

Tear Down Invisible Teaching Walls

Pincipals across the country are consumed with disaggregating the scores from end-of-year state assessments. When there are huge discrepancies on a grade level that cannot be explained away by class groupings, you are left with the question of why some children perform so much better than others with the same ability. Was it that certain children were not taught? If so, why not? The bigger question for some of our children becomes: Why didn't you teach me?



When standardized scores pour in across the country, many principals are dissatisfied because student scores indicate that there is a divide between the teacher and student. While some teachers don't seem to have any problem relating to students from different backgrounds and creating successful classrooms, others build up a wall, using as barriers everything from low-level reading ability to language barriers to students with parents who don't come to conferences to check their child's progress.

The results are simple: Students don't reach their true potential. Teachers must begin to listen to their

hearts more than their heads and understand that every student deserves to be taught and included in every aspect of the classroom. It is important to begin tearing down those invisible, negative walls that affect learning.

There are three invisible walls teachers need to break down for best results in the classroom: physical, emotional, and academic.

Physical Walls

These are barriers teachers quietly build to separate themselves from a student. To perform at their best, students need the close attention of the teacher. Teachers also need to

incorporate the freedom of movement into the classroom to create a better comfort level for students.

A classroom teacher recently used a piece of masking tape to separate her desk in the room, daring the students to cross over the visible tape line as a way to send a clear message to stay away from her. That line represented a clear boundary and made the teacher unapproachable.

On a positive note, a teacher of a second-grade class, with most students reading below grade level, decided to invest in exercise balls as seats for the students. That year was phenomenal for the teacher and her students. Every student completed the year reading on or above grade level.

Emotional Walls

This is an area that challenges many teachers because the walls go beyond what we can see, and breaking them requires respect from both students and teachers. It is difficult to work with children who are acting out and are belligerent. Teaching respect is the key. Even children who do not show respect still need respect from educators. Students watch everything the teacher does, even when they are not instructing. When students witness a teacher sarcastically addressing a classmate, they will be reluctant to form a relationship with that teacher. They will wonder when it will be their turn to be embarrassed.

For example, a bright, third-grade student realized his teacher did not like his presence in her classroom, so he decided to show her that he was smart enough to make her scores look bad. The student shared that information with the principal, who transferred him out of that classroom. In the new classroom, the student connected with the teacher and began a new, successful completion of the year, making perfect scores on all the assessments.

Academic Walls

Students constantly face academic barriers—even from some of the best teachers. Students who share differ-

ent ideas and have different thought patterns are regarded as challenges to teaching. Teachers need to differentiate their attention to students, leading them through exploration and real-world experiences by using different kinds of problem-solving approaches. All students deserve to have their inquisitive nature satisfied without being given a lot of busy work to keep them quiet.

We know that the majority of students are visual learners, and that others respond more to kinesthetic or auditory learning. These are the students who need much more than a written assignment. A good teacher works to find out each child's learning modality and then plans accordingly, finding ways to assess students' knowledge through alternative methods.

Break Down the Walls

Principals must know their staff's strengths. Some teachers work

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especially well with boys, while other teachers are the perfect match for young children who are just entering kindergarten. School leaders cannot be locked into a rut of always doing what was done in a building. It is often necessary to change your teams around to infuse fresh ideas into their teaching styles.

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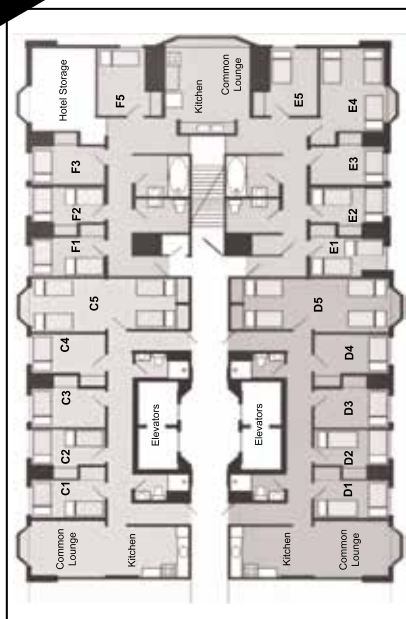
serve. Principals will also need to have difficult conversations that will force teachers to face their invisible walls of discrimination, whether it be toward students who are constantly tardy, are sleepers, have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, speak different languages, or need more emotional attention. It is vital to know your staff and form teams of people with a variety of skills that complement each other. When we can assist in breaking down the invisible walls among our teaching staff, we can begin to look forward to end-of-year test scores, knowing that every child has an opportunity to give it his or her all.

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