

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: EXPECTATIONS AND ADULT BEHAVIOR

Many of the critiques of education reform focus on the impact of negative effects of testing, narrowly defined accountability for teachers, and undue corporate influence on the quality of teaching and learning in schools. All of these criticisms have validity. But these critics do not have an answer for what it takes to improve student achievement, especially for low income students. My answer to the question of what it takes to improve student achievement is that two things make the most difference: expectations and adult behavior.

You get what you expect from students. In each of these districts in which I have taught or had a leadership role, there was a prevailing sense among too many staff and community members that low income and minority students could not do well. In each of these districts we were able to significantly raise student achievement by confronting this mistaken attitude through a combination of setting high standards, training staff and administrators on how to improve student achievement in the classroom holding people accountable.

Setting high standards meant doing away with graduation without being able to read, write and do math. Connecticut and many states still don't have literacy standards for graduation. Too many still only require passing classes (with D's) to earn a minimum number of credits. The School Board in New London, CT agreed to change the policy and require literacy skills. The drop-out rate decreased! More students "on the bubble" were working harder (as were the teachers). And New London High School was recognized by U.S. News and World Report as one of the best in the U.S for improving student achievement.

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. Hundreds of parents have no idea of how to address their children's behavior or failure in school and are frustrated that they are unable to help.

All the evidence I've seen says that parent involvement is a wonderful addition to student success when it is available. But children can succeed, when parents aren't involved in school. Helping parents to understand how they can help their children is always a great idea. But that assistance must be done in the context of understanding the instability of many families, that most parents have to work and that often when conferences and help are offered to parents, they have to be at work.

The key to improving student achievement is changing adult behavior. Setting high expectations means that all the adults in schools need to accept nothing less than a maximum effort from students. One of the best teachers I've ever seen teaches math in New London. I was observing in this class when a student she called on said, "I didn't do my homework." She responded, "Troy, come to the whiteboard and we will work out the problem together." If students said they didn't understand, if they said they didn't know how, she wouldn't let them opt out. That is teaching.

As teachers set high expectations for students, we set high expectations for teachers. But there are a significant number of teachers and administrators who didn't have the privilege of a first class education in how to teach, and continuing education has been woefully inadequate. People can't do what they

were never taught. So first we had to teach administrators what effective teaching looks like. At the same time we worked with the teachers' union to create a high standard of effective teaching and an evaluation system that was fair. And then administrators and teachers worked together to implement effective teaching in classrooms. This project took 3 years to fully implement. Dave Iler, who taught English/Language Arts at New London's Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School, was one of the teachers who took full advantage of the opportunity to improve his quality of teaching.

In the April 10, 2012 (New London) Day article, "Evaluation plan imposes professional standards on New London teachers," Mr. Iler stated: "I didn't have the skill set ... to really know how to make my students as successful as they could be. The article then noted, "Iler is praising the system's two-year-old teacher evaluation and professional development system...Through intensive, almost daily, support from the school district's literacy coaches, Iler has made a '180-degree shift' in his teaching."

Improving student behavior. Adults can dramatically improve student behavior by taking several steps. 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.

We need to be consistent as adults. If 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.

How children act is most often a function of how they are treated. They are not born acting inappropriately, most often they are modeling 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.

Throw Away Kids. Facing 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.

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, then he stays in touch with you, and lets you know how much he appreciates your stepping up on his behalf. To me, there's nothing more rewarding