

What Great Teachers Do Differently?

This book is about what great teachers do that sets them apart.

1. Why Look at Great?

A valuable component of this work was the discovery that in every setting teachers also exhibited a wide variety of skills.

Once challenge in any profession is the ability to self-reflect—accurately.

In the studies of principals described earlier, practically all the principals thought they were doing a good job, but only some were right.

In my experience, many ineffective teachers also think they are doing a good job.

This book is not about what we know. Many teachers know what works best. This book is about who we are; more directly, it is about what we do.

Everything described in this book is simple, but not easy.

One day I ask her how she stayed inspired. She replied, “This is my 38th year teaching 5th grade, but for these students, it’s the first time around.”

2. It’s People, Not Programs.

As the quality of teachers drops, so does a student’s opinion of school. All the way from kindergarten through college, the quality of the teacher determines our perceptions of the quality of the school.

It’s never about programs; it is always about people.

However, we must keep in mind that programs are never the solution and they are never the problem.

3. The Power of Expectations

A teacher’s classroom management sets the stage for student learning. Great teachers focus on expectations. Other teachers focus on the rules. The least effective teachers focus on the consequences of breaking those rules.

Great teachers are very clear about their approach to student behavior. They establish clear expectations at the start of the year and follow them consistently as the year progresses.

The teacher may have predetermined and stated consequences for misbehavior, but these are clearly secondary to the expectations. The key is to set expectations and then establish relationships so that students want to meet those expectations.

On the other hand, there are disadvantages to spelling out cut and dried consequences. Students are experts at cost benefit analysis. If I skip one hour of class I'll have to go to two hours of detention. Is it worth it? (How many of my buddies will be in detention?)

The excitement of starting a new school year provides opportunities to reestablish expectations and introduce changes. We're all on our best behavior, full of positive energy about the coming year. For effective teachers, the start of the year is a chance to set the tone for the school year and, more importantly, for the students.

What is the variable? Not the specifics of expectations, but that they are clearly established, focus on the future, and are consistently reinforced. All teachers can do this. The great ones do. They establish expectations for their students-and for themselves.

4. Prevention vs. Revenge

When a student misbehaves the great teacher has one goal: to keep that behavior from happening again. The least effective teacher often has a different goal: revenge. Effective teachers are motivated to prevent misbehavior, ineffective teachers are motivated after a student misbehaves, to punish the student.

As educators, we must focus on what we have the ability to influence. We all know we can't change what already happened; what's the point of directing our energy there?

Effective teachers understand that what matters is not whether a student leaves the office mad, and not what the student reports to his peers, but how the student behaves in the future. Effective teachers don't need the principal to wield the sword of revenge on their behalf. They do need the principal to reinforce their expectations for student behavior and to support their responses to misbehavior. In fact, they welcome all the help they can get.

Who decides how many arguments you get into a week? The answer of course is that we do. We never win an argument with a student. As soon as it starts, we have lost. If their peers are watching, they can't afford to give in.

In general, students know the difference between right and wrong, and they want their teachers to deal with irresponsible peers. If you always respond appropriately and professionally, everyone else will be on your team. But the first time you do not, you may lose some of your support and students-and you may never get them back. This makes maintaining a high level of dignity, especially under pressure, a critical skill. Effective teachers have this skill, others do not.

5. High Expectations-for Whom?

Many people believe, and I agree, that great teachers have high expectations for students. However, let's focus on the question, what is that variable? True, great teachers have high expectations for their students. But is this a difference that separates great teachers from the rest?

The variable is not what teachers expect of students; many teachers of all skill levels have high expectations for students. The variable-and what really matters-is what teachers expect of themselves. Great teachers have high expectations for their students but even higher expectations for themselves. Poor teachers have high expectations for their students but low expectations for themselves.

As a presenter, I said, I feel a responsibility to engage the audience. I believe that what I am saying is important, and of course I want my audience to give me their full attention-but it's my job to gain, and to keep, their attention. If I'm not doing that, I need to change my approach.

