Wayside Teaching: Focusing on Relationships

Sara Davis Powell

Being a Southern girl gives me a little leeway to open with a Billy-Bob and Bubba joke, as long as it has to do with fishing and is somewhat relevant. So, here goes:

Billy-Bob and Bubba rent a boat and go fishing. They catch a lot of fish and return to shore. Billy-Bob says to Bubba, “I hope you remember the spot where we caught all those fish!” Bubba replies, “Yep! I made an X on the side of the boat to mark the spot.” Billy-Bob says, “You numbskull! How do you know we’ll get the same boat next time?”

Their reasoning is, of course, wrong on multiple levels—just as wrong as teaching middle school without focusing on relationships!

We teach sixth graders, seventh graders, and eighth graders, not just sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade. The two letters Rs make all the difference in our attitudes, approaches, and actions. In January we defined wayside teaching as building and maintaining positive relationships with students. Wayside teachers value the power of Rs.

While the components of wayside teaching are as numerous as the teachers who practice it, in Wayside Teaching: Connecting with Students to Support Learning, I outline 12 components I consider very important.

- Know your students.
- Practice little gestures that matter.
- Reveal your personal self.
- Create and maintain an inviting classroom.
- Encourage a culture of acceptance and compassion.
- Help students find their voices.
- Learn to listen.
- Speak carefully.
- Help students to be autonomous, not anonymous.
- Build resiliency.
- Encourage imagination and creativity.
- Infuse humor.

Components for finishing the school year

Now that it is May, let’s concentrate on a few components that will help you end the school year in wayside teaching style. These are things to do today!

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: Value Young Adolescents — School Environment — Adult Advocate
1. Practice little gestures that matter.

This is one of those components we can begin any time and, if we’re not careful, end just as abruptly. Even a 10-second interchange may make a young adolescent’s day. An unexpected smile, a friendly greeting, or a quick shoulder squeeze may be significant to a student in ways we can’t imagine. Because these small gestures impact kids, we should make them purposeful daily habits.

2. Encourage a culture of acceptance and compassion.

Acceptance and compassion are almost impossible to fake. John Lounsbury tells us, “Wayside utterances are often heard at a deeper level than classroom pronouncements” (1991, p. 29). We can talk about acceptance and compassion, but if we don’t practice it in all the little and big opportunities every day, kids will know it.

While there are many ways to encourage acceptance and compassion, fitting them in during the last few weeks of school may not have lasting value. One thing that will last, however, is the impact of quality literature. As a team, try choosing a book with a message about acceptance and compassion, perhaps from the list below. During first period, regardless of the subject, all the kids will read the same passage. Then they go to second period and hear the next passages in the book. By the end of the day they will have heard 40 to 50 minutes of the book and will have been impacted by the message.

As Dr. Seuss said, “Oh, the places you’ll go,” and the differences you’ll make!

- *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting
- *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
- *Dovey Coe* by Frances Dowell
- *The Misfits* by James Howe
- *Rules* by Cynthia Lord
- *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry
- *Star of Luis* by Marc Tolbert
- *The Man Who Loved Clowns* by June Wood

3. Infuse humor.

Infusing humor in our classrooms is not frivolous or silly, although that may be exactly how we feel while we do it. Humor can help kids connect with us and with each other, and can even make the curriculum more meaningful. I am not advocating sarcasm, ridiculing students, or off-color humor. But silly humor? Yes. Self-deprecating humor from the teacher? Yes, occasionally. Some of the most genuine laughs result from moments when our humanity shows itself in ridiculous ways. We can’t be offended when a student remarks, “Oh, man, is that lame!”

If you are naturally funny, then humorous comments will come to you without a lot of effort. If not, try a sing-along with your students or wearing a funny hat in class. Tell a funny story from your own experiences. (Come on, we all have them!) And remember, it is OK to embellish a bit … it’s a middle school teacher’s artistic license.

Commit a few jokes to memory so you can tell them casually in class. Here are a couple to get you started.

- What did the boy mushroom say to the girl mushroom at the seventh grade party? “Come on and dance with me. I’m a fungi!”
- A man visits his aunt in the nursing home. She is taking a nap, so he just sits down in a chair in her room, flips through a few magazines, and munches on some peanuts in a bowl on the table. Eventually, the aunt wakes up, and her nephew realizes he’s absent-mindedly finished the entire bowl: “I’m so sorry, Auntie, I’ve eaten all of your peanuts!” “That’s okay, Dearie,” she replies, “After I suck the chocolate off, I don’t care for them anyway.”

Components for planning the next school year

Now let’s consider a few components that will propel you to plan for next school year in wayside teaching style.

Wayside teaching focuses on developing and maintaining positive relationships with students. Photo provided by S.D. Powell
1. Know your students.

Viewing kids as individuals with learning profiles, family backgrounds, peer relationships, talents, skills, interests, and challenges—in addition to their diverse ethnicities and cultures—takes effort stemming from an attitude of care. We have to want to know our students.

- Before school starts, drive through the neighborhoods where your students live. It’s very important to see where your kids spend their nonschool hours.
- Determine to know all students’ names within one week.
- Use student surveys to give kids opportunities to tell you about themselves.
- With the right attitude and approach, studying all available records concerning our students before the school year begins can be very valuable. As professionals, we can use the information we gather to enhance our relationships and instruction, not to set preconceived limitations or overly grand expectations.

2. Reveal your personal self.

Mutual self-disclosure promotes trust and security. By revealing ourselves and our stability, we show that adults and relationships can be positive and productive.

Share your dreams, your challenges, your humanity, what you do for fun. Try creating an “All About Me” bulletin board. Traci Peters, a seventh grade math teacher in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, has a “Mrs. Peters Board.” This board features Traci’s own seventh grade school picture, her seventh grade report card, and family photos. Students regularly gather around the board to look and laugh. Traci says the board has paid big dividends in terms of building relationships with students.

3. Create and maintain an inviting classroom

Ever promised yourself that your room would be organized, interesting, appealing, and interactive—next year? Well, here’s your chance to be a wayside teacher by planning now and doing in the summer. Your classroom is, after all, your home-away-from-home for eight to ten hours a day. Kids spend 50 to 100 minutes each day in the “home” you create. Consider flexible seating arrangements, maybe a couch or a couple of comfy chairs, along with rugs, plants, and lamps. Make the walls interesting and change the posters every once in a while. Have multiple places to display student work and a current events board. Considering the self-conscious nature of young adolescents, it is often helpful to provide a mirror or two in the classroom. A mirror hung above the pencil sharpener allows students to check themselves out while they are seeming to simply sharpen a pencil. Playing music softly between classes and during group work often creates an atmosphere that may be less stressful and more inviting to students.

Wayside teaching can be a power of one—YOU—or it can have exponential impact when whole teams or schools of teachers consciously employ wayside teaching components. So let’s end this year in positive ways and determine to infuse next year with all the potential power of wayside teaching!

References


Extensions

Teachers, teams, and whole schools should consider the following questions as they work toward developing wayside teaching habits that benefit all kids:

- How can I become more sensitive to relationships and my own power as a wayside teacher?
- As a team, how might we make wayside teaching more prominent in our everyday attitudes, approaches, and actions?
- What are some ways all adults in our school can become more aware of their own wayside teaching practices, or absence of them?

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