What do the Hippocratic Oath and the Carpenter’s Rule have in common? It may sound like a riddle, but it is not a trick question. A state board member recently told me he tries to keep these two maxims in mind every time he makes a decision on education policy.

I laughed when he first said it. But then I realized that, although he is a very funny person, he was serious about this. And now, after thinking about it myself, so am I.

The Hippocratic Oath. All physicians and health care professionals are taught the oath attributed to the Greek physician Hippocrates: Primum non nocere. That is, first, do no harm. In the healing professions, it is not always possible to effect a cure for a sick patient, but at a minimum the treatment given to an individual should not make the situation worse.

(A historical note: The Latin phrase primum non nocere does not actually appear in the original text. The oath itself also might not have been written by Hippocrates and may, in fact, date only to the 19th century. But origins aside, the sentiment still holds.)

What’s good advice for healers is also good advice for education policymakers. There are great challenges ahead for state boards. From choosing a summative assessment to providing support for low-performing schools, your board will make choices that can have a big impact on schools, teachers, and students.

The best way forward is not always clear. (Let’s face it: If we knew how to improve low-performing schools, wouldn’t we have done it already?) But when you are making a decision, your first goal should always be that you will not make things worse.

The Carpenter’s Rule. Carpenters know that there are some actions that do not allow for a do-over. If you cut a piece of wood too short, there is no way to fix it. So the rule for carpenters has always been “measure twice, cut once.”

And really, that is pretty good advice when making education policy as well. Whether your board is selecting metrics for the state accountability system or crafting a policy on teacher preparation, there will be real-world consequences for your decision. Schools will create systems to collect certain types of information, all of which will have to be disaggregated by subgroups. Prospective teachers will—or will not—enroll in a course.

Those choices are not easily undone. So the best advice is to proceed with new policies or changes in a thoughtful way. As I sometimes say, you can make change fast, or you can make change last.

As states begin to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act, everyone who touches a state's education policy is entering new territory. State boards, state legislators, state education agencies, and governors are all playing new roles and taking on new responsibilities. There is no roadmap.

But you can still scout for road signs that will keep you on the right path. The Hippocratic Oath and the Carpenter’s Rule are two such guideposts toward thoughtful education policymaking in your state.

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