

Reflections From the Classroom

Every Child Is At Risk

By Eric Fox

I teach at-risk students—considered, by some, a trendy thing to do. The government pours money into programs for the students. The media decries the ones who don't make it and celebrates the ones who overcome.

I've had these students in my classroom throughout my teaching career. I've had students who are gangbangers and serving time. I've also had Ms. America and students who went on to top-tier universities. I've had students from homes with plenty and those that are lacking. I've had students of single parents, raised by surrogates, those who are only children, middle children, firstborn, and the "baby" of the family. I've had students who were over-protected and overindulged. I've had students who had to raise themselves, their siblings, and their parents.

I've seen a lot in my career, and I don't have many "aha" moments anymore. I hope it's not because I'm jaded or cynical. It isn't because I know it all. I don't have the explanations for students who study but don't test well; or who chronically don't turn in homework; or lack skills, but refuse to give up; or who quit just before they figure it out; or who make learning look effortless. If I had those explanations, I'd be on TV talking about my book or touting my answers as the path toward educational utopia. Those experts get paid to travel and talk about problems that exist today.

Me? I'm just a teacher.

I battle ignorance, apathy, lack of vision, lack of motivation, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, disorganization, and a bad memory on a daily basis. I don't have enough degrees and have never been elected to public office, so much of what I say may not seem important. My view is minuscule. I can't see the landscape with trends and data points. I just see the trenches. All I know is Joey left his house last night because he and his dad got into it. He finally went home after he thought his dad was asleep. I don't know where Joey is today.

I know Annie is flunking every class except for music (a mid-D), and her

mom doesn't know why she's no longer the B-C student she once was. Her counselor doesn't know why she's apathetic.

I know Mary missed the week before her state tests because her mom decided to visit a relative. She missed practice tests, reviews, and tutoring.

“How many students will we write off because we didn't go the extra mile? How many times have we decided which students were worthy of extra attention or encouragement?”

She also missed the last three days of summer school and took a zero on her final because she wanted to go on a family trip that couldn't wait until the session was over.

I know a colleague had to pick up Meredith and bring her to school because she missed the bus. Meredith can't afford to miss school. She's about to fail for excessive absences. Meredith tells everyone she will be going to college next year. I'm hoping she ends up with enough credits to graduate from high school. She's living with a younger friend who dropped out of school as a teen mom. Meredith said it's "a little weird" having a friend at her house with a baby.

I've had students like these for a long time. Most days, they go home with me—in my mind. I wake up thinking

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ERIC FOX teaches U.S. history and Advanced Placement U.S. history and coordinates the AVID college-prep program at his school in Jenks, Okla. He is certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and was a finalist for the Oklahoma Teacher of the Year in 2003.



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about how to reach them or wondering if they are making wise choices. I did have an “aha” moment recently: I realized I teach at-risk kids; that’s all I’ve ever taught; that’s all any of us teach. Each student who crosses the classroom threshold is at risk. They may not be “at risk” according to the definition the government requires for the program your administrator wants. They may not seem “at risk” to themselves or their parents, but they are.

Every child, adolescent, or young adult who enters our school doorways is at risk of not developing his or her potential. I’ve never heard an elementary student

say, “I want to make meth when I grow up,” or “I can’t wait until I’m old enough to go to prison,” or “When I’m a teen mom, I can really play house.”

Early on, children have bold dreams that we almost laugh at, though maybe we disguise our response with a grin that they may interpret as encouragement, when we know we’re patronizing them. They want to make it. They want to have it, do it, enjoy it, taste it, live it, love it!

Most of them can’t consider a reality where their dreams *won’t* come true. For a long time, they are of the age of why-shouldn’t-it-be-true. If they can imagine it, it must be possible. Then they mature to *I-hope-it-will-be-true*, followed by *I-wish-it-were-true*.

Eventually, they discard the dream.

Maybe they don’t have the right skills from preschool, or the right ZIP code, or don’t look right, or they talk differently, or learn differently, or lack parental resources, or didn’t get the right teacher, or don’t qualify for special services, or ... fill in the blank. We use lots of factors or excuses to rationalize why some kids make it and others don’t.

