



The Apple Core



January 2011 Issue

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Superintendent's Message – Lost?

Superintendent
Mark Dockins

A good friend of mine has one of the most well developed senses of direction of anyone I've ever known. He is like a biological GPS unit. When it comes to directions and finding your way around in a strange city or in the back county, he is like Raymond from the movie "Rain Man." Last year while hunting pheasants in the flatlands of western Kansas, he separated from the rest of us as we walked through a cut field of Milo. Fog had set in and visibility was down to about 100 yards, which isn't too bad when you are just trudging through cut Milo knowing that the pheasants all have their track shoes on and won't be flying anyway. When the group of us got to the trucks at the other end of the field we waited for an awful long time for our walking GPS unit to show up. When he didn't show after a reasonably long time, we started driving down the roads looking for him. When that didn't produce any results, we went back to the end of the field and started eating snacks and hoped that he would either shoot his gun in the air or walk out of the fog. We weren't too worried because it is western Kansas after all, it's not like he's going to fall off a cliff or anything. Eventually he walked out of the fog and embarrassingly explained

how he had walked down a fence line in the fog thinking it was going towards the trucks, when in fact it was going the opposite direction. The man with a Tom-Tom in his head actually got lost!

When we think of getting lost, we often think of losing our direction from a point of reference. I get lost all the time because I don't pay attention to landmarks or street signs. When I don't consciously think to look at everything around me and figure out where I am, I'll end up becoming narrowly focused on the destination and just start plodding towards the end. The problem is that if I have to veer around something I get lost. One time driving through Kansas City I was forced off the interstate due to a detour. The signs, of course, had much to be desired as far as directions were concerned, and I drove for two hours in a random attempt to find my way back to the interstate—and yes, I did stop for directions because my wife told me it was either the next gas station for directions or the next attorney's office for a divorce. It was a tough decision at the time, but I think I made the right one.

Sometimes getting lost is more about

losing our focus on something intangible—the idea of losing focus on the big picture. It's easy in education to become so narrowly focused on the minutia of the job at hand that we lose our direction. There are many times I have been so distracted by all the problems that I lose my focus of why I went into education in the first place—to teach children. I have yet to meet an educator who says that she went into education because she wanted to change the policy on tardies. I hope to never meet an educator who says that he went into education because he hated school as a kid and wants to ensure that all future children leave school with that same feeling of hatred for education. No. Educators go into education because they genuinely love children. Yet we lose our direction when we get too focused on all the side issues like tardies, sagging pants, supplies, hygiene, parking, playground supervision, committee responsibilities, assemblies, sports, etc... These tangential issues are important and certainly have to be dealt with, but it is important that they are kept in perspective.

As the New Year is upon us, and we are all looking for resolutions to make and break, it's a good time to take a step back and refocus yourself on your purpose in education.

I hope everyone had a great holiday season with your loved ones.



Student learning is the reason we come to the building every day.

Rebecca DeFour

Enhanced Learning Through Relationships

- Lee Gagon, Human Resources

I hope your holidays were lovely. Mine were, with family and friends and good books and great food! I admit that I'm happy to be back at work. I love my job. The people I work with are really nice and thoughtful. That means a lot to me. When I wake up on work mornings, I think about how pleasant all of you are to work with, and I'm happy to get going. Is that how it is for you, too? I believe we all like to hang out with people who are friendly and caring, who smile at us and ask us how we are doing. I try to remember that when I cross paths with people. I try to practice the Golden Rule. Sometimes I blow my composure and mouth off, though, but those times are rare (thank goodness) and usually only happen when I allow my temper to get the best of me.

I have to really watch my temper when I witness someone making sarcastic, rude comments about other people or saying rude things right to another person's face. I tend to flare up the most when I witness adults talking badly about kids or

sharing put-downs directly with kids. So, I try to be on guard to catch myself before I say things I'll later regret.

I imagine that when we think back to our years in elementary and high school, we all have good and bad memories. My bad memories can all be grouped together with this title: "Times I Failed." Like the time my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Neaves, called me to the front of the class where she pulled my shoulder-length, frizzy hair back into a ponytail and announced to the class, "There, see how nice she looks when you can see her face?" Eek! I thought I would die of embarrassment, and I knew that any chance of appearing cool had just evaporated.

