

A Point of View

For forty-six years I have labored in the vineyards of public education. During those years I have worked at local, state and national levels in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Virginia, Delaware, Iowa, Florida, Minnesota and Wisconsin. I have been a high school teacher (and I have taught at every level of public schools), an elementary school principal, director of human resources, associate superintendent for instruction, superintendent and associate commissioner for finance and accountability. I have worked in cities, suburbs and rural areas. There are many things that have become clear to me over the years. Among them are:

- In schools, you get what you expect from students and staff.
- The key to improving student achievement is changing the behavior of adults who work with students
- If you don't have a literacy standards for graduation in English and math, closing the achievement gap is very difficult and potentially meaningless
- The keys to improving student behavior are:
 - defining what you want as opposed to what you don't want;
 - clear rules, consistent enforcement of rules;
 - and changing the behavior of adults and students
- Parent involvement helps students, but whether parents are involved does not determine whether students can do well in school
- Parents income does not determine whether students can do well in school
- Schools need help with services that students need
- Decreasing class size only makes a difference in student achievement when what students are taught and how they are taught is changed
- This is no such thing as "good" and "bad" kids, there are many kids whose behavior I find unacceptable but that doesn't make them bad, it makes their behavior unacceptable.
- There is no such thing as a "throw away kid."

You get what you expect from students. I grew up and went to public schools in the Central Ward of Newark, N.J, Williamsburg and East New York (Brooklyn) and Jamaica (Queens), New York. Those experiences plus superintendencies in the Christina School District in Delaware, Fall River, Massachusetts and New London, Connecticut convinced me that you get what you expect. In each of these districts there was a sense among many that low income and minority students could not do well. Most recently, in New London, 90% plus of New London students live in poverty, 58% are Hispanic and 27% are African American. In each of these districts we were able to significantly raise student achievement through a combination of setting high standards, training staff and administrators and holding people accountable. Most recently, New London High School was recognized by U.S. News and World Reports as one of the best in the U.S.

The key to improving student achievement is changing adult behavior. If I had a nickel for everytime I heard an adult say, "if these kids..." insert "acted right, had parents who cared, came from decent homes, valued education, and....", I'd be wealthy. What I've learned is that kids come to school to be safe. That sounds strange to some who think that some students only come to school to cause trouble.

When students and staff feel safe, and they know what the rules are, there is a great likelihood that student achievement goes up. This all depends on adults having clear, positively stated, high expectations, and enforcing them consistently. This also means we need to check with students to see if they understand what we are saying rather than saying “ya’ know what I mean? any questions? or O.K.?” Adults also need to accept nothing less than a maximum effort. One of the best teachers I’ve ever seen teaches math in New London. If a student said they didn’t do their homework, if they said they didn’t understand, if they said they didn’t know how, she wouldn’t let them opt out, she demanded without castigating that they come up to the whiteboard and that they solve the problem together. That is teaching.

We need literacy standards in English and math for graduation. How many students graduate from high school every year with passing grades, all the credits required, who cannot read or write. How are we helping students by letting them have a high school diploma when they cannot read or fill out a job application, or read the content of social media or a newspaper? In many school districts and states, literacy is not required for graduation. One of them is Connecticut. It is imperative that every school district addresses the skills required to be successful in our lives as adults in their requirements for graduation.

Improving student behavior. Just about anybody who has worked in schools has heard their colleague say, “if kids acted right, I could teach” or “in my day, we wouldn’t even think about doing that (in response to student defiance of adults).” Across school districts in the United States the leading reasons for student referrals for discipline or suspension are fighting and defiance or refusal to follow adult instructions.

In my experience, we as adults can dramatically improve student behavior by taking several steps. First, we can tell students what we want them to do as opposed to what we don’t want them to do. Many lists of school rules look like a swimming pool rules sign, “NO” followed by a litany of forbidden behaviors. Instead of saying “Don’t Run”, we’d be better off saying walk. Instead of saying “No Fighting”, we should say, keep your hands and feet to yourself. Embedded in the difference here is that if you’re doing one you can’t be doing the other.

Second, we need to be consistent as adults. If we say that there is a rule in a class or the hallway, and only some adults enforce it, students know that they don’t have to take it seriously. As strange as it sounds, a reason that many students come to school, especially those living in dysfunctional situations at home, is that they’re looking for consistency. There’s safety in adult consistency.

