

1

In the Beginning

Enthusiasm No Substitute for Wisdom

In 1992, public schools were being restructured and the sixth grade was getting ready to transition to middle school. I was getting my teaching credential that summer, and I was eager to find my first teaching job. I had recently found my passion for educating others while teaching English in Japan, and I found that I liked novelty and I even liked the challenge of dealing with a little discomfort. I wanted a real challenge. My goal was to teach in the toughest environment possible. I was looking for a teaching job in Los Angeles, a city that was rebuilding itself after the unrest following the Rodney King verdict. Finding a challenging school environment in Los Angeles was easy. I accepted a job at a “Ten Schools Program” school. The name identified it as one of the 10 lowest performing elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. My new sixth-grade class would really need a caring, dedicated, talented teacher to help move students through the school year, and I was sure I was that teacher.

I was hired on a Thursday and told to start the following Monday. I spent the entire weekend getting my room ready. I placed the desks into pods. I created lively bulletin boards and wrote out a nameplate for each student. I put up a huge tie-dyed sheet on the wall for colorful decoration. I brought in my old stereo so we could have music in our classroom. I wasn’t just ready; I was “pumped.”

I met my new students on the yard and walked them back to class. I asked them to find their nameplates so they could find their seats and sit down quietly. I had rehearsed my opening monologue in my head countless times. Now, it was show time. “Class,” I began, “My name is Jeff. I understand you’ve already had three substitute teachers so far this school

year. I am excited to be your teacher and want you to know that I care about you and your education. I plan on proving this all year long *by staying.*” There—I put it all out to them. What I didn’t realize at that moment was that I had introduced myself by saying *nothing*. I swaggered in with soaring self-confidence and obvious commitment to helping these kids. I assumed that they would sense this and immediately believe it. I did nothing to *demonstrate* any of it.

My class proved this to me by getting out of control very quickly. By my third week, there was a chair fight, a full-on brawl, right in the middle of my classroom. Not knowing what else to do, I went over to a table and kicked it out of frustration—*hard*. Since I am a big, athletic guy, I kicked it hard enough to shatter the table. The kids froze, then jumped back into their seats and remained motionless. I finally had their attention. In the silence, I pointed at the table and yelled, “The next one of you that breathes without my permission will end up like *that*.” Through the haze in my head, I knew there had to be a better way to handle the situation.

I made many critical mistakes in this short time period. The most fundamental mistake I made was that I expected the students to like me. I expected them to *want* to work for me simply because I told them I cared about them. It’s no accident that there are so many generations that have heard the phrase, “Actions speak louder than words.” I didn’t *show* the kids that I cared about them; I *told* them. However, the bigger mistake was that I wasn’t appropriately prepared. Although I planned out my first few words, I didn’t plan beyond that. I thought it wouldn’t be necessary because by then, they would all like me. I failed to map out the first 15 minutes of my introduction. I winged it, and that is a mistake I never made again. Later, we discuss the importance of the first 15 minutes of the semester or year. However, before talking about change, it’s important to see why there is so much reluctance to change.

To Change or Not to Change

Why do teachers resist change? Teachers are often in a position where change is mandated. There is an old joke: “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer is this: “One, but the light bulb really has to want to change.” While the joke may not be so funny, the point it makes is significant.

It’s hard for people to change even when they really do want to change. When told they must, it’s way more difficult. Teachers are often in this situation. They must change every time their state credential committee enacts new standards. They are also accountable to principals, department chairs, and parents.

In addition to being forced to change, the entire process of change is stressful. First, it often forces teachers out of their comfort zones. If you have watched an older teacher who is unfamiliar and uncomfortable with new technology, you know how much resistance you get in moving some teachers out of their comfort zones (Mach, et. al., 2005). When they are told that they must now infuse it, you often see incredibly creative forms of resistance. They are used to closing the door of their classroom and facing their students as the *expert*. They don't want to be thrust into a situation where their middle school students know way more than they do.

In many cases, change means having to learn. I often see university faculty using outdated textbooks because they don't want to go through the effort of having to read a new one and learn a lot of new information. Many teachers don't think the effort necessary for all that head-throbbing learning is worth the rewards they will get from it.

