Virtual Schoolhouse Best Practices

What is "Best Practice?"

The term "Best Practice" has been used to describe "what works" in a particular situation or environment. When data support the success of a practice, it is referred to as a research-based practice or scientifically based practice. As members of the Virtual Schoolhouse Team, we are striving to provide best practices for our students and schools.

Grover J. Whitehurst, as assistant secretary for Educational Research and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education, defined evidence-based education as “the integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction.” Professional wisdom allows educators and family members to adapt to specific circumstances or environments in an area in which research evidence may be absent or incomplete. But without at least some empirical evidence, education cannot resolve competing approaches, generate cumulative knowledge, and avoid fads and personal biases.

Virtual Schoolhouse Mission

Virtual Schoolhouse is a school designed to address the needs of students in grades K-12 who are at risk of dropping out. Our students face many economic, environmental, emotional, and/or academic challenges, including physical and mental health illnesses, social disadvantages, learning disabilities or other special needs. Virtual Schoolhouse strives to provide exceptional educational experiences for all students regardless of grade or performance level.
1- Teamwork

"Teamwork: Simply stated, it is less me and more we."
- Unknown

Working for the Virtual Schoolhouse means being part of a team. We are an organization in which every member plays a significant role in the success of every aspect of the whole. You are an integral member of educators, mentors, administrative staff and a whole support system working for the academic success of our students.

Every part of this organization depends on your positive attitude and work ethic. As it is with any team, the strength lies within the heart mind and commitment of each individual player.

"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."
- Henry Ford

"There is no I in Teamwork."
2- Clear and Common Focus

At the Virtual Schoolhouse, administrators, teachers, students, and parents share and commit to clearly articulated and understood common goals based on the fundamental belief that all students can learn and improve their performance.

"'Cheshire Puss,' [Alice] began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. 'Come, it's pleased so far,' thought Alice, and she went on. 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' 'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat. 'I don't much care where--' said Alice. 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat."
3-High Standards and Expectations

Virtual Schoolhouse teachers believe “all students can learn and I can teach them.” Staff members are dedicated to helping every student achieve challenging standards. All students are engaged in an appropriately ambitious and rigorous course of study in which the high standards of performance are clear and consistent and the conditions for learning are modified and differentiated. This results in all students reaching their potential to the maximum.

"The will to win is worthless if you do not have the will to prepare."
- Thane Yost

Virtual Schoolhouse is successful because, “our program follows Ohio Core Curriculum Content Standards (OCCCS), IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and ELL (English Language Learners) guidelines. We maintain the smallest student-teacher ratio possible, maximizing each student’s potential through individualized attention. High-quality professional development plays an essential role in successful education improvement.”
4- Supportive, Personalized, and Relevant Learning

At Virtual Schoolhouse, supportive learning environments provide positive personalized relationships for all students while engaging them in rigorous and relevant learning.

… At Virtual Schoolhouse, we pride ourselves on ensuring that the appropriate staff is in place at each institution, whether public or private, thus guaranteeing that each child is serviced in accordance with his or her educational/cultural/religious requirements.

Our staff is trained to work with all children, regardless of their needs. We service the learning and physically disabled, the gifted and talented, the behaviorally challenged as well as the chronically or terminally ill child. In all cases, we exhibit the highest level of care and professionalism.

Our services all fall under the funding of Basic Skills Title 1, I.D.E.I.A., Available Services provided are,

- Educational Instruction in Every Subject
- Resource Rooms
- Tutoring In-Home
- Psycho-Educational Assessment
- Behavioral Assessment
- Counseling and Therapy
- Speech Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Nurses and Nurse’s Aides
5-Parent Involvement

Parents help develop, understand, and support a clear and common focus on core academic, social, and personal goals contributing to improved student performance and have a meaningful and authentic role in achieving these goals. The Virtual Schoolhouse team work together to actively solve problems and create win-win solutions.
6- Monitoring, Accountability, and Assessment

At the Virtual Schoolhouse, teaching and learning are continually adjusted on the basis of data collected through a variety of valid and reliable methods that indicate student progress and needs. The assessment results are interpreted and applied appropriately to improve individual student performance and the instructional program.
7- Balanced Curriculum and Instruction

The Virtual Schoolhouse have aligned curriculum with core learning expectations to improve the performance of all students. Students achieve high standards through rigorous, challenging learning. Staff delivers an aligned curriculum and implements research-based teaching and learning strategies. Students are actively involved in their learning through inquiry, in-depth learning, and performance assessments.

**What a Balanced Curriculum Is**

- Includes entire *Standard Course of Study*
- Educates the whole child
- Includes a challenging and common curriculum based on best knowledge of how children develop and learn
- Prepares students for success in school and in life
- Includes all subjects versus only those subjects tested
- Promotes brain growth and development through an enriched environment
- Provides a curriculum that is rigorous, relevant and promotes relationships
- Creates active participants rather than passive observers
- Allows students to use the whole brain

**What a Balanced Curriculum Is Not**

- Planning and teaching in isolation
- An individual effort
- Teaching to the test
- Teaching ONLY English Language Arts and Mathematics
- A program for only some children
- Fake" integration
- “One size fits all”
- Teaching without assessing student Needs
- Teaching the text
- Teaching the teacher’s favorite or most comfortable topic(s)
8-Homework

Some researchers are urging schools to take a fresh look at homework and its potential for engaging students and improving student performance. The key, they say, is to take into account grade-specific and developmental factors when determining the amount and kind of homework.

