

Education questions, no clear answers

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In each of the past few years, young fresh faces have entered Room 207 as interns soon to become student teachers or newcomers to the Grimsley staff. I often tease such novice educators about why they have chosen a career in education, yet I also compliment them for assuming a position of such responsibility.

I find their questions both intriguing and difficult to answer. With sympathy for these college students and recent graduates, I cannot help but chuckle to myself when they seek simple answers regarding ways to motivate a student, to improve a student's attendance, and/or to remove the chip (or boulder) from a student's shoulder. I wish I knew the magical, formulaic answers.

Five years ago, I could have answered without any hesitation: vary instructional practices, and make learning fun; encourage a student to attend class for special incentives, and communicate how much you miss his or her presence; and take the child aside, give a hug, convey how much you care about what is bothering him or her, and promise to help in any way you can.

Unfortunately, the old Band-Aids do not seem to work anymore. Grades used to be an obvious motivator, as was a glowing letter of recommendation or the prospect of college admission. Attendance issues were rare, contrary to nowadays when they are excessive and then falsely remedied by makeup time with little or no relevant attention to classwork missed, and the personal problems various students endure are beyond our expertise.

With these conditions in mind, I find it difficult to provide the proper advice. I do not want to sound cynical, but I believe the

future teachers of our schools deserve honesty with doses of encouragement, a nurtured sense of confidence, and pats on the back whenever deserving.

Ironically enough, as I reflect upon my last words, I realize that even we "old-schoolers" crave the same workplace diet. How we yearn for discourse that involves no mention of test score averages, graduation rate percentages, and visits from financial advisors who insensitively remind us at faculty meetings that we are in dire need of supplemental income and savvy investment practices.

In my first year of teaching in Cleveland, my great uncle asked me if students rose from their desks when I entered the classroom. Uncle Gus grew up in Europe in the first two decades of the twentieth century when parents and students alike put teachers on pedestals, recognizing them as admirable individuals who groomed the next generation of leaders. Even then, back in the 1970s, I recall rolling my eyes and telling him that I considered myself fortunate if my seventh graders and ninth graders didn't place tacks on my chair or didn't throw spitballs when my back was turned toward the blackboard (yes, blackboard, not dry-erase board.)

As I contemplate how to provide input to foster new teachers today, the best support I can offer them is to remain hopeful, to be forgiving, and to remind themselves that students are still children. Yes, our students consider themselves worldly, intelligent enough, and mature for their age, but we know better.

Many students today live in households in which they are expected to earn income for the family, share beds with brothers and sisters, and avoid walking their neighborhood streets in fear of violent attacks. Even so, we must remind these

young people that they must take control of their destinies. Excuses will not resolve their problems; proper action, self-discipline, and a competitive edge will.

Perhaps our best plan of attack would be to instill in our students that we have faith in them, that we can see their hidden talents even if they cannot, and that regardless of their lack of appreciation for our efforts, we will persistently appear in our classrooms every weekday to model good citizenship, professionalism, and our passion for education.

Bankers handle cash, but it belongs to their customers. Bakers create masterpieces of chocolate, coconut, and cream cheese frosting, but they don't dare eat their efforts; seeing and smelling such foods everyday results in dislike or nausea. Celebrities earn millions for their pretty faces, blockbuster films, and endorsements; however, they must tolerate invasion of their privacy from paparazzi.

On the contrary, we teachers still find gratification from learning our devoted students earned academic or athletic scholarships, from watching our diligent students cross the stage on Graduation Day, from hearing our brave students survived their time in the military, or discovering our ambitious students acquired jobs in which they earn double our salaries.

As final advice to those courageous individuals who choose education as a career, I suggest you dare your students and their parents to accept invitations into your classrooms. Then dare your students' parents to maintain authority over their children and, finally, dare your public officials to visit your classrooms before mandating criteria that just plainly does not make sense for the latest generation of adolescent learners.

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