

# School Administrators Association of New York State Vanguard

SPRING/  
SUMMER  
2023

Exploring  
Educational  
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**INSIDE**  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
DR. THOMAS GUSKEY



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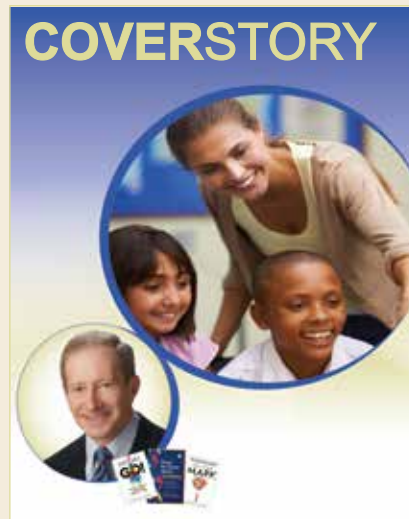
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from practitioners

SPRING/  
SUMMER  
2023

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**BETTER STUDENT EXPERIENCES:**

# Building a Culture of Caring

By Kim M. Smithgall

Here's today's homework assignment: Create optimal learning environments that will motivate students to do their best. If *students* were completing the assignment, they might just turn the tables and offer up a few assignments for their teachers:

- Take the time to get to know me as a person.
- Let me know how I'm doing so I can improve.
- Make learning experiences more relevant and fun.
- Give me the benefit of the doubt (e.g., if I miss class or deadlines or get a low grade).
- Give me another chance (to redo assignments if I get a low grade).
- Do a better job of controlling the class.
- Don't play favorites.

These were some of the top responses to a recent *EdWeek* Research Center survey that asked 13- to 19-year-olds what could be done to make them feel more motivated in school.

Essentially, students indicated that they want a nurturing and equitable place to connect with each other and adults — schools characterized by a caring culture that allows them to take risks, learn, grow, and thrive. “These are very much universal student concerns... and they’re universal human concerns as well,” said Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., executive coach and founding director of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST).

Many of the most popular survey responses reflect what Johnson sees each day as he works with educators and leaders to both celebrate successful schools and help districts improve outcomes for various student populations.

“Students want to feel valued and appreciated and they want to feel safe — both physically and emotionally safe,” he commented. “And then, they want to feel like they have a reasonable likelihood of success. If these concerns are not adequately addressed, the ability or willingness to expend effort is going to be limited.”

The big question is how to get there.

**STARTING AT THE CLASSROOM DOOR**

While the universal concerns can be addressed in a variety of ways depending on grade levels, academic subjects, learning styles, etc., Johnson and other experts see the classroom door as the starting point for schools that are ensuring children are fully engaged and motivated.

“First, as students enter the classroom, teachers are smiling and welcoming the kids, acknowledging children by name. Teachers are asking quick personal questions — for instance, “You had a soccer game yesterday; how did it go?” or “You mentioned last week that your mom was sick; is she feeling better?” Johnson said, “These teachers are building connections. They are showing students that this classroom is not a sterile labo-

ratory or environment. This is a place where human beings are coming together because we care about each other.”

Cobleskill-Richmondville Central School District’s director of teaching and learning Scott McDonald would concur. “One of the core beliefs in our district is ‘Building relationships is paramount to our success.’ Every student needs a trusted adult. Every student deserves to have someone who knows their name. That, to me, is most important,” he commented. “Once we build those relationships, other things start to fall into place.”

**EXPANDING THE RELATIONSHIPS**

Erica Battle, who spent decades as a reading teacher and instructional coach before beginning her latest journey as an educational consultant, built similar relationships with her students — not only making personal connections with them, but encouraging the pupils to get know her, as well.

“Kids want to be known beyond how you see them in their cumulative record. They have hobbies; they have interests,” Battle said, adding that she would use moments of transitional time in her classes to ask students about their lives. “You need to get to know them, but also allow them to know you outside of who you are as their teacher. For example, I would tell my students that although I taught reading, I had to admit that I wasn’t the best speller — but I could use a dictionary. That transparency on my part allowed my students to own up to their deficiencies. It created a type of safety in my classroom.”

For some districts, the culture of caring extends beyond the classroom walls to include adults who may not always be the first ones thought of as top “child influencers.”

“Every adult in your building impacts students in some way. And that means all of us — the cafeteria staff,



the main office staff, ... everybody,” McDonald said.

When McDonald served as his district’s middle school principal, he tapped the daytime custodian to lead a new orientation program for sixth-grade students — yes, the custodian. “It made perfect sense. He has contact with the students every day in every part of the building. He runs after-school clubs. He knows all of the kids by name,” McDonald explained. “It’s important that everybody is invested in the success of our students.”

**MULTIPLE VOICES AND MUTUAL RESPECT**

Once students feel comfortable and accepted as individuals, true engagement in the learning process becomes easier.

“In very successful schools, we often hear student voices more than we hear teacher voices,” Johnson said. “Teachers are creating opportunities for students to talk in small groups, answer questions and express their opinions. And when teachers invite students to discuss — and sometimes debate — ideas, the students are getting the feeling, “Gee, this teacher wants to know what I think and values what I think.”

At the same time, the teacher is still in charge, exhibiting enough control of the environment to ensure students feel safe, Johnson added. “The students know they’re not going to be teased by their teacher or by their peers because this is a teacher who is not going to put up with that. The teacher has made it

**“In very successful schools, we often hear student voices more than we hear teacher voices.”**

– Joseph F. Johnson, Jr.



clear that the classroom culture is one in which everyone values and respects each other," he said.

Erica Battle was very intentional about creating this type of atmosphere in her classes. You can hear the pride in her voice when she relays a story about a Hindu student in her class who felt comfortable enough to ask if he could share information about his religion and culture with his classmates when the day's lesson focused on religion. There was a similar sense of pride evident when Battle talked about English language learners bringing in food from their homelands of Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, and Mexico during celebrations for National Hispanic Heritage Month. "We had mutual respect," she said.

This focus on creating a positive classroom culture led to improvements not only at the classroom level, but also on a larger scale. When Battle started as an instructional coach, the Nashville-based school where she worked was in the bottom ten percent for

achievement. Within two years, it was a reward school for math and literacy.

"That speaks to the intentional things you can do to ensure student growth," Battle commented.

**CULTURE OF LOVE**

Ithaca City School District superintendent Luvelle Brown might describe the process as shifting into what he calls a "culture of love."

"It's not love in the emotional sense," Brown explained. "To be loving is to be trusting and to be committed and caring. It's taken us years to develop this approach. I will say that it's bold and audacious — but that's the culture we're striving for. And having defined it, we can see very clearly that this culture of love is not the default in schools. It's a struggle. If we were loving by default, we wouldn't have the inequities that we have in schools today."

Brown stresses that to be fully effective, this commitment to caring and

trust — this culture of love — must welcome and empower everybody. "Everyone has to be part of the conversation," he said.

For districts like Ithaca and Cobleskill-Richmondville, this means students have a strong voice far beyond the classroom walls. In other words, the defined or emerging culture is much bigger than interactions between teachers and students.

"We have students sit on our strategic planning teams," McDonald said. "And each time we form a committee — even if it's an ad hoc group that isn't planning to meet for a long period of time — we include student voices on those committees."

