

Do You Really Care About Me?

Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Dennis G. Queen

How many times have we heard a teacher say, "Just suspend him," knowing full well that when the suspension period ends, the student will return and most likely exhibit the same behavior if not worse? There is no easy answer to the dilemma of maintaining a safe and orderly school environment while having to deal with unruly and disruptive students.

Schools struggle to put a framework for academic success in place without reaching out to understand the underlying causes of disruptions and poor academic performance. A framework provides the parameters in which students and staff are expected to operate, including rules, expectations, procedures, and consequences for violations. But once these structures are developed, communicated, and in place, what do we do then?

Simply to assume that the structures will work is a bit naive. This attitude forces us to become reactive in dealing with disruptive students, meaning that we wait for something to occur, then react to it. Being reactive tends to increase disruptions and suspensions, leading to a poor school climate in which academics become secondary due to the amount of time invested in discipline.

So how do we become proactive in maintaining a safe and orderly school, where every child is afforded the opportunity for success? Again, there is no easy answer. Perhaps we should explore the underlying causes of student behaviors and lack of engagement. We hear about building relationships and about how important relationships are in education. Motivational speaker Zig Zigler says, "You never know when a moment and a few sincere words can have an impact on a life." That has never been truer than when working with students. Educators are in a position to shape the hearts and minds of the students

they teach, and how educators work with students during difficult times often impacts their future.

Now, don't get me wrong. As a former law enforcement officer, I tend to take a more direct approach with students, and I was once described as a "compassionate hard ass" in dealing with staff and students. But we must all remember that as true educators, we are counselors as well as administrators. It is our role to build relationships with all students and seek to understand them and their cultural, economic, social, and academic needs. We must take the time to go the extra mile. Attending ballgames as well other activities that students are involved in demonstrates a level of caring as well. We have all heard the adage that students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. This is absolutely true.

A Design for Success

At my school, we believe that "Achievement Is By Design." Whether we are working to increase academic achievement, parent engagement, and instructional equity, or reducing student suspensions and academic ineligibility, we attempt to design success in all of our initiatives.

One of our designs is to move our staff members from being just teachers to becoming educators. A teacher is defined as "one that teaches, especially one whose occupation is to instruct." An educator, on the other hand, is defined as "a student of the theory and practice of education." As one can see, educators reach deep within the student and truly work with the whole child. As educators, we have to move from the old-school philosophy of "I taught it and they didn't get it" to reaching out to students and working to make life changes within each one.

Most disruptive outbursts can be avoided if educators take the time to connect with students. Granted, there are some students who choose not to be reached, but nevertheless we must work to build relationships and treat all students as if they were our own children. Effort goes a long way in our classrooms.

As proactive educators, we should work to illuminate, enlighten, empower, and inspire all students. If we are to see fewer suspensions, greater academic achievement, and student success, we must change our approach and expectations for instruction. Our teachers must re-evaluate their educational philosophy.

Public education has been grappling with the issue of safe schools for some time and, with the direction that society seems to be headed, this issue will not go away. The days of disciplining students for chewing gum and throwing paper across the room have ended. Today's schools face more serious incidents that are often violent. Until we decide to engage students in learning, promote positive avenues to excellence, and devote the time necessary to become part of their lives, we will continue to fight the good fight with little success.

Educators must take the time to engage students in meaningful discourse that brings out the best that they have to offer. If we do not, we will continue to see problematic results and wholesale suspensions. When educators truly invest their time and energy in this way, they will see increased student achievement, fewer suspensions, and greater community support.

We take risks with almost everything we do in education. It is time to take a risk in reaching deep into the hearts of our students and encouraging them to develop the best that they have to offer. To do this, we must be willing to reach deep into our own hearts. We need to let all students know that we do care about them. As I tell my staff, "Make it happen!"

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How do the issues brought up by the author's initial query, "do you really care about me?" affect student discipline and academic achievement?
2. What is our school's educational philosophy when it comes to discipline?
3. How can we be more proactive in maintaining a safe and orderly school?
4. What will we need to change about our school culture to ensure that it inspires positive behavior?