Teachers don't like uncertainty. It's stressful. They like to know what to expect from any action they take. Change eliminates predictability and replaces it with uncertainty. If you walk in the first day of class and present your rules, you know what to expect. If you change and have your students decide what the rules should be, it could work very smoothly, or it could lead to arguments and chaos. It's too big a risk for many teachers.

Wisdom, Not Experience

After I got some experience as a middle school teacher, I learned a lot about how to motivate my kids. One of the things I did was come in an hour before school started and stay an hour after so that I would be available for students who needed my help or just wanted to talk with me. That was one of the ways I learned to show them I cared about them. Many of my students came in just to hang out instead of talking to me about their problems. It was a very effective bonding procedure.

Whenever I run inservice workshops for middle school teachers, I make the suggestion that they try this approach. The first few times I mentioned it, I was surprised to hear the amount of hostility I got from many of them. My first reaction to them was an antagonistic one. Why weren't they more dedicated to their jobs? After talking to many middle school teachers, I changed my view drastically. Just about every one of them went into teaching with the dream of helping kids. Just as a rock will erode after years of water dripping on it, middle school teachers' fantasies erode as unmotivated, discourteous, antagonistic, uninterested middle school students keep dripping on them. I went in looking for an extra hour a day and found *the death of hope*.

To protect themselves, many teachers have learned to withdraw, become guarded, develop armor and fight apathy with apathy. In way too many cases, we see veteran teachers *burned out* and *hanging on* until they can retire. It is our goal to end this vicious cycle and restore the hopes and dreams you had when you first became a teacher, unless you got into it for the money, in which case you're well beyond our help. In this section, we examine the topic of *impression management*.

Impression Management

Impression management looks at two things: (1) how you are judged by others and (2) what factors you can control to help shape those judgments. In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell (2005) writes about a fascinating bit of research on teacher evaluation. College students viewed a 10-second video segment, and based on that short sample, evaluated how much they liked that college professor. Then they took a course from that very teacher and evaluated him again at the end of the course. The two evaluations, 10 seconds before taking the course and at the end of an entire course, showed a correlation of 80%. If that seems amazing, I have omitted a huge fact that makes this study even more amazing. The researchers stripped off the sound on the 10-second video. The students only *saw* the instructor teaching. They didn't even get to *hear* him. *Students make their judgments about you very quickly and accurately.*

When you walk into the room on that first day of school and utter your first few words, your students have pretty much made their decisions about you, and how you will all get along. You literally have a honeymoon period of a few minutes to create the impression that will help or haunt you for a semester or an entire year (Leary, 1996). *What you say, how you say it, and most important, how you back it up, will create that impression. So, how and where should you start?*

The Three Cs for Presenting Yourself to Your Class

Fortunately for you, educational psychologists have researched this question quite a bit, and surprisingly, most agree on where to start. You start with the three Cs: *caring, credibility, and competence*. They have a very interesting relationship to each other.

Caring

Telling students that you care about them is easy, fast, and vastly inadequate by itself. Caring helps only if your students believe that you

really *do* care about them. This vital fact brings the idea of credibility into play.

Credibility

You can tell students anything you want, but for them to believe it, you have to *do* things that make what you told them credible. In the section that follows, we suggest several things you can do to help get students to believe both that you care and that you are competent. I have seen teachers tell kids that they will always be supportive, no matter what. Then, unfortunately, a student does something that really does require an advocate, and the teacher is not there for that student. Credibility has to be *proven repeatedly*, but it can be destroyed with *one* bad act.

Competence

You have to let students know that you are *capable* of delivering what you claim. Once again, you have to tell them *why* you are competent and then back it up to make it credible. You have a responsibility to know your subject matter, and your students can quickly figure out if you really do or if you need to rely on the review questions at the end of the chapter to “get through a lesson” you don’t know much about. One aspect of competence is your ability to let students know your strengths and weaknesses. If a student asks you a question you don’t know the answer to, don’t fake it. Admit it, then do your research and come in the next day with the answer. Use this experience to inform students about how you went about doing your research to find the answer. You can turn not knowing something into an inspiring life and school lesson.

All three Cs are interrelated and must come out in the first 15 minutes of presenting yourself to your class. Remember that *first impressions are created very quickly*. Begin by letting students know that you care about them. Caring is one of the most powerful forces operating in the classroom. If your students believe you care about them, you can motivate them. If they believe that you don’t care about them, most attempts you make to motivate them will be an exercise in futility. The question becomes this: “How can you persuade your students to accept the idea that you care about them?”