Similarly, Brown empowers Ithaca students to have a voice in the district. "We're giving agency to young people and blurring the lines between students and staff. In addition to encouraging students to evaluate multiple perspectives and challenging each other in the classroom, we are doing things like asking students to partner



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with us to update the code of conduct," he said. "We're on the fourth iteration of that code of conduct and I think it's one of the most impressive documents we've ever produced."

The district is also asking Ithaca pupils to provide feedback on what they're learning. "We're sending out a memo this week to invite young people in to review case studies and projects that are being considered for the curriculum. We're encouraging them to share their thoughts and rate the content using a rubric. And we're honoring their efforts by paying them for their work," Brown commented. "We want students to see their work and efforts changing the environments they're navigating each and every day."

**NO MAGIC WAND**

Empowering students and enriching their educational experiences clearly motivates them and improves their academic outcomes. But it's a long and extremely difficult process – one that also requires encouraging and supporting educators... so those educators can do the same for students.

"It's not a couple of workshops and 'poof!' the magic happens," Johnson said. "It's about changing school cultures, right? And anytime you're talking about changing an organization's culture, that's a challenging undertaking. It's not something that happens with the wave of a magic wand."

Brown would agree. "It sounds and it feels challenging, and it feels uncomfortable, as well. "But, if we're not uncomfortable, we're not likely engaged," he commented. "In fact, there should be a perpetual state of discomfort. After all, we're trying to eradicate generations of inequities and lack of achievement. We're trying to create a system that's inclusive for everyone."

When Battle works with school districts, she is often helping administrators pinpoint what kind of support educators may need in order to yield those larger systemic changes. "I think we have to recognize that just because

people are dedicated to being a teacher, they may not have the necessary expertise to do so. In the education system today, we're pulling in a lot of second career people to be teachers. They may have been in the business world, for example. They're learning to be teachers while they're teaching," she said.

Johnson has similar experiences in his consulting work. "Teachers will have varying levels of comfort and varying levels of skills when it comes to creating classrooms where all students feel valued and safe and capable of academic success," he said. "So, leaders have to be sensitive to that and sensitive to how they can help teachers create those cultures in which students, regardless of race, regardless of family income, regardless of background or any other demographic characteristic, are going to have a high likelihood of success."

"Leaders also need to provide the professional learning that is applicable to what teachers need," Battle commented. "That learning might be along the lines of effectively running a classroom or having rich and positive interactions with students. Administrators might also pair up new teachers with successful veteran educators or make sure instructional coaches are available."

In Cobleskill-Richmondville, McDonald encourages his teachers to team up and work collaboratively with each other. "The teachers are working together around problems of practice and grade-level content and curriculum," he commented, adding that the educators form strong bonds that ultimately benefit students. "Just by working together with shared beliefs, shared understandings, and even shared nonnegotiables, they are growing and learning strategies to bring into their individual classrooms."

Additionally, both Battle and Johnson advise school principals and

other education leaders to ensure they are giving feedback to teachers. "Sometimes, administrators are doing

... "it's just as important for leaders to know when someone is clearly not on board, when a teacher is not endeavoring to create a positive school culture, they [the leaders] have a responsibility to sit down with that teacher and to help them know what's expected."

walk-throughs, but not following up and providing feedback to teachers on how they did," she said. "Whether the comments are supportive or corrective, we can't discount the power of feedback. How can teachers know if they're interacting well with students or meeting other expectations if no one is giving them feedback?"

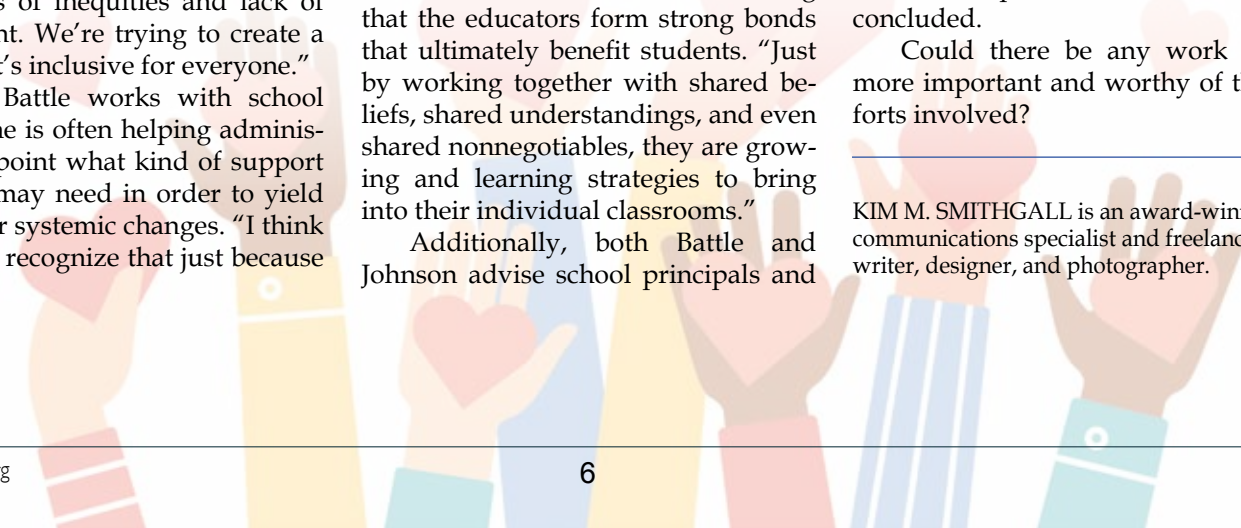
And, sometimes, creating a culture of love takes a little tough love.

"When teachers are making progress and creating positive environments for students, it's important for leaders to be the cheerleaders," Brown said. "And it's just as important for leaders to know when someone is clearly not on board, when a teacher is not endeavoring to create a positive school culture, they [the leaders] have a responsibility to sit down with that teacher and to help them know what's expected."

"We're not just pouring knowledge into a machine. We're educating children. We're educating human beings. And our capacity to do that is directly related to our ability to build relationships where children feel valued, safe, and capable of success," Brown concluded.

Could there be any work that's more important and worthy of the efforts involved?

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.





