

Why Do We Do What We Do?

I recently had the great privilege of receiving some direct reinforcement of “Why I do what I do.”

My reason for choosing a career in education was, as trite as it sounds, to make a difference in the lives of my students. My love for children extends beyond my two sons and encompasses all children of every age. One of the reasons I am successful as an educator is, I treat all students as if they were *my own*.

My treatment of all of my students as if they were my own extends to both positive and negative reinforcement. I’ve learned that children *love* consistent limits. In setting clear limits, the students realize that their choices incur consequences. I’ve also learned that **WITHOUT EXCEPTION**, students rise to the level of their teachers’ and parents’ expectations. So, I always maintain the highest possible standards for my students.

When I was a classroom teacher, one of the ways I set high expectations was to hold students accountable for their work. I insisted that every student complete each assignment. Each student’s assignments were personalized according to my expectations for that particular student. Holding students accountable is very important because it develops their sense of responsibility and, even more importantly, their self-esteem. When a high expectation is set, and the student accomplishes that expectation, he or she realizes, “I can do it!” That “can do” attitude can continue even after the student has moved on to another teacher’s class.

Maintaining high expectations and holding students accountable requires a great deal of parental support. Parents need to follow through at home with the standards and expectations set up in class. Almost all of my students’ parents were successful in providing follow-through at home. That is, except Steven’s parent.

Steven was a bright 3rd grade boy whose mother was working two jobs in order to support Steven and his younger brother. His father was an abusive person who had been out of the picture for a long time. He did not contribute to his children’s support. I realized it was not possible for Steven’s mother to provide the type of home support that was needed for Steven to be held accountable for all of his assignments.

While I was not able to ease Steven’s mother’s financial burden, it *was* possible for me to assist her with holding Steven to a high level of expectation. I simply provided him with the environment he needed to accomplish this goal. Steven was allowed to remain in my classroom afterschool for an hour or so while I was preparing my lessons for the following day. If he finished his work, he simply walked home. If he was not yet done, I piled him into the car with my two sons and took him home to continue working at my kitchen table while I cooked dinner. All Steven needed was adult supervision to keep him on task until his work was complete. Since his mother was only in the house for 8 hours day (many of which she slept), she was unable to provide this supervision. I was more than happy to provide it for her.

Steven finished the school year as my “pseudo-son,” finishing his assignments at my kitchen table alongside my own boys. At the end of the year, by learning how good it felt to be responsible for his own work, and with a healthy dose of guilt (“Look at how hard your mother is working!”), Steven learned to complete his work independently. I sent him on his way, hoping that I had made a long-term difference in his life.

Apparently, Steven felt that I did. Now a senior in high school, Steven nominated me for the “Inspirational Teacher Award” sponsored by Ventura High School. Last Friday night, I was presented with this award during half-time at Ventura’s Homecoming football game. As I walked out onto the field to receive my award, I was humbled to reflect that such a small effort on my part made such an impact on this child, now a young man. So many other teachers are giving so much more everyday as they pour their love into their students, without recognition. Although it was not expected, it felt good to be acknowledged for my positive influence.

Accolades aside, it was a wonderful reminder of “Why we do what we do.”