6. Who is the Variable?

The real issue is not what is the variable, but who. Great teachers know who is the variable in the classroom: They are.

How many of you could predict which teacher in your school will send the most students to the office this year?

The answer is simple: They know because the main variable in a classroom is not the students. It's the teacher.

The variable is how the teachers respond. Good teachers consistently strive to improve, and they focus on something they can control-their own performance.

Clearly the best teachers accept responsibility for their classrooms and the worst teachers do not. I do a great deal of work in classroom management. At all levels of our school systems, the effective educators take responsibility.

If everyone looks in the mirror when they ask, "Who is the variable?" we will have made tremendous strides toward school improvement. This empowering approach raises the level of teacher efficacy and will eventually be passed on to the students. Success in any profession starts with a focus on the self. After all, we are the one variable that we can most easily and most productively influence.

7. Ten Days out of Ten

Every year it was my practice to remind my faculty: “You don’t have to like the students; you just have to act like you like them.” The reason is simple; if you don’t act like you like them, then it doesn’t matter how much you like them. And if you act as if you like them, then whether you like them at all becomes irrelevant.

Think of the teachers you most admire. Do they like some of their students less than others? Of course they do. But ask yourself this: How do they treat the students they like the least? Well, the best teachers treat them just like all of the other students. Every student might as well be their favorite student. Whether they like a student or not, they act as if they do.

Effective teachers treat their students with positive regard. In particular, effective teachers understand the power of praise.

Five things that help praise work.

To be effective, praise must be authentic, specific, immediate, clean and private. Let us apply these general characteristics to the specifics of motivating and praising in our daily life.

First-Authentic means that we are praising people for something genuine, recognizing them for something that is true. The recognition of something authentic can never grow weary. Praise will not lose its credibility if it is always authentic.

As educators we have many opportunities to catch people doing things right. Each is an opportunity to give authentic praise.

Second-Effective praise is specific. The behavior we acknowledge often becomes the behavior that will be continued. You can identify those areas that do have merit and acknowledge them through praise.

Third-Immediate praise. This means recognizing positive efforts and contributions in a timely manner. Providing authentic and specific feedback when good things happen, or soon afterward, is an important element in making reinforcement effective.

Fourth-praise must be clean. This is often a very challenging expectation, especially for educators. Clean means a couple of different things. It is important to compliment someone because it’s authentic, not just because you are hoping that they will do something different or unrelated tomorrow. Oftentimes we take the inappropriate behavior of less positive students too personally. Although our goal is to get them to be more positive, we need to be aware that more often their mood has much more to do with the way they feel about themselves than it does with how they regard us. The second aspect of clean praise is also tricky for educators: If praise and reinforcement is to be

clean, it cannot include the word “but.” If you criticize after you praise, they will only remember the criticism.

Finally, effective praise is private. Dr. Bissell believes the vast majority of the time, praise needs to be given in private. I agree with this and would also say that if in doubt, you are always safe to praise someone in private.

Giving praise in public can cause resentment from peers. It has this potential.

8. The Teacher is the Filter

Teachers are the filters for the day to day reality of school. Whether we are aware of it or not, our behavior sets the tone. If students overhear us whining or complaining about something, it may be the talk of the school for days even if it was something minor. By the same token, if we always approach things in a positive manner, then this is what the students reflect.

When the teacher sneezes the whole class gets a cold. This is neither good nor bad; it is just the truth. Our impact is significant; our focus becomes the students focus. If we have great credibility, students work to please us. If we lack credibility, students work against us. Students come to class each day wanting and expecting us to set the tone. If the tone we establish is positive and professional, they’ll match that tone; if our attitude is negative and confrontational, they’ll respond in kind.

On the first day of school, students hand us respect on a platter. We determine what happens to that gift. The best teachers continue to nurture and build respect all year long.

