

A report to the participating schools

KIDS FAILING or FAILING KIDS?

Conversations with students who are failing
in our schools: What did the *students* say?

Submitted by:

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2008 Arkansas Teacher of the Year

August 6, 2009

School and Student Data

Schools N = 20

High Schools (9-12)	Jr. High Schools (8-9)	Middle-Intermediate Schools (5-8)	Elementary Schools (K-4)
9	4	5	2

Geographic Distribution (by quintile)

NW	NE	SW	SE	Central
6	1	7	4	2

Students N = 84

Males	Females
46	38

African-American Males	African-American Females	White Males	White Females	Hispanic Males	Hispanic Females	Asian Males	Asian Females
17	14	26	20	2	3	1	1

The students who were interviewed in this study were chosen by teachers, counselors and administrators of the participating schools. Each student was having difficulties being successful in school for a variety of reasons including:

- low socio-economic backgrounds
- generational poverty
- high absenteeism
- issues with the judicial system
- violence against students
- teen pregnancy
- lack of parental support
- parents being absent
- parents are drug users or are incarcerated
- drug use
- victims of sexual abuse
- others.

Additionally, all of these students were also performing below their academic abilities. In other words, school officials indicated that these kids could do the work successfully, but have problems outside of school which impede their possible success.

Sample questions which were asked of these students

Tell me about your school.

How does the way you feel about your teacher affect your grade?

Describe the teacher that you work hardest for?

Describe the teacher who you don't want to work for?

Who is your idol?

Is school teaching you the things that you need to know to prepare you for your future career?

What types of courses would you like to see your school offer?

Do family obligations keep you from reaching your goals in school?

What can the school, teachers, counselors or administrators do to help you?

Is there something outside the school you need to be more successful? If so, what is/are those things/services?

What are the reasons you don't come to school regularly?

What happens in the morning or the night before which causes you to not walk out that door for school?

If you have a job outside of school, how many hours do you work a week?

What is the thing you like least about school?

Would respond to a cash prize at the end of each semester for perfect attendance? If so, what amount would make you come to school every single day?

RIGOR - RELEVANCE - RELATIONSHIPS

This is a common, and laudable, phrase used in education today. Based on my experience and this study, I believe our phrase should be - RELATIONSHIPS - RELATIONSHIPS - RELATIONSHIPS.

There will be no rigor or relevance without relationships. I found that these kids need someone who will respect them, love them and not judge them. But, there is a pretty big catch to this - it is not necessarily a reciprocal relationship. These kids demand a teacher's respect even before they earn the respect of the teacher. Teachers and administrators really need to understand this point.

The overriding themes I have learned from the kids - we probably already know. But, I believe it is very helpful to be reminded of what we think we know, and take action when our perceptions may not be realities anymore. More importantly, I believe it is critical that we examine our practice with kids who are failing. What worked for me 15 years ago many times does not work now with these kids - I have learned this about my teaching from your students. So, here are a few things we might learn or re-learn from what kids said:

1. Kids really want to be liked by their teachers and administrators
2. Respect from teachers is very important to all kids
3. But, respect from teachers to minority kids and kids from poverty is absolutely essential
4. We must focus on the fact that we must respect these kids FIRST and that respect may not be a reciprocal relationship - at least in the beginning
5. We must keep supporting these types of kids. Remember - in many of their lives, they are used to people giving up on them. Many of them are rejected, abused or even kicked out of their homes when they repeatedly fail. So, the teacher must be that "rock" which continually tries to support them, while still demanding from the students as much as they can give.
6. Building on number 5, teachers and administrators need to look for ways to incrementally reward these kids. For example, no homework turned in yesterday and one problem turned in today is progress - maybe even success. We must reward this behavior with at least an "attaboy." With kids from poverty and/or abuse, the road to a meaningful and productive relationship will be one which is long and taken in very small steps.
7. Kids want role models
8. They want someone to hold them accountable. We must be very careful how we approach holding them accountable. It is important to remember that these kids may not have positive role models in their lives. So, how we handle ourselves is critical to how they will (or will not) respond.
9. They want hands-on learning - even in regular classes
10. The classes they wished our schools offered included: vo-tech courses, culinary arts, emergency responder courses, building arts, martial arts, welding, and many others
11. The number one answer to classes they wished our schools offered: culinary arts. Many kids expressed an interest in planning menus and cooking for large groups or in a restaurant.
12. They also wanted after-school clubs: guitar hero, rock climbing, cooking, martial arts, video game and others
13. Many of these kids were interested in after-school tutoring as well. But, nearly every single student (who did not live within walking distance) indicated they would not have a ride home. Therefore, the current programs in place did not serve the students who really needed them.

