

Dr. Derek Mitchell on Transforming Schools Through Authentic Connection and Community

The Ruckus Report

Quick take: When traditional approaches to school improvement aren't working, the answer may not be more control - but rather more connection. Dr. Mitchell reveals how transformative leadership starts with listening and building authentic relationships.

Meet Your Fellow Ruckus Maker

Dr. Derek Mitchell serves as the CEO of Partners in School Innovation, working with schools that face long histories of chronic underperformance and serve predominantly high-poverty communities. His organization partners with schools to create lasting, meaningful change through innovative leadership approaches.

Breaking Down the Old Rules 🛠️

In this episode, Dr. Mitchell challenges traditional education paradigms:

Key Insight #1

- **What's broken:** The assumption that out-of-control schools need stricter discipline and tighter control
- **The shift:** Building authentic connections with students by listening and understanding their perspectives
- **Impact:** One principal transformed his challenging middle school by first meeting with 30 struggling students to truly hear their needs, leading to innovative solutions like stealth support systems for students in distress

Key Insight #2

- **What's broken:** Traditional professional development that's neither professional nor developmental
- **The shift:** Creating authentic learning communities that build relationships while focusing on growth

- **Impact:** Moving PLC meetings off-campus and sharing meals together led to vastly improved outcomes and stronger teacher collaboration

Key Insight #3

- **What's broken:** The "skill solution" approach to addressing performance issues
- **The shift:** Using the skill-will-way matrix to properly diagnose and address teacher performance challenges
- **Impact:** More effective interventions by matching solutions to the real root cause - whether it's skill, will, or way

Quotable Ruckus

"Working within the lines will only produce what's been produced in the past. If we're really talking about excellence for each and every child, mean every young person reaching their potential, we got to get beyond the lines." - Dr. Derek Mitchell

Your Do School Different Challenge

Ready to implement these ideas? Start here:

1. **Tomorrow:** Color-code your calendar based on your top 3-4 strategic priorities to see how you're really spending your time
2. **This Month:** Move one regular meeting off-campus to build stronger relationships and more authentic dialogue
3. **This Semester:** Create a system to proactively schedule regular check-ins with your supervisor where you set the agenda and priorities

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