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Appreciating Today's Students

We estimate that aggregate expenditures by 15- to 24-year-olds in the 15 urban areas with the highest concentration of multicultural youth will total \$203 billion in 2007. This represents cumulative growth of 26.7%. (Montuori, 2003)

A 2004 study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that Hispanic and African-American males had the lowest rates of literary reading, at 18% and 30% respectively. Though reading rates were falling for all students, from 1992 to 2002 African Americans had the largest decline, from 45.6% to 37.1%. (Literary reading in dramatic decline, 2004)



In order to help you bring your best stuff every day, this chapter will teach you how to do the following:

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- Understand Today's Students and Today's Schools
- Understand the Power of Peer Influence
- Understand Media Influence
- Understand Families
- Have an Effective Team
- Appreciate Today's Students
- Have Belief and Hope

In today's data-happy era of accountability, testing, and No Child Left Behind, the most astonishing statistic in the whole field of education is the fact that, according to a *Time* article titled "Dropout Nation," 30% of America's high school students will leave high school without graduating. For Latinos and African Americans, the rate approaches an alarming 50%. Virtually no community, small or large, rural or urban, has escaped the problem (Thornburgh, 2006).

To make matters worse, at least a million illiterate students graduate from America's high schools each year. This means that these students cannot read, write, or use numbers sufficiently to get along in our society. According to the *Time* article, 13% of all American 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate; among minority students, the rate climbs to 40%. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that our educational system has already left us with 24 million functional illiterates. These are not students who never went to school; these are students who, for the most part, have spent 8–12 years in our public schools (Thornburgh, 2006).

We are beyond the crisis point and must act quickly to combat the mediocrity that exists in our classrooms. But, in order for us to act, we must realize that we've been acted on by the ills of society. The damage done to our children by the breakdown of the American family is at the very core of our dilemma (The Center for Reclaiming America, 1997). Before we can begin to go forward, we must look back over time and identify the core elements and beliefs that have mysteriously vanished, leaving the foundation of our students' security broken.

When I became a principal in the early 1990s, my staff and I began looking at our competition. We learned that we were

not competing with other schools in our district or in other districts, but with the "home invasion" of our society and students as a whole. From our research, we identified five sources that strongly influence children (in decreasing order of negative influence):

- Television/Media
- Peers
- Church
- School
- Home

We then developed a plan to combat or offset the power of the negative influences by moving from understanding the problems to creating solutions for all learners in our school. For many of us involved, it came down to remembering the major influences in our lives as children and how there was always a choice to be made. Unfortunately, many students today are making negative choices and receiving negative consequences as a result.

Understanding our past is important because it allows us to understand the changes that have occurred, as well as their impact on society and our schools.



From the list above, in what order did the major influences in your childhood fall? What other influences shaped your childhood?

UNDERSTAND TODAY'S STUDENTS AND TODAY'S SCHOOLS

Office referrals in schools are increasing each year. In large part, students are angry at the adults in their lives who continue to disappoint them. This anger grows at school every day that someone says or does something to irritate them further. When students hold feelings in long enough, those feelings usually don't manifest in a manner we'd like. The first person to confront today's students will in turn be confronted. Therefore, it is

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important for us to create win-win situations with our students. The more win-win situations we're able to create, the more deposits we make into that relationship with our students. We all know what happens when we make deposits. There may also be times when we need to make a withdrawal. Understanding what students are going through will give us opportunities to deliver better quality education to each one of our students.

Today's School

Today, we talk about "vision," which is the order of business in schools. Unfortunately, in some schools, that vision is blurred. While participating in research, many students and teachers expressed their desire for better school conditions (Peters, 2006). The common theme was they both desired a safe and secure environment, caring adults or students, and an opportunity to teach or learn. When we look at this, the answer seems simple, doesn't it? If the teachers and students want the same thing, then why is it so hard to produce in our schools? However, I am a firm believer that not enough students and, yes, teachers desire the same thing.

