

The Equation of Student Success

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I have written before in the past on various blog sites and networks about the vital equation that must exist in order for a student not to fail in our schools:

Student Success = Family + Student + School + Policy makers/Voters

Each variable is co-dependent on the other. Each link in the chain must do its part, pulling its weight for the goal to be achieved. To tackle this polynomial equation takes deconstructing its parts. Therefore, much like a “Top Chef” contestant deconstructs a grilled cheese sandwich to analyze its ingredients, I am going to break down our education equation into parts and analyze what each must contribute for a student to succeed.

So I've posted three articles simultaneously, a webquest of sorts through my blogs, covering the following:

- At [The Huffington Post](#), you'll find my take on what the family and home life must contribute to the equation.
- At the George Lucas Educational Foundation's [Edutopia](#) site, I've written on what the student must bring to the table.
- At my personal website, [Tweenteacher.com](#), you can read about the schools' responsibilities, specifically those of the teachers.

Stop by each site and look at each of the variables. For without any of them, the equation will undoubtedly fail.

1. The Family's/Guardian's Responsibility

It seems simple to say that a family provides the first and most important education for a student, but it's true. As a teacher, I have influenced many students in my time, but never more so than the lessons coming from their homes. It doesn't matter whether the student comes from two parents or one guardian, a traditional home or an alternative one; there must be structure at home that supports a child's learning. At school, we struggle to differentiate for the 30 or so students before us, but in the student's home, individualization should be the norm. Teachers may be educational experts, but those at home are supposed to be experts at their own children.

The home life must follow some foundational rules to contribute to the equation of student success to avoid a student's failure:

1. Get the student to school... on time.
2. Make sure the kid is fed... on something other than Snickers.
3. Make sure the student has had proper medical care.
4. Communicate with the school: show up to meetings about the child, have a way to reach out with questions or comments.
5. Be accessible. Make sure the school has accurate phone numbers. Make sure calls are returned.
6. Know where the student goes after school.
7. Make sure the student has a place to work and a routine time to do homework.

8. Follow the homework to its destination. Many times, parents let go of monitoring before the student is ready. Check to make sure the work was done. SEE the kid put the work in their bag before school.
9. Learn how kids change from year to year. A student who is an A-student in fourth grade might be struggling to make Cs by middle school or might never find a passion for learning until high school. Students are constantly trying to redefine themselves, and it is not always the school's fault if a student is trying on a costume that we all disapprove of.
10. Share honestly what a student has a tendency to do socially, academically, and behaviorally. Don't leave that knowledge for the school to unearth. It wastes time in solving the problems. Be upfront with the school, and work together to provide consistent structure as soon as possible.

Look, I know that not every home life is set up to allow for all of these rules to be followed. There are parents with multiple jobs, homes of nomadic families, and things that happen that throw a tragic wrench into the consistency of a family's life. I get it. But it's important to realize that there is a trade-off if this variable in the equation is not functioning at its full peak, and schools cannot always bridge the gaps that exist in all homes.

So far, families are not held accountable the way the schools are for their student's failure. But one must ask: are some families of failing students living up to their end of the social bargain?

2. The Student's Responsibility

Every parent and teacher of a struggling student has looked in the mirror at one point or other and asked themselves: *What more can I do if Johnny is not helping himself?* Many feel that there is an unconditional amount that adults should do since students are still learning how to be responsible for themselves. However, in the era of "Race to the Top" (RTTT) and "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), those in control of school accountability need to acknowledge that there are some students sabotaging themselves despite the Herculean efforts of the adults around them.

Nevertheless, a student should be allowed to struggle without being abandoned to his or her sole efforts. School is a place of learning, after all. But students struggle for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that their emotional and impetuous side of their brains develop earlier than their logical, rational side. In other words, they are wired to make poor decisions.

That's not an excuse, but it does mean that we adults have a responsibility to be patient and consistent guides as students learn how to own their own learning.

To help students along, here is a list of some basic rules that children should follow to avoid their own failure and to step up as a variable in their own equation of success:

1. Be your own advocate. Stake a claim in the classroom by making sure the teacher knows who you are...in a good way.
2. Ask lots of questions....and show confusion appropriately.
3. Communicate your struggles to your teachers. What is going on that affects your work?
4. Think of school as your office in training. Are you a good co-worker?
5. Dress for success, but don't panic, you don't have to wear a suit to be taken seriously.

