

Focus on Student Assets, Not Deficits

As educators, our primary purpose is to provide all students with the necessary tools for their success. However, with state accountability pressures to increase student achievement, it is easy for us to lose sight of why we do what we do. I, too, fell prey to succumbing to the pressures of today's school environment, until an "aha moment" renewed my sense of purpose and pride in the work I do.

A Rekindled Purpose

While working on a back-to-school presentation for teachers two years ago, I wanted to incorporate a personal touch that would hopefully motivate us to continue the work we were doing. As teachers in a Title I school, we had become accustomed to the challenges presented by students who live in poverty. Most teachers in Title I schools can list off a host of challenges students face that carry over into the classroom. The challenges include a lack of background knowledge, academic deficits, inconsistent discipline at home, poor attendance, and low levels of parent involvement. I thought the only way these students could be successful was for them to adhere to our teachings and the expectations that we held for them. At the time, I generally viewed students as children in need of saving from their current states.

In preparing for my teacher presentation, I reminisced on my own elementary school education at Sabal Palm Elementary in Florida's Miami-Dade County. My memory of the school consisted of an old building with teachers who were nothing less than phenomenal. I remember in kindergarten playing the role of the father of the bride in the marriage of Q and U. The teachers took the time to host a mock wedding for us to understand that the letters Q and U always belong together. There was even a motorized child-sized car available for the groom to drive the bride away.

That was my earliest memory of elementary school. As I got older, I had the opportunity to learn Spanish, most of which I have since forgotten. I also

remember one of my teachers teaching us the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, watching parts of the mini-series *Roots* to learn about the American experience, and going on field trips to a variety of locations to learn about important places in our local community.

As I put the finishing touches on my presentation, I did a little bit of research to try to find class pictures from my elementary school years. I found a picture of another classroom taken the same year I graduated. What caught my attention was the number of students in the classroom: 36 present and one absent. I stared at the picture for a while, thinking back to the 22 fifth-grade students who I taught the year before and pondering how I may have fared with an additional 15 students added into the mix. With my curiosity piqued, I pulled demographic data from the state accountability office and discovered that, when I attended, the school was 96 percent minority and 86 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunch.


Discovering the demographic information of my elementary school allowed me to put things in perspective. Based on statistics alone, my elementary school would have been considered a high-need school. However, it certainly didn't feel high need. It is one thing to work in a Title I school to help "save students from themselves," and it's another to realize that you are a product of such a school. When I was in school, I did not feel like I needed to be saved. While I will never know what conversations my teachers had about us students in the teachers' lounge, I am glad that they believed

in the work they were doing every day. My teachers invested their belief—the belief that we students could accomplish whatever we dreamed to accomplish in spite of any real or imagined challenge that we faced.

This new knowledge of my own elementary school experience rekindled my purpose and sense of pride in the work I do. At the conclusion of the back-to-school teacher presentation, I shared my personal revelation with the teachers as a reminder that students' demographics do not make them who they are. Sadly, I believe educators in Title I schools, while well meaning, fall into the trap of focusing on students' deficits as a way to shirk responsibility for their students' learning. When students do not respond to our instruction, do we reflect on our practices or blame the students or parents for our students' poor performance? I do not say that to romanticize the job of teachers in Title I schools. But having taught at a Title I school, I have come to learn that more is gained by focusing on the assets and strengths that students bring into our classrooms.

Simply Believe

Now as an assistant principal of a Title I school, I have redefined my beliefs and purpose for the work I do. I firmly believe that all students can learn, without exception. I believe the most impactful thing a Title I school principal can do is to challenge deficit beliefs about students and families, and encourage asset thinking. I try to model this daily in my school.

We do not ignore our 97 percent free or reduced-price lunch rate; but since we cannot change it, we choose to focus on the things we can control to improve our students' learning. We continue to focus on providing students with an engaging data-driven curriculum that is responsive to their individual needs. And even more important, we believe that students in our school are future somebodies. We believe; therefore, they achieve. 

David Sanon is an assistant principal in Florida's Lee County School District.