Schools tend to have elaborately written vision and mission statements hanging on their walls; they are so well written and sound so good, but the alarming fact is that teachers, students, staff, and parents are unaware of their significance. We should all adopt the same mission: No Child Left Out!

There is so much we can learn from small learning communities (which, by the way, existed long ago), courageous leadership, differentiated instructional approaches, curriculum mapping, and effective school cultures, but we must first develop great relationships with our students and other educators within our school because good is no longer good enough to produce schools of quality.

UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF PEER INFLUENCE

Peer groups provide one of the strongest influences available to our students today and continue to gain power in a society

that appears to pay more attention to money and fame than to whether a child can read and write.

The nation's attention has long been captured by the plight of increasing numbers of students in circumstances that place them at risk of educational failure, particularly in inner-city communities. People in these communities face poverty, lack of employment opportunities, poor health care, and crime, all of which jeopardize quality of life.

In years past, older siblings, friends of the family, church members, responsible teens, and programs such as the YMCA provided an extension of the family's core support system. Younger brothers and sisters looked up to their older siblings and parents had high expectations for their children despite the shortage of money or material possessions. Parents who lacked a formal education wanted more for their children. In the worst case scenario, young people who made bad decisions would reflect and try harder to make the right one the next time they were faced with a similar situation. Today, rap stars, negative peer influence, promiscuous teens, and gangs team up with television and media influences to make an indelible imprint into the hearts, minds, and spirits of today's students (Powell, 2007). In some school communities, gang members have replaced brothers and sisters as role models, providing consistent patterns of behavior that provide a false sense of trust and family. Today, a bad choice can end in death, with no second chances.

Although some households continue to struggle to put food on the table and clothes on the backs of young children in the home, the American retail economy experienced a 17.4% increase in sales in 2003, which can be traced directly to the spending of urban and inner-city youth as they accumulate new sneakers, jewelry, stylish clothing, and other material possessions they define as "necessities" (Montuori, 2003).

Students today struggle to develop and maintain an identity separate from the identity their peers create for them. According to many of the students, the pressure is unbelievable at times. Contrary to the picture painted by the media,

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this issue does not only affect poor, urban students—middle- and upper-class students are affected as well. One U.S. school district with a median household income of approximately \$300,000 a year also has one of the highest rates of suicide among its students entering high school.

UNDERSTAND MEDIA INFLUENCE

Every student entering a school today is influenced greatly by television and other media outlets like never before in history. On average, our students are watching television and DVDs, playing video games, listening to iPods, text messaging, surfing the Internet, or being influenced by other associated outlets 30 hours or more a week (Davison, Francis, & Birch, 2005). Imagine the impact of doing anything 30 plus hours a week! It is difficult to separate and rank these major influences in terms of which has the most damaging impact on our students' lives. More important, there is an increasing need for us to understand the collective power of these influences. In the past, families watched television programs together to gain knowledge and understanding or to be entertained through wholesome content. The programs were appropriate for children and often provided insight into a subject for later discussion by viewers. There were also a limited number of channels for public viewing pleasure.

Today, however, many households receive countless television programs that offer a wide array of content. And aside from television, Web surfing, chat rooms, and blogs are popular with today's youth. Although some of the content on the Internet is not appropriate for our students, they are viewing it at an alarming rate. The negative impact of this media consumption could be underrated because the jury is still out on the number of students making decisions based on what they saw or heard on television or a computer. The influence is steady, consistent, and powerful. The images can be more harmful to students who are too young to understand them. The fantasy of television and technology becomes the reality of many of our students.

As schools, we have very little control over the amount of time our students watch television or the content of what they watch, but we do have a great influence over what they experience when they are with us. Over time, I have become convinced that we spend enough time with them to make a significant impact on their lives; we can help them become human beings who seek knowledge and understanding of how the world really works and how they can play a key role in making it a better place.

Education is the only way we will ever be free.

