

New Teacher Orientation Talk
September 2, 2009
8:00 a.m.

Good morning and welcome.

In an article published in Education Week two years ago, Nancy Ginsburg Gill described how in a quest for higher test scores, many schools now mandate that teachers follow a script and eschew spontaneity and passion. If this trend continues, the fear is that few great teachers will be left in the classroom. Gill's article reminded me of time I spent assisting in a first grade class. One of my pleasures as a superintendent is that I still am able to carve out time to visit and work in classrooms, and each year I offer to volunteer to assist in classrooms. Nothing makes me happier than being taken up on this offer.

This first grade classroom was a place of joy, exploration, and imagination. I still can see the faces of these children. Children's voices were often heard. Their ideas dominated the curriculum. Children's interests dictated what books they read and what pieces they wrote. This classroom was filled with objects that students had brought in – there were stone collections, button collections, pictures of rockets drawn... I loved listening to the children in this room. They owned the room, and they knew it. Contrast this with the room Gill described in her article:

“I walked into the kindergarten classroom with the school's superintendent and the principal. The well-behaved children in their plaid uniforms were discussing butterflies with their teacher. Then, as we left the room and entered the hall, the teacher rushed after us with a panicked look on her face and apologized: “I'm sorry. We had finished our lesson early, and one of the children asked if he could bring his caterpillar to school, which led us to a discussion on how caterpillars turn into butterflies.

At first, I couldn't figure out why the teacher was apologizing and why her supervisors looked so displeased. And then I understood: This young teacher was worried because she had committed what is considered taboo at this particular private school. She had gone off script. In seizing what she saw as a teachable moment, in spontaneously allowing the children to discuss the process of metamorphosis

when she was scheduled to be teaching something else, the teacher knew she was in danger of receiving a negative evaluation and perhaps losing her job.”

In North Colonie, we do not have scripts for teachers, and we value a focus on educating the whole child. Our emphasis is on life long learning, and we pay attention to all curriculum areas, including art, music, foreign language, character education, and physical education. Teachers work to develop students who are independent and critical thinkers. Our emphasis is on teaching our students to love learning for its own sake. Students and their ideas have a place in the classroom and their contributions are respected.

A study commissioned by the federal government of Australia focused on the development of literacy among students during their first two years of school ([In Teachers' Hands](#) website). While this study focused on the early primary years, I believe that its major finding is applicable to all grade levels in our school system. This finding was that while what teachers do is important, of even greater importance is how they do it. According to the researchers, virtually all teachers engaged in literacy activities and the teaching of phonics. The differences in student learning depended on how teachers approached these core literacy developmental activities. The study found that those teachers who had the greatest impact on literacy gains among their students did at least five things exceptionally well:

- They explained learning activities more clearly than their less able counterparts.
- They drew on a wider array of teaching practices.
- They maintained a high level of intellectual challenge throughout instructional activities.
- They generally had deeper subject knowledge than their less effective counterparts.
- They and their students had more fun than was observed with less effective teachers.

As stated in the article:

“According to the researchers, the lessons these teachers presented were lively and fast-paced and included jokes and classroom games. These teachers

engaged and maintained the attention of their students which resulted in consistent and deep learning.”

So, I urge you before the school year begins, to recall some of the really great teachers that you have had in grades K – 12, the ones who taught important basic skills, but also infused their classrooms with creativity and passion. I suspect that these teachers went “off script” occasionally to encourage discussions and activities generated by students’ interests, curiosity and passions. Teach your students, as if they were your own children. Demand the very best from them, and do not compromise your standards or lower your expectations. Really listen to your students, get to know their hopes, dreams, and interests; get to know them in a deep way.

This will enrich your life in this wonderful and noble profession. It will make you an integral part of the fabric of this exceptional school system and part of our strong, capable and caring instructional faculty. I wish you success and happiness in your first year here.

Randy A. Ehrenberg
Superintendent of Schools