14. They want teachers to teach them things not on the curriculum (how a functional family works, friendship, advice on life which is not “preachy”). Some even said they just wanted to learn what it was like to live in a “normal” family.
15. Many of these kids believe the system is against them. It is important not to dismiss their beliefs on this one as their perceptions are their realities.
16. Here are some direct quotes from item 15: Rich kids are teacher favorites; Popular kids don’t get in trouble, even if they do the same thing I did; Teachers play favorites; Kids like us don’t really matter;
17. These kids expect us (teachers and administrators) to be the adults. When they act up in class, many of these kids are expecting us to de-escalate the situation. Kids from these backgrounds probably are not capable of doing this. In fact, some of these kids want this to escalate to a point where we are out of control. The result is that sometimes they get what they want – go home, get suspended, quit school, etc. We must remember that school is not a place where they are comfortable or even feel welcomed.
18. Most of these kids will NOT back down in a situation which is being verbally escalated. They can’t. Or, they don’t know how. These kids will tell you that they watch for physical escalation clues, too. It is critical that teachers and administrators be cognizant of their physical positions when in these situations.
19. Kids want teachers to take an interest in their personal lives (who they are, what they need)
20. The vast majority of these kids do not live with both biological parents. While this situation is not necessarily inherently bad, many of these kids talked about abusive and/or strained relationships with step-parents. Additionally, these students also mentioned strained relationships with girlfriends or boyfriends of the biological parent with whom they live.
21. One student was particularly insightful on item 20: “My dad has a girlfriend. Now, she’s pregnant and she’s moved in with us. She thinks she is my mom, now. She doesn’t have a job and we don’t have room for her. But, she’s in the house leeching off of us now. It makes me really stressed.”
22. Parents allow (either voluntarily, or through empowerment) these kids to be absent. This issue was pervasive. At every school, kids told me how they skipped school or were allowed to miss school by their parents or guardians. The examples are too numerous to include them all. In item 23, I will include a few examples of how and why kids miss school regularly.
23. Missing school:
 - a. 6th grade female - “My mom says she hated school and was not good at it. She knows I am not good at it either. So, she lets us take off 2 or 3 days a month from school.”
 - b. 7th grade female - “We have really long driveway. My mom drops me at the end of the driveway and she drives to work. I walk back home and watch TV for the day.”
 - c. 5th grade male – “I put a wet wash cloth in the microwave and heat it up. I put it on my head for a minute and then have my mom feel my head. She thinks I have a fever and I stay home. She doesn’t really care if I go to school or not.”
 - d. 9th grade female – “My mom is a bit co-dependent. I really don’t even like her. She calls the school and gets me out for all kinds of stuff. Last week she took me out at 1:00 (pm) because she didn’t know how to work a program on our computer. That’s a pretty dumb reason to take a kid out of school, huh?”
 - e. 5th grade female – “When my mom has to go to the doctor or the dentist, she takes me out of school. I either need to hold her hand and be there for her, or, I have to watch my younger sister while we are there.”
 - f. Many students of all ages expressed some form of the following – “My grandma was sick, so I had to go to the hospital with my family. We stayed at UAMS for about 6 or 7 days.”
24. It was stunning how many days these kids reported missing over medical issues of family members. Of course, this is another component of kids of come from poverty. Although educators may see these

families (from the outside looking in) as dysfunctional, it is important to remember how families work in poverty. Ruby Payne explains this best when describing the “driving force” of people from poverty: survival, relationships and entertainment. This may help explain why our kids from poverty may miss so many days from school for reasons middle class parents would never allow.

25. Some of these kids have been, or are being abused, physically, sexually or emotionally
26. Many of these kids are alone at home (latch-key, parent sleeping at girlfriend/boyfriend’s house, fending for themselves, parents are addicts, parents are absent due to legal troubles/incarceration, etc.)
27. Who’s the adult??? One of the students told me about a time when he was talking to a neighbor just as the bell rang. The teacher shouted very loudly at him to stop talking. The student responded by raising his voice at the teacher. As this situation amped up, the student said he eventually wound up in the vice-principal’s office. The situation repeated itself there with the principal suspending the boy for 3 days. The student told me he was wrong to be talking in class. But, he said, “Who’s the adult?” Why do teachers and principals escalate a really simple situation? I am supposed to be the kid.” I learned a lot from this young man. I learned it is important to remember that I am the adult and that, as a professional, it is my responsibility to not let simple situations get out of control.