UNDERSTAND FAMILIES

The home environment should be the most influential of all to our students. It provides an abundance of resources even in families of limited economic means or those facing hardships such as divorce, death, or chronic illness. Parents serve as children's first teachers and should provide knowledge about the world as well as functional connections to the larger community. However, what is expected is not always provided.

A positive family life is incredibly important for children's well-being.

Short-term prospective studies demonstrate that many family-related factors protect against adversity, including a positive parent-child relationship, family cohesion, warmth, assigned chores, responsibilities for the family's well-being, an absence of discord, and other secure childhood attachments. Other family attributes associated with school success include emphasis on good attendance, high expectations, consistent practices, assistance with homework, and reading to children daily. But many of our students do not have this family foundation in place, and many are also attempting to provide these elements to their younger siblings as well as extended family members.

Many students are resilient and determined in many respects to make it in the world; they show an amazing ability to keep going regardless of all that's happening around



What are other influences that have affected today's students?

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them. And we in the schools can help. Even without strong families, there is always hope for our students and schools as long as there are knowledgeable, caring adults rallying around them and believing in them. To produce award-winning schools, it is important that educators believe in educating students regardless of their family backgrounds, how they look, or where they are from. We must believe in unconditional positive regard: failure is not an option for any student. The blueprint for our success may differ from that of others, but it will always center on the most important question educators can ask: "Is it in the best interest of the students?"

HAVE AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

While serving as principal of my first school, which had 1,200 students, I realized the power of peer influence. We found in most instances that 90% of our problems were being caused by 10% of our student population. Understanding this was one of the most important elements in our attempt to turn around a school on a collision course with disaster. We had 135 adults who cared about our students, but they lacked the authority to engage them in a relevant manner.

I will never forget the morning of October 11, 1996, as I stood in the auditorium of our school awaiting the arrival of 30 of our most hardcore students to arrive for a meeting I called. Nothing could have prepared me for what was about to take place as I began requesting help from the very students who were causing the majority of the problems in and around our school. Their first reaction was to ask whether they were going to be suspended again, and I responded that I couldn't suspend them because I needed their help. After recovering from the shock, most of them began to listen to my plan. These students would become part of my management team to assist me in the running of the school. There were certain requirements such as appropriate dress and behavior, but there were also rewards and incentives for them such as eating at restaurants, attending professional sporting events, and

other activities. The hardest group in our school to reach was beginning to come around, and I was hopeful for a moment.

This all changed as I laid out the dress requirement for members of my management team: They all had to wear white shirts and ties. The reaction was as I expected. Several of the students, who, incidentally, were all boys, began shifting in their seats as if to say, "you must be out of your mind." We were eventually able to convince this group of highly disengaged male students that this was best for them and us. Many of these young men came from the troubled Winona Middle School. Unless something intervened to offer them a chance at something better, these young men's past lives would have determined their futures. The group I formed that day, which became known as "The Gentlemen's Club," offered them a chance. On the day of their unveiling, newspaper photographers and reporters were there to greet, interview, and encourage them; the resulting front-page article was titled, "Principal Turns Problems into Princes." There was a buzz around school about this group of students who were making an attempt to collaborate with their school community to make a positive difference.

The Gentlemen's Club

Our school was first in areas you wish to be last in and last in areas you wish to be first in. The school day was characterized by violence, lack of attendance, repeat offenders, and disrespectful students and adults. As principal, I knew we had to find an intervention strategy that worked. After that initial meeting that led to the formation of the Gentlemen's Club, our students, teachers, administrators, and community leaders banded together to make sure our school grounds were safe and that something positive was taking place in each classroom every day. The image of our school began to improve slowly. In fact, after two years the school was in pretty good shape, but we were still not reaching our targeted male students. We could always suspend them, but that would not solve the problem—it would merely change its location from the school to the streets.

