

News notes

April 2008

Volume 3 Issue 9

Congratulations to KIM FIGGINS! Kim is a dedicated teacher who has worked especially hard this year with a challenge. She increased her professional knowledge of the exceptionally, modified her teaching style, developed a program and stayed the course in a difficult situation. YEA KIM!

Almost all children are eager to learn when they first start school, what happens? (From Ed Leadership March 2008)

Do you have a wounded student? Schools sometimes undermine students' confidence in their ability to learn. Reluctant learners are reluctant for a reason. They often have been wounded by comments from school personnel about their perceived abilities or by specific school practices. Many suffer from lacerations that go unnoticed in school cultures that encourage a stiff upper lip, compliance with group norms, and an uncomplaining acceptance of one's placement in ability groups. Being put in extra classes to make up for deficits and not allowed to take classes of interest reminds me of the old animal school article I read in the 70's.

The short story of that article is that rabbits had to quit hopping classes to take more swimming class because they did not do well in swimming. You get the point. (If anyone has that old article I'd like a copy.)

Education environments have the power to shape self-concept and determine what students think of themselves and their abilities. Some students come to feel that "not learning" is an expression of positive resistance in a system that does not seem to value them or have high expectations for them and often in ways that are unrivaled and often undeserved. (Kohl, 1994) This work suggests how deeply personal, internalized, and often hidden school lacerations are and how directly they relate to reluctance in learning. We need to help wounds heal by:

- o acknowledging school wounds-listening to the student and acknowledging that his/her feelings are real and giving them a place to be heard
- o questioning labels-help student understand that the way schools sort, judge, and classify students need not be a judgment on their lives
- o remind students of their own contributions to school success or failure-remind them that self-discipline, persistence, and ambition are

significant to academic success as much as ability

- o seek professional development-we need to become more skilled at identifying the kinds of learning experiences and challenges that students encounter thus preventing teachers from labeling students and tracking them into situations that provoke learning reluctance.
- o Reflect on how you speak with students-how do you sound to students? Use video analysis to uncover wounding talk about student's ability or unconscious attitudes that slip into conversations

As schools move away from a 19th century model of school, with their rigid classifications of students by ability and their passive, adult-centered teaching and leaning patterns, we must acknowledge that some students have been wounded along the way. All students have the capacity to heal from these wound and by listening to our students attentively and without judgment we can help them heal.

Enroll students for the fall in courses that are challenging and that are needed by the student to become what they have listed on their Transition Plan.

Provide help by answers to students. Next year I plan to focus on para development. Some of you are experts on how to help students without putting them down by giving answers. Please let Margo know if you would like to be a part of this training.

What is beneath the apathy of students and staff? According to Gail Thompson in Ed. Leadership March 2008 it could be several things. Check out the reasons she gave and consider how this fits in your building.

Student perceptions in a low-achieving school:

- Relationships-the quality of students' relationships with their teachers can strongly influence their behavior and their perceptions of school. All students need caring and competent teachers because positive relationships between teachers and students can improve students' achievement and the likelihood that they will attend college (Wimberly, 2002)
- Expectations-the hallmark of high achieving school is a culture of high expectations for students, teachers, staff, administrators and parents. The behavior of the school counselors also convey low expectations in some schools as the choices presented to the student for classes and colleges is limited.

- Instructional practices-teacher quality is clearly shown as one of the most important factors affecting student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teachers in the study perceived their own level of efficacy positively. A large majority (87%) ranked themselves as outstanding; 86% believed that their students viewed them as outstanding; 96% said they were willing to answer questions; and 97% said they were available to give extra help to struggling students. However; their students had a different perception: more than half of the black and Latino students said they wished that they had better teachers. Fewer white students responded this way. Students felt that teachers were impatient with them when they didn't understand an assignment and that their teachers didn't make the coursework comprehensible. They said teachers were not willing to give them extra help and answer their questions.
- Curriculum-many secondary school students view the school curriculum as boring and irrelevant. Textbooks and teachers often ignore, minimize, and misrepresent the history, culture, and contributions of blacks and Latinos it is any wonder they tune out. Most teachers in the study were unaware of the problem. Blacks said that they learned about negative black culture and about slavery but not about positive black people.
- Testing-current testing practices contribute to student apathy. Students complained that they were required to take too many tests. Most did not see the benefit and felt inadequately prepared.
- Discipline-students complained that many teachers unfairly pick on students of color.

What is needed?

The first part is a mind-set work, must be intensive, ongoing, thorough, and done in a safe environment that invites honesty and self-reflection. We need to raise our expectations for students of color. Second, professional development should be targeted at instructional practices. Teachers must patiently answer questions and provide help to all struggling students. Teachers need to make the curriculum interesting and comprehensible and culturally relevant. Teachers must understand why hearing about slavery year after year offends, embarrasses, and angers many black students, and why hearing and reading little about the Latino culture sends a strong message to them as well. Third, we must address discipline and create alternatives for learning instead of punishment.

So how do we motivate the reluctant learner? **Spark enthusiasm, boost confidence,** enthusiasm is contagious, praise students for trying and reassure them often. Create positive experiences routinely.

From practice and tenacity comes improvement, but it doesn't happen unless students believe in their own intelligence and potential. When students believe they have a chance to pass they are more willing to produce. **Encourage argument** because argument motivates and the abilities it cultivates are at the heart of intellectual development, college prep and career advancement. **Build learning around students' experiences.** There are few reluctant learners in classrooms designed this way. **Foster relationships and a love of school** create opportunities for positive relationships between each student and an adult in the student's academic life. **Honor students' cultures** some students did not learn the Mother Goose nursery rhymes they grew up with stories of their grandmothers and grandfathers about injustices, poverty, and shame that their families endured. **Provide structure and feedback-** most students will require some sort of external encouragement to meet their goals. Most will react positively to a deadline for completing work and most want to know how they did on an assignment. Teach students to plan ahead, to defer gratification of their immediate wishes; to work for abstract rewards rather than dollars or donuts.

What about the reluctant teacher? Reluctant teachers often avoid students who do not look, act or talk like them. They categorize students as being at risk, having behavior problems, or being unteachable. Teachers want to make a difference in the world. They love and care about children. They also want a fulfilling job. The reality of teaching today often does not match these expectations. Large classes, standardized testing, mandated curriculum, behavior issues and school bureaucracy can make teaching more stressful than fulfilling. Many teachers (50%) leave in the first five years. Teachers need to create a network of peers to rely on when times are tough. (Really Tri-County 607 could offer you a wealth of peers through email. We should have a fun committee to get together outside of work for FUN!) We need to grab on to those small and all-too-rare expressions of gratitude received from students, parents and administrators. We should recognize the students' world outside the classroom. A note, a joke, a song, or such from their culture stuck on the door is one way to do it. Build relationships and connections with families and communities. Get a bigger tool box for behavior strategies so that discipline is not force and threats. Classroom management is a big issue from the moment the students walks into the classroom there should be an activity to engage them: a warm-up journal topic; a crazy question about a topic, (Do fish sleep?) or a puzzle to solve. Writing the learning objective and agenda for the class on the board each day and the standard indicator being studied, with specific directions helps them transition from one activity to the next. Work until the bell rings. Students who come from chaotic or disorganized homes need this. Teachers need to be "with-it" and remain calm. Big job but the rewards are even bigger.

