

... outstanding teachers routinely do what a thousand hand-wringing social programs have found impossible: close the achievement gap between rich and poor, transform students at risk of failure into achievers and believers, and rewrite the equation of opportunity.

—Doug Lemov, teacher, author of *Teach Like a Champion* (2010, p. 2)

that on the day he planned to end his life, a teacher he cared about had reached out to him and told him she was worried about him. She didn't do anything exceptional except listen to him, comfort him, and tell him she would help him work through this. He said that one brief conversation changed his mind, and he credits having been saved by that teacher." The brother choked back tears and said, "That teacher was you, by the way." Then it was the author's turn to cry because that student and that conversation were but hazy memories. Recall of the student had faded, and the exact conversation was not even remembered. The teacher cried because of the thought, "What if I hadn't reached out to the student on that day? I cannot even remember the event, but a life was changed that day, and I didn't even know it. Sometimes, I am overwhelmed by the power we teachers have."

## RELATIONSHIP CULTURE: HOW TEACHERS SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THEMSELVES

What we do or don't do, say or don't say, are or are not, truly matters to students. Each and every day, students at every level are scrutinizing us carefully to see what changes we have made to our hair, clothing, and shoes. (Yes, they know when the roots get done and when we wear the same outfit twice in one week.) It is true that most students cannot see the assignment written on the board behind your head, but they do see (and like to point out) the tiniest spot on your shirt or piece of food lodged in your teeth. In spite of our foibles, though, the fact remains that all students aspire to be an adult. In most cases, who are the important mature adults in their lives that they look at anywhere from 50 minutes to a full day for over 180 days? That would be the perfectly pressed teacher. (Or some of us might call it a good day if we have on matching socks.)

With all the pressures and constraints on our time, how can we make sure that we are still building a positive relationship culture? *Purposeful attention* to relationship building within our classrooms and buildings is a start. Strategies and ideas don't have to be complex or time consuming. Many suggestions can be woven seamlessly into an environment or a lesson that is already established. It can be as simple as sharing some things about ourselves with our students. Here are some suggestions from one of our authors on what a teacher can do to start the relationship building by letting students know more about you:



## Sharing the Real You With Your Students

- Have pictures of you, your family, your pets, and your friends framed and placed around the room.
- Bring your scrapbook or old school yearbooks to class for students to view.
- Weave relevant personal stories into appropriate teachable moments.
- Participate in team building and/or advisory activities with students.
- Stock a bookshelf with books you read at their age along with your personal favorites now.
- Make a display or list of people you most admire.
- Perform for them something you like to do such as a dance move, karate move, song, interpretative reading, magic trick, physical feat, or joke.
- Bring in artifacts of your skills like a trophy, a certificate, a painting, a poem, a song, something you built, a needlepoint, a picture of your garden, a picture of you competing in a sport, a picture of you doing charitable work, or whatever it is you do when you are not with them.
- Share with them your “dream list” of things you still want to do in this world before you leave it. ■

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It is sometimes the little things that help build relationships with kids, and part of that can be sharing our stories with them. There are also great ideas for getting to know about your students. We believe it is critical to go see them play sports, watch them perform in the band, or sing with the choir anytime that you can. It might even mean attending a few dance recitals, birthdays, and other events. We know this takes time and energy.

The fact is you do not even need to leave the comfort of your own home or classroom to make a student feel special. In some cases, many middle school teams, elementary teachers, and high school teachers are making it a priority to write letters to students and parents about simple and great things that are happening in their classrooms as well as about their child's accomplishments. Personal letters have special meaning and are quite different from the computerized mass-produced letters that clog our mailboxes. Many of us have received e-mails, letters, and handwritten notes from a friend, a teacher, or a parent that have lifted our spirits and changed our outlook on life.