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Helping Struggling Students Pages 50-54

Where They Are: Working With Marginalized Students

Educators share successful strategies for connecting with hard-to-reach students.

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Of all the challenges educators face, perhaps the most daunting is trying to connect with adolescent students for whom the engine of schooling has sputtered to a halt. These students come in all guises: the teenage mother, the unmotivated genius, the poor test taker, the creative dyslexic, the family wage earner, the homeless student, and so forth in endless diversity. How can we bring these young adults back into a learning community to fulfill their potential as thinking citizens in a democratic society?

To answer that question, I interviewed several New England educators who have made such work their mission. They come from public and private schools and alternative and charter schools. As teachers, principals, and counselors, they work with youth who have become marginalized from school or are at risk of dropping out. These educators share some of the tools and strategies that have made their programs successful and helped them motivate their students. Their work has led to some surprising transformations.

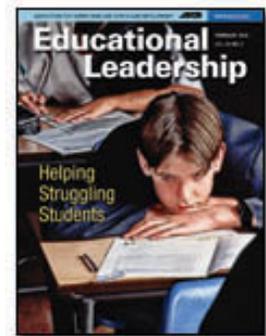
The Personal Connection

Many of the educators I interviewed emphasized the personal connection they make with their students. They act as role models, pushing students to identify short-term and long-term goals and then inspiring them to go the distance to achieve them.

Martin Tighe brought that metaphor to life when he rigged up a treadmill at Attleboro High School in Attleboro, Massachusetts, where he is a counselor for the Network, an alternative program for at-risk youth. Already an experienced distance runner, Tighe aimed to set a world record for the most hours run on a treadmill in a 24-hour period. After six hours he fell ill, but his students took up the challenge themselves. They finished the run for him, taking turns on the treadmill along with the high school's track team.

Tighe's "Go the Distance" project provided an ideal analogy and catalyst for talking about goal setting in the Network program. Tighe explained,

The message I try to get across to the students is that they can reach any goal they



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choose. However, it's not just going to happen because you want it to happen. You can achieve those goals if you're willing to put the time and effort into going the distance. We talked in class about how sometimes we set goals and don't reach them, but that's OK. What's important is how we deal with that and what we learn from it.

Whether role models work one-on-one with a few students or inspire an entire community, they can wield enormous power in helping kids set goals. John Roberts and Marge McDevitt lead the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School in Lowell, Massachusetts. The school was founded in 1995 to serve high school dropouts between the ages of 15 and 21. Approximately 100 students are currently enrolled. Students follow an unconventional schedule and a skills-based curriculum that includes individualized learning plans, one-on-one tutoring and advising, and counseling to address students' psychosocial needs.

According to Roberts, forging personal relationships with students is a priority. Each student has an advisor. "Advising happens every single day, for 30 minutes," said Roberts. "Students know that at least one adult will ask them how they're doing every day."

Calling students by name is also important, noted McDevitt. Students tell her that at other high schools they attended, "No one even knew I was there."

The Lowell charter school is small, which helps foster personal attention and recognition. But even a large, crowded school can take steps to prevent students from feeling disconnected or invisible. Maria Cunha coordinates Connections/Transitions, a comprehensive dropout prevention and reentry program serving 4,000 students in the Lowell, Massachusetts, public schools in partnership with Middlesex Community College.

Cunha talked about meeting the needs of such a large and diverse group, pointing out that 60 percent of the student population in the public schools were ethnic minorities. The parents often didn't speak English and didn't know whom to contact when they had questions.

According to Cunha,

These kids needed role models in the building that looked like them, that they could connect with. So we made sure we had people who were bilingual and bicultural.

Having people on the staff from the students' countries of origin has helped make students feel welcome and understood.

Putting the Passion Back in Learning

Every teacher I interviewed for this article remembered countless examples of students who might have been easy to dismiss as unreachable or lazy or as troublemakers. Yet once teachers identified and nurtured the teenagers' interests, students often became engaged in their learning.

Melissa DuBose, a former social studies teacher at Central High School in Providence, Rhode Island, described a class unit she taught on genocide. Students read Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* and *Maus II*, narratives about the Holocaust in an unusual comic book format. Students had

the option of deciding how they wanted to demonstrate the book's major themes and chose to enlarge and laminate the illustrations. After getting permission from the library, they displayed the illustrations in the library windows.