Then there was the time that I accidentally showed my underwear in sixth grade. It happened in my middle school library, where hundreds of students were present (or so it seemed), and mini-skirts were in high

fashion. The library was so quiet, and the librarian yelled from across the room, "Young lady, I can see your underwear from clear across the room!" I almost fainted from embarrassment.

I could rattle off several more similar examples...times I wanted to curl up and disappear because of the embarrassment. Now, I'm not saying that I didn't have a responsibility to keep my hair pulled out of my face or to sit like a lady. But I wasn't a bad kid...just an ignorant kid. I was terribly shy, and those two teachers calling me out publicly only enhanced my sense of alienation at school.

James Raffini, in an article titled "Student Apathy: The Protection of Self-Worth; What Research Says to the Teacher," claims that:

Apathy is a way for many students to avoid a sense of failure. Those behaving from this motive approach each new learning experience with appre-



hension and fear-often masked with apathy, aloofness, or indifference. Their philosophy toward schools become "Nothing ventured, nothing failed." Teachers and parents worry that they are unmotivated. In reality, they are highly motivated to protect their sense of self-worth. As they get older they begin to reject education completely. If they state publicly that school is a valueless, boring waste of time, then their self-worth is protected when they receive a failing grade. These students have discovered that it is less painful to reject school than to reject themselves. (p. 12)

Now, I know that kids can be little pills at times, and that supervising a class full of students can sometimes be very challenging and exhausting. But they're kids. Even teenagers are still kids. They care about how they're perceived by their peers. They don't want to fail any more than you or I. But kids are people. They're complex. They may appear to be one thing on the surface when deep down they're much, much more complex. Many of our students, kindergarteners and older adolescents and those in the middle, are dealing with major stressors in their lives. Peer issues, family issues, issues of security and safety, hunger and abandonment, abuse, neglect...and on and on and on.

My point is this: Relationships we (as the adults in school) foster and facilitate with students in our classrooms, in our schools, should serve to enhance learning...not to shut it down. Even students who come to us with all of their basic safety and security needs having been met still need relationships with teachers that enhance their sense of self-worth, and research soundly supports the notion that academic success promotes a sense of self-worth.

Then there are those students who come to us carrying emotional baggage. The Utah Department of Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS), has published its "Quick Facts 2010" report. In Utah in 2010, 35,738 complaints of child abuse were received; 19,808 complaints were investigated; 8,341 were substantiated. The most common complaints involved kids who had allegedly witnessed domestic violence and kids who had allegedly been physically abused. Neglect accounts for 43% of referrals of children who end

up in state custody. The state foster care system received 2,021 new children in 2010, and substance abuse was a factor in 60% of those cases.

As of early December 2010, in our little tri-county area, DCFS had received approximately 500 referrals. Our local Children's Justice Center, which receives referrals of serious physical abuse and sexual abuse allegations involving children under the age of 18, received - between January 1 and November 30 of 2010 - 199 referrals, of which 100 were substantiated; nearly all cases involved never-before-referred victims.

The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

So, we receive kids from all walks of life into our schools, where they spend hours upon hours of their lives for 13 years. I've been thinking a lot lately about the idea of school culture - the idea of "the way things are done around here" - and its impact on student learning. I'll bet that when you walk into any school in our district, you almost immediately get a feeling for the ambience of the place...an idea of that school's culture. When I walk into some schools, I'm struck by the positive atmosphere...sometimes I think about how nice it would be to grab a pillow and blanket and move into some of the classrooms in those schools, they're so comfortable. Seriously. In those schools, teachers and students are, for the most part, engaged in some academic activity. I don't hear many negative comments. People smile.

When I've visited a few (a very few) other classrooms in our district, I know almost right away that I don't want to be there. Relationships seem to be different in those classrooms. There's a tension that's uncomfortable, like a seething undercurrent. I often wonder, as I observe in those classrooms or as I converse with those teachers outside the classroom, if they perhaps don't like kids. Is that it, or did they just get caught up in the busy teacher's life and lose site of the fact that kids are complex and much more fragile than they often appear on the surface?