In this vein, we need to remember that the average youngster in elementary school encounters 12 to 15 adults every day, the average young person in high school, 20 to 30. Every adult has their own expectations. It’s unfair to students to assume that they know what you mean. Rules need to be identified for each activity. Student comprehension of those rules needs to be checked and “ya’ know what I mean” doesn’t work as a check.

Third, if we want student to learn responsibility, we have to hold them responsible. In enforcing school rules, we frequently hear adults say, “stop that (whatever that is)”. What if we said to students, “what are doing?” and then “what are you supposed to be doing?” What if adults stopped trying to be judge, jury and hangman, and focused getting students to look at their behavior and their options. If we tell

students what we want them to do, are consistent in enforcement and base consequences on things that have meaning to students, disciplinary referrals will go down.

Recently there has been much attention to “restorative justice” as an alternative to traditional practices of suspension and expulsion. Restorative justice focuses on clarity, consistency, and getting people to take responsibility for their own behavior. Does this mean that you let students get away with whatever they want to do. No. It means that adults must be committed to making it work, to mediation, group work and consistency. It also means, for a very small number of students, regular school is simply not an option.

Parent involvement helps students, but.... There are many who say that the reason that many schools are failing is the lack of parent involvement. Bologna. There is this mythical belief that parents were much more involved in their children’s education fifty or one hundred years ago. Historical evidence does not support this. There were certainly parents who said then as there are today, “I expect you to do what the teacher tells you to do.” But the idea that parents really knew what was happening in school or really followed up with their children’s school work just isn’t borne out by the facts.

In my forty six years in public education I’ve never met a parent who didn’t love their child or didn’t care about them. I’ve met hundreds of parents who had no idea of how to address their children’s behavior or failure in school. I’ve met hundreds of parents who were angry about their children’s inability to read, write and do math. I’ve met hundreds of parents who really wanted to help their children have better lives than their own.

I’ve met many educators and other parents that complain about parents not attending parent conferences. Let’s step back for a minute. How many of the parents who people may wish would attend parent conferences dropped out of school, or saw themselves as failures in school. How many parents were counseled out of school? How many parents graduated from high school unable to read and write, and are embarrassed to say that they have no idea of what the teacher is talking about when they hear terms like “rubric, assessment, formative, and summative.” How do we think these parents see themselves coming to a parent conference, in which they may not understand what the teacher is saying, but would be ashamed to say so.

All the evidence I’ve seen says that parent involvement is a wonderful addition to student success when it is available. But none of the evidence I’ve seen says that students can’t succeed if parents are not involved or don’t know how to be.

Helping parents to understand how they can help their children is always a great idea, but it must be done in the context of understanding the instability of many marriages, that 60% plus of children in public schools are the children of single parents, that most parents have to work and that often when conferences and help are offered to parents, they have to be at work.

Parent income does not determine whether students can do well in school. Fifty years ago James Coleman published a study that implied that unless your mother has a masters degree you are not going to well in school. The interpretation of Coleman’s findings became a classic and consistent error of people reading statistical studies in education. Coleman’s findings were based on what are called regressions and correlation studies. Regressions and correlations look at how many times things seem to occur together, for example, for how many children who do well in school have parents with graduate

degrees. Just because there seemed to be a statistical connection between a parents level of education and their children's achievement, does not mean that if your parents did not finish high school you cannot do well in school. In brief, a statistical correlation is not a cause and effect relationship.

And yet many people have come to believe that low income children cannot do well in school because their parents did not do well in school, did not graduate from high school or work in jobs that don't pay much. This just is not true, and it defies what we know from history.

In the early twentieth century, how many immigrants came to this country and became very successful even though they and their parents could not read and write? The fact is that they learned to read and write. And in the same way, regardless of a parent's level of education, when low income children are challenged with high expectations, they do well in school.

Schools need help with services for students. Schools are community centers. People are generally more comfortable coming to them than any other unit of government like the mayor's office or the police department. We need to build on that.

Many students come to school with many health and social needs that are not being met where they are living. In New London, we have universal feeding, meaning all students eat for free. When we added supper to the breakfast and lunch offerings we had, several hundred secondary students signed up. Similarly, especially prior to the Connecticut's health care program for children and the Affordable Care Act, many children came to school having not been to a doctor for a number of years. They were and are sick. They experienced hearing and vision problems. Many children are malnourished.