I sought to end each meeting on a positive note, sending teachers to their next challenge with energy and enthusiasm. No matter what the purpose, content, or focus of the faculty meeting might be, I always had a fundamental goal: I wanted the teachers to be more excited about teaching tomorrow than they were today. Great teachers take the same approach in their classes. No matter what the lesson plan covers, great teachers want their students to be more excited about learning tomorrow than they are today.

If our attitude shows we want to be there, our students will reflect that positive energy back to us.

Teaching is a demanding job-but it’s the job we’ve chosen, and we can choose to focus on its rewards and challenges in a positive way. The great teachers do that.

People who say, “This is the worst group of kids,” soon start to believe it. Eventually, they start to treat them that way and unfortunately, the student will start to behave accordingly.

9. Don't Need to Repair-Always Do Repair

A relationship, once damaged, may never be the same again. That is one reason that effective educators are so acutely sensitive to every single thing they say and do. They work to avoid actions that cause hurt feelings. The most effective among us go beyond that.

One of the things I noticed about the best teachers is they seldom engage in behaviors that cause harm to students. The best teachers consistently compliment and praise students.

As we noted before, the best teachers have high expectations for others, but much higher expectations for themselves. The best educators work hard to keep their relationships in good repair-to avoid personal hurt and to repair any possible damage-and others notice.

We really need to put our time and energies into building our "people skills".

What keeps them from apologizing? Usually, what stands in the way is their lack of self-confidence or-often the flip side of the coin-their pride and ego.

I am not saying it was my fault; I am not accepting or placing blame; I am just sorry that it happened. And the more offensive the parent is, the more sorry I am it happened. The simple statement, "I am sorry that happened" is a powerful defusing technique.

Why must I give Johnny the word for word language? Because he may not have it himself. Telling someone to do something without teaching him how makes no sense at all. So I teach him what to say. Now, how do I actually get him to do it? Simple: I make it a benefit to him to do it. When you get pulled over by the police your goal is to get out of the ticket. You can be nice or rude-which is more likely to get you out of the ticket? Kids apologizing to a teacher is similar to getting out of a ticket.

Even if they apologize you may need to give them a consequence. Yet you can reinforce the apology by saying, "Because you apologized I'm only going to . . ." this way I still encourage the apology.

Effective teachers reinforce these behaviors; they also take advantage of teachable moments to help other students build the skill of repairing.

10. Ability to Ignore

Effective teachers know how one or two students can disrupt the flow of learning, but they also know when to go with the flow, when to take a stand, and how to quell minor disturbances without further distracting others.

Effective teachers model self control; their classroom management is grounded in their ability to manage their own behavior.

But great teachers know how to give their students the attention they need, right from the start. Misbehavior doesn't spiral out of control in their classrooms, because they stay ahead of the curve.

The best leaders ignore minor errors.

We are often our own worst critic. Although we may think that when others criticize us we try harder, at some point, when it happens to frequently, we are likely to quit. Just as with our own children, if we say, "no" too often, their response becomes to tune us out completely.

The great teacher has the ability to ignore trivial disturbances and the ability to respond to inappropriate behavior without escalating the situation. The great teacher has the ability to pay attention to students, to recognize and praise their achievements, and the ability to overlook minor errors. It's a fast-paced and delicate balancing act; the great teacher has mastered this essential skill.

11. Random or Plandom?

One hallmark of great teachers is that in their classrooms, very little happens at random. Great teachers have a plan and purpose for everything they do. If things don't work out the way they envisioned, they reflect on what they could have done differently and adjust their plans accordingly.

Great teachers intentionally arrange, rearrange, alter, and adjust the structures that frame their teaching. Their classroom setup, their instructional approaches, their time management—all are carefully planned to promote a productive learning environment. If two students cannot sit by each other peaceably, they no longer sit by each other. If one student tends to be disruptive, the teacher takes steps to minimize that student's impact on the classroom. If a class spirals into rowdiness by the end of the day, the schedule of activities makes room for them to let off steam appropriately.

