

School Matters – High Expectations

Although I was not aware of it at the time, one of my first experiences with academic expectations occurred when I was a freshman taking Algebra I in high school. I was not a strong math student, but Algebra I was required for graduation so I reluctantly signed up for the course. After a few weeks, the instructor asked three of my friends and me to stay after class. When all of the other students left, he presented us with an offer. He told us that, in his opinion, we were not really Algebra I material and we would probably have a difficult time passing his class; however, he understood we needed this class for graduation and he was willing to make a deal with us. He would give us a passing grade if we completed all of the homework assignments, participated in class discussions, and did not cause any disciplinary problems. The four of us thought this was an excellent deal and we readily agreed.

Throughout the remainder of that year, we did what we could, but it was limited. We barely passed the class and were confident that our teacher had taken good care of us. This deal worked well for me throughout the remainder of high school; however, the deal was not so productive when I entered college as a freshman. I failed the college math entrance exam and had to take remedial math. I remember those first few weeks in college, especially that remedial math course. Two questions constantly arose in my mind. The first was a question about whether I could actually pay for college by working those long hours and be prepared for class. At that point, I was working over 40 hours per week to pay for college expenses because my mother was a single parent attempting to raise four children. She couldn't provide a great deal of financial support, and I was on my own.

The second question was focused on whether I actually belonged in college. I distinctly remember questioning myself and wondering if I had the right "stuff" to be a college student. Perhaps I didn't belong in college because I was not even smart enough to pass the college entrance exam in math. I did overcome this initial deficit and became a decent student. I graduated on the Dean's list, developed a respectable GPA, and eventually earned two master's degrees and a doctorate degree; however, that first semester was difficult, and it nearly convinced me that I couldn't be successful in college.

In today's society, it is extremely important to develop and maintain high expectations in everything we do. We live in a global economic environment, and other countries, states, and nations will quickly surpass us if we fail to possess high personal standards and expectations. My ninth grade math teacher was not a bad educator, and he still had a passion for teaching. He looked at my initial work in his class, saw that neither of my parents had graduated from high school, realized that I came from a highly impoverished family where no one had ever experienced any academic success, and he concluded that I probably didn't have the ability to pass Algebra. I am convinced that he thought his offer was kind, legitimate, and designed to help us, but it had a devastating impact on me.

I have dedicated the last three decades of my life to public education. I have been employed as a classroom teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. All of these positions have provided me with a unique perspective, and I have gained considerable insight on the importance of education. I have grown increasingly convinced that access to public education has been one of the fundamental components that have made this nation great. Unlike many other nations, we open our doors to every student – regardless of their academic ability,

social status, race, economic strength, or political connections. In America, we believe in the value and worth of each child. We provide a free and appropriate education to all. Education has always been the great equalizer in this country, and I possess the firm belief that public education is one of the most critical elements that provide us with the skills and opportunity to overcome any barrier or obstacle. Education has the ability to place even the most at-risk student on a level playing field if he or she will take full advantage of school. It could be argued that public school education is the essential foundation of the American Dream.

Public education will only hold this power if the entire community develops high academic expectations for all students. We can't offer excuses or reasons why students fail. Although some students may be born with a number of academic challenges, it is our responsibility to help them overcome those barriers and to be successful. The very foundation of this success begins with having high expectations – for all. Everyone in the community must have high expectations for public schools to operate at maximum potential. School boards, administration, staff, and teachers must have high expectations. It is equally important that parents, students, community members, and governmental agencies also possess high expectations. We must avoid the trap of adopting the “bless his heart” philosophy and lowering our standards for at-risk children. Clearly, we must provide additional resources and assistance to those students in at-risk environments, but we don't do them justice when we lower our expectations or focus on reasons why they fail.

Although it is important to have high expectations, it is equally important to understand that students possessing a number of at-risk factors (such as being economically disadvantaged, being English Language Learners, having learning difficulties, and coming from impoverished homes) will need more resources and attention to be successful. School boards, superintendents, and central office staff must identify those who are dealing with significant at-risk factors and funnel additional resources to those in need. We can't expect principals and teachers to meet these high standards without having the necessary resources to be successful. Everyone in the community has a role to play in this endeavor, and we will be successful only when we all accept responsibility for our individual roles in the educational process.

One of our primary district goals and objectives will be the creation and maintenance of high academic standards for all students. Improving student academic achievement will be our fundamental mission. We will adopt the concept of “Failure is not an Option” and will be relentless in our efforts to help students succeed. We will give them the necessary experiences, support, resources, and attention to be successful. We will search for ways to help each child reach his or her potential without looking for excuses or reasons why he or she can't compete. This is the heart of why we chose this profession.

I recently heard a nationally renowned speaker talk about his difficult early years and the obstacles he had to overcome to be successful. He constantly heard from others that he had no chance in the world to be successful, but he constantly pleaded for just one chance to show the world he could. We will give those students that chance. Thanks for your attention. Remember: School Matters!

--Jeff Perry, Superintendent
Hamblen County Schools