

# Introduction

Often lost in the blur of activity that makes up the average school day in most any town or city in the United States and around the globe is the reason we all are in school. Now this statement may seem naïve and innocuous, given that most people assume the goal of education is for teachers to impart knowledge to students. We teachers are not “most people,” however, and we would be well advised not only to dismiss this observation out of hand but also to take a contrarian stance on the issue of educating students.

Quite simply, the chaos and pressure that K–12 students and their teachers endure day after day is very often a grand waste of time. This does not mean that students shouldn't have to go to school or that teachers should find a different line of work. What it does mean is that all of us—teachers, administrators, students, and parents—have a stake in making the process of education a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor. Trouble is, we seem to be spending a lot of time spinning our wheels.

Today we are educating more students than at any other time in history, and we are doing it better in spite of a system riddled with paradoxes. Several of these paradoxes require schools to (a) ensure social cohesion and, at the same time, ensure cultural diversity; (b) boost academic achievement as

well as teach vocational relevance; (c) maintain an apolitical milieu despite politicization caused by local, state, and federal mandates; (d) be sensitive to national needs and yet be subject to the desires of the local citizenry; and (e) staff themselves with professional educators, even though schools are controlled by laypeople.

Clearly, we educators face an arduous task. Our burden has become so immense, the red tape so long and serpentine, that it is often difficult for many of us to believe that we actually survived another day. Yet success, not survival, must be our ultimate goal. Because we have become so intent on implementing ceaseless changes in curriculum and school policy and structure, we seem to have lost sight of our most important responsibility: our students.

## **Listening to Students Is a Must**

During the past couple of decades, staff members of the Global Institute for Student Aspirations have been listening to students from all grade levels and from numerous schools in the United States and abroad. That, after all, is our mission: to effect positive social change in the world by helping students reach their full potential. We also strive to stimulate professional dialogue and strengthen public awareness of critical education issues and the conditions that foster aspirations for students around the world. Our findings indicate that if we teachers want to feel less tired and more motivated, less frustrated and more satisfied, then we need to know what our students are thinking and what they want to tell us about their learning experience.

We should listen carefully to what they are telling us. As we have discovered in the course of our research, the glue that holds the education process together is *student aspirations*. Students who lack the desire to aspire are just along for the ride; teachers who don't challenge students to aspire are simply taking them for a ride. How can the situation be perceived any other way? If students attend class and find that the teacher is less than motivated and apparently uninterest-

ed in them and the subject matter and uninterested in teaching altogether, then how can we expect students to be motivated to learn and achieve? How can we expect them to look for ways to set short- and long-term goals? How can we expect them to feel the desire to raise their aspirations if they don't believe we care what it is—10 to 20 years down the road—that will make them happy and content with the path they've chosen?

## **How the Eight Conditions Raise Student Aspirations**

Student aspirations are the lifeblood of the old, red brick school building. By itself, the structure is just one more edifice. What goes on inside is what makes it a school. We teachers may be at the helm; we may even model excitement and good citizenship. It is our students, though, who breathe life into the classroom and who bring vitality to the process of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, from listening to thousands of them, we have concluded that change is everywhere, but progress is not.

We at the institute do not, by any stretch of the imagination, claim to be experts on invoking change. We have, however, managed to filter out of the maelstrom of everyday school life a number of conditions that must be implemented and must exist in every school in order for administrators and teachers and students to work together and be successful. By learning and promoting these conditions, we educators can simultaneously bid adieu to worn-out attitudes in our classrooms and schools and create a new, fresh mind-set that provides fertile ground from which student aspirations can sprout and flourish.

During our empirical observations, we have repeatedly come across eight conditions that exist in schools today and stand out in bold relief: *belonging, heroes, sense of accomplishment, fun and excitement, curiosity and creativity, spirit of adventure, leadership and responsibility, and confidence to take action.*

Understandably, there is a tendency for those of us in this field to look askance at any venture that seems destined to

swallow up more time than we have available. We urge you to take a second look. Promoting student aspirations in the classroom is both exciting and rewarding.

## **Fostering Aspirations Depends on a Fresh Outlook**

As a teacher, you need to understand that fostering aspirations is not the same as implementing an add-on unit or a special program; rather, it is a way of looking at things from different points of view. You can be sure that your students will notice your new, refreshed frame of mind, especially if you manage to do the following: (a) stand up for your convictions about the eight conditions; (b) realize that you already have on hand more resources than you'll need to implement the eight conditions; (c) look through the aspirations lens at every lesson you teach and every program and policy with which your school is involved; (d) concentrate on your colleagues' patterns of behavior and connect with those who likewise believe in promoting student aspirations; and (e) celebrate your accomplishments and persevere in good times and bad, recognizing that the implementation of the eight conditions takes continual effort and should never be perceived as something that has a definitive end.

To bring about change at any school is both arduous and challenging; some might call it a miracle. Considering how extraordinarily difficult it is to be a teacher, it is especially reassuring that we can always help change circumstances that we believe should never be considered the status quo.

We can make our goal of helping students raise their aspirations either easy and fun or difficult and boring. Regardless, it's a tough job that requires determination. To first gain and then maintain students' attentiveness, we teachers must work differently from before, think as nonconformists, and come up with unique and creative ways that can be used as bait to reel students into the mainstream of school life.

Sure, our job is taxing. We already know that. But are we so engrossed in teaching the way we've always taught that we cannot take the time to search for new, exciting, and

entertaining ways to attract our students' attention? Have we fallen so deeply in love with our single-minded approach to teaching that we are bereft of the confidence necessary to take action—to challenge ourselves to learn new methods?

If we teach with a purpose, supported by a plan, then we can make our job of teaching and our students' job of learning a delight rather than a pain. All of us should be excited about taking part in the education process. It really needn't be drudgery.

Because students are in our classrooms to learn from us, we should at least grant them the courtesy of giving them what they came for by providing them with a friendly, exciting, and altogether positive environment. If we aren't excited about what we are doing, we can hardly expect our students to be excited. It is crucial, then, that we look at each student's individual needs, show all of them that we care about them as unique human beings, and give all of them a stake in their own education. Our job is to provide students with a friendly learning environment, celebrate their accomplishments—no matter how minor—and motivate them not only to learn facts and figures but also, and most important, to seek to raise their aspirations.