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We developed the Gentlemen's Club (GC) to serve as a lifeline to save countless young men from falling through the cracks. The GC would show the students that there was another way to live their lives. It would prove to them that one need not let the rhythm of the streets dictate the tune they will sing in their lives.

Collaboratively, we decided these young men needed a new direction, one that would enlighten them, expose them to a world outside of their own, and ultimately restore hope to their young lives. They needed real mentors, adults who could give them reasons to dream again. Through teacher and staff recommendations, we compiled a list of young men in need of such intervention. The list of nominees included students ranging from class cutters and smokers to gang members and felons. Their disciplinary records (many longer than the wingspan of an NBA player) included offenses for attendance, disrespect, insubordination, harassment, hitting, profanity, disruption, fighting, and assault. Eventually, we narrowed the list to 30 young men who probably would have appeared in every teacher's rogues' gallery. The team of faculty and staff members who volunteered to work with the Gentlemen's Club had their work cut out for them. Fortunately, more help than they ever imagined was headed their way.

In college, most of us had read the now-classic *Dress for Success*, and we knew appearance greatly influenced people's impressions, especially first impressions. But, although a crisp white shirt and a tie can make a remarkable change in one's appearance and the perception of others, you can't wear them if you don't have them. Most of our young men lacked a white shirt, a tie, or the financial resources to acquire them.

Through the efforts of our teachers and school community, the principal's office was soon filled with shirts, ties, and sport coats—every size, shape, and color imaginable. For a while, it seemed we were transforming our offices and conference rooms into men's clothing outlets. After we had the white shirts and ties, and after considerable effort and an equal

amount of spray starch, our fine and practical arts teacher transformed them into "crisp" white shirts. She also developed a handbook of etiquette and conducted "manners workshops" with our club members. Our rallying cry became "there is never an excuse for bad manners."

Our faculty advisor/GC facilitator explained the fine points of knotting a tie. Thanks to the efforts of our school family, on Mondays our 30 select young men would be wearing white shirts and ties to school. Instead of being suspended over and over again, these young men were fast becoming part of our school's management team, using their influence in a positive way.

The key component of the Gentlemen's Club is collaboration. We employed the concept of reciprocal respect in all of our dealings with each other and encouraged our school community to do the same. We began to see immediate results from the teamwork and continued to grow together to understand the term *synergy*. The most powerful lesson for many of the adults in our building was to understand the influence these 30 young male students exerted over their peers. The immediate positive results included better attendance, fewer behavioral problems, and higher academic achievement. More important, we were onto something big in terms of cultivating a more positive school environment that would produce positive results for our students.

APPRECIATE TODAY'S STUDENTS

When teachers and principals exhibit high expectations and concern and serve as appropriate role models, they help militate against the likelihood of academic failure, particularly for students in difficult life circumstances. In order for educators to build productive relationships and connections with students, it is important to understand what is going on in students' lives away from school. Close relationships with educators can reduce students' stress and provide positive

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support throughout difficult times. Educators can not only provide instructional support for academic content and skills, but also serve as confidants and internal support for students. Effective educators help their students develop values and attitudes needed to persevere and excel in their schoolwork. They introduce new and meaningful experiences that make learning interesting and relevant to today's students. The most important thing educators can do is to promote educational resilience by encouraging students to master new experiences, believe in their own efficacy, and take responsibility for their own learning.

We know now that all students, including those with special needs, can surpass high academic standards when provided with relevant and stimulating content and instruction, as well as support, tailored to their individual strengths and learning needs. By contrast, information and subject matter that are disconnected from students' experiences, culture, and needs contribute to their learning problems and ultimately their failure to connect and lack of desire to do so.

However, it is important to remember that the school, the family, or the community acting alone cannot address the multiple risks and adversities that today's generation of students faces. Rather, the resources within these three contexts must be harnessed if educators are to solve the educational, psychological, and social issues that confront families and our students.