A good way to begin is by telling them that you care about them. But, if you do that, you must *immediately* back it up. Although I was there an hour before and after class, you can start with just 15 minutes. Let your students know that if *any* of them need help or just want to talk, you will be there for them. Yes, it’s an extra half hour of your time each day, but it speaks volumes about your sincerity. Would a half hour a day be worth plummeting discipline problems and a motivated

classroom? Remember that it takes two to stop the vicious cycle. This is the beginning of your part.

The First 15 Minutes

One aspect of good teaching is knowing where you want your class to end up. In educational circles, this is referred to as *backwards planning*. Planning out your first 15 minutes should incorporate the following principles:

1. Ask yourself what information and experiences you want the students to have in that initial time period.
2. From there, work backwards to the point where your students first set eyes on you.
3. Make sure that everything you say is backed up with evidence.

The Element of Surprise

Many teachers' first words are a recitation of their classroom rules. In middle school, teachers have to remember that their students transition through six classes a day, unless they are on a block schedule. If kids hear similar messages every period, they will confirm their belief that school is a boring place. Since the messages they keep hearing concern ways to limit their freedom, they also look at it as a confining environment. This is how many school years begin for kids. They come home. A parent asks, "What did you do in school today?" They reply "nothing," and mean it. This is not a pretty start.

In a typical first class, most teachers quickly get to the class rules. They want to act preemptively. Students hear about rules in every class they walk into on that first day.

Here is your first opportunity to surprise them. Most middle school students don't need to hear, "Raise your hand before you speak" or, "You're not allowed to fight or take stuff that doesn't belong to you" on the first day. *They already know all that.* Imagine how shocking it would be if you were to say, "You've been students for years so you know what the basic rules are. Please follow them." By making a simple statement like this you are giving them instant respect and dignity. You are treating them more like the adults they want to believe they are. Communicate that as you all get to know each other better, the most meaningful rules will emerge. On the first day, surprise them by beginning with your *vision statement* instead of your rules.

If you are like most middle school teachers, you have focused on the immediate: *survival*. You never sat down and created a vision statement. You were probably just following the lead of your own teachers who never opened up the year with a vision statement either. Most of us teach the way we were taught. This next section will guide you through creating your vision statement.

Creating Your Vision

When I teach a course in graduate school, I open up the semester by telling my students exactly what they will be able to do as a result of taking this course. Then I tell them why I'm qualified to teach this course. I give them my academic history as well as my professional and personal history. I believe that it's valuable for students to know that I view my professorial duties from the perspective of a father, a former middle school teacher, and a professor. I tell them why I love the topic of educational psychology and continue explaining why I think the course can provide answers to their educational questions. I point out the areas of possible confusion in the course and encourage them to ask lots of questions.

Many students believe that asking a question is like saying, "I'm the dumbest person in the room and I'm the only one who can't follow what's going on." I quickly point out that they need to listen carefully for a specific sound immediately after asking a question. Right after a student asks a question, the rest of the class will hear the sound "*phew*" coming out of five or ten relieved students who had the same question, but were too afraid to ask it. I literally say, "Don't limit yourself to *intelligent* questions. Good questions can be as simple as, "Huh?" or "Would you please repeat that?" or "I understood everything you just said, but there's a guy in the back who seems confused, so for his sake, would you please repeat that?" It is essential to make your class environment *safe* for students who need your help.

I end my first 15 minutes by telling students that I want everyone to earn an "A" and that it will be essential for them to help each other get through the course. I put students in peer editing groups during class time to evaluate each other's work before it comes to me. This helps both the editor and the student whose work is being edited. We go over the expectations and guidelines so that they are clear. I also let students know that if they score low on an assignment, they can resubmit it to get the grade they want. I let them know that it's in my best interest to help them learn things well so I don't have to keep regrading their papers. Peer editing and resubmission show students that I use assessment to make sure they learn, not as a way to categorize them with grades. This is another way to demonstrate my level of caring.