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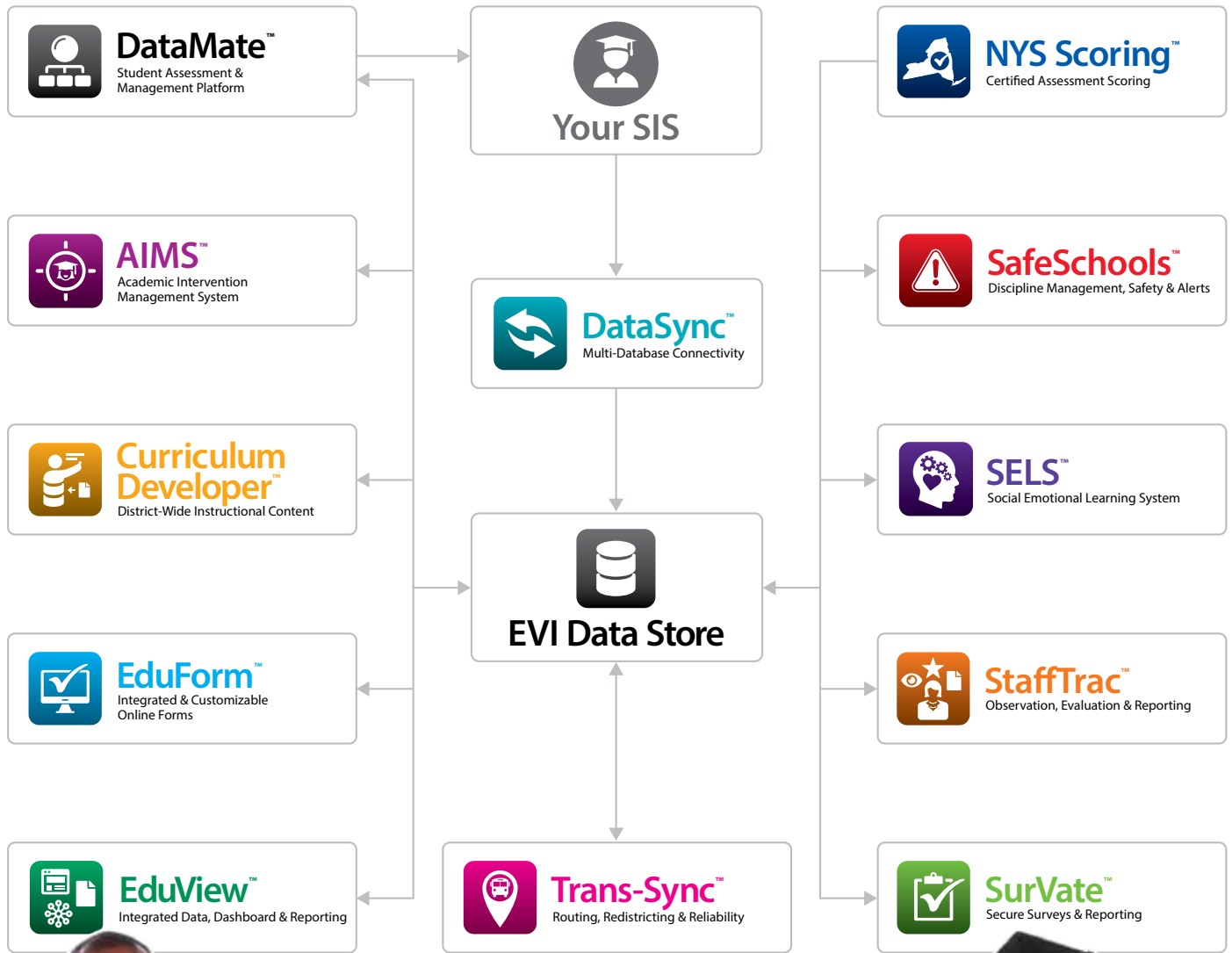
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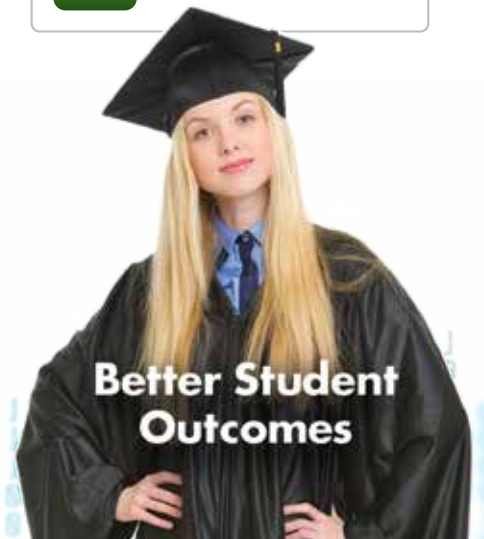
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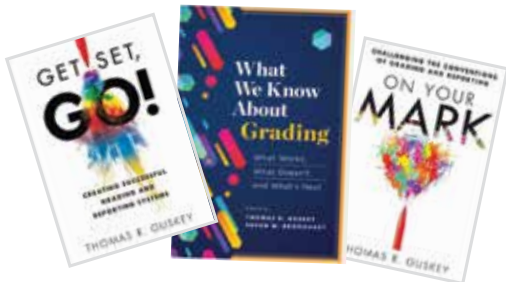
## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. THOMAS GUSKEY

# Making the Grade

By Pat Fontana

Giving a grade to the performance and not to the student is an important step in developing a more meaningful grading system, says Thomas R. Guskey, PhD. Separating responsibility and achievement is another important move toward a safer educational environment that truly encourages student learning.

Dr. Guskey has spent most of his career helping school leaders learn more about ways to improve the grading system. Professor Emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, author, and grading expert, he has identified a number of strategies that can lead school administrators, teachers, students, and students' families to a better understanding of student performance.



In particular, he notes, students and their parents tend to think of grades as being assigned to the student rather than to the student's performance. Changing the mindset from "I'm a C student" to "My performance is at a C level" can be a challenge but it is possible, with some shifts in the way grades are kept and reported. That change needs to occur at all levels, from school leadership to teachers to students and their families, according to Guskey.

When grades are entered in a digital grading system, he finds "that kids and parents are checking their phones three or four times a day to check on their grade." He adds that there is "nothing that we have found that is more detrimental."

### BE CLEAR ABOUT THE PURPOSE

One of the first steps in shifting the grading system and the mindset that accompanies it is to be clear about the purpose of those grades. Guskey says that is "the crux of the matter. People don't agree on the purpose."

There are actually six categories of grade purpose, he explains. "We use grades to communicate information about student learning to parents and families. We communicate information to the students themselves." He adds that "we use grades to identify selective groups of students for certain programs," such as promoting from one grade to the next, getting into honors classes, or assigning to special education classes.

Additionally, Guskey says, grades can have the purpose of providing incentives. He adds that "people argue about this all the time." Grades can also act as major criteria when school leaders are evaluating instructional

programs. Finally, he explains, grades can "document effort or responsibility on the part of the students."

Acknowledging that "all of these could be considered valid," Guskey says that when he presents this information to school faculty, asking them to rank the purposes, he has "yet to find any school where the faculty agree." It is clear that "you can't serve all these purposes with one device." He emphasizes that the "number one issue for students and parents is inconsistency among faculty within the school."

The key is that "schools need to be clear about their purpose," he says, and then "develop a purpose statement that is an introduction to grading policies." Determining and sharing the purpose for the grading system is one of the prerequisites for establishing a standards-based approach or competence-based approach, which Guskey sees as being the future of grading.

Defining the grade purpose will require "sitting down and bringing your faculty together to determine what the focus is ... to have agreement on the purpose." The process involves bringing people with different perspectives together and having everyone put their perspectives on the table. Guskey says it's important to "recognize you have to come together to reach a consensus. Then turn to your policy and practices and see if they align with the purpose."

### MULTIPLE GRADES, NOT ON A CURVE

In traditional grading practices, a student receives one grade at the end of a specific period. That one grade may be required of the technology used to post it. As Guskey notes, "Grading is one area in education where the technology is working against us. Most are based on antiquated systems of grading, on traditional practices." In contrast, "probably the most important factor when it comes to fairness and equity," he explains, is to assign multiple grades based on three areas of criteria: product, process, and progress.

Changing the mindset from "I'm a C student" to "My performance is at a C level" can be a challenge but it is possible, with some shifts in the way grades are kept and reported.