The bottom line is that today, not tomorrow, I’m going to view each student in those desks differently. If I view each of them more as what they can become—instead of where they are now or where they need to be before I ship them off to someone else—I might work with greater urgency

so their dream doesn’t crumble before my eyes. If I never truly challenge them, I am responsible for that untapped potential.

If I view each student as at risk, I might make more calls to parents who want to help, but may not know how. I might contact more colleagues who have strategies to reach those I haven’t. I might take more seminars, read more books, or watch more videos.

What disturbs me is, what would happen if I didn’t take this view? What if *we* don’t take this view? How many students will we write off because we didn’t go the extra mile? How many times have we decided which students were worthy of extra attention or encouragement? How many times have we shot down a dream be-

cause we expected too little? How many times have we let our own frustration spew, or felt as though our comfort and convenience were more important than a student’s?

If you already had this figured out, you are to be commended. I wish we could have met long ago. If this has caused you to reflect, you are also to be commended. Those who take time to refine their craft will find a better way to reach the students who didn’t get it the first time, or the second, or however many times they needed. I’m sorry it took so long for me to get here, but I’m thankful that I see my students now. It’s got to make a difference. There are too many students at risk of being left behind for it not to. ■

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Commentary Gave False Picture of NAEP Proficiency

To the Editor:

In a recent Commentary (“NAEP’s Odd Definition of Proficiency,” Oct. 26, 2011), James Harvey makes inaccurate assertions about the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, achievement levels—specifically, that they are invalid and that the “proficient” level is set too high.

While there has been much debate about the challenging nature of the NAEP achievement levels, Mr. Harvey cherry-picks the findings he presents, most of which are decades old. He ignores more current findings—which happen to be positive—including the most recent NAEP evaluation report, which concludes that “the internal and procedural evidence supports the validity of the [achievement-level setting] process;

who has never served.

The governing board intends to use research rather than opinions about international achievement as one of the external sources of information about the achievement levels. In fact, the 2011 NAEP scores will be compared to both the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, or PIRLS. The results of these studies will provide additional evidence about the achievement levels of U.S. students. To be globally competitive, our nation must benchmark against the best in the world.

Accepting low expectations is perilous for students and the country as a whole. In contrast with Mr. Harvey, the board will not accept demography as an excuse for setting low standards of achievement.

Cornelia S. Orr
Executive Director
National Assessment Governing Board
Washington, D.C.

Jefferson County, Ky.,
‘Fixing for Long Haul’

that teaching is a collaborative rather than individual practice, creating teachers who take collective ownership of the fact that Johnny or Susan doesn’t get it and *fixing that!* Time for teacher collaboration focused on hard questions and increased pedagogical and content knowledge; ongoing focus on formative assessment to identify student strengths and weaknesses for acceleration and remediation; and the inclusion of additional learning support in the school day as the result of scheduling to better personalize learning are all what I’ve come to know as truly “investing” in our schools’ long-term fix.

Gary S. Mathews
Superintendent
Newton County School District
Covington, Ga.

Changes in GED Should Force Government Policy Decisions

To the Editor:

The article “GED Revision Opens Path to Higher Ed.” (*Education Week*, Nov. 16, 2011) describes the current efforts to redesign the test of General Educational Development. The GED is an important

organization. But this year, the GED Testing Service was acquired by Pearson, a for-profit organization. Pearson’s changes to the exam will roughly double the price for the exam.

New York state, which fully funds the price of the exam, using its current budget, would be able to test roughly half of those who now take the test each year. As public budgets continue to be weak, many states, including New York, are looking for ways to shift the costs of the exam to GED consumers. Given the value that the GED entails to individuals and the resulting economic benefits to the public, this represents an unwise barrier to the exam.

The changes in the exam will also require increased support to the many organizations that help people prepare for the GED in classes that range from literacy to test-prep, in settings that include community groups, libraries, and schools. These programs already faced limited public support despite increasing demand for their services; states and localities will need to consider how they can support these organizations in this important work.

As a large corporate entity, Pearson has strong lobbying abilities and relationships with public education