My First 15 Minutes

In order for your opening segment to work, there are certain things you need to address to present yourself as caring, credible, and competent. After you welcome students to your class, tell them about your academic history. When I introduced myself to middle schoolers, I always included a funny story about middle school. For example, I lived in fear for 180 days of the sixth grade because of “Dump Day.” On entering middle school, I was told that Dump Day was the day when eighth graders grab sixth graders and throw them into trash cans. Everyday I used to run from my classroom at lunch to a place that I had heard was the “Safe Zone” on campus. I would end fourth period the same way. I would slowly gather my things up. I would go to the door. I would peer out. Then, like a bolt of lightning, I would make a mad dash to the tree in the corner of the yard. I would then breathe a huge sigh of relief knowing I had made it to the “Safe Zone” again. This happened every day. Later, I learned that Dump Day was just an eighth-grade joke, like snipe hunting. The eighth graders had no intention of throwing me in the trash can. But, they had a great show every day around 12:15. I tell stories like this because they bring us together as teacher and students. We know that people like stories, and middle school students are actually people.

In addition to going over your academic history, it is important to tell students why you enjoy the subject you teach. Tell them why you decided to teach the subject and grade level you currently teach. Did you select it when you were in middle school? I suspect that you probably didn’t. If this assumption is correct, remember that few kids in middle school have career aspirations to teach middle school. If you introduced yourself in a way that created a bridge rather than a divide, telling students why you like the subject is just another reason for some of the kids to try to like it as well. Finally, your first 15 minutes should address why the class you teach is relevant for the students *right now*, in today’s world. More important, tell students why it is *personally* relevant to them.

I have found several interesting results from this introduction. First, I get feedback from students, early in the semester, letting me know that they feel like they know me and are more comfortable coming to me than other professors who seem more guarded and standoffish. Self-disclosure is a good way to show caring. Second, they tell me that when I talk about my background, it adds to my credibility. Third, they tell me that they believe I’m there to help them learn. These first 15 minutes are a shrewd investment of your time. However, once the students buy in, you *must* live up to your words.

So, your first 15 minutes are over. The students have a sense about *who* you are, *why* you are there, and have been given reasons for why *they* should be there. Congratulations. You have laid the foundation for a

successful year. Now the work begins. You have to build on the foundation you created during your first 15 minutes.

Getting to Know You

There is a well-known Hollywood actors' joke. An actor is in a conversation and says, "Well, I've talked enough about myself. What do you think about me?" We know that people love to talk about themselves. However, it's really difficult to show caring about your students if you don't know who they are.

You have given them information about you. Now it's their turn to give you information about them. An effective follow-up activity after your first 15 minutes is to get your students to write about themselves. Ask them to answer the four questions that follow. This data will help you learn who your students are under the best circumstances. We all love to brag, and it's best to brag when you think people are *really* listening and interested. We like people who make us feel good about ourselves. Answering these four questions will put your students into a position whereby they can write down what makes them feel good about themselves, to a caring and interested audience—you!

The Four Questions

1. Until now, *how* have you liked school?
2. What are your special talents and gifts?
3. What do you like to do?
4. What do you want to get from this class besides a good grade?

When you get home that day, get comfortable, take out these papers, and read each one carefully. Make sure you are alert and in a good mood as you do this. If your attention starts to drift, take a break and come back to it. This is the beginning of your chance to bond with each student. Because you are doing this as a written exercise, you give your students a chance to write as much about themselves as they want—in private. Because you are the only person who will see these papers, you can guarantee that their information will be kept confidential. As you are well aware, middle school students become embarrassed very easily around their peers. By doing this, you also gather an informal assessment of their writing abilities. Most important, you develop an understanding about each student and can begin to craft a strategy to captivate each one. These strategies all require you to invest some time, but you will make it up by having fewer classroom management problems.

More Daring Caring

There are many additional ways to demonstrate caring to your kids. One of the most important is to make them feel safe in your class.

Safety First

There are some middle schools where physical safety is a concern. Whether it is fear of one-on-one violence, gang violence, physical bullying, emotional bullying or cyber bullying, these issues need to be addressed. If a student ever contacts you about one of these safety issues, it is essential that you take immediate action. Generally, these are schoolwide issues. They must be addressed all the way from the top administrators to the custodial staff and every point in between. In this section, we are more concerned about students' emotional safety.

There are many ways that kids can feel unsafe in your class. When I was in junior high school back in New York, my math teachers wanted to guarantee that we were stripped of any feelings of safety as we entered the room. The more vulnerable we seemed, the more important it was for them to remove any shreds of dignity we might still have left. I guess they assumed because that strategy worked so well in the military, why not use it here? One of their favorite methods was to select kids who didn't seem to be doing well and ask them to write their work on the board.

