Introduction

On paper, I was a terrific teacher. I was getting great grades in all of my education classes, although my training—and confidence—were geared to things like sequencing content and creating gorgeous instructional materials. In terms of preparation, I could not have been outdone. Yet the thought of facing a roomful of children somehow wasn't relieved by my skill with the laminator. Throughout my methods courses, one question persistently nagged: What do I do with the *kids?*

I did not get many answers, and those I did hear were not particularly satisfying. More often than not my question was answered with a warning: "Keep them busy and make sure you look like you're in charge."

Great.

To make things more interesting, there appeared to be a contradiction between the priorities expressed in our teacher training programs and what the schools actually seemed to want. While the university was big on freedom, creativity, and democracy in the classroom, the undercurrent from the schools, where we would actually be working, warned that control was the goal. It didn't take long for my idealism to yield to this pressure. I remember meeting veterans who confessed to having their students copy their science books because, when observed, the kids were quiet and looked busy. But that certainly wasn't what drew me to teaching. Surely there was a way to actually create order and inspire productivity without policing my kids—or academically wasting their time just so I'd look like I knew what I was doing!

Hoping for the best, I started my career armed with the most beautiful bulletin boards in the district and a handful of clichés: *Be tough. Be consistent. Be clever. Don't smile before Christmas.* Nonetheless, my power was, for the most part, unimpressive and unheeded. The worst punishments I had at my disposal were generally met with a shrug. My students resisted cooperating on even the most reasonable requests, and despite all their street smarts and savvy, could not make simple decisions or get from one side of the room to the other without a problem. I spent so much time nagging, reminding, and monitoring them that I never seemed to do any teaching.

Those months were painful, to say the least. Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that all my dedication, enthusiasm, and creativity would not be enough to engage my students, keep them on task, or generate a passion for learning. And I was devastated to find that my expectations alone would not generate their cooperation. Kids were indifferent to me and mean to one another. Nothing I tried seemed to create anything resembling a sense of community.

For weeks, I cried at the end of every day. But every now and then, I'd stumble across something that worked. And over time, I discovered that the success of these strategies was closely tied to the quality of the classroom culture and the interactions that occur, things over which I had far more influence than I realized. I stopped blaming other teachers,

the system, or parents, and eventually found ways to meet the students' needs without sacrificing my own.

Probably the most important lesson came from the discovery that the common thread among the most effective teachers I observed seemed to be the relationship and the connections that these teachers established with their students—and most often, with the students' parents and with other staff as well. While I may have implicitly understood the importance of these connections when I entered the profession, I had not a clue as to how to bring them about. And so the search began.

In recent years, I've had the pleasure of standing in the halls of a number of schools and watching teachers connect with kids between classes. I've seen the impact of a simple expression of interest or concern. I've heard of a teacher who greeted each of her first graders with an offer of a handshake or a hug.[1] I've sat in a class with an Algebra teacher who stayed after school until five o'clock to tutor her low-achieving kids, each of whom had voluntarily stayed or returned for help catching up. (Unfortunately, I've also walked down hallways and heard yelling and insults that would wither the most emotionally hardy adult, and sometimes wonder how things aren't actually worse than they are in some schools.)

The work I've done since I left the classroom has focused on developing a greater understanding of the dynamics of adult-child relationships and the power of connectedness, and how these contribute to learning, achievement, motivation, self-concept, and behavior in school. This book details what I've learned. My initial focus on discipline, which is still a major concern for educators worldwide, led me to the importance of honoring the need for everyone in a classroom to be valued, respected, and successful—in other words, the need for everyone, teacher and student, to "win."

I remember a conversation that occurred several years ago with my friend and colleague, Dr. Stephen Tipps. In discussing the problems with win-lose patterns so common in schools, he succinctly noted that whether we're talking about discipline or achievement or social interactions, "We cannot afford to have losers in education." Yet how many of our long-cherished traditions continue to put children in this very position. Whether insisting on a certain degree of failure to maintain the distribution of a bell-shaped curve, creating and imposing discipline policies that focus on punitive outcomes for misbehavior, or according privileges or status to certain individuals or groups of students,[2] when it comes to creating an environment with a high degree of commitment, self-management, and success in all students, we keep shooting ourselves in the foot.

Yet it's hard to let go of what we know. As author Alan Blankstein cautions, "Like the smoker who knows better or the gambler who occasionally wins, we can become wedded to what worked at one time or what works once in a while."[3] What I hope to do in this book is to present an alternative to the practices and policies that no longer help us reach our goals, and, in fact, may very well be getting in our way. It would be nice to imagine that the direction for the changes we need will come from the system itself, but it seems, more and more, that the most positive changes are happening *in spite of* established systems.

So here is a roadmap for change, presented with the power of the individual in mind. If you've questioned existing patterns but couldn't think of other options, you'll find them here. These ideas will help you match behaviors to intentions, enhancing the successes you're probably already experiencing. If your work environment is negative and toxic, you'll find some ways to create your own little corner of sanity and success, and maybe even turn the culture of your school around. With or without support, there are things you can do to make your work life a positive, productive, and enjoyable

experience, one that will have a significant impact on the kids whose lives you inevitably touch. And in so doing, everyone wins.

NOTES

1. From a story by Michele Borba in *Mentors, Masters and Mrs. MacGregor: Stories of Teachers Making a Difference* by Jane Bluestein (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1995).

2. The most common prejudices in schools tend to favor kids with money, kids who dress well, and those with academic or athletic talent. From *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools* by Jane Bluestein (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2001).

3. Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure Is Not an Option* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004).