

Creating Great Students

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The more I think about how we have been looking at education, I think we have it all wrong. Up until now, all of our emphasis has been on creating great teachers when we should have been emphasizing creating great students.

For years we have been trying to create the super teacher: a mythical being that can reach every student, comply with all state and federal mandates, attend to all the extra duties and committee meetings, and still enthusiastically smile at the end of the day. This awesome teacher employs perfected strategies, powerful instructional planning skills, and superb classroom management all with indefatigable energy.

We all try to be this teacher and fall uncomfortably short in the attempt. Even worse, hardly a dent has been made in turning around low reading scores, poor math understanding, and the general apathy for learning. Even though we see this trend and are trying our best to ameliorate the symptoms, we really have not addressed the real problem -- the quality of our students.

We know (and have known for a long time) that the best all-around way to get students to learn is student-directed learning (also known as student-centered), but after all this time, we are still trying to get the teachers to quit doing so much direct instruction and engage more students with inquiry, project-based learning, and experiential learning.

Tools to Consider

By focusing on creating great students and placing our efforts on improving the kind of students we want to have, we will break through the current ceiling of minimalist learning and be able to finally do what we do best -- help students learn. The question you are probably asking is, "*How do we improve our students?*"

To start off, changing the type of student we have now is not a quick fix and may take years for the new type of kindergarten students to make their way through the system. Nevertheless, we can prepare our current students to take the responsibility for learning right now. Here are five things to get immediate changes started:

1. We can set weekly learning goals with each individual student and teach them how to set their own daily goals for learning. (Even first graders can and should do this.)
2. We can utilize rubrics to set high performance standards and help students to evaluate their own performance.
3. We can give students opportunities to create high quality products that are relevant to what they need to learn.
4. We can evaluate learning in formative ways (i.e. let the students take the test over).
5. We can provide students with the appropriate and effective learning skills -- learning brain-based strategies, processes, heuristics, etc.

Lack of motivation on the part of the student is probably the first thing that should be addressed. First of all, students need to want to learn. For most kids, that is not a problem while they are in kindergarten to third or fourth grade. As the grade level increases,

however, fewer and fewer students want to play the game of learning the way it is played now (how is it played now? That is a conversation for another time). We have change the system so that students don't stop learning when they get to fourth grade.

Using Backwards Planning

Perhaps another way to look at changing the system is to do some backward design. For example, I have to ask myself what would I as a teacher do differently if I had a classroom full of eager and capable students? Here is my brainstorm. As a teacher, I would:

- **Spend less time drilling and droning and more time with hands-on.** It is hard to trust students when they disregard and ignore simple instructions
- **Engage them at higher levels and make sure they had something worthy to create with their new knowledge and skills.** Authentic products help students to see the connection between what they are learning and how to use their newly acquired knowledge
- **Find out how I could help each student.** This means, ask them. At first, some students will not know how to answer this question because they do not have learning goals. Keep asking. Help them set those goals high and help them reach them daily
- **Provide the students with just the right curriculum and technology tools** This allows them to learn independently from us. The most frustrating thing for students is not having what they need to research questions, to explore, to discover, and to create
- **Help students learn the best ways to learn.** We know so much about the brain, and learning, but we do not share this with students. Students should know how their own brain works and the best ways for acquiring knowledge and skills
- **Have fun with the learning.** A good rule of thumb here is if you are not having fun, the students probably are not either
- **Find out what the students want to explore.** Then, design learning activities around those in order to explore with them. I would create practice learning activities that are energizing and interesting that reflect authentic situations that students will encounter
- **Extend the learning into the home.** This does not mean just "homework." It also means that students teach family members what they know, and engage them in learning too
- **Publish my student's discoveries and creations.** Publish them to more than parents and school board members. When things are widely published, students are motivated to do a good job because they know others will be looking at it
- **Create a learning environment that makes it easy for students to learn.** Immersion works for all subjects not just in world language classes

Interesting enough, if we start using strategies like those above, students will begin to behave accordingly. With such a list we can start creating the new and improved students immediately. Realizing that no one is naturally a great student, we have to make the focus more all about learning and not teaching, giving them the right motivation, skills, and tools.

