



WHY “BEST PRACTICES” MEANS ...



NOTHING (A PARENT PRIMER)

BY MICHAEL JOHN CARLEY

*“Best practices” are defined as methods, strategies and theories that have been **proven** the most effective. Think of the Billboard 100 and you get the idea. The #1 song of the moment is “the best,” and the best keeps changing. Whether the strategy (or the song) referred to is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, SCERTS, or “assume trauma”... is not implied within the phrase, “best practices.”*

You just have to assume that of the existing techniques, you’re getting one of the good ones. And if you’re really getting the top or most current methodology, then “best” is an appropriate word to use in promoting your services as high quality.

But is this really how the phrase is used? Or does its vagueness easily render it as a tool used to deflect—to lie even? When a school official wishes to reassure you that they’ll do whatever is needed for your child, and they say,

“Don’t worry. We use best practices.”

Have you ever thought to ask, “Which ones?”

“Best Practices” is a script. And when the overall quality of education is compromised, the ability for all of us to see through the scripts is getting worse and worse.

Even if you're a neophyte when it comes to educational strategies, couldn't you write down their answer and then go hit Google? Because if someone says that leeches applied to your skin is a “best practice” for curing cancer, how do we call out the inaccuracy? The answer is we can't. That Billboard-like website tracking the movement and qualitative value of all available educational strategies? It doesn't exist.

To start: Understand that “practices” cost money. One reason a school district might not be employing SCERTS isn't just because they're dumb as a doornail and prefer punishment-based behavioral strategies reminiscent of the 50s. Given how public education is under-funded throughout this country, it may be that the district can't afford the subscription, materials and professional development needed for SCERTS. They may need a cheaper “practice.”

As a cost-cutting method, districts might purchase a “best practice” from decades past given how irrelevant and cheap it is. These examples are rare but known. Also, sometimes, districts that exist in states that have shoddy licensing boards (hello Wisconsin!) might send one of their own employees through a dubious certification process so that they can *write a best practice of their own!*

Locals leading locals is indeed a valuable strategy for any grass roots campaign. But many states will go cheap on the trainings by hiring someone local, who might not know much more than the audience about the subject.

In addition to children not getting the best services, this is also one of the reasons why teachers often feel spat on in states like Wisconsin. In addition to salary cuts, no one's paying them much respect by forcing them to receive training from someone they know isn't much of an expert. Knowing that in better districts, cities, or states, teachers are inspired by real development? This only makes the devaluation of teaching feel worse. The contempt then spreads.

In 2009, there were 6.6 applications for every teacher opening in Wisconsin. Thanks to former Governor Scott Walker's demonization of public schools, by 2015 that number was 3.2. The steering of their public funding into private, religious schools (“voucher” programs) caused children in economically-challenged families to suffer more, and wealthier families who could already afford private schools were then subsidized by public

money... for schools that got to cherry-pick the kids they let in. To go further, I've had to listen to a rep from the state's educational service's firm (CESA) sell their product by citing the lower GPAs that new teachers in the state bring from their educations. The message being “Your teachers are dumb, so you need us more.” In Green Bay, the largest school district has a high percentage of children of color, yet the Board President has remained firm that the entire school board be white. I could go on, but this is all part of a larger problem with education itself, to which Wisconsin is merely the worst example.

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In 2003, when I was a FAR Fund Fellow, I toured group homes and supportive housing facilities. And I will never forget when one staff member proudly narrated for me how well they'd served one of their non-verbal residents.

“We really were looking into what would make Charley's life better, and then we found it! He loved music!!!”

“Seriously?” I thought. *“Who's ever said, ‘I hate music?’”*

Who's also said, *“We use worst practices.”*

As many know, after decades of living in New York City, I moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin a few years ago. Yes, the culture shock was immense, and while there were some educational pros, the differences were mostly cons.

The Midwest, while referred to as “flyover country” to cruel levels, is indeed behind in the attitudes they bring to their spectrum students. While still chock full of educators who demonstrate themselves as eager and willing to learn, Wisconsin educators are unaware (or dismissive) of our east coast advances in how we interpret self-identification, and the overall improvements to self-worth, capacity for trust, and capacity for emotional regulation that these new attitudes bring. I hear *“Why do you want to put a label on him?”* every now and then in the Midwest, a taboo phrase I hadn't heard since 2007. *“What about consequences?”* is another, as the Midwest still believes in punishment as a behavioral tool. Compared to its neighbors, Wisconsin has a woefully underperforming autism society. Compared to its neighbors there are no self-run groups for adults on the spectrum. And

there is nothing but resentment and defensiveness when this is all brought up. When I want a dose of context and/or critical thinking – I’ll be real – I go back to New York.

But when I moved, I did not expect to find such a deep love for ideas surrounding the buzzword of “inclusion.” In working with some of the better districts in the Milwaukee area, the big picture attributes of long-term community that inclusion somewhat promises, seem infinitely more within the realm of possibility than I thought prior due mostly to teacher enthusiasm. And as I regard being a good person as a higher priority than being smart or going to Harvard, consider me an ally.

That said, old school, segregated environments will fare far better than the disaster that will occur in *unsupported* inclusion environments. Regular education (i.e. inclusion) teachers are not trained in the ways of autism spectrum behaviors, while their special education brothers and sisters are. Among many things, inclusion programs need staff development (outside of best practices)

and high-quality teacher’s aides.

Administrators, not teachers nor aides, are the problem, as they refuse to risk sacrificing their six-figure salaries by protesting the state government destruction of public education. Without staff development, overwhelmed teachers could interpret natural, healthy, spectrum curiosities as disrespectful, personal insults. And without high-quality aides, my special needs kids, during periods of frustration, will not have that buddy to give them a break outside the classroom, and their in-class sorrows will prevent their neurotypical classmates from absorbing the curriculum as best they can. This causes unjust stigma to the special needs kids once the other kids’ parents get a whiff of why their kids’ grades are in decline.

I know these teachers now. They’re not dumb, nor dull, and they are often heroic under the circumstances. They’re underpaid compared to neighboring states, and they’ve simply had the figurative stuffing beaten out of them while no one (they have no union, by the way) of any impact has risen up to defend them. I don’t blame the opportunistic “bad guys” as much as I blame the people who think like me; peo-

ple who despite their “better values” have displayed cowardice by not standing up to the bad guys.

In the old school, separatist system, kids with disabilities at least had the chance to make friends. Supported inclusion is the best. But the old ways are infinitely better than unsupported inclusion programs—often the main abusers of deceptive scripts like “Best Practices.”•

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Michael John Carley is the Founder of GRASP, a school consultant, and the author of *Asperger’s From the Inside-Out*, (Penguin/Perigee 2008), *Unemployed on the Autism Spectrum*, (Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2016), the upcoming *Book of Happy, Positive, and Confident Sex for Adults on the Autism Spectrum... and Beyond!*, and the column, “Autism Without Fear,” which for four years ran with the Huffington Post but is soon to move to Neurodiversity Press. Dozens of past “Autism Without Fear” columns can be found by going to www.michaeljohncarley.com/index.php/articles.html. And for more information on Michael John, or to subscribe to his updates, you can go to www.michaeljohncarley.com.

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