The students enrolled in our schools are bright, resilient, eager, and curious, and all have the ability and desire to learn; the problem is reaching out to them in ways that engage them. Researchers using an action research design conducted a series of intervention studies on how schools can be more responsive to today's students by changing their organization and using innovative approaches to service delivery. These studies focused on the areas of (1) implementing small unit organization to improve student engagement, (2) collegiality among staff, and (3) cross-disciplinary collaboration (Oxley, 1994). Findings suggest the importance of the following:

- Changing the mind-set of administrators and the teaching staff on how learning takes place.
- Implementation of coordinated approaches to organizing school resources.
- Staff development that focuses on developing strategies and expertise for meeting the diverse needs of students.

In several schools studied, these changes were found to produce significant improvements in teachers' attitudes toward school and ability to institute radical changes in the service of students, as well as enhanced student motivation and improved student achievement (Nash, n.d.).

Schools are finding themselves in a precarious position, serving both as a delivery system to their students and as the foundation for the delivery to take place. To deliver quality to our students and school community, we must understand that quality is never an accident. It is the result of good intentions and skillful execution; it represents the wisest choice from many alternatives.

Schools truly have more opportunities to become successful when the adults in the school understand the power and authority they have to restore hope to students. Those opportunities are increased each time a teacher recognizes another chance to capture and inspire a student (discussed further in Chapter 7). Students understand and appreciate adults who exhibit caring attitudes toward them and tend to work harder for these adults. In the end, it will not be those who have the most content knowledge whose students soar, it will be those who have content knowledge and the ability to capture and inspire ALL learners.

HAVE BELIEF AND HOPE

There is an element to improving schools and students' academic performance that transcends any method or approach:

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the attitude and spirit of the team. We have to understand that we will never stop learning about ourselves, our students, each other, or the world as a whole. When we embrace the reality of becoming continuous and lifelong learners, there is some humility attached. There is a strong measure of independence in our profession, and it is often difficult to come to terms with the fact that there may be a better way to teach something than the way we have always done it.

Unless:

1. There is a belief that regardless of a school's social or economic circumstances, improvement can occur.
2. "I" becomes "we" and we work collaboratively to accomplish all of our goals, remembering that we are here for our students and keeping their best interests in our minds and hearts.
3. We arrive each morning having confidence in our collective ability, knowing that even if we fall short, there are others teaching beyond their capacity today.
4. Leaders understand the need to consistently validate and affirm teachers and support staff.
5. We constantly remind ourselves that students are our #1 priority.

To help us generate and maintain hope, we must celebrate and elevate success. We should study other schools and systems that have overcome great odds, taking learning about their successes as well as their stumbling blocks. But to be most effective, we must resist the impulse to leap prematurely to solutions before understanding the nature of the problem. Before selecting and elaborating on a potential solution, we should always carefully consider its consistency with what we know from research and our sense of its potential impact on student learning.

As we embark on this remarkable journey, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are in the midst of a hostile takeover—a takeover by certain aspects of society of our students' hearts, minds, and spirits. We must elevate our teaching and communication skills to a level that will lessen the power of the grip that certain harmful parts of the world have on our students. **We must bring our best stuff every day!**



Think of a success you had with a student. Think of a failure you had with a student. How did the situations compare and how were they different?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In years past, the majority of students entered school buildings ready to learn. A loving, caring family created a foundation of consistent practices and expectations that bolstered this state of readiness. Many of today's students lack the foundation many of us had while growing up, and as a result, are influenced heavily by each other as well as today's ever-changing society that values the material aspects of the world far more than education. However, through strong collaboration and positive belief systems, such as the formation of the Gentlemen's Club to transform troublemaking students into leaders, many schools and teachers are helping students succeed by understanding the root of what divides us from them.

Chapter 2 discusses the important role and the characteristics of school leaders. Families and students are different, and so is the role of leaders, which has expanded to the degree that many are calling for increased preparation and training for teachers and administrative staff. Through the development of effective teams who understand and appreciate today's students and families, school leaders are beginning to embrace the changing nature of school leadership.