Creating Positive Educational Environments

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Positive learning environments, and developing the leadership capacity to create them, are the keys to turning around low-performing schools.

In the midst of escalating calls for reforming an education system in crisis, the proliferation of competing "technical models" of education reform, and the constantly growing cottage industry of "drop in" educational experts, we continue to rush past the few core teaching and learning principles that achieve positive results EVERY TIME THEY ARE CONSCIENTIOUSLY APPLIED. One of those foundational principles is building a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment.

We are convinced that building a positive learning environment is a core requirement for any comprehensive reform effort, and that this reality, already understood by students and results-producing educators, must be understood and acted upon by all educational decision makers.

Its basic principles can be applied by every school; it is inexpensive to implement; it feeds off the positive energy of all stakeholders; therefore, it is sustainable.

Very importantly, it allows us to stop avoiding a reality many educators secretly understand - that purely technical solutions which ignore the human factor in successful implementation will continue to fail. It is also perfectly compatible with any competent curriculum-focused model.

What do positive educational environments look like? Feel like?

A positive educational environment is one in which all participants - faculty, staff, community, and students are committed to learning, and not just to students' learning. There is a culture of respect and collaboration, in which everyone understands that the focus is on everyone succeeding, and everyone continuing to learn. It is the duty of the administrator to actively create a culture in which these attributes are valued, modeled and monitored.

Why are they so powerful?

Positive educational environments derive their power from the supportive, respectful, and caring attitude that a true learning environment both engenders and demands.

Such environments build a positive energy flow between and among stakeholders - one that serves to increase both the motivation to work together to achieve educational goals and the degree of effective effort stakeholders are willing to invest in achieving them.

What self-sustaining energies for competency building do they unleash? What defensive routines do they reduce? How do they promote persistence?

When constraints such as boredom, irrelevance, hostility, and the need to be constantly "right" are removed, the natural human instinct to learn and grow is nurtured. When there is no fear of failing, and when one's interests, skills, and learning styles are truly respected, achievement and competency skyrocket.

Most defensiveness is a response to perceived attack, either physical or emotional. In an environment in which no one is attacked, there is no need for defense. When defensiveness is reduced by this approach, confidence, curiosity, and trust can develop or return. When there is no way to fail, there is no reason to give up.

Examples from the arts. What is applicable to all subjects?

The beauty of an arts learning environment is that it provides a defined focus which is shared with others. It is eminently clear that everyone has the same goal to create art and many of the arts, particularly music, need the collaboration of others in order to come into being. There is no reason that we can't take an arts approach to other subject matter and skills. Creating knowledge and skills in mathematics can be the product of collaborative problem-solving, and the satisfaction of shared curiosity.

Why haven't we created more of them? How can we create more of them now?

Public education is mired in tradition, and a lingering culture in which educators are supposed to have all the answers; the false belief that it is possible to coerce high performance, and a reluctance to deal openly with the "human factor" in education reform. It is also handcuffed by lack of funds. Research is either ignored, or merely set aside in favor of continuing the current model. When one proposes a restructuring of schools, one is confronted with an endless stream of objections, most of which are centered on financial costs, and some on collective bargaining agreements. The unfortunate reality is that there are too many teachers who have not had the empowering experience of working in a positive educational environment, either as learners or teachers, and so do not accept that it can be done.

We need to train and support administrators in the creation of positive learning environments, and adequately fund the schools so that we can realize the fruits of research in our communities. Existing schools can be transformed by the development of collaborative and respectful staffs and faculty. As Karin Chenoweth writes, "We must be relentlessly respectful and respectfully relentless". This is the administrator's role, and it is the best way to begin the process of transforming our schools into positive learning environments.