



LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN ASPIRATIONS ADVOCATE

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More than two decades ago, I decided that the most important work I could do in my life was make the world better for kids. I believed I could reach this goal by talking about ways educators, parents, policy makers, and students themselves – basically anyone – can make a difference: by fostering students’ aspirations.

I have spoken all over the world about student aspirations. I have spoken in the basements of churches and VFW halls, in schools where there were 40 students to a classroom, and in schools where the entire K-12 population was 80. I have spoken at the best universities and the most underserved communities, in the richest districts and the poorest states. No matter where I am, I say what I believe is true: when the conditions that foster aspirations are in place, every child can reach his or her fullest potential.

My experiences over the past thirty years as an educator have taught me important lessons about working in this field. As I look to the future, I realize it is time to share those lessons so that together we can change the world.

LESSON 1: RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS

We need to have relationships with our students if we expect them to reach their fullest potential. Our research shows that the majority of students don’t think we care about them. In fact, most students in this country don’t think teachers mind if they are absent from school. I understand the importance of rigor, relevance and relationships ... well, let me be the first to tell you the order is *relationships*, relevance and rigor. If relationships aren’t in place, not much else can happen. And it’s not just relationships with students that we must cultivate. Among the lowest findings in all of our data is that so few staff answer positively to the statement “Staff respect each other.” Lesson number one is to build, nurture and sustain relationships – with students, but also with colleagues, parents, and community members.

LESSON 2: COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION

The most common reason school improvement efforts fail (including the Aspirations initiative) is poor communication ... poor communication between staff and administrators, poor communication between and among staff, poor communication between staff and students, and poor communication between and among students. Believe it or not, educators are not the most effective communicators. Despite the fact that we make our livings communicating with students so they can learn, we don’t do a very good job of communicating with one another or about things that matter. When we talk amongst ourselves, we tend to be good at stating our ideas and beliefs, but we are poor listeners

who are quick to judge. When we talk with students, we tend to be good at talking about academic knowledge, but not so good at letting them know we care about them and their hopes and dreams. Lesson number two is that we are all in this together, so let's start communicating like we are.

LESSON 3: ADMINISTRATORS HOLD THE KEY ... THE STAFF HOLD EVERYTHING ELSE

I have worked with more administrators that I can count, and I know one thing for sure: when I work with an administrator who does not believe in the importance of student aspirations, or who finds it a nuisance to deal with, the road is rough and there is not much hope of success or change. More troublesome still is when an administrator says he or she is on board with the Aspirations work, but does nothing to show support or participate – then failure is imminent. In contrast, there is no doubt in my mind that if the administration is on board with the Aspirations work, the school or district can move forward. Yet administrative support is just part of what needs to be in place. If the staff doesn't buy into the Aspirations initiative, the entire school is just wasting its time and energy. It is like rowing upstream ... without staff participation, you won't go anywhere and you will just get frustrated trying. Teachers and other school staff are a critical part of making any positive school change. In the Aspirations work, they need to see themselves as critical to the initiative and make it happen. Lesson number three is that the entire school community needs to be on board for student aspirations to flourish.

LESSON 4: DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE TARGET ... THE STUDENT

One of the most frustrating experiences I have had is working with people who are passionate about the Aspirations work and believe in educating the whole child, yet never seem to have time to do it. They leave meetings and seminars excited and overflowing with great ideas about everything they are going to do to make things better for students. Then, without fail, the next time we meet and I ask about what steps have been taken, too many tell me: "There is too much going on right now" or "We can't do everything." Well, they are right – there is a lot of stuff going on, and I remind them we always have time to do what we think is the most important. If we think settling a teacher contract dispute is more important than a child's aspirations, then we will not have time for a child's aspirations. If we think it is more important for students to score well on standardized tests than to be connected in a meaningful way to their school and learning, then we will not have time to ensure each and every child feels like they matter at school. If we believe it is of paramount importance that each student has self-worth, is actively engaged in their learning and has a sense of purpose, then we will invest the time it takes to ensure all students reach their fullest potential. Lesson number four is if you believe in the importance of developing the aspirations of students, then *put students first* ... no matter what has to be moved to second place in the long list of things to do in today's schools.

LESSON 5: IT'S ALL ABOUT ACADEMICS ... ALMOST

Those of us committed to fostering student aspirations must never forget that the ultimate goal of our work is academic achievement for all students. We do not want happy, ignorant students graduating high school. Nor is our ultimate goal to have students in the hallway singing "We Are

the World” and failing out of school. We don’t expect all students to get all A’s, but we do expect them to reach their fullest potential. For some students, that is an A average; for others, it is a C average. But it is not all about academics either. We do not want to graduate bright kids who lack social and personal skills. We do not want graduates who are devoid of curiosity and creativity, or who lack a spirit of adventure. We want to graduate young people who have the confidence to take action, are responsible leaders, and are heroes to those around them. And we *can* have both! We can have bright students who have a sense of self and a social conscience. Not only can we, but we must ... and it is our responsibility to ensure that we do. Lesson number five is that parents send their entire child to school – not just their child’s brain. It’s time we consistently support and nurture students’ academic, social, personal and physical growth.

LESSON 6: FRUSTRATION IS ENTHUSIASM IN NEED OF AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Changing a school culture through the lens of student aspirations can be frustrating. It’s frustrating when people don’t really understand and value the work, frustrating that the process of changing school culture takes longer than a 45 minute prep period, frustrating because sometimes the journey feels endless and lonely. Despite these frustrations, I believe we must be thankful that we feel frustrated ... because feeling frustrated means that we really care, that we really want something to happen, and that we are impatient for all of the possibilities the future holds for ourselves and our students. When educators learn about the Aspirations work, they get excited because it reminds them why they became educators: to make a difference for students. Their expectations are sky high, their enthusiasm is at a fever pitch. Yet they inevitably feel frustrated, as well, and that is not a bad thing. I remind us all: when we feel frustrated, it means that we are invested, committed, and excited about changing schools for the better. I urge educators going through these frustrations to take a step back, reflect on how things were, how they have changed, and how they can continue to improve. Lesson number six is that, with a little attitude adjustment, your frustration will turn back into enthusiasm!

LESSON 7: A PERSON WITHOUT PURPOSE IS A PERSON WITHOUT PROMISE

I believe all of the work I do is about a single word, *Purpose*. I thank my colleagues at Stanford University for helping me understand this. There are many ways to define Purpose, but mine is relatively simple: understanding who you are, what you believe in, and that you can make a difference in this world. When I look at the most successful people I know, they live these three components of Purpose. They are clear about who they are, they know what they believe (and are not afraid to show it), and they know that they can and will make this world a better place. Educators with Purpose are so sure that they can make a difference for themselves and others that they will rise to any occasion, motivate and inspire people around them, and believe that wonderful things are just waiting to happen ... and that all their hopes and dreams for themselves and the students they serve are well within their reach. The final lesson, number seven, is that having Purpose is really what we are all about as educators, and instilling a sense of Purpose in all students is our ultimate goal.