Product refers to the student's academic achievements. The grade for this area would reflect their exams, projects, and reports, for example, as a way of describing "what they have learned and are able to do as a result of their experiences in school."

Process is focused on criteria such as the student's behaviors, efforts, and class participation. It is within this area that the student would receive a grade for turning in homework on time or complying with classroom procedures.

Progress reflects "not where they are but how far they've come." Guskey says that progress and product may be interrelated but that it is possible for a student to show progress without meeting certain goals related to the product. In turn, a student may be able to achieve a high grade in the product criteria but not actually be making discernible progress.

Guskey notes that "problems occur when teachers combine these into a single grade." Assigning multiple grades would ensure that they are separate on a report card and on the transcript. He explains that "if you go to other places around the world and look at their report cards, they've done this for decades." He says he's been told by educational leaders in other countries, "It's easier than what you silly people do in the states."

Students are encouraged to take activities such as homework and class participation more seriously when they receive a grade for these responsibilities that is separate from test scores and other accomplishments. Parents appreciate receiving a "more active profile" of their child's performance. And colleges and universities love the multiple grade option, Guskey says.

He cites an example of a group of schools in Kentucky that had asked for help with changing their grading practices. He says, "We approached it in terms of how can we change the



experience.” To do that, they sent home two different report cards for the first two marking periods. One report card recorded a single grade for each class for the student. The second report card broke the grades out, included the teacher photograph, and had comment sections in which the teacher described what the class worked on in the grading period as well as a sentence or two about the particular student.

At the end of the second grading period, they surveyed the parents to learn which type of report card they would choose to see going forward. Guskey says that “100% of the parents chose the new report card.” He adds, “It’s just better.”

Grading according to the three criteria areas has the added benefit of eliminating the practice of “grading on a curve,” a method of grading according to the student’s standing among classmates. Guskey emphasizes that there are many “negative aspects to grading on the curve. It destroys any sense of collaboration and destroys the relationships of teachers to students.”

### VALEDICTORIANS SAYING GOODBYE

Comparing students to each other when recording grades is also used to determine class rank in many schools still today. Guskey asks, “Why do we do that?” He states that most colleges and universities do not rank their students. The only postsecondary school in New York to use class rank, he points out, is the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Weighted grades have also been used by many schools across the country, to attach more weight to classes labeled advanced or honors than to those of regular classes. It’s been thought that weighted grades would entice more students into those types of classes. However, Guskey says, there is “no evidence that it encourages the student to take more challenging classes.”

The idea of weighted grades goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, he explains. In high schools at the time there were three different tracks for students: academic, vocational, and commercial. The commercial track was for “young women who were going to be secretaries or stenographers. Weighted

grades “were developed to keep those students in the vocational and commercial track from being class valedictorian.” Guskey says that this was a “discriminating policy that we have continued because nobody has asked why we do it.”

The word *valedictorian*, Guskey explains, “means to say farewell. It has nothing to do with achievement.” While noting that “our grading practices are based more on tradition than any other country in the world,” he adds that we “need to reconsider the way we select the valedictorian.”

### REASSESSMENTS

Teens who were surveyed recently by the EdWeek Research Center said that being given a chance to redo an assignment on which they received a “bad grade” would be the most influential factor in helping them feel more motivated at school. Guskey notes, however, that there “must be an incentive for doing well on the first assessment. It needs to be a valuable learning experience.”

He says that “if it doesn’t count, kids won’t do it. As soon as you say to kids it won’t count, they won’t do it.” Guskey points out the many pros and cons of allowing a second chance for students to redo their work, in an article that was just published in *Educational Leadership*, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s (ASCD’s) flagship publication.

He states in the article that it is flawed thinking to argue that giving students a second chance does not prepare them for the “real world,” and he adds that successful professionals have to learn their craft by practicing and making mistakes first. He notes that they “learn from their mistakes and improve their performance.” Students may feel they are in a “do or die” situation when they have “no chance to demonstrate what they learned from previous mistakes.”

One of the practices he recommends avoiding is “failing to provide any incentive for success on initial assessments.” He explains



that the student needs to be able to identify the advantages of preparing and performing well on the initial assignment, beyond “simply avoiding the agony of having to take a reassessment.” He notes that when students understand the mastery learning process and are able to select their enrichment activities, they tend to be more motivated to do well initially, rather than depending on the opportunity for a redo.

Guskey also emphasizes that grades for reassessments should accurately reflect their level of performance. Teachers may tend to place a limit on the possible score for a redo. He argues that this practice defeats the purpose of mastery learning and “it miscommunicates students’ true level of performance.”

### DEVELOPING A MODEL OF CHANGE

Traditional grading practices have been ingrained in the school system for a very long time. How do school leaders make these changes, to reflect more accurate and more equitable grading? Guskey stresses that it has to “start with your purpose.” Engagement is one of the keys to shifting successfully. When dealing with the “why issues, the purpose statement becomes so critical.”

Developing a model of change involves “getting down to a reasonable number of grade categories and multiple grades.” Guskey recommends streamlining the grading categories and eliminating percentage grades. The more grade categories there are, the more subjectivity of grading increases, he notes.



He adds that the “order of change also holds for students.” It’s important to “show kids the strategies where they can be successful and they control the conditions of the change.”

Parents, especially, “want to know why before they can consider what.” He adds that the “mistake is to tell parents what is going to change without giving a rationale for doing it.” Citing the case with the Kentucky school

Guskey says that “everybody agrees that change is important in three different areas.” Those areas are attitudes and beliefs, practice, and students and their learning. He says that “experience changes attitudes and beliefs. Teachers don’t change their attitudes until they see it working.”

system that sent out two sets of report cards for the parents to choose from, Guskey notes, “instead of trying to convince people upfront, we changed the experience and showed them.” It “helps parents understand that what they experienced with grades was maybe not the best practice.”

When developing that model of change, to move the grading system forward so that it reflects accuracy, meaningful, and equity, Guskey stresses that “multiple grading becomes even more important. We need to pull these things out and report them separately.”

---

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

# Articles *and* Books

BY DR. THOMAS GUSKEY

## ON REASSESSMENTS:

“Giving Retakes Their Best Chance to Improve Learning”  
Educational Leadership (ASCD) -  
April 23, 2023

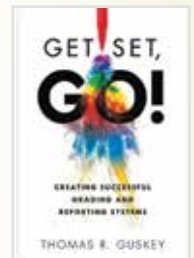
<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/giving-retakes-their-best-chance-to-improve-learning>



## ON CREATING SUCCESSFUL GRADING SYSTEMS:

Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems  
Bloomington, IL: Solution Tree, 2020.

