, classroom driven, and teacher directed. That type of classroom is not a reflection of the future, so we have to break away from some of the research-based best practices and use what the business world and a few education leaders refer to as "next practices."

The concept is simple: Schools should focus 20-to-30 percent of their resources on true innovation and "next practices." Next practices aren't necessarily about being better; they're about being different. Teachers should be encouraged and empowered to experiment and try new things. Then, when some of these ideas become accepted best practices, schools should already be working toward a new set of next practices.

The overarching lesson here is that making a better 20th century school is not the solution to school reform. Singapore realized this several years ago when it required all teachers to work with e-learning techniques and strategies, even if they don't actually teach online on a regular basis. Education leaders there believe that students will need to be adept at using technology throughout their careers and the world beyond school. Moreover, 100 percent of Singapore secondary teachers use online learning in combination with face-to-face instruction.

Michigan is one of the few states that is experimenting with next practices. In 2008, the state fully implemented a seat-time waiver program that allows high school and middle school students in participating districts to take courses by certified teachers online and off campus. Many students who have been granted these waivers were either dropouts or at risk of dropping out. Seat-time waivers are also granted to students seeking courses not offered by their home schools or students with physical disabilities.

Are seat-time waivers helping to improve student performance? There probably is no conclusive data so far. But what we do know is that learning happens 24/7 in today's world of ubiquitous, in-your-pocket access to the Internet. To dismiss the possibilities of online learning because it doesn't meet the standards of "best practices" is to turn away from a tool that has already changed the way kids (and adults) communicate, collaborate and consume information and allows students of varying skills and interests to pursue their passions.

In Michigan, best practices would have required every student to take district-approved courses by district-managed instructors. But this next practice might very well transform the way students learn and better prepare them for college and careers.

Our greatest innovators have long embraced the need to try something completely new in order to discover the next great idea. During the earliest stages of the automobile industry, when horses were still the main mode of transportation, Henry Ford said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."