I can still remember being called on to put my solutions to math problems on the board. I can still feel the back of my neck turn red as I was writing on the board and hearing kids laughing at my work while my back was turned. I used to wish that I never had to turn around and face the class again. As I did turn around, I would swear that I saw a smirk on the face of my teacher as the kids laughed at my solution. Then, the teacher would ask the class how many of them could see something wrong with my work. I watched all those hands raise. Finally, she would call on one of the better students to actually come up and correct my work. This five-minute experience took about an hour in my mind, a long brutal hour. Her name was Mrs. Allerdice. She's probably no longer with us, but in the unlikely event that she is, I hope somebody shows her this page.

Please keep in mind that your kids are going through a huge transition in middle school. Adults are losing their authority; it is being sapped by students' peers. For students, their peers' impressions of them mean everything. If you put them into a position where they will be embarrassed in front of other students, they will hate your school, your class, and of course, you! So what are some things you can do to increase their feelings of safety around you?

Decreasing Their Fear of Detection

There is an abundance of kids with skill deficits in most urban schools. There is an incredible range of reading abilities in any middle school classroom. Asking kids to read aloud is a great way to embarrass many students, if that is your goal, but sarcasm aside: please avoid doing this. It is embarrassing beyond measure for most kids, and it is also incredibly boring for the rest of your students. They have to sit passively and endure bad, choppy, nervous reading. Their only possible source of entertainment is laughing at the kids who don't read well. They can read silently at twice the rate that they can read aloud. There is no reason for this kind of tortuous task.

It is important to make kids feel comfortable when they are learning something new that is difficult. You already know that they will make many mistakes along the way. You have to let them know that you expect them to make mistakes along the way, that it's part of the process and helps them grow. Alerting them to the common mistakes is a great form of scaffolding. The important thing is to make them feel safe to experiment and learn new skills, even if it is very difficult. It's easy to practice your strengths, but very few people like to practice their weaknesses. Remind them that if they don't go through this process, they may end up like Abdul.

The Story of Abdul

I was one of five new students beginning a karate class. There were four of us who were very raw, unskilled, and awkward. And then, there was Abdul. Abdul was also new to karate, but he was an accomplished soccer player. The way a soccer player kicks a ball is very similar to a roundhouse kick in karate. Abdul could put you through a wall if he hit you with his roundhouse kick. Every time we had to fight in class, we prayed. The teacher would call one student's name and that student would stand up. Then he would call a second name. If he called Abdul's name first, we would shudder, hoping to hear any name but ours next.

Every day we would come to class and practice. We learned front kicks, side kicks, roundhouse kicks, crescent kicks, back kicks, and spinning kicks. We looked liked clods, but we kept practicing them every day, and slowly, we got better at all of the kicks. All of us went through this except Abdul. He felt that he was so far above us that he wasn't willing to look foolish trying all those new kicks. The only thing he worked on was his powerful roundhouse kicks.

After a couple of months, we all couldn't wait to fight with Abdul. We knew what he was going to do because he only had one skill. Pretty soon we were beating him up on a regular basis. We were *hoping* to hear our name called after Abdul. Pretty soon, he got tired of being beaten up and quit.

Practice your weaknesses, not just your strengths.

Being Available

We've already suggested that if you came in 15 minutes early and stayed 15 minutes late, you would be more available to your students. Another way to demonstrate your availability is to give them your e-mail address. E-mail is great because it is very unobtrusive in your life. You can read it and respond to it on your own time schedule. It also maintains your students' privacy. They can talk to you without anyone else around. You'll be surprised how many problems you can avoid in class by making yourself *omni-available*.

Being Approachable

I find that when I question many medical doctors about their choice of treatments, they tend to act defensively. Their attitudes seem to say, "I'm the doctor," and that's all that should be necessary. I find this trait shared by too many teachers as well. I think the Pope has enough problems with being infallible; we don't need this burden as teachers. Ironically, making an occasional mistake ingratiates you to your students. You end up appearing human. It ends up increasing the empathy you share with your students. Here are two ways you can increase your approachability: throw in an occasional mistake that students can catch and correct you on and use self-effacing humor.