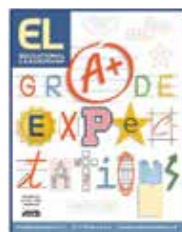
<https://www.solutiontree.com/products/get-set-go.html>



## ON ASSIGNING MULTIPLE GRADES:

“Breaking Up the Grade”  
Educational Leadership (ASCD) -  
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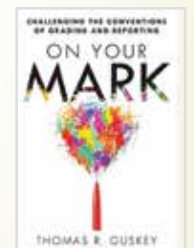
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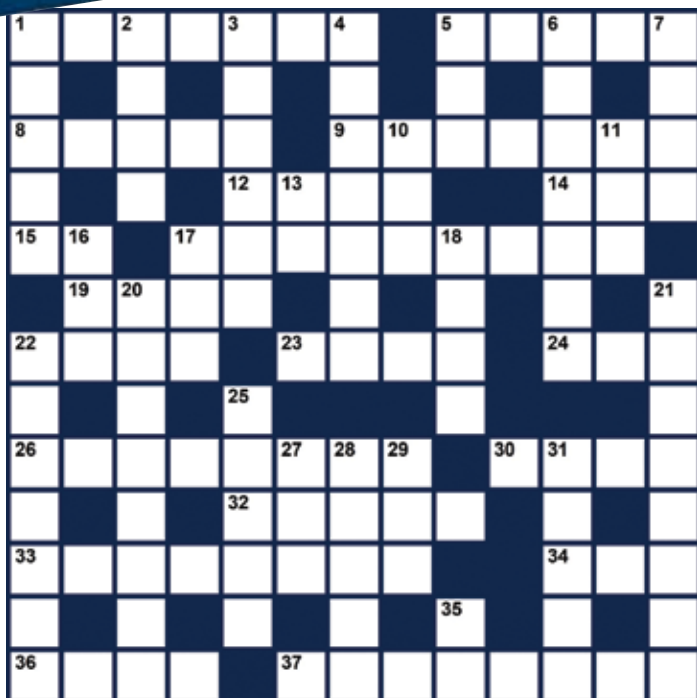
Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2015.

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# F Y I



## ACROSS

- 1 Take under one's wing
- 5 \_\_\_ from your mistakes
- 8 Brings tranquility
- 9 Shared knowledge and values in a society
- 12 Clinches a success
- 14 Innovative "Talks"
- 15 Alien flyer in film
- 17 Really handled, an issue, e.g.
- 19 Present!
- 22 Regulation
- 23 Flower holder
- 24 A pair
- 26 Someone to turn to for help or assistance
- 30 Trustworthy
- 32 Very large in scale
- 33 Results
- 34 Brace
- 36 Ordinary, 2 words
- 37 High school memento

Answer key: See page 26

## DOWN

- 1 Special place in the market
- 2 Depend
- 3 Advantages
- 4 Passage from a book
- 5 Internet laughter
- 6 Most critical
- 7 Must have
- 10 Put into practice
- 11 Type of "flag" that is a sign of potential danger
- 13 Storage medium, abbr.
- 16 Notwithstanding that, informally
- 17 Exist
- 18 Math calculations
- 20 Provides data to a student for application
- 21 Extra schoolwork
- 22 Wanting to learn more
- 25 Levity: per surveys kids want more of it
- 27 Computer's capacity
- 28 Context behind something
- 29 Hosp. areas, abbr.
- 31 Zoom button
- 35 Medical title

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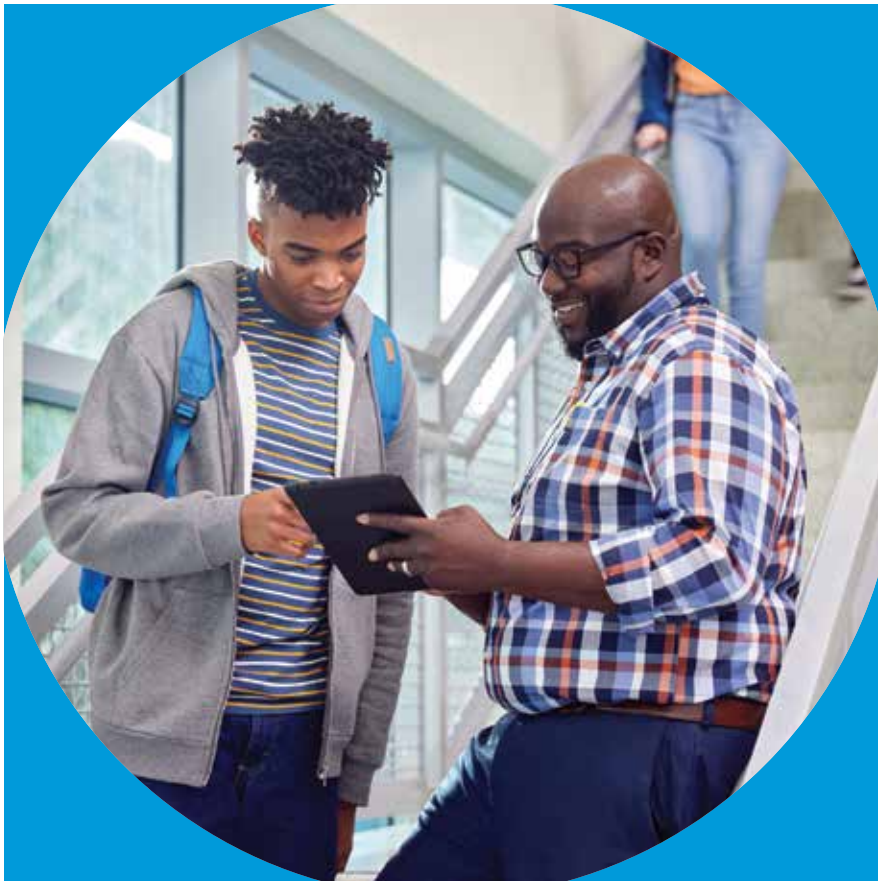
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A photograph of a classroom scene. A teacher, a woman with dark hair wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is leaning over a desk. She is holding a red pencil and pointing at an open notebook on the desk. A young girl with dark curly hair, wearing a light purple t-shirt, is sitting at the desk, looking up at the teacher with a smile. Her hand is resting on her head. In the background, other students are seated at desks, and a chalkboard is visible. The overall atmosphere is bright and positive.

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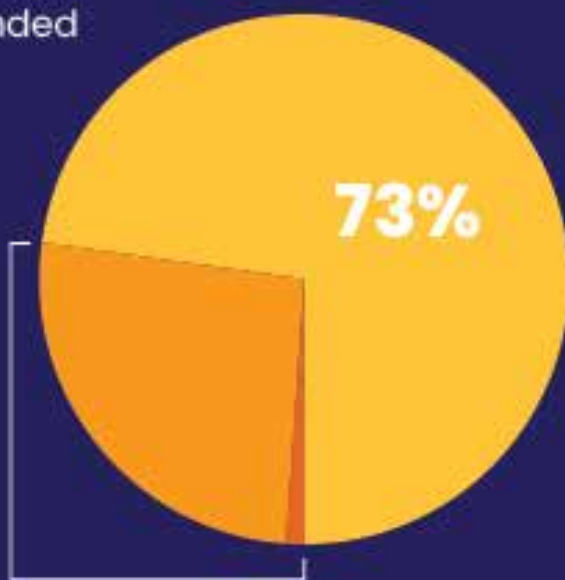
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Five Easy Ideas to Increase  
Educational Buy-in...

# Students, Families, and Staff



---

By Susan W. Prince

We've all heard the news.... COVID has taken a toll on our educational system, kids are different, adults are different, education is different.... And on and on. Before COVID, school staff felt like they were professionally growing, standardized test scores were improving, and students were making amazing gains – but were they?

It's been easy to blame the last three years on COVID. It's a common theme. I do agree to some point that things have changed, but I feel things were changing before COVID.