6. At least do the minimum so you aren't creating gaps that are harder to bridge later. Better yet, do more.
7. Sweat a little. School is your brain gym. You have to work out your muscles, make them a little sore, if you're going to lift a heavier load later on.
8. Find ways to relate to your reading and writing. What original thoughts and experiences can you bring to the lesson to make it come alive for yourself?
9. Be in class. Don't jeopardize your own training.
10. Surround yourself with other students who can help you. You don't have to be best friends with everyone you seek advice from, but find friends or acquaintances that are rooting for you, the best of you.

Look, it's important that you trust adults when we say that your future is important, and that what you do now affects it. It's also important that you know that while many people may contribute to your struggles, you're the only one who will suffer if you fail. Rise above them. Be stronger than the hurdles that life throws at you.

Live up to your potential. Do your job. Look ahead. Keep up your end of the bargain in your own equation of success.

3. The Teacher's Responsibilities

What's rough about defining a teachers' necessary contribution to the equation is that it has become an evolving job description, with obligations added to our plates without appropriate increase in compensation or the necessary ongoing training. Nevertheless, there are still responsibilities which make up the foundation of our profession and ones that we must be willing to adopt as the world around us changes if we are to really hold our own in the equation of student success.

1. Be experts at our content. This means continuing to invest in updating our knowledge.
2. Be experts in communicating our content. A good math teacher not only knows math, but can transmit their knowledge to students in a way that the clientele understand. A good history teacher not only appreciates the past, but can pass on their passion in a way that makes students appreciate it too.
3. Be up to date on skills students will need to know for their future. I've written about this in the past. Teachers must find ways to teach forwards, to teach in a way that helps prepare students for their future, and that often means moving beyond the methods in which we ourselves were taught.
4. Collaborate and model collaboration, for the future world in which they will live will not be an isolated one. It will be a global community that requires adults to work together in ways we cannot begin to predict. Cut the losses that go hand-in-hand with our inability to see the future, and teach an openness to collaboration.
5. Be a role model. Yes, you signed up for that.
6. Communicate with the student and the family in multiple ways, in methods that work for them and for you. You have email but they don't? Find a way. You have given a paper to the student and it never reached home? Call until you reach someone or wait at the curb for an inescapable meeting at drop-off.
7. Continue being a student yourself, and model being a lifelong learner.
8. Make lessons applicable. Don't be a part of the disconnect between school life what real life. Take time to explain the relationship and why what kids are learning now is important later on.
9. Be willing to adapt. We are in the business of teaching the group that is before us at any given year, and as times change, so must our methods and lessons.

10. Enjoy your job and your clientele. The minute you find yourself not looking forward to spending your day with those kids, find another profession.

For some teachers, this may seem obvious. For others it may be more than you bargained for when you signed up for teaching. But it's the basic fundamentals of what we need to do if we are to keep up our end of the equation. And I'll be honest; I think we should be evaluated on how we accomplish these steps. We should be held accountable for how we uphold our end of the social bargain. Even though I believe teachers and schools can't be held accountable for other variable's failures, we cannot allow that discrepancy to dictate our own contributions and efforts.

4. The Final Variable in the Equation of Success

Of course, the last vital variable is what we all, the voters and the policy makers who work for us, must do for education to succeed.

It's important enough that I want to end each of my three posts with this challenge: make education a priority in the voting booths and the campaigns. Retired baby boomers can't dismiss educational issues as no longer their problem to solve. Younger families coming up through the system can't cut-and run from our public schools in their indecision of how to educate their own children. The problems that plague some of our schools belong to us all.

Public schools are a miracle of this country. The mission, to educate all for free, is one that anyone on any side of the political fence should be fighting for as a top priority. But it's up to voters to send the message that it is important, and it's up to policymakers to do the right thing despite party politics and lobbyists.

Cutting education will only cut the future of this country, and that hurts us all. With every vote that does not pass and with every "nay" on the floor, our voters and policy makers condemn our system to further failure.

The equation of student success isn't about who is to blame. Rather, it forces us to ask the question: how can each variable that involves us all, better do its part?