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Why Students Need to Sit Up and Pay Attention

Our charters are guided by what I learned from a great public-school teacher: Distracted, misbehaving children aren't learning.

By EVA MOSKOWITZ

Success Academy Charter Schools, New York City's largest network of free charter schools, has recently been the center of controversy over its policies on student behavior. Our critics accuse us of pushing out children who might pull down our test scores, and in doing so creating what some call "a kindergarten-to-prison pipeline." In reality, our attrition rates are lower than those of the district schools. How then do our students, chosen by lottery and mainly children of color, routinely outperform even students from wealthy suburbs?

I wish I could claim that I've developed some revolutionary pedagogical approach at Success, but the humbling truth is this: Most of what I know about teaching I learned from one person, an educator named Paul Fucaloro who taught in New York City district schools for four decades.

When I founded Success Academy in 2006, I hired Paul to coach our teachers. I soon learned that while he was quite instructionally sophisticated, Paul was decidedly old school on the topic of student behavior. Every child had to sit up straight and show he was paying attention.

I wasn't completely sold on Paul's approach at first, but when one of our schools was having trouble, I'd dispatch him to help. He'd tell the teachers to give him a class full of all the kids who had the worst behavioral and academic problems. The teachers thought this was nuts but they'd do so, and then a few days later they'd drop by Paul's classroom and find these students acting so differently that they were nearly unrecognizable. Within weeks, the students would make months' worth of academic progress.

Teachers couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. But Paul did it over and over again. And incredibly, the kids seemed to love Paul more than the teachers who were far less strict.

So what did he do? Well, imagine that a man to whom you're speaking at a party is looking over your shoulder. You'll suspect he isn't really listening. The same is true of kids. Their physical behavior reflects their mental state. Therefore, Paul set behavioral expectations to reflect the mental state he insisted his students have.

Paul's students had to sit with hands clasped and look at whomever was speaking (called "tracking"). They couldn't stare off into space, play with objects, rest their head on their hands in boredom, or act like what Paul called "sourpusses" who brought an attitude of negativity or indifference to the classroom. Paul made students demonstrate to him that at every single moment they were focused on learning.

He also had more sophisticated techniques. He'd call on students randomly rather than ask for hands, so students had to prepare an answer for every question he asked. He made students repeat or comment on what their classmates said to make them listen carefully to one another. And he'd

never repeat what a child said, as most teachers do, because—besides wasting precious time—it suggested to students that they didn't have to listen to one another, only to the teacher.

These practices ensured that while only one student could talk at a time, every child was continually engaging in what Paul called "active listening," meaning thinking critically and preparing to participate if called upon.

Success Academy in large measure uses Paul's approach, and that is much of the reason why we have schools where more than 95% of the students pass the state math tests in neighborhoods where on average fewer than 20% of students do.

Some critics find our approach rigid and overbearing. I've got two of these critics in my own home: my kids, who attend Success. They complain when they get into trouble for not tracking the speaker. They were listening, they protest. Maybe so. But sometimes when kids look like they're daydreaming, it's because they are, and we can't allow that possibility.

As Paul repeatedly preached to me, it's morally wrong to let a child choose whether to pay attention, because many will make the wrong choice and we can't let them slip through the cracks. So if a student had trouble paying attention, he'd move him to the front of the class, call his parents, keep him after school to practice. Whatever it took. Paul was relentless.

Some critics say that it's hard for young children to focus. True. But it's our job to teach them this. Recently, I was at a news conference at which I was asked why Success has strict rules regarding behavior. As I answered, the reporters didn't stare off into space, look bored or fiddle with things. Because they were focusing. A school that fails to teach students this necessary skill isn't doing right by them.

People have understandably expressed concern that some students may have particular trouble meeting our behavioral expectations and ask why we can't simply relax them. The answer is that Success Academy's 34 principals and I deeply believe that if we lessened our standards for student comportment, the education of the 11,000 children in our schools would profoundly suffer.

In my case, that belief has nothing to do with any ideological predisposition or pet pedagogical theory. I came to it only because Paul Fucaloro—the most gifted educator I've ever met, who spent four decades honing his craft before retiring last year—showed me that it works.

Ms. Moskowitz is the founder and chief executive officer of Success Academy Charter Schools.

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