Students definitely needed to adapt to changes in March of 2020. The world shut down, people were scared, things were uncertain. As our country opened up, some areas adapted to the changes more than others. Some schools remained on remote learning, while others tried to get back to a more normal school day. Anxiety has been at its highest over the last three years and has majorly impacted students, staff, and families.

So how do we get back to “business as usual”? I’m not sure we ever will; however, we need to keep pushing forward and accepting change as a positive not a negative aspect. Students crave normalcy. They crave attention, comfort, praise, and acceptance. The tech world never took a COVID break! Students were connected even more to the online world during COVID – which has had both positive and negative effects on all of us. How do we keep up with those changes? Educators need to keep up with AI and Chat GPT, at least learn to navigate these and “use them for good, not evil”! There are so many things for all of us to think about.... How do we adjust? Below are five simple strategies my school district has been implementing with fidelity over the last three years to improve educational buy-in:

1. Increase the SEL in your school.... Try different programs (Positivity Project and Beautiful Me are two we used), and bring back morning meetings, “soft landings,” and Friday hallway dance parties. Students need to feel welcome in their school. They need to feel like they belong. We strive to treat everyone as family. Our consistent theme through all of the changes has been #EaglesStrong. It’s a simple hashtag, but when there are so many changes, including tragedies (a student death and a staff death) – we needed something to join us as one.
- 2.) Implement an after-school homework club or enrichment classes. This is the time when a school might have extra funding to help “bridge the gap” from COVID

loss. Use the funding to try new before- or after-school groups. Help students feel part of something attached to the school. We have a “homework club” at different grade levels. They eat a basic snack (cereal or pretzels), then focus on homework, extra practice, or other projects from their daily classes. We started this in the fall and the attendance rate is amazing!

3. Enrichment classes during the school day – some that include all students, not just those who are working “above and beyond” their grade level. This makes all students feel like they are able to achieve beyond their current level. Hire an energetic teacher and the students will strive to be their best for that teacher! Our students love to participate in the enrichment class and have studied a variety of topics while digging deeper into research and higher order thinking.
4. Try a few new PE programs to get students active again. My school was lucky enough to start an All Kids Bike program through several donations. Our students are actively learning how to ride bikes – a joy that seemed to fade away the last few years! We have students as young as three years old learning to ride bikes. It is an amazing confidence builder and a huge success for our students. We also purchased new snow shoes this year, as well as coats and snow pants, to make sure our students could learn to enjoy our central New York winter weather! These are fitness skills they will carry into adulthood. We definitely want our students outside and moving!



5. Through the MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) process – engage families in the school community again. Our MTSS committee held a family night where we invited families into our school to see all the offerings we have for students and families. We provided a simple meal, raffle items, fun giveaways, snacks, and informational materials. We hope to continue this type of family night in the fall with a “welcome back BBQ.” Our elementary school also hosts some other fun family events such as our Thanksgiving luncheon, grandparent luncheon, wellness day, and kindergarten VIP breakfast. These events are a great way to invite communities back into the school and help schools build positive relationships and trust with students and their families.

Those are a few basic ideas that we are doing to improve educational buy-in and help our students adjust to life post-COVID. I know that there are hundreds of ideas schools are using around the state to fight their way back to a more normal school year. I hope others are willing to share their successes as well. I wish everyone the best as we head into the 2023-2024 school year!

---

SUSAN W. PRINCE is the principal at McGraw Elementary School in McGraw, New York.

# The Key to Inspire Dynamic Student Connections and Personal Relationships



---

By John E. McKenna, EdD

“People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” This quote is attributed to Theodore Roosevelt but has been used by many others to emphasize the importance of empathy and taking a personal interest in the well-being of others.

Our schools today need caring and compassion now more than ever. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) 2022 Survey of America’s School Leaders and High School Students, “3 out of 4 of school leaders (73 percent) and students (74 percent) report they needed help with their mental and emotional health” (<https://survey.nassp.org/2022/>). These statistics are alarming and represent a crisis that must be directly addressed.

To combat this crisis, school districts across the country have been implementing many programs to provide additional support to their students, staff, and families. This is necessary and there are many fine programs, but this is not enough. Todd Whitaker, in his book, *What Great Principals Do Differently*, emphasizes the point that it is “people – not programs” that make the biggest impact on the lives of students (Whitaker, 2020). It is now imperative for educators to make intentional efforts to directly connect with students in individualized and personalized ways.

Recent findings from the CDC stress the importance of “school connectedness.” Their research highlights that a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging at school is critical for students’ emotional well-being (cdc.gov, 2022). The challenge becomes, “How can principals directly connect with students?” School administrators have traditionally held an indirect role in the lives of their students but there are many specific strategies they can implement daily that directly impact students and the culture of the school.

In *The Fundamental 5 Revisited*, Sean Cain and Mike Laird provide some concepts for teachers that can easily be adopted by principals to make direct connections with their students. Two key strategies they highlight are “Recognize and Reinforce” and “Work in the Power Zone” (Cain & Laird, 2021).

**Recognize and reinforce:** This concept refers to the recognition and reinforcement of individual students for specific reasons. Most administrators engage in what Cain and Laird (2021) refer to as “positive talk.” These are general, nonspecific, positive statements. When recognition and reinforcement are individualized with specificity, they become a powerful tool to motivate students.

**Work in the power zone:** In relation to building administrators, this refers to the concept that you need to get away from your desk and spend your time directly in areas where your students are. In classrooms, in the lunchroom, and on the buses. This allows you to have personal

conversations with your students, get to know their interests, and recognize and reinforce them individually.

In my 23 years as a building principal, the most significant impact I had was when I directly connected with my students, got to know them, and took a personal interest in their lives. The following are some simple yet powerful methods that building leaders can use to work in the power zone and directly connect with their students.

#### **MAKE IT A GOAL TO KNOW EVERY STUDENT BY NAME:**

This seems difficult and intimidating but it is easier than you think. You can look at previous yearbooks and memorize names, but the best way to get to know your students is to interact with them. When you see them in the halls, smile, and greet them by name.

#### **BE PRESENT AT ARRIVAL AND DISMISSAL:**

Greet your students with a smile and wish them a great day. Look at their eyes and faces for signs of distress or anger. Intervene and ask them if they are OK. At dismissal, ask them how their day was and what activities or events they will be going to or participating in.

#### **EAT LUNCH WITH STUDENTS:**

This can be done in the lunchroom, or you can invite a small group to come to your office so you can talk without interruption. I sat at a different table each day and asked students about things they were interested in. I learned a great deal about my students, and we often laughed and just enjoyed each other’s company.

#### **BE ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN OPENING ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

Each day be part of the opening announcements. The schools I was principal at always did live video announcements. I said the Pledge and sang the national anthem live each day with a group of students.

I also presented awards daily to students who showed good citizenship and were leaders in kindness and empathy. This allowed me to get to know individual students and highlight positive values across the school community.

#### **CONDUCT PURPOSEFUL WALK-THROUGHS:**

Each day when you conduct your walk-throughs, do them with intentionality to connect with students. Sit at desks and ask students individually about what they are learning. Ask them how they will apply what they learn after they graduate. Get to know the aspirations and dreams of your students and help them see a positive future!