Some of the raw data (quotes and paraphrases) for your perusal

WHAT STUDENTS NEED – Here are some of their comments

Have night school classes

Getting up in the morning is really hard for me

I hate early morning classes

I want art and PE first thing in the morning – not classes. I’m not even awake yet

The preps get what they want and never learn that life is not easy

We don’t like the Cards – locker, behavior, bathroom, etc. – We have so much to keep up with already

Homework – If I can do it at school, I will – if not, it won’t get done at home

If homework can’t be done in class, I won’t get it done at home

Our time at school is school time, but home time is home time – not homework

School is great for everyone going to college/university

RESPECT is huge for these type of students

Real writing classes where we could write based on our interests

More agriculture classes

More hands-on science

More classes with hands-on applications

Culinary arts class

Homework – I can’t do it if it is assigned, things are too crazy at my house

I never do homework – even if it is assigned

I won’t do homework if it is assigned – I’ve got other things to do

If it is raining, I won't come to school
Problems at school can cause problems at home
If I am doing okay at school, then things go well at home
School puts a lot of tension on my family life
School drags into our family issues
Many kids named "themselves" as their idol or someone they looked up to

THERE IS A LOT OF DRAMA IN THEIR LIVES – WHETHER REAL OR NOT

Kids from poverty – family is everything and so is the "drama" of the problem
Grandma has heart problems going to hospital– kids from poverty – family is everything and so is the drama of the problem
Mom is sick and we have to take her to Conway hospital – I have to watch her
Girlfriend lives with us and she is pregnant and she has moved in – so, I need a job
I can't stay after school for help because the bus leaves - or I work
Kids will respond to cash rewards to come to school
Homework – most of these kids will not do any more work than they can do at school

TEACHERS

Counselor is not helpful at all this year. The counselor doesn't want to help – he just hands us forms and makes us do fill out something we don't understand
She plays music for us in class that we like – it helps me concentrate
She is awesome – plays music we like if we work hard in class
If I don't like the teacher, I won't do the work
Teachers I don't like – I will try the harshest things to make them mad
I want to work for teachers who makes it fun, hands-on.
I like outgoing teachers.
I work hard for teachers who are smart and know what they are doing
Teachers who start trouble
I don't like teachers who lie about what happened when I get in trouble
There are too many teachers who escalate situations in the classroom
Teachers who get loud and get in my face and yell
She will talk to you about ANYTHING and she keeps it private
She sent me messages in the mail and called me to check on me
She's just not like the other teachers, she cares about us

PARENTS

Mom spilled coke on the alarm and we don't have one now – I'm late a lot

Tired from staying up late

On the phone or texting all night long

Mom leaves for work and I walk back to the house

Quick money when someone hires me (clean chicken houses, cut/haul firewood, work lumber jobs)

Sometimes – my parents had to leave and I had to stay and run the chicken houses

Sometimes my mom calls me home (she couldn't do something on the computer and needed my help)

If Dad is at his girlfriend's, I don't get up

Have to care for my brothers and sisters – mom is an addict

OTHER THINGS THE KIDS TALKED ABOUT:

What is the power of relationships between teachers and kids?

- Students motivated by teachers who care
- Students sense if teachers like them or not
- They tell me they work harder for teachers who take an interest in their personal lives
- They tell me they work harder for teachers who they think are fun and do hands-on learning
- They tell me they work harder for teachers who respect them (Poverty and Respect)

RESPECT

- This is not necessarily a reciprocal relationship
- Most of these kids don't have the necessary skills to give respect first
- Most of these kids don't have adults in their lives who can model these skills
- It is very important for these kids to be able to save face
- The "drama" and "Jerry Springer Syndrome"

The kids NEED us. They want us to teach things that are NOT in the curriculum

- Teach them things which aren't even on the curriculum - such as...
- Right versus Wrong (without preaching)
- What it is to be a middle-class citizen
- Social mores
- Family values (not abortion, being gay is wrong type of family values)
- How does a loving family function?
- A family with no violence, abuse, malaise

We must "Wrap the student around the curriculum, not the curriculum around the student."
This is the essence of what good educational relationships are.