



There Oughta Be a Law

Everyone could learn from a year spent with elementary school students

By *Dennis Tynan*

After completing my first year of training as an elementary school vice principal, I think that the U.S. needs to pass a new law that requires every person in America to work in an elementary school for at least one year. And as a former high school social studies teacher, I think that folks working in high schools might benefit from some time in an elementary school more than anyone else.

The school administrator preparation program in my state, Hawaii,

attempts to place teacher candidates into vice principal trainee positions in schools of a different level than what we taught previously. This is because the Hawaii School Administrator license is K–12, and it is issued after a successful first-year placement. When I was given my training placement this past fall, I thought I could endure just one year with the little ones and return to what I believed to be the far more important work of molding

adolescents into high school graduates the following year.

I learned so many things working in an elementary school, however, that I think our country would be a better place if every man, woman, and child had the kind of opportunity I had. Just in case my proposed law never materializes, I thought I'd share a few of the insights I gained:

- **Hugs are awesome.** And elementary-age kids love to hug!


As someone who likes his personal space, I was warned about this aspect of elementary school culture, but since have come to look forward to getting and giving hugs more than any other part of my day. Sometimes it's because of something you did, sometimes not; it doesn't seem to matter. What I learned is that there is something very powerful about making that connection—literally—with another human being, and I think we would be a better country if we all just did that more often.

- **“Poopy-head” is a serious cuss word.** Wouldn't that be a nice change from all the harsh words we hear in many of our workplaces, on television, at the mall, in the movies, and so on? I, for one, could use more days without a liberal sprinkling of “F-bombs” and the mean-spiritedness that has infiltrated our national discourse. I'm not saying elementary kids aren't occasionally mean, but they often exhibit a kindness that I would love to see carry over into many other aspects of American culture.
- **Imperfections are forgiven liberally.** One of the things I do when students are referred to the office for misbehavior is to have them go through the process of apologizing to the person they hurt and specifically ask for forgiveness. I have come to believe that being forgiven by another human being for an imperfection can be an incredibly healing experience. Better still, young kids appear almost always eager to forgive everyone; it's the adults who have a more difficult time releasing our hard feelings. I would love to see us get better at forgiving those who hurt us, whether the hurt is intentional or not.
- **Kids are nonpartisan.** People in our country appear to be growing further and further apart.

Many people are creating echo chambers made up only of others who think and act like they do. I might have been guilty of this myself in the past. Nevertheless, there is something refreshingly apolitical about an elementary school experience, and I'm pretty sure my kids don't give a hoot about whom you voted for. Being around elementary students would help us to remember to be more tolerant of each other's viewpoints.

- **Humans can go a full day without using their phones.** It is refreshing to walk around campus and not see electronic devices everywhere. They are absent from classrooms, and I don't see them at lunch or recess, either. I know many schools have a no-phone rule like ours, but elementary

students actually follow it. I confiscated only one phone last year! Our society could benefit from paying a little less attention to devices and a little more to personal interaction.

Passing a law mandating that everyone spend a year in an elementary school is never going to happen. But I can't help but wonder—based on my own experience in a positive, student-focused school that's concerned with providing a strong foundation for kids' future—whether the whole country wouldn't be better off if everyone had the chance to learn some of these important life lessons from our elementary students themselves. 

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