Solutions Are the Problem in Education

By Mary Kennedy

There used to be a saying that if you were not part of the solution, you were part of the problem. The implication was that we all, collectively, were creating the problem, and that the solution required all of us to change together.

But in education, solutions are a big part of our problem. School people are swamped by a deluge of solutions. They suffer from reform fatigue.

A few years ago, I visited teachers in several districts spread across the nation. I was struck by the variety of interruptions they experienced in their classrooms, and by how many of these had begun as good intentions. Here's one example: A science teacher took part in a National Geographic Society project that gave his students a chance to collect samples from a local waterway and contribute them to a national database. Sounds like a great idea, right? His class got to participate in a national science study. But the timing of the project caused the teacher to interrupt his ongoing science unit. When the project was finished, students had forgotten where they were in their regular curriculum.

National Geographic is hardly alone in wanting to help educators. The number of associations, institutions, government agencies, and volunteers of all kind who want to solve educational problems has grown so large that teachers are now surrounded by helpful voices and besieged by ideas too numerous to attend to. Instead of strengthening teaching, this multitude of innovations and reforms distracts both teachers and students from their central tasks, making it difficult to concentrate, to stay on task, and to sustain a coherent direction.

Moreover, these improvements often contradict one another. Consider two ideas currently on the table for evaluating teaching practice. On one hand, we have lesson study, a highly structured undertaking that requires months of collective effort and careful thought. On the other, we have walk-throughs, quick and unstructured events that can be conducted by one person in under five minutes. These ideas seem to make entirely different assumptions about how we can learn about teaching, yet they are both popular right now.

There have always been zealous education reformers, of course. But the number and variety of helpful ideas is now so great that the solutions themselves have become a problem.
It is easy to brainstorm about alternatives in education, but hard to anticipate their unintended consequences. Take, for instance, pullout programs. These well-intentioned entitlement programs, introduced in the 1960s, pull students out of their regular classrooms for special instruction. The timing of the pullout has to fit the pullout teacher’s schedule, which means that the original teacher must adjust her instructional schedule to accommodate this movement. Since both teachers may be teaching similar content, they also need to coordinate their instruction, something that takes time. And that is not all: Every time a student is pulled from a regular classroom, and every time that student returns to the regular classroom, the ongoing instruction is interrupted. Students are distracted, and so is the teacher. Lesson continuity and coherence are at risk.

Pullout programs are one of many helpful ideas introduced to improve education. Every test, every assembly, and every public-address announcement is a helpful addition that ultimately disrupts instructional continuity. Every change of schedule, from hourly to block scheduling and back to hourly, requires teachers to revise their routines and strategies. Every new policy, from zero tolerance to team-teaching, pulls teachers’ attention away from their teaching and toward solving a logistical problem. Instead of thinking about how to engage students with curriculum content, they must think about how to revise their procedures, schedules, and strategies to accommodate the newest helpful idea.

Remember when we decided that teachers should have telephones in their rooms? The idea was to “professionalize” the job. Well, now that teachers have telephones, parents can call up at any time to leave messages for their children. So when students are struggling with the difference between ¼ and ½, or debating the merits of the Bill of Rights, the phone rings. And it is right there, in the middle of the classroom and in the middle of every lesson.

The problem is this: Both teaching and learning require sustained attention. Not only do students need opportunities to think, but so do their teachers. More than anything, teachers need time to compose their thoughts and make sure that, when they approach a new unit or a new lesson, they have a clear idea of what they want to accomplish.

Students are even more vulnerable to distractions. In my conversations with teachers, I have found that they care more about maintaining the momentum of the lesson than anything else. The central challenge of teaching is finding enough uninterrupted time to get students’ minds wrapped around an idea, and keeping it there until the idea makes sense to them. Disruptions don’t merely take a few moments of class time: After them, teachers often feel that they need to rewind the entire lesson and begin anew.

Yet we live in a time when reforms and fads have become so commonplace that every new board member or superintendent feels a need to make a personal mark on his or her district by introducing something new. As these policymakers come and go, teachers are buffeted by the raft of competing new ideas they leave behind. So routine turnovers in leadership reignite this continuing series of distractions, further reducing teachers’ chances of finding time for reflection and maintaining a stable environment for intellectual work.
No wonder that when the new superintendant comes to town, and the new professional-development program is brought in, teachers go into their classrooms and quietly shut their doors.

Every American teacher feels some level of reform fatigue. If you think you are part of the solution, check again. You may be part of the problem.

Mary Kennedy is a professor in the department of teacher education at Michigan State University, in East Lansing, Mich.