The display had been up for two days when complaints started coming in. Two illustrations upset some faculty members because they contained swastikas. Said DuBose,

My first reaction was to take down the display or move it to a less visible spot. I gave the students the choice [of removing the illustrations or leaving them up], with the caveat that if they chose to leave them up, they would need to speak with the offended parties. Forcing the students to defend their work was one of the best decisions I could have made. J, who typically will only do what he needs to do to get by, volunteered to stay after school and discuss the work with the faculty members in question. He spoke passionately about context, argued by analogy, and charged that removing the display would violate the oath "Never forget." I was proud of J, and I could tell by looking at his face that he was proud of himself.

Dramatic changes in attitude can occur when students find themselves listened to—and not written off. Meg Maccini is head of school at Boston Day and Evening Academy, an alternative public school serving students who are over-age for their grade level, who are parents or have other special issues, who need to attend school in the evenings, or who have failed in other schools. Maccini told of a student who labeled herself as a bad kid and who always used to get into fights. It was the student's fourth or fifth high school. But the alternative school also saw her strengths: She was an artist, a rapper, and a clothing designer who could sew anything. Maccini explained,

The first day she came to school, she said, "I hate school. You're never going to make me like it." We had her do a project designing the costumes for a play. She had to address the time period, the design, the characters, even anatomy. Her report was 25 pages long and incorporated sketches and PowerPoint slides. She loved that project. When she graduated, she said, "It was because none of you gave up on me."

Trust and Patience

As these educators related their experiences with youth, they described with awe their students' strength and resilience in the face of relentless adversity. They also spoke of the challenges of trying to establish relationships of trust with teenagers who have learned to expect mistreatment and injustice from adults. Some mentors keep working with students without the gratification of seeing their commitment effect an immediate, noticeable change. Transformation can take great patience and lots of time.

Meg Maccini recognized her students' strengths and challenges:

In the face of terrible things going on in their lives, our students are able to come to school, be funny, give hugs, and do unbelievably inspiring academic work. Because our students mistrust school, because they've had crummy experiences, they need to know we're serious, that we won't give up on them. Students sit on our board of

trustees, we have town meetings, and we *listen*. All these things engender trust. Kids come, and they'll be defiant, but that's the outside. Anyone who's that defiant is hiding something—a tender interior, a secret pain. We don't have to get at that part if they don't want to share it, but you don't destroy someone or alienate them for having it.

The Context of Students' Lives

Working with a vast and diverse student body at Lowell High School, Maria Cunha, coordinator of the Connections/Transitions dropout prevention program, has taken a holistic approach. The school works with students not just on academics but on other issues as well. If a student is sick or has health insurance or housing issues, noted Cunha, the school assists the parents. “We can't expect the kids to come to school if they're sleeping in a car,” said Cunha. “We address those issues as a unit. It's the only way to make an impact.”

Teenagers' individual, family, and social contexts form a web of issues that no education program can disregard. Rather than ignoring or denying students' painful stories, the educators with whom I spoke found it helpful to adopt a nonjudgmental attitude, combining concerned counsel with acceptance. Many students' feelings of dissatisfaction with school, inconsistent attendance, and lack of academic progress arise from such situations as homelessness, family incarceration, family or personal illness, depression, lack of school fit, or gang activities. Said Meg Maccini,

Each student has a story, and each student has their own reasons why they have come to our program. You accept students for where they're at. You don't pass judgment when a student finally decides to divulge who they are. There are things they've had to do to survive, and they know they're wrong. The last thing they need is someone moralizing to them who hasn't been in the same situation.

John Roberts described how the Lowell charter school teaches students to manage these stresses and become more reflective:

If students can recognize their own triggers, whether it's their family or other outside influences, it makes them more aware of a coming crisis, and they don't melt down as much. They begin to understand why they feel frustrated at certain times and recognize that frustration. It's amazing when kids can really articulate what's bothering them. They think about why they've been unsuccessful in school, and it often has to do with things that have nothing to do with their academic ability. When students can be self-reflective like this, they're more aware of what's going to get in their way in the future.