#### **BE ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN STUDENT CLUBS AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES:**

Make it a priority to stop in frequently and visit students as they are engaged in extracurricular clubs and activities. Students are often there by choice, and these are the areas that motivate and inspire them. Students are also more relaxed after school and more inclined to open up and have an honest conversation in these environments. I also encourage administrators to directly create or co-advise an after-school club. I have done this several times in my career and formed lifelong relationships with my students. It was also a lot of fun!

#### **ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE IN NIGHT ACTIVITIES AND PTA EVENTS:**

This is a must to get to know your students and their families. Interacting with students at these events is game-changing because they get to see you in a different light, showing you care and are enjoying yourself with your students. Many parents felt more comfortable in these settings



and would share their personal concerns and issues with me. This allowed me the opportunity to help them access services and show that I listened and cared about their concerns.

**ATTEND SCHOOL SPORTING EVENTS AND SPECIAL LEAGUES AND COMPETITIONS:**

It is imperative that school leaders attend their school sporting events and cheer on the teams. Get to know who is on each team and touch base with them individually about the games. Congratulate them on good performances and cheer them up after a loss. Be on the sidelines to high-five them and encourage them during competition whenever possible. Students will appreciate this and never forget your direct support!

Take a personal interest in the outside activities of your

students and attend them when possible. Showing up at a Little League game, cheerleading competition, hockey tournament, soccer game, or music competition will make an indelible impression that will last forever.

A building leader can create a culture of caring by strategically implementing the strategies reviewed in this article. Embracing optimism and being a role model of empathy for others to emulate is essential to develop dynamic environments where students feel connected, safe, and secure. The key is to be intentional and focus on individual relationships.

A principal can make a direct connection with students if they have the will to do so. I suggest starting slow: Set a goal to have five personal interactions with students per day, conduct five purposeful walk-throughs per day, eat lunch with students one time per week, and be present and engaged at arrival and dismissal. This will get the ball rolling and before you know it you will know every student

in your school, and they will motivate and inspire you to never want to be at your desk!

JOHN E. MCKENNA, EdD, is an assistant professor in the Leadership Studies Department at Niagara University and a former president of SAANYs.

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# Creating a Community of Learners



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By Carin L. Reeve

The challenges facing educators in today's classrooms are significant and the solutions seem out of reach for both seasoned and newer teachers alike. While it is true that the way we educate today's youth must change to better align with the needs of our current and future realities, the solutions to today's challenges may lie in what we already know.

I spent 20 years of my career in urban education and one of the most powerful lessons I learned was about creating a classroom community that was focused on learning.



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Too often, teachers spend the first weeks of school building community separate from the context of learning, and when they try to shift into more academic tasks in the third week of school, students push back and teachers think that they have failed. This isn't failure, it's an opportunity. By using the strategies and skills that students will need in the classroom as the community builders, we can start on the first day of school by setting clear expectations and establishing a common language for how we will do school together.

As a turnaround principal in a large urban elementary school, I talked with my teachers about being "tight by week three." My own observations over 30 years in education have shown that the culture of a classroom is typically evident by the third week of school — what you see in week three is usually a strong indicator of how tight (or loose) the routines and expectations are. So, if students are up and walking around while you are teaching, or you are doing all of the thinking and the work, or your class struggles with walking in the hall in the third week, that will likely set the tone for the rest of your school year.

As part of our turnaround plan, we created a schoolwide plan for what needed to be explicitly modeled, taught, practiced, and reinforced with our students in the first eight weeks of school. From there, each teacher built a plan for their classroom, so that they had a clear outline of the skills that students needed throughout the year in order to achieve academically.

We have learned from Covey, Marzano, and Hattie that effective teachers start with the end in mind and align their classroom community to those end goals. For example, if your goal is for students to read fluently and comprehend complex text in your ELA classroom by the end of the school year, what do you need to start building in the first three weeks of school? You need a trusting classroom community where it is safe to take risks, where every student voice is heard, where opposing views are valued and appreciated, and where students use text-based evidence in

discussion and in writing, and you would need whole-group and small-group structures in place to address gaps in student learning. To build that community of learners, a teacher would need to structure classroom safety through the use of dialogue and discussion, using sentence starters to provide a scaffold for students to

**Student voices need to be heard, but if they don't trust us, they will never let us in.**

hold on to. The teacher would have to facilitate these dialogues, rather than lead them, so that students could feel how their thoughts and their voice truly matter. The teacher would need to work with students to develop agreements for how they will interact in the classroom and hold students accountable, not in a disciplinary way, but in a human way, for those agreements. Teaching students to actively listen and paraphrase what they hear from others would start with personal, low-risk discussions and then add in opinions, quotes, articles, and high-interest text to build student capacity alongside the interactive community skills.

Students need a reason to take risks in your classroom. Knowing that their voice is heard, that there is not one right or wrong answer, is powerful for students of any age. Teachers who can build a community of learners where student voice contributes to the level of high expectations in the class are the teachers who will navigate this current reality in education.

As a turnaround principal, I inherited a school with single-digit performance and high levels of unsafe student behavior. Turning around a school takes a clear vision, common language, and clear expectations for what learning will look like, feel like, and sound like across all content areas. It also takes committed teachers who are "all in," ensuring that every student is getting what they need and giving what they can.

That vision and commitment lived

throughout my school, but it was very powerful to see in fifth grade, where students had lived through multiple principals with inconsistent expectations, and they had developed some very bad habits for how they did school.

The fifth-grade team was committed to building a community of learners with tight routines and student ownership for their learning. It was not an easy road and the students needed constant redirection and reminders of the expectations. Many teachers would have given up and decided that these students were not going to achieve. The teachers on this team continued to work with students on individual and collaborative skills alongside content.

I walked through one morning, as I was known to do, to find students discussing a problem that they had been working to solve. One student was at the smartboard showing her thinking and how she had solved the problem. Another student raised his hand and said, "I disagree with you because when I multiplied  $7 \times 6$  I got 42, and so my calculations were different." I looked at the teacher, thinking that she might stop the discussion, but she did not. Another student raised their hand and said, "I agree, I got 42 for that part too, but I used a different strategy to show my thinking."

This dialogue went on for several minutes before the teacher brought them back to the original problem, although solving the problem seemed less important than the discussion that had just taken place. She let their discussion, their questions, and their discourse speak for itself: they were doing the thinking and they were doing the work.

In this classroom, the teacher was clear about what students needed to know and be able to do by the end of the year, and the teacher structured the experiences that built trust and safety within the learning community so that they would be able to take risks in academic dialogue. Student voices need to be heard, but if they don't trust us, they will never let us in.

As we return to our classrooms this fall, please invest in building your classroom community, but give them the specific skills that they will need

to be highly successful learners within that community. Identify and explicitly teach the strategies that you need students to use regularly (e.g., Turn and Talk, 4 Corners, Socratic Seminar, Partner Reading). Teaching those strategies with personal content in the beginning of the school year and then gradually adding in curricular concepts will help students understand

the strategy and trust you enough to apply it in a different way.

Most of all, don't give up. We need teachers and leaders who have high expectations and a clear plan to get our students there. Every day, educators have the power to change the trajectory of their students' lives. We need believers, we need dreamers, and we need committed educators

who can see a path for making the world a better place.

CARIN L. REEVE is the director of literacy in the Oswego City School District. A successful turnaround principal, Carin has presented at the local, state, and national levels and her writing has been published in SAANYS Vanguard and ASCD Express. She recently published her first book, *LOL: Letters on Leadership*, which can be found on Amazon.

