

Thursday, August 31, 2006

Top Tips

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"We've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'"

Tender, loving care seems to be in retreat in our school districts, and even in some of our classrooms. Whether it is the backlash of test-stress, the anger of children towards teachers for failing to protect them from being beat up by the high-stakes bully, or the estrangement teachers feel towards students because of "hands-off" policies against hugging (due to the fear of being accused of sexual abuse); the vision of teaching as a caring, gentle art seems in decline.

"Don't smile before Christmas" always was a misinterpreted maxim. But, teachers attitudes changed from the old days of, "Kids will be kids", to "These smart kids who won't learn are jeopardizing my job." This hidden attitude shift seems to have developed into a "cold-war" type tension between teachers and their students.

Here are ten suggestions for restoring the "balance of power" in education to "balanced loving, caring and nurturing." Let's "Bring back that lovin' feeling." into our schools.

Resurrect your Mission

Remember the reasons that you entered the teaching profession.

Focus upon your values and ideals.

Remember how you cared for children and how precious you valued them to be

When you look for and perceive the positive, noble, redeeming qualities within every student; you can always discover worthwhile traits

Clarify your Goals

Define your mission in terms of goals that you can measure, preferably with countable numbers

Keep your goals simple and doable

Make it a point to perform one act of kindness and caring each day, with no expectation of a reward or payback

Map (integrate) values of kindness and caring into even the most tight-ship, test-factory-output goals

Build a "What's in it for Me" Case for your Students

Explain the personal, tangible benefits that your students will enjoy from learning

Make sure that these benefits are framed upon your students', not your goals

This will take analysis, and you will have to listen to your students, both to what your students say and don't say.

Map Points of Mutual Benefit

Know where good teaching and your students' aspirations intersect, and focus upon delivering what your students value in ways that meet campus and district curriculum goals

Become proactive in helping your students learn what they need to learn

This step only requires creative integration. (If you can integrate technology without training or dependable, working equipment; you can help your students with learning that matters to them.)

Select Instructional Activities and Learning Tasks

This is often a trap for teachers who allow activities to drive instruction.

On the other hand, avoid "Analysis-Paralysis" where you are unable to start until you know for sure. Do something and keep your fingers on the pulse of your students' learning

Be ready to adjust

Ensure that more benefits accrue to your students than "just passing the test."

Build a Reusable Library of Tools

Train your students in the use of modular tools and forms

Demonstrate how the use of these tools streamlines learning and makes learning easier for your students

Point out the benefits for students, now, as well as for long term, life-long benefits

Understand that even the most estranged students appreciate (even crave) consistent structure and predictable procedures

Train your Students in Standard Procedures

By standardizing on modular learning tasks, you assist your students in feeling good about their mastery and achievement

Feeling good about mastery and achievement increases your students' self-concept and self-esteem

Increases in self-concept and self-esteem build the capacity to care and share (for both teachers and students)

Consider Every Project a "Pilot Project", and Let your Students Know that they have a Special opportunity to Participate This "specialness-feeling" is called the "Hawthorne Effect"

Feeling special and being singled out for caring (either as a person or as a group) creates a natural flow of good feelings that make effort (and learning) easier and enjoyable

Expand Every Procedure that Works in Creative New Ways and Give Credit to your Students

Allow serendipity and unplanned for good fortune to blossom as you are relaxed, spontaneous alterations in your plans
Learn from what happens by holding to an attitude of learning by discovering what is, instead of labeling outcomes that differed from your plan as "failures"

Repeat each Success and Lavish Praise on your Students

Praise is the premier method for communicating respect, caring and the positive value that you hold for students

Ensure that your praise is consistent and heartfelt

Be completely honest with praise, and do not use praise to manipulate or reward students (Students will see through shallow manipulation, and recovering trust afterwards will take longer than the school year is long)

If you loose your students' trust, the school year will seem to drag on forever, and both you and your students will feel as though the year will never end

With an atmosphere of caring and trust, the school year will breeze by; and everyone will hold sweet, fond memories of their time together

Remember, it is still possible for you to talk "test-tough" at faculty meetings and curriculum planning sessions and still demonstrate caring and kindness toward your students when you are alone in your classroom.

Having students who like you is still the easiest way to motivate high student achievement, even though the school's culture may frown upon any procedures that fail to "toughen the students up for test readiness."

So, bring back that lovin' feelin', before the joy of teaching is "gone, gone, gone."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 07:00