IN CANADA

20 Minutes to Change a Life?

BY BEN LEVIN

Sometimes, there is serendipity in the way an idea comes to us from several different places at about the same time, making it seem like something that really requires our attention. In the last couple of months, I've had three different reminders of the difference that teachers can make to the futures of students, especially in high schools, and often with a remarkably small investment of time and effort. It seems that in many cases as little as 20 to 30 minutes of supportive adult attention can move a student from the wrong path to the right one.

My first encounter with this idea was in a conversation with Amanda Cooper, a high school teacher who is now a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She recounted talking with colleagues about working with students in difficulty. At one point in their conversation, she asked the group how much time they needed with a student to change that student's trajectory in the school from negative to positive. The group concluded that quite often 20 minutes of concentrated time with a student was enough to make a significant change in the student's attitude, outlook, and behavior.

Then, last March at the American Educational Research Association conference, Susan Nolen, a friend and professor at the University of Washington, said she asks teachers working with her to spend 30 minutes out-of-class time — for example, during the lunch hour — just getting to know a student with whom they don't relate very well. She reports that teachers overwhelmingly say this simple step not only gives them a deeper and more positive understanding of the student, but often dramatically alters the way the student engages in their class. Once students feel that the adults involved actually are interested in who they are, their willingness to make a positive contribution increases.

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The third instance of the same idea was in the September 2008 issue of *Educational Leadership*. An article on seeing the best in students cited work by Ray Wlodkowski about something he calls a "two by 10" strategy (Smith and Lambert 2008). For two minutes a day for 10 consecutive days, a teacher has a personal conversation with a difficult or challenging student about something the student is interested in. The authors report that this simple strategy will almost always yield noticeable improvement in the student's attitude and behavior in the class.

These are remarkably similar and remarkably encouraging conclusions. When evidence from different sources points in the same direction, it increases confidence that the findings are truly valid.

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Every time I share this finding with educators, I get further confirmation. A high school principal in Winnipeg recently told me about that school's graduation, in which each graduate is asked to say something about himself or herself. Very often, graduates name someone — a teacher, a parent, or someone else — whose belief and support they felt was crucial to their success. "I could not have made it without X" is the typical comment. Occasionally, it's the opposite: "This is to show Mr. Y that I can do it after all." Further reinforcement comes from studies showing how many adults, decades later, can recall, with considerable emotion, a remark made by a teacher that either was vital in encouraging them or, sadly, sometimes had the opposite effect.

All these pieces of evidence support a point that emerges powerfully from the research on dropping out of high school — that the single biggest factor in whether students try or give up, leave or stay, is their sense that somebody in the school knows who they are and cares about what happens to them. Study after study has pointed to the importance of those personal connections in giving students, especially those facing real challenges, the desire to persist.

These ideas put a new slant on the effort to improve high school success and graduation rates. Around the world, large-scale improvement has proven to be considerably more difficult in secondary schools than in elementary schools. There are good reasons why this is so, including the more complex organization of secondary schools, the division into departments and

subjects, the different attitudes of secondary school teachers, and the multiple and inconsistent expectations for secondary schools. A few years ago, the World Bank (2005) issued an excellent book on the challenges of secondary education that also identified the contradiction between the role of schools in creating success for all and their role in sorting students in terms of their destinations.

Canadian high schools are quite successful organizations by world standards. Canada's international test results are good. Our high school graduation rate is decent, though not spectacular. While nearly 90% of Canadian 24-year-olds report high school completion or equivalent, the "on time" high school graduation rate across the country is probably closer to 75%. Oddly enough, the two provinces that often do best on international tests, Quebec and Alberta, have among the lower rates of on-time high school completion. Raising graduation rates has proven to be a considerable challenge, though, for reasons just mentioned. The most prominent ideas advocated for high schools do not seem to work all that well. Creating new courses or programs for disengaged students runs the risk of relegating those students to tracks that are less desirable with fewer future options. Reorganizing high schools into smaller units or creating teacher-advisor systems have proven to be difficult to do and don't always yield the desired results.

How might a "20-minute" view of the world inform the way we think about improving high schools? It would put our focus on the relationship between teachers (and other adults) and students, not in a mechanistic way but as people reaching out to each other. It would remind us of the importance of personal connections in the lives of students, and especially for those students facing the greatest challenges to their success.

Of course, it's not as simple as finding 20 or 30 minutes for each struggling student. Sometimes, 20 minutes will not be nearly enough, and many times one "dose" of attention won't be sufficient. Some students have challenges that are much more severe. Some students will test us as adults repeatedly, just to see whether our commitment is more than rhetorical. Some students will fall off the path repeatedly, and some will engage in behavior that no school can tolerate.

Moreover, caring itself is not enough. Students still need to develop real skills, and we do them no favor if we pretend otherwise. Schools will still have to pay attention to curriculum, pedagogy, and support services. Students need us to push them to do more and better work, to do and be more than they thought they might be capable of. This requires effective pedagogy, engaging curriculum, good assessment practices, outreach to parents and families, and opportunities for students to improve their skills and knowledge through practice and feedback. Here, as in every other area of education, there is no magic bullet for student success.

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Still, the idea that there are many students for whom a single conversation, or two minutes a day for 10 days, will make a real difference to their futures should give every educator pause. Our words and our attitudes to students really do matter! This should be an idea that is both exciting and frightening, since it speaks both to the impact and the responsibility of every educator. Who are those kids in our class and our school? How can each of us be confident that our interactions with students are moving them toward the right path? It's a question we should keep in our sights as we work with young people, with all their potentials, delights, and frustrations, each day. K

REFERENCES

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