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CROSSWORD  
**Answer Key**

**ACROSS**

- 1. Nurture, 5. Learn, 8. Calms, 9. Culture, 12. Ices, 14. TED, 15. ET, 17. Addressed, 19. Here, 22. Code, 23. Stem, 24. Two, 26. Recourse, 30. Safe, 32. Macro, 33. Outcomes, 34. Duo, 36. So so, 37. Yearbook

**DOWN**

- 1. Niche, 2. Rely, 3. Upside, 4. Excerpt, 5. LOL, 6. Acutest, 7. Need, 10. Use, 11. Red, 13. CD, 16. Tho, 17. Are, 18. Sums, 20. Educates, 21. Homework, 22. Curious, 25. Humor, 27. Ram, 28. Scene, 29. ERS, 31. Audio, 35. DR

# Building a Better School Environment



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By Michele R. Boutwell

Students want to come to school when they feel safe and secure, welcomed, and successful. The American philosopher William Durant said, “Success breeds success.” Everyone likes the feeling that success brings. Helping students feel accomplished costs nothing and means everything. First, we must provide a structured environment that clearly articulates the expectations in observable and measurable terms for every setting.

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Forging Limitless Power

**AMERICA'S NAVY™**



They should know exactly what it means to behave appropriately in the cafeteria, the restroom, the classroom, and on the bus. Students should be explicitly taught what the expectations look like and sound like. They should be precorrected for behaviors — reminded of how we assume they will conduct themselves when they are about to move from one setting to another. If they fall out of line, we should reteach them by modeling our expectations once again. As Ross Greene has said, “We have forgotten that those skills on the more positive side of human nature have to be taught, have to be modeled, have to be practiced.”

The good behavior game is an example of a classroom management approach that rewards students for good behavior during instructional time. The class is divided into two teams. If there is an infraction of the rules or expectations of the class, the team responsible for the infraction scores a point. The goal is to be the team that gets the fewest number of points to win the team prize, or if teams end up with tied scores, the whole class shares in the prize. If a team includes a student who has a tendency to be disruptive, the team will have to work together to keep the student engaged and on track. The game was first tested in 1969. Several studies have been done since then and confirmed its efficacy. It has been shown to increase the rate of on-task behaviors and reduce the number of challenging behaviors (Barrish, Saunders, and Wolf, 1969; Harris and Sherman, 1973; Medland and Stachnik, 1972).

Mindfulness should be a part of the everyday routine to prepare students for the demands of the school day. Some simple stretching activities to calming music should be part of the morning ritual alongside the Pledge of Allegiance — a *modus operandi* beneficial for both mind and body. To complete the morning schedule, mindfulness circles should be established. Circles provide a few moments in time for each one to have the floor uninterrupted, allowing them to respond to a prompt, while others listen or perhaps use a “free pass” to share something that is keeping them

from fully participating in school. It is a safe outlet and an opportunity for students and teachers to get to know each other better and learn to put themselves in another person’s shoes and build their capacity to show empathy for others.

Students need to hear when they are doing what is expected of them. They need to be acknowledged with measurable, observable, behavior-specific feedback when they demonstrate expected behaviors. Behavior-specific praise reinforces positive behavior and increases the likelihood students will repeat that desirable behavior in the future. Giving five positive statements for every negative or neutral comment helps students to stay academically engaged, develop positive relationships with their peers and teachers, and reduce the need to be disruptive in order to get attention. Unfortunately it is not natural for us to comment on expected behaviors that most people do without thinking about, so we have to work at finding those gems in the sand. “Thank you for putting your name on your paper.” “Your desk is very neat.” Behavior affects behavior. The Mary Poppins principle builds our students’ confidence, making the mundane seem like a joyful surprise, plotting the next usual act to see if we notice. You can’t give too much behavior-specific praise. As a reminder, teachers can put five rubber bands on one wrist and set a timer for 15 minutes. Every time the teacher provides behavior-specific praise, they move a rubber band to the other wrist. If they have moved all five bands before the buzzer rings, they have accomplished the goal. This also demonstrates active supervision, teachers moving about from one student to the other, always engaging with the class as they work or listen.

Another positive way of interacting with students when they find themselves in a difficult situation is to give them two to three choices that are acceptable to us and will be appealing to them. That means we need to get to know them, what they like and what makes them tick. Choices



give students a sense of power and control over their lives, but they also learn the possible consequences of the choices they make and how to accept the responsibility for their decisions.

Students need to feel successful academically. They need “just right” work — nothing too hard and nothing too easy. They need to feel challenged but not overwhelmed. Instruction should be explicit and systematic enough that students do not have to guess about what the outcome of their work should look like. Learning objectives should be observable and measurable in clear and concise language that students understand. The teacher should model what they want the students to do, provide guided practice as they try it out, and then let them have a go at it on their own without consequence should they not get the preferred outcome. Anita Archer says, “How well we teach equals how well they learn.” There should be plenty of opportunities for all students to respond to guarantee that the teacher can see the students’ practice work before they are expected to work independently or be tested. The teacher must be careful that the “loudest voice in the room” is not the only one who ever gets a chance to respond or actively participate in answering or discussions; otherwise, some of the less confident students will give up and fade into the background. Students should not be penalized for when they are having difficulty learning. Just as with other behavior, students need to be retaught and reassessed once they feel confident about the process and the content. If it was important enough to spend

time teaching it, it must be essential that they learn it, no matter how many tries it takes. Students ought to feel comfortable asking for and accepting “hurdle help.” There should be no students suffering in silence. Asking for help should be viewed as a strength and not a weakness. Confidence comes from lots of practice, so teachers should build in review of previously taught skills and content in their daily lessons prior to teaching something new, so they have more than one session to get comfortable with the task or material. There should be no satisfaction in letting a student fail. How well they have learned tells us how well we have taught.

Accommodations should be made available for all students. Once again,

it is essential to have measurable and observable learning outcomes. The activity that has been developed by the teacher may depend on a student’s weakness. If students are asked to retell the outcome of a story, it doesn’t mean that the student has to write it by hand. They could dictate to a peer, a teacher, another adult, or a computer. The path that is taken to get to the outcome is not consequential to the outcome; if the learning objective is written in clear and concise language, it will be easy to see when it has been met. Once again, choice provides power and control, making students feel comfortable with both their strengths and needs. Allowing for differences in learning paths builds trust between student and teacher.

Students work for teachers they feel like them and value them as individuals. We don’t need more money or more things to improve outcomes for students. We need commitment to grow them as the next adults to achieve their dreams and to treat each other with empathy and understanding. It is a part of every teacher’s success story to have her students remember how to be socially appropriate and to have the knowledge and skills to make a difference in this world.

Michele Boutwell, MEd, is the instructional coach in the behavior services department at Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES.

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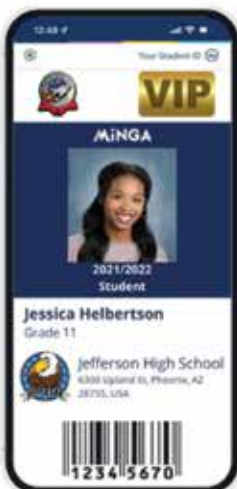
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