12. Base Every Decision on the Best People

Great teachers aim high. Great teachers make decisions following three simple guidelines:

1. What is the purpose?
2. Will this actually accomplish the purpose?
3. What will the best people think?

One way of reflecting on our teaching practices is to look at why we do what we do. Too often, however, we frame this exploration in the wrong way. Instead of asking what is the purpose, we settle for what is the reason.

Before making any decision or attempting to bring any change, effective educators ask themselves one central question: What will the best people think?

You can take the same approach with your students. Asking yourself what will the best students think? can help you manage your classroom like a well run business. One easily remembered standard for classroom management is that we always treat our students as if their parents were in the room.

The atmosphere in a well run classroom is charged with positive energy; every student is engaged. If our top students can coast along in neutral, the entire class loses momentum. Great teachers find a way to keep every student in gear and moving forward. We can not afford our best students to be “fine anyhow.” They deserve much more than that.

The concept of centering on the best people may seem new and unfamiliar, yet it is one of the crucial differences between the best educators and the rest. Nurture the superstar students you have, and work to cultivate the others. Keep your best most well rounded students at the forefront when you make decisions.

13. In Every Situation, Ask Who Is Most Comfortable and Who Is Least Comfortable

When people become uncomfortable, they change.

Teachers who ask themselves, “How will my best students feel as a result of my decision?” will probably take a different approach to discipline.

The students whom teachers are most tempted to yell at are probably quite used to it. However, the other students lose respect for a teacher who uses putdowns or tirades.

Part of our job as teachers is to teach people appropriate ways to behave, not just help them refine the inappropriate skills they already have in abundance.

We may decide to do something that will make the least effective people uncomfortable, but at the very least, our decisions will not make our best people uncomfortable.

Effective teachers find that this ground rule-make the people who do the right thing feel comfortable-works for them too. They feel more comfortable with their decision making.

It’s always appropriate to gather everyone’s input. But it is more important to be aware of what the best people’s views are.

14. What About Those Darn Standardize Tests?

Effective teachers don’t let hot button issues shift their focus from what really matters. The best educators spend their human resources carefully, aware of the limited value of many mandates from on high.

Standardize tests measure only a part of what schools should be doing. Effective teachers focus on the behaviors that lead to success, not the beliefs that stand in the way of it. Effective teachers don’t let standardized test take over the entire class.

In a study of schools that exceeded expectations on standardized tests, the perspectives of the educators were refreshing. The teachers and principals in those schools did not believe in the value of testing more than others; they just understood the importance of test results to others. They were fully aware that success on standardized tests brought them greater autonomy to do what they believed was best for students.

Are you so interested in improving reading scores that you are willing to change what you do in your classroom-or do you want to raise test scores so that you don't have to change what you do in your classroom.

15. Make It Cool to Care

My central goal was incredibly simple and incredibly complex. I wanted it to be cool to care in my room and in my school. I wanted everyone, every student, every teacher, each staff member, all the parents-to think it was cool to care.

Rather the key is to develop and establish a school wide environment that supports everyone's efforts to do what is right. If we create an environment where each person does what is best for the students and for the school, we will seldom make a wrong decision.

The best teachers are able to achieve this in their classroom. The students care, and they care deeply. They care about learning, they care about the teacher, and they care about each other. Once it is cool to care, anything becomes possible. All the behaviors we have described in this book lead to this. Treating everyone with respect and dignity; always taking a positive approach; always modeling how to treat others; understanding that what matters is people-each of these helps create an environment where it is cool to care.

When teacher's sensitivity to students increases, so does the opportunity to reach them. We can present logical reasons why each student should give a teacher attention and respect but that alone will not work with many students. It is easy to convince ourselves that we can't work with one student, or several. But until we connect with them emotionally, we may never be able to connect with their minds. Great educators understand that behaviors and beliefs are tied to emotion, and they understand the power of emotion to jump start change.