Making Mistakes

Occasionally misspelling a word on the board is a great way to offer your class an opportunity to correct you. It's a very public mistake. The key is how you accept their criticism. You want to indicate that you understand you are not perfect and that you don't expect perfection from your students either.

Self-Effacing Humor

Self-effacing humor is another powerful technique to make you accessible to your students. Making fun of yourself shows that you don't take yourself too seriously. We did some research recently where we asked teachers to rate their principals on how they used humor. We found that principals who use hostile forms of humor were judged as unapproachable. Those who used self-effacing humor were judged as more approachable.

If you choose to use self-effacing humor, you must use it correctly. The rule is that you can only kid yourself on areas of strength. If you are big and work out a lot, you can make fun of yourself being weak or working

out too much. If you are in bad shape and puny . . . leave the area of strength alone. Self-effacing humor in areas of weakness are perceived as admissions of weakness and make people feel uncomfortable.

Learning Their Names

When I was just in my third year at the university, I was asked to go into a middle school and, in one day, tell the faculty why everything they were doing was wrong and show them that my way was the right way. I was barely 30 years old. I knew I was probably going to be one of the youngest people in the room and that they were going to kill me. I tried to think about tactics to delay their onslaught and decided that I would learn all of their names. You've probably been in situations where you walk into a room and meet 10 or more people. They begin introducing themselves, and by the seventh or eighth person, they all laugh as if to say, "Oh yeah, like you're going to remember all of these names." Sometimes they'll even joke about giving you a quiz at the end, because everyone knows you can't remember that many names. My strategy was to go around the table, have the 20 or so people introduce themselves, and remember their names. I thought this would have two great benefits. One, it would make me appear friendly because I was making an effort to know them, and two, it would surprise them. Maybe they would be impressed thinking I was smart and delay my execution for three or four minutes. So, here's how I did it.

Some people might call this cheating, but I considered it a good use of understanding Paired-Associate Learning (Schneider & Bjorklund, 2003). This is the name psychologists give to flash-card type rote learning. There are three stages. One stage is called *Response Availability*. In this case it meant learning all of their names. I asked for a list of the teachers a few days before and had all their names memorized, even though I didn't know who the names belonged to. It's like kids learning the names of the letters from singing the Alphabet Song. They know that there's a letter called "j" even though they don't know what it looks like.

Another stage is called *Stimulus Discrimination*. In this case, it meant learning what each person looks like. I stared at each teacher as he or she entered the room and kept staring until there was something unique that I could remember about each person. If a child is learning letters by appearance, it's easy to tell an "x" from an "o," but it's difficult to tell a "b" from a "d." I learned what each person looked like so that years from now if I run into one of them at a supermarket I will think, "Hey, there's one of those teachers that wanted to kill me."

So, now I knew their names and I knew what they looked like. There was one more stage left: *Stimulus-Response Pairing*. I had to *link* the name with the face. While they were chatting with each other, I tried to listen for

any of them to use a name to give me a head start. The real work was trying to pair the name with the face during the actual introductions, but two thirds of the work was already done before I got there. They were impressed. Throughout this book you will learn some of the other survival techniques I used that day. The important thing to take away here is that learning kids' names is another way to prove to them that you really do care.

Involving Parents

The more your students' parents are informed about your class, the more likely you will be to get cooperation from home. There are several ways you can keep parents in the loop. One of the best things you can do is to create a class newsletter. Let parents know what you are doing and what they can do if they want to get involved. You can give them tips on how to work with their kids, fundraising news, and samples of their kids' work. If many of the parents don't speak English, you can create a bilingual newsletter. It will be good practice for your students to do the translating.

If you have a parent community that is technology-enabled, and if you or your students have the skills, you can create a class Web site that parents can access whenever they want. If they are fairly low-tech, you can just send letters home every month or so.

In Closing—and Opening

Remember that your students begin to form their opinion of you before you say a word. Right or wrong, they will evaluate your age, your gender, your ethnicity, your clothes, your attractiveness, your physical build, whether you wear glasses, and a few thousand other variables. This process takes a few seconds. Fortunately, during your honeymoon period, you can shape that first impression. A good way to really understand this process is by remembering the experience of going out on a "blind" date. Remember how quickly you determined whether you were happy, disappointed, or needed more information? It took one or two heartbeats. As a closing thought, remember that words do not convince; actions and follow-through do. Middle school students are as committed to data-driven decision-making as we are; they just look for different forms of data.