Or is it burnout? Burnout has been defined in the research as:

...loss of concern for the client and a tendency to treat clients in a detached, mechanical fashion; increasing discouragement, pessimism, and fatalism about one's work; decline in motivation, effort, and involvement in work; apathy; negativism; frequent irritability and anger with clients and colleagues; preoccupation with one's own comfort and welfare on the job; a tendency to rationalize failure by blaming the clients or 'the system'; resistance to change; growing rigidity; and loss of creativity. (Sarason, 1982, p. 203)

Research has given us, through the years, a bank of knowledge regarding school culture. We know that school culture does affect the behavior and achievement of elementary and secondary school students. We know that school culture does not fall from the sky; it is created and can be manipulated by people within the school. Adults set the tone, the culture, of the school. Kids in schools are to be served by us, not blamed by us. We know also that the culture of every school is unique, and that is good. Culture is the glue that bonds a school together as it goes about its mission. Culture can be productive or it can be counterproductive and present obstacles to student academic success. A school's culture can be one that embraces all learners, or it can be oppressive and discriminatory for various subgroups within the school. Lasting fundamental change for the good requires understanding and, often, changing the school's culture. Students must believe that they are respected as persons and that they are somehow tied to the school in a positive way. Yet studies have shown that boredom and alienation are not uncommon among students who struggle in school; one sign of alienation is a reluctance to engage in academic activities.

We'll be talking about school culture over these next months, and about how it impacts student learning. I encourage you to reflect upon your own beliefs and attitudes about students, and to analyze your interactions to determine whether or not you - like I - have areas in which to improve. Change is difficult, but change that is good for kids serves to leave us all better people when all is said and done.

I wish you all a rich and rewarding new year. Thank you for all that you do to help our kids!

them laugh. Teaching our students takes thousands of man-hours each week. Why is it that our students seem to remember those times that took only minutes, and sometimes just seconds?

If Becky Cleavinger wouldn't have made the effort to bring the part of Dorothy to life, or if the Sloan brothers and Ian Durant hadn't worked as hard as they did, the winged monkeys would have simply been a group of boys on ropes with monkey masks on. If the stage-crew, techies, dancers, chorus, and other characters wouldn't have done their part, the monkeys certainly wouldn't have gained celebrity status.

The factor that separates a random act of kindness from a memory that places the teacher into the "favorite teacher" category is the time and effort that is spent before and after that isolated moment. Without the hard work and dedication involved in teaching our students the skills necessary for their future success, our kind words, funny stories, smiles, encouragement, love and concern for our students would simply be forgotten, not a memory that will place you in the heart of a child forever.

Memory or Moment? - Kevin Dickson, Student Services

Several years ago I was the director of Uintah High School's production of "The Wizard of Oz". We had an incredible group of students who worked hard to build sets, develop characterizations, balance sound, work on harmonies, create and use special effects, and spent countless hours perfecting demanding choreography. As a team we spent thousands of hours each week to give our audience a great show.

As we approached opening night we decided to have the "winged monkeys" use repelling gear to drop from the cat walk into the audience and then head on stage to kidnap Dorothy, scare the Cowardly Lion, rip the stuffing out of the Scarecrow, and make the Tinman cry so he would rust. They spent several minutes perfecting this scene.

When the production opened, the winged monkeys were the talk of the town. It irritated me that we had an entire cast work for 13 weeks in demanding rehearsals, under the direction of highly trained adults, and the audience was more impressed by a group that put on a monkey mask for their character development, didn't have a single line, didn't sing, or didn't dance. I started to resent winged



monkeys, and would have bought a winged monkey license if our local fish and game would have taken them off the endangered list and allowed us to hunt them.

In education it amazes me what our students remember. Seldom remembered are the countless hours we spend teaching our children to read, multiply, research, think, and be able to function in a world that they will soon lead. For some reason when a student talks about an educator being their "favorite teacher of all-time" they will mention a time when a teacher was kind to them, or helped them through a difficult situation, or smiled at them at the right time. Sometimes it was simply the ability to make