

What is the Most Important Thing We Can Teach Our Students? A Plea For Compassion

Today, many schools and school districts are preparing ‘the next generation of college and career ready’ students, including mine. But what does it actually mean to be ‘college and career ready’? Preparing a college and career ready student is no small task.

Go ahead and Google ‘college and career ready school mission statement’ and notice just how many schools employ this phrase as a mission statement. It is certainly important.

However, as a teacher, how do I possibly decide what to teach students when considering what makes them ready for colleges and careers? Considering this, I began thinking about successful college students and professionals in my own life. What characteristics do they share, and how can I teach these skills to students? My research led me to the obvious traits: work ethic, persistence, focus, flexibility, respect, etc. The list goes on. I acknowledge these skills are valuable, but I can’t help but think of recent headlines: “Woman and Man Brutally Caned For Crime of Affectionate Contact,” “Couple Convicted of Plotting Terrorist Bombings,” and “No Charges in Tamir Rice Killing.”

I love science and teaching it but, if these are the most important events of today, I wonder what my students spend their time thinking about or dealing with. Are STEM and its associated skills and content meeting them where they are? Thinking scientifically is certainly something our students need to be able to do, but, more importantly, what do I think they need? If I had to choose one skill above all else to teach my students, it would be compassion. My experience and reflection has led me to believe that the most important thing is not asking questions, using mathematics, analyzing data, or even learning specific content, such as evolution, climate change, or genetics; rather, it’s compassion.

As sad as it is to say, as a new teacher, I can sometimes get so caught up in lesson planning, classroom management, meetings, professional development, grading, coaching, advising, and much more, that it is easy to forget about the people who are truly important – the students. In my fifth year, those professional obligations have not diminished, but I have made more time to get to know my students. My first four years of teaching took place at a school in the wealthiest county in Kansas, with a student population that was considerably different, ethnically and socioeconomically, than in Seattle, where I teach now.

So then, what changed in my approach to teaching? The need to focus on science skills and content did not change. These students did not need anything different from what every student needs: a high quality teacher and a high quality education. What changed was me. I realized that the best way to teach these students was through compassion. In a school where I am asked to mentor 21 of our freshman for their four short years of high school, I've learned much more about my students and I encourage them to get to know one another. By listening and empathizing with their fellow students and with their teachers, the students in my classes can begin their high school careers with the strong foundation of compassion. As much as I enjoy seeing students conquer the misconception that humans did not evolve from chimps or hearing from a parent that their daughter now loves science after hating it previously, I know that what got me to that point was developing personal relationships with the people I teach. I have learned that getting to know students and having compassion and empathy for them made it not only easier for me to understand them as people, but also for students to begin to see and know me too.

“Reach me before you teach me.” Easy to say, difficult to do. Reaching students takes more than asking someone their favorite sports team (mine: Kansas City Royals, World Series champions); it takes getting to know them on a deeper level. There is a difference between being a student's friend and caring about them. Letting them use their phones in class makes you a “cool teacher;” texting or calling a student's parents after they ace the test they worked so hard on makes you a compassionate one. So does a nice email or call home when you see a student do the right thing when no one was watching. Or heck, even inviting the parents of an advisory group to a potluck would work too.

Compassion for students models what compassion for each other looks like. In

teaching practices like **Restorative Justice**, schools are challenging and breaking the cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline. Bullying is not simply met with a detention or suspension. The bullies and victims are brought in along with the rest of the community involved. Students are allowed to share how they were hurt, both bully and victim alike. How often today do we hear about students who were “lost” or “isolated” in school, sometimes unfortunately after devastating tragedies?

Giving students a chance to be heard and included in their community is one way to fix this problem. When teachers know students and when students know each other they all begin to do something remarkable: They care for each other, they involve each other, and they teach each other. What happens when the student who never sees their mom who works night-shifts gets to learn with the student who has had the privilege to go to space camp every year? Learning happens in every way imaginable, far beyond the academic realm. Perhaps one student helps another take notes or learn how to study Spanish vocabulary.

Maybe the other student develops an understanding of privilege and differences in their world. As neighborhoods grow more racially and socioeconomically segregated, the **divide** in some cities like Chicago, Atlanta, or Milwaukee grows greater than that of even pre-**Civil Rights** era, this scenario is becoming more rare, but it cannot be an excuse to not give students a chance to know each other. A chance for students to break from the sometimes competitive college admissions race and instead taking a chance to get to know each other may lead to new and inspiring outcomes.

There it is, one story, one data point, one teacher. Teaching inspires me, science is my expertise, but I write here with a plea: Show compassion and teach compassion. Believe me, as a public school teacher, I know that no single thing is a panacea, and none of what I have said or say is simply a dichotomy. But as a teacher who has found new relevance and passion in teaching, it is not more testing, more technology, or even more STEM programs that has reinvigorated me and given me hope that education in the United States is improving and that my students will make our future a better place: It's compassion.