A Taste of Success

According to the educators I interviewed, taking every possible opportunity to single out a student for positive attention and feedback makes a real difference. Marge McDevitt, from the Lowell charter school, always tries to make a positive public statement to a student who is doing well or who has turned things around. She described how this played out with a

particular student:

One student with a difficult situation at home as well as a drug problem went from failing all his classes to passing four classes and failing one. When I saw him in a group, I said, "I saw your grades. Congratulations! Good job!" He was happy, not embarrassed. On Parents Night, we talked to his dad about looking at the positive side—not to focus on the one class that his son failed, but telling his son that he did a good job.

Melissa DuBose, the former Central High School teacher, recounted a student's success with a yearbook project. The student, who was popular in school but not interested in doing coursework, realized as the project started that he was the third generation of his family to attend Central. For his yearbook project, he decided to create a tribute to his family. DuBose explained,

In addition to looking for members of his immediate family, the assignment became a personal quest to locate members of his extended family. For the first time, this student was actually talking to his family about their experiences at the school. Piecing his family together through yearbook photos triggered a curiosity in him that I hadn't seen before. His project was prominently displayed in the library. He is a much better student now because he began the year with an enormous, public success.

Holding Students Accountable

The educators I interviewed asserted that students need firm boundaries and consistent training to develop a sense of responsibility for their lives and for their learning. As program leaders made expectations clear to the students, followed through with consequences, and took care to be fair and respectful, they found that teenagers responded and grew.

John Roberts discussed the Lowell charter school's attendance policy, which he called "fair, balanced, and rigorous." A school cannot build relationships with students, he said, if the students aren't there:

Our social worker gets on the phone every morning and calls every student who isn't here. Students pick up the phone and say, "Hello Mr. P.," because they know he's calling! When students walk in the school, they're going to hear it from every single person: "Where were you? I haven't seen you for two days!" We're holding students accountable.

Marge McDevitt, also from the charter school, reiterated the importance of accountability, of getting students to see that school is a place to get their high school diploma so that they can be more successful in their lives. She tries to get students to understand that they need to face their responsibilities—not avoid them:

We have many young people who have babies themselves. When your child is crying, I tell them, you must get up. You can't just go through life thinking that if you wake up and feel like rolling over, that's what you're going to do.

Leaving the Comfort Zone

Pulling students out of their school context and pushing them in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways can bring surprising and far-reaching results, said several of these educators. Even a little separation from the everyday routine can lead students to become more open and engaged. “We take them places,” said Melissa DuBose. “Some of the best conversations you have are on field trips.” DuBose told about how she and another teacher led a group of 10th grade girls into the woods:

We took 10 self-described “hardcore hood rats” camping for the weekend. Most of these girls lived in a poor and dangerous section of the city and had amassed a substantial number of disciplinary referrals. I couldn't believe that they actually agreed to go. I was afraid they would get high or that there would be a fight. But neither happened. The moment the van left the city, a group of silly kids emerged. None of them had been camping, and a couple had never been out of the city. I couldn't believe how scared of the dark they were! We built a nice fire, and then, one by one, the girls began to express themselves. They resolved disputes, spoke of their families, their disappointments, their dreams. By the time we returned to Providence, a community of young women was born.

Turning Struggle to Strength

All the strategies and approaches described here are grounded in a belief that students like these, who face adversity of all kinds in their daily lives, have strengths that can sustain them as they reach for education goals. The educators interviewed respect those strengths and help students recognize and develop them.

They see the results—in students crossing the stage to receive their diplomas, coming back from college to visit their mentors, or even jumping on the treadmill themselves, taking up the challenge their teacher has modeled.

Martin Tighe, counselor for the Network, pointed out how disenfranchised these students feel from the education system, and how the Network program tries to give students a voice and empower them to make choices for themselves. “Sometimes the choices are not good ones,” Tighe said, “but we try to emphasize the learning opportunity that developed because of that choice.”

As mentors to young people whose lives may have hurt and hardened them, these educators have discovered great resources emerging from some of the most painful circumstances. This might mean turning street smarts to positive use or learning from the missteps of the past. Meg Maccini spoke of teaching her students to use their lives as the “palette for their work”:

You may not like the palette from which you paint your picture—some things just suck, aren't fair, and are wrong, but they're part of who you are. You can use those experiences to give you strength and wisdom. And you can make something beautiful out of your life.

Author's note: The author originally prepared this paper for the Youth Development Institute/Fund for the City of New York in spring 2005.

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