

Applecore

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The beginning of school every year is exciting and filled with hope. Students hope to see their friends, parents hope their children will be successful and learn, and teachers hope that they can make a difference in children's lives. As a teacher, the beginning of school for me was a time filled with excitement and anxiety. I was excited to start a new year and try out the new ideas or lessons based upon my reflection of the previous year. The anxiety always came from the understanding that I had to find a way to get to know all the new students before I could truly teach them anything.

We all know that great teachers don't stand in front of a class and spew information that students just absorb. Great teachers know their students at deep levels. Great teachers know what their students like, how they think and what engages them in learning. Great teachers know where their students are in their learning. This always filled me with anxiety at the beginning of every year because I didn't know the new "crop" of sophomores. How was I realistically going to get to know nearly 400 students in a single year as they rotate through my classes? I knew it was going to take some time to get to know my students, but it was essential that I did know who they were and what they knew.

Those first weeks of school are the most critical and the most stressful because they aren't spent "teaching", they are spent assessing students—much like a high school coach trying to figure out what kind of individual athletes she/he has before establishing the type of training that must occur to get the athletes into an actual team. It would be insanity to start the first day of basketball season running specific plays with a team of kids who didn't have an understanding of what a guard or forward did. Yet, that's what happens traditionally when we start our first week with the first page of our curriculum map and trudge ahead saying things like, "Well, you were supposed to know that from last year. I don't have time to re-teach that just because your teacher didn't teach it last year."

I recently ran into my former Algebra teacher from high school at a 3 on 3 basketball tournament in Casper, Wyoming. Mr. Henry was not a particularly good teacher. He was the exact teacher that I just described. He believed that if he taught it and you didn't get it, it was your problem, not his. He had a pacing guide, which was his textbook, and he followed it from the first page to the last for each semester. Mr. Henry didn't know his students by name—we each had a number in his grade book and we were assigned a seat based upon the number starting at the door going around the room. Since I was a "D" for "Dockins" (not my GPA) my number came early, and I sat in the back of the room next to Chris Collingsworth. Chris was amazingly smart at math and he tutored me through the class.

Mr. Henry's teaching style was such that he sat at his overhead every day and worked algebra problems from the previous day. His room was always dark with the overhead as the only source of light in the class. He took attendance on the overhead, wrote down the new assignments on the overhead, had every quiz and test on the overhead and worked every sample problem on the overhead. He had no idea what those of us who sat in the back even looked like.

At midterms our school had the traditional parent-teacher conferences where the parents were supposed to go from class to class meeting with teachers. Our parents were notified by a letter which each student was supposed to take home. By high school, my parents never attended those conferences—mostly because I told my parents that when we got to the high school, they didn't have parent-teacher conferences anymore and very few notes ever made it home with me.

I was missing a few assignments and my grade in Mr. Henry's class wasn't anywhere near my mom and dad's expectations. Mr. Henry announced that by bringing a parent to the parent-teacher conferences we were able to earn some extra credit which I sorely needed, but I didn't want my parents to actually talk to any of my teachers. So, I talked my cousin, Darrin, into impersonating my dad. Darrin was a 19 year old goof who barely made it through his senior year in Ft. Collins, Colorado. My dad had recently secured him a job on his line-crew as a favor to my Uncle who had indicated that he was ready to tear Darrin limb from limb. Darrin was living with us on a very short leash at the time.

I told my cousin just to play it cool when he met with Mr. Henry. I explained that I doubted that the teacher would even know I was one of his students. Believe it or not, the parent-teacher conference was held on the overhead just like every class Mr. Henry taught! I stopped worrying so much about the fact that my cousin actually looked as young as I did since the room was dark and Darrin's beginning of a goatee actually looked more established in the dark. Mr. Henry had all the class grades on a transparency and would uncover each individual student's average score of homework and tests when he talked to their parents. Sure enough, Mr. Henry had no idea what my name was and had to ask. Throughout the conference, however, my cousin was very un-cool. I wanted him to just sit there, say things like, "I see" and "Thank you". I hoped that Darrin would simply shake Mr. Henry's hand firmly and walk out of the meeting with a few extra credit points in my column. Darrin took this opportunity to let his true colors show.

First of all, Darrin started by asking "Why on God's Green Earth" did Mr. Henry not know what his son's name was after six weeks! Darrin made reference to not caring enough for kids to even know their first name. He was also throwing in cuss words here and there to make his point. I remember cringing with each expletive he let loose. He then went into a tirade about working for fifteen years in the "real world" and never using algebra once. Mr. Henry calmly tried to explain the value of algebra, but Darrin kept saying it was a waste of time. The last thing I heard Darrin asking as I was fleeing the classroom saying I felt sick was why Natrona County High School's football team was so terrible. Eventually Darrin came out of the classroom and said he thought things went well. I called him every nasty thing I could think of and caught a ride home with one of my friends.

That next Monday I was worried about the fallout as I entered Mr. Henry's classroom after my cousin's fiasco. Mr. Henry welcomed me to class by name and asked about my weekend. This was very strange behavior for someone who didn't know my name last Friday. I did get the extra credit and Mr. Henry always remembered my name—I seemed to be the only student he could remember because I was called to answer every question for the remainder of the year. Because of that, I actually did all my assignments and learned a great deal about algebra by the end of the class. Mr. Henry never changed his teaching style, yet I paid attention because I knew Mr. Henry wasn't going to let me slip by on

anything. Mr. Henry genuinely knew if I understood what he was teaching because he assessed me every single day. I feel sorry for the rest of the class who missed out on those assessments. Thankfully Chris Collingsworth was there to help me through the stuff I didn't understand. Mr. Henry also never passed up the opportunity to acknowledge me in the halls, at the mall, in restaurants and sporting events for the next three years. He appeared to actually care about me.

As Mr. Henry and I were standing on the sidewalk catching up on our lives, he told me that he plays golf with my dad on occasion. I was taken back because I knew he wasn't talking about Darrin, who still lived in Ft. Collins, Colorado, and who would only find a golf club useful to whack pinecones out of his yard. To my knowledge, he had never actually met my parents or found out about my criminal past. Mr. Henry winked and told me to take care of myself. I chuckled to myself and thought about how smart I had considered myself back then and how this teacher had played along for some strange reason. I'm sure he tells a very different version of this story to his buddies when he is reminiscing about his former students.

What I learned from Mr. Henry, besides algebra, is that teachers need to know their students. We can't allow a student to hide in the shadows and just get by. We need to know where each student is in their learning and challenge them to make progress. We can do this for every student by keeping an intense focus on learning, by using high-performing collaborative teams, and by focusing on continuous improvement and student results. These three "big ideas" are what will drive our teaching to reach every student. If we can operate with those driving ideas, we will know what all of our students know and how to get them to continually improve.