How Much Homework Do Students Do?
Survey data and anecdotal evidence show that some students spend hours nightly doing homework. Homework overload is the exception rather than the norm; however, according to research from the Brookings Institution and the Rand Corporation. Their researchers analyzed data from a variety of sources and concluded that the majority of U.S. students spend less than an hour a day on homework, regardless of grade level, and this has held true for most of the past 50 years. In the last 20 years, homework has increased only in the lower grade levels, and this increase is associated with neutral (and sometimes negative) effects on student achievement.

How Much Is Appropriate?
The National PTA recommendations fall in line with general guidelines suggested by researcher Harris Cooper: 10-20 minutes per night in the first grade, and an additional 10 minutes per grade level thereafter (e.g., 20 minutes for second grade, 120 minutes for twelfth). High school students may sometimes do more, depending on what classes they take.

What are the benefits?
Homework usually falls into one of three categories: practice, preparation, or extension. The purpose usually varies by grade. Individualized assignments that tap into students' existing skills or interests can be motivating. At the elementary school level, homework can help students develop study skills and habits and can keep families informed about their child's learning. At the secondary school level, student homework is associated with greater academic achievement.

What’s good policy?
Experts advise schools or districts to include teachers, parents, and students in any effort to set homework policies. Policies should address the purposes of homework; amount and frequency; school and teacher responsibilities; student responsibilities; and, the role of parents or others who assist students with homework.
9. Professional Development

Ongoing professional development aligned with the Virtual Schoolhouse common focus and high expectations to improve the performance of all students is critical in high-performing schools. These professional development offerings are focused and informed by research and school/classroom-based assessments. Appropriate instructional support and resources are provided to implement approaches and techniques learned through professional development.

Sharpening the Saw

A man was struggling in the woods to saw down a tree. An old farmer came by, watched for a while, then quietly said, “What are you doing?”

“Can’t you see?” the man impatiently replied, “I’m sawing down this tree.”

“You look exhausted,” said the farmer. “How long have you been at it?”

“Over five hours, and I’m beat,” replied the man. “This is hard work.”

“That saw looks pretty dull,” said the farmer. “Why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen it? I’m sure it would go a lot faster.”

“I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,” the man says emphatically. “I’m too busy sawing!”

In this story, it is pretty obvious that if the man took a few minutes to sharpen his saw, he would be able to save a lot of time afterwards. However, in real life, it isn’t always so obvious when we need to stop and “sharpen the saw.”

The Virtual Schoolhouse views its teaching staff as a community of learners. In order to maintain the excellence of our program, it is imperative that Virtual Schoolhouse provides and the staff participates in on going in services to maintain the “sharpness of the swords” of our educators.
10- Professionalism

Education is considered a profession as opposed to a job. As such each teacher is considered a professional governed by certain standards which include but not limited to standards of behavior, confidentiality, work place ethics and integrity.

At all times a staff person must remember that he or she is governed by the laws of confidentiality. Discussing the grades or behavior of a student with anyone other than a parent, guardian, or one’s direct supervisor has significant professional implications. This includes making an example of a student to other students even for their own good.

Not doing the necessary and expected record keeping in a timely fashion or being lax in punctuality, is an offence against your employer who pays your salary.

Ethical speech-- cleanliness in speech and respect for one's neighbor-- is not a denominational concept; it is a basic factor in human dignity.

While unethical speech is clearly never in anyone's best interest, gossip has even more negative implications. Using unethical speech to bring negative attitudes and actions into another person by means of gossip such as "I don't like my student John. John did something. Therefore you should not associate with John either," attempts to destroy the very important sense of community which all people need and deserve.
11-Children and School Safety

Our teachers are responsible for our children's welfare for the six or eight hours they are at school and we need to know without question that their safety will be paramount on the minds of teachers, faculty and volunteers.

Mike Fitzpatrick

School safety is something that all individuals in authority in a school setting need to take into consideration. No matter how large or small a school is, if there are children who attend, the safety of those children is the school's responsibility.

Safety for school applies to all areas of the school, including the classroom. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher should set some classroom rules that dictate safety protocol for the students. Older students can help create these classroom rules, and younger students should have the reasons for the rules explained to them carefully.

You are responsible to know the systems in place in your school and classroom to assure the safety and well being of your students.

At any time you are with children, their well being must be paramount in your mind. Notwithstanding the legal ramifications of your position, the notions of life saving should also govern your actions.

Whoever saves one person is as if he saved a universe.

The Talmud
12- Student Advocacy

Teachers are child advocates in school to protect and nurture children. In most circumstances, mothers, fathers, and families advocate on behalf of children, although it is well recognized that teachers have the ability and responsibility to advocate on behalf of children.

A child advocate typically represents or gives voice to an individual whose concerns and interests are not being heard. A child advocate will try to prevent children from being harmed and may try to obtain justice for those who have already been injured in some way. A child advocate may also seek to ensure that children have access to positive influences or services which will benefit their lives such as education, childcare and proper parenting.

You should be aware and knowledgeable about mandatory reporting laws, when you suspect that the well being of a child is being compromised.

All States, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have statutes identifying persons who are required to report child maltreatment under specific circumstances.

Individuals designated as mandatory reporters typically have frequent contact with children. Such individuals may include:
• Social workers
• Teachers and other school personnel
• Physicians and other health-care workers
• Mental health professionals
• Child care providers

Many of your students have special needs and are entitled to special services and considerations. As their advocates, you want to make sure that they receive all benefits to which they are entitled.

Conclusion

This document only highlights each of these Best Practices. It is not meant to be the end all of each practice. Rather each practice should seen as a category by itself which has many applications and this form will serve as an outline for you.