Hundreds of students come to school every year with mental health needs. In every school district in which I have worked, there was a paucity of mental health services available to many students with very severe needs. Clinical depression and anxiety are pervasive problems among many students who live in stressed families.

Across several of the districts in which I have taught or lead, homelessness was a severe problem touching five percent or more of the students. Students can have a home address and still be homeless, moving from couch to couch every night, to avoid toxic or violent home environments.

Schools simply do not have the funds to provide all needed health, mental health and social services needed by students.

When decreasing class size makes a difference. No matter where I have been professionals have said, "if we could reduce class size, we could teach and really help students." Clearly it's easier to deal with a smaller number of children no matter the grade level. However, research going back to the 1970's indicates that until you get below 15 students in a class, there doesn't seem to be much difference in student achievement.

What we also know now is that to increase student achievement there has to be a change in what is being taught and how it is being taught at the same time as class size is reduced.

"Good and bad kids". In and out schools, I can't count the times I have heard people talk about "good" or "bad" kids. Most often the label is associated with behavior. A youngster who acts out or is violent is "bad," the youngster who does what everyone expects in school, follows the rules and people like is

“good.” Too often, regardless of the youngsters’ efforts to improve, that perception does not change. I think that it’s also fair to say that some seem to believe that kids are born that way.

In my experience, very, very few children have no conscience, or totally lack the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Many, many children frankly have had little or no experience with adults who act responsibly, and to be honest, this an equal opportunity phenomenon, meaning that children who act inappropriately are from the entire spectrum of income levels. How children act is most often a function of how they are treated. They are not born acting inappropriately, most often they are modeling on the adult with whom they are or would like to be the closest. A good example is expressing anger. Many children don’t have a vocabulary for anger. Their only experience is with adults who when they are angry, hit other adults or children.

What I have come to believe is that to be most helpful, we have to stop calling them good or bad (frankly, it wouldn’t hurt if stopped calling adults good or bad). It’s nothing but a way of pigeonholing them and often not wanting to deal with them. What is more helpful is to speak to a youngster’s behavior. It’s helpful to let a youngster know what’s in and out of bounds, make it clear that there consequences, positive and negative, for behavior, and to try to be consistent in setting boundaries and giving consequences. It’s not easy, but very important.

Throw Away Kids. I don’t think that there was a week in my professional experience when I didn’t hear youngsters being described as hopeless. Statements like, “what do you expect, look at the kid’s parents” or “what do you expect, look at the kid’s brother and sister” are used to categorize students as throw aways, meaning there’s nothing we can do to help them. To me, saying that a youngster can’t be helped is the worst thing we can do as educators, and as adults.

What we need to do is to go back and look at how the youngster got to where they are. Having many expulsion requests every year I made it a practice to review the child’s cumulative folder, or record going back to kindergarten. Almost without fail, each of the youngsters recommended for expulsion had a traumatic experience somewhere between second and sixth grade. The trauma may have been parents divorcing, a significant other to the youngster like a grandparent dying, the death of a sibling, physical, emotional or sexual abuse. In most cases, the event was identified, but no assistance was offered.

In one instance, a middle schooler tried to commit alcoholic suicide in the hallway of the schools. He was referred for expulsion for violating the district’s alcohol policy. Digging into his file, I found that he had untreated suicidal tendencies and clinical depression. The youngster was also assaulting young women and smoking marijuana. His psychological file revealed that he had been sexually abused by his father for six years and had watched his mother almost beaten to death for several years. It took me almost nine months to get the youngster into a residential treatment program. When I went to court, the state youth workers said that they had never seen a superintendent come there.

With all that I have said, I love working in urban schools, with students, staff and parents. Can it be frustrating, yes. Can it be exhilarating, absolutely. The appreciation that students have when you just show up, let’s say at the away games of a women’s basketball team is simple and sincere. The kids know that you’re there. When you walk the halls and say hello, the kids know that you’re there, even if they just grunt in acknowledgment. When you can help a student achieve his dream like attending the

U.S. Naval Academy and then he stays in touch with you, and lets you know how much they appreciate your stepping up on their behalf. To me, there's nothing more rewarding.