

Getting to the Heart of Education

Listening to the Whole Child

Dr. Stephen R. Sroka

Many students are crying out for help with non-academic issues, yet many educators continue to respond with an emphasis on academic-proficiency skills. With today's stress on academic achievement at all costs with little regard for the mental, social, physical, emotional or spiritual aspects of the whole child, many teachers teach tests rather than students, who become point averages and not people. Consequently, many students tune out and drop out literally or figuratively. Sex, drugs, violence and boring classes are sensitive issues that need to be examined and addressed if schools are to become successful.

One person can make a difference by teaching to the whole child, and help students learn more and live better. Today, new ways to motivate, inspire and help children learn include social and mental-health communication skills that incorporate kindness along with motivating brain-based learning strategies. They integrate cutting-edge research (including social and emotional learning, social intelligence, stress management, communication strategies, motivational interviewing, brain-based learning, media and cultural literacy, character education, resiliency, and youth and asset-development programs), humor and inspirational real-life stories to facilitate learning about the whole child and the students' mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical-health needs, and their relationship to success, both academic and in life. These novel approaches make classrooms come "alive" by offering relevant information, life skills, and most



importantly hope for the future. For many students, if you don't get to their hearts, you don't get to their heads. In the end, for many students, only kindness matters.

I had the opportunity to present at a closing general session for the Conference on Teaching and Learning for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in San Francisco in 2005. The topic was titled, "Students Speak! Voices from the Trenches: Are You Listening?" I brought some experts with me – four high-school students.

In 2006, I keynoted the Kentucky Truancy/ Dropout Prevention Symposium. This session

of experts included a panel of 10 students to discuss the real-life issues that had an impact on whether they dropped out and stayed in school. It was a chance for students to tell their teachers what they wanted.

In both conferences, the students made suggestions on how we may reach and teach the whole child. Among the issues discussed were concrete strategies to retain, engage, challenge, support and educate all students, including the unmotivated, as well as suggestions on how to make your learning environments come alive.

The following are students' responses to my questions:

What problems would you remove from your school?

- Apathy
- Not being challenged
- Not feeling welcomed
- Bullying
- Discrimination
- Dispassionate and lifeless teachers and students
- Boring classes
- Standardized lessons
- Standardized tests
- Standardized lunches
- Testing as a way of ranking students
- Grades
- Drugs and alcohol
- Early morning classes

What top qualities would you want in your school?

- Positive discipline
- A clean safe and welcoming environment
- Teaching for understanding, not memory
- Emotionally nurturing, quality teachers (with a sense of humor)
- Creativity that is valued and encouraged
- A feeling that it was like a family community
- Extracurricular activities – sports, music, art, clubs, dances, field trips, service learning, things to do besides boring school work

What makes a school a safe and healthy place?

- Supportive teachers that students can connect with
- Being free to speak your mind and being respected
- Knowing you're there to learn and there are no outside or internal threats
- Healthy lunches and snacks

What are the qualities of effective teachers? What kinds of teachers make the classroom come alive?

- Their passion
- They are nonjudgmental. They let kids know their opinions are welcomed and respected
- They are outgoing, understanding and not intimidating, and you can confide in them
- They care
- They have a passion for the content and the students they teach. They don't just say, "It's in the book"
- They see you as a person and not as a point average
- They respect you

After listening to the students tell me what they want, researching adolescents and learning, and teaching for 30 years, I respectfully offer these observations.

Do all students learn the same? Of course not, so why do we teach and test them all the same? Are all students gifted? Of course they are, but some just open their boxes a little later. If students are not learning the way we are teaching, we must teach the way that they learn. All children have different learning styles, so teaching should be tailored to involve all students in activities that are interesting, fun, insightful, useful and let them explore their creativity, reflect on their life and develop relevant life skills that utilize all of their multiple intelligences. All students need individualized learning plans.

Teaching is about relationships. To get to the head you must go through the heart. Students



don't care what you teach if you don't teach that you care.

Safe and healthy schools help make better students who learn more. Many students, who put themselves at risk with sex, drugs and violent behavior, are crying for help. But today, rather than try to help them, we punish them. What good is it if a student can pass a proficiency test but not a reality test? What good does it do to develop your head if you are going to be dead? Students need life skills to prevent risky behavior, and interventions to help them overcome problems which impact their ability to learn more and live better, safe and free of drugs.

Everyone needs the three Fs of life: a "family" that loves them, even if it is not a biological family; "friends," who will pull them up rather than down; and "faith," a moral compass, a sense of right and wrong.

The three Fs sound like a sound bite, but are firmly based on research on resiliency, asset-development, connectedness and protective factors.

Programs don't change kids, people do. Put your money in training people. Studies show that resiliency is related to an adult, other than a family member, who is there to help turn a person around.

You have the "Power of One" to make a difference. The Power of One is a belief that with education, helping one another and believing in yourself, you can help change schools, communities and lives. The Power of One is not something you buy; it is something you buy into.

Even small gestures may have huge effects. I met a former student whom I had not seen in 20 years. He gave me a hug and told me that I was his favorite teacher. When I asked him why, he replied: "Because you always said, Hi," – a courtesy that he could not remember any other teacher doing. He said that he now has kids in school, and when he goes to their school, he still sees teachers who do not acknowledge students as




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they walk down the hall. After 20 years, long after all the classroom lessons were forgotten, he still remembered a simple act of kindness. After I keyed the Kentucky Great Kids Summit this last summer, one of the participants sent me a large manila envelope with the words largely written on the outside, "You changed my life at the Kids Summit." Her letters confirmed the importance of treating people with honesty, respect, dignity, love and kindness.

Students crave honesty and heart, and they love humor. Humor grabs attention, fosters creativity and makes learning fun. But knowing how and when to use humor in the classroom is just as important. Humor is not appropriate when it makes fun of a person's race, color, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, national origin or disability. Good humor does not include crude language; off-color words have no place in the classroom. Humor should never hurt.

Recently I retired after teaching for 30 years. When some of my former students gathered to honor me, I asked them what they remembered about me "back in the day." Was it the time I jumped up on the desk and took off my shoes to teach the bones of the feet, or the community projects in the ghetto in which we participated during summer breaks? One student piped up and said: "No. It was your caring and sense of humor. In fact, we forgot everything you said, and most of the things we did, but we never forgot the way you made us feel."

I believe that education is the most powerful weapon we have against the problems our youth face today. I believe the efforts of one person can make this a better world. This is why I teach. I have the Power of One to make a difference, and so do you. Our students are speaking. Are you listening? 

Further information on this topic can be found at DrStephenSroka.com

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