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September Thoughts: Reflections on a New School Year

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The summer begins to wind down. The days get shorter. The evenings get cooler. Beach chairs are removed from the car trunk and stored in the garage. Labor Day plans begin to be discussed. The final propane bottle is purchased for the grill. Baseball pennant drives begin in earnest. Days of relative leisure begin to morph into frenetic afternoons at the mall for "back to school shopping" for new clothes and supplies.

As I rapidly careen toward my sixth decade, I realize that I have followed these rituals since I was a mere six years old. "Back to school" routines have been a part of my life for most of my Augusts... as a student, a teacher, a dad, a school administrator, and now as a school consultant.

There is a comforting sameness about the rituals of pre-Labor Day. The first day of school represents something of a rebirth. It offers an opportunity for new experiences, new relationships, new knowledge, and new skills for *all* of us who walk the halls of America's schools.

For most of us, these routines bring excitement and eager anticipation. But for some students, these are days of anxiety and angst. They are the "Saturday kids" — the kids who are confident and competent on Saturdays, summers, and school vacations, but are frightened and frustrated when they enter the classroom. They learn differently than the other kids. Language and learning do not come easily. Instructions confuse them. Show-and-tell terrifies them. Endless "word searches" frustrate them. Quizzes panic them. Oral reading embarrasses them. Timetable drills humiliate them. Class discussions seem to move too fast. The classroom clock's hands move too slowly.

These are the kids who try to scrunch down in their seats, hoping to be invisible during class discussions. They hold tightly to the belief that "if I can't see the teacher, the teacher can't see me." They would surrender all of their holiday gifts in exchange for a snow day on "Spelling Bee Thursday." They make excuses and messes — but seldom make progress or eye contact.

No matter where or who you teach, you will have some of these kids in your class this year. You have had them in past years. You will have them in the future. Because of the inclusion movement, these kids are now the responsibility of *all* of us. They are no longer *those* kids from *that* class. They are *our* kids — and they are never, never ever, *EVER* absent!

So let's make a commitment to deal more effectively and sensitively with these kids who struggle with learning every day... through no choice or fault of their own.

But that is far easier said than done. These kids need a commitment in time, energy, and resources. They don't learn, they need to be *taught*. Their development is compromised in all areas — academic, social, emotional, and behavioral. You cannot pick and choose the difficulties that you will accept or that you will reject. You can't say, "I understand he has difficulty reading, but I will not tolerate his continually losing his homework." All of his problems are caused by the same neurological misfiring. Picking and choosing is unfair and ineffective. He's not a salad bar... he's somebody's child.

As we lurch toward September, let me offer some advice that may be helpful as you attempt to make special needs kids in your class feel warm, welcome, and wanted. Using the word SEPTEMBER, I have written of nine concepts that I believe can help you in this effort.

S — Squeaky wheel

We often hear our colleagues complain about the extra time and effort that special needs kids require (or demand!). They lament, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." As advocates and shepherds for these kids, we need to be ever mindful of the fact that the squeaky wheel *needs* the grease, that's why it's squeaking. Further, if you don't apply the grease, the wheel is likely to fall off the wagon or bring the wagon to a screeching halt! One of the most troubling phrases in education currently is "attention-seeking behavior." Teachers moan "...he's only doing it for attention." *Well, then, give him some!* How often does a child tell us what he needs? Our contraindicated (and counterproductive) approach to "attention-seeking behavior" is to ignore the child. You may choose to ignore the behavior... but you can't ignore the underlying need.

E — Every child is motivated in a different way

Teachers recognize that we must use a variety of approaches to teach reading because children learn to read in a variety of ways. Some children require a visual approach; others need auditory methods. Some students benefit from structured phonics; other students require a more language-based approach. One size does not fit all. However, many teachers will attempt to *motivate* all thirty, unique and disparate students in the class by using one, solitary approach. Further, the approaches that we commonly use to inspire kids (competition, reward systems, punishment, etc.) are effective with only a small minority of the children. In my new book, *The Motivation Breakthrough: 6 Secrets to Turning On the Tuned-Out Child*, I offer a new and innovative approach to student motivation. These methods are based upon the extraordinary research conducted by America's advertising industry. Madison Avenue has invested tens of millions of dollars studying the motivational needs and habits of America's youth. Of course, they use these data to design and market CDs, DVDs, candy novelties, clothing, and other products for the multi-million dollar "kids' market." Nevertheless, the research offers invaluable insights into methods and strategies to motivate and inspire children. Primary among the research findings is the fact that different kids are motivated by different approaches. As a result, marketers use a variety of strategies within a single commercial in order to ensure that a maximum number of potential customers are reached. Teachers must also use a variety of motivational approaches. In the book, I outline and explain the six 'P's of student motivation. There are six basic "drives" that inspire students to strive toward their fullest potential. They include:

- Praise
- People
- Prizes
- Projects
- Prestige
- Power

We must use all six approaches daily in order to ensure that we motivate all the students, particularly in learning and language.

P — Performance inconsistency

One of the most common — but least understood — difficulties experienced by struggling students is performance inconsistency. Quite simply, their learning problems come and go. Some days they are capable of accomplishing a certain academic task and other days they cannot. They can spell "banana" on Tuesday, but spell it incorrectly on Thursday. Of course, teachers find this inconsistency quite frustrating. But try to imagine the frustration felt by the *child*.

These kids historically have "good days" and "bad days" that are largely beyond their control. I have a long-held belief that the true test of our understanding of these kids does *not* lie in our reaction to their "bad days," but rather in our response to their "good days." Too often, when a child is having a "good day" we actually *punish* him for it. We say things like:

"Well, I guess you can do this work, when you put your mind to it!"

We use his positive performance as evidence that he had "not been trying hard enough" in the past.

This school year, make a commitment to provide sensitive support on the kids' "bad days" and to embrace, celebrate, and maximize their "good days."

T — Troubled kids

You will have students in your class who are troubled. They face tremendous difficulties in their communities and their homes. They struggle daily with dysfunction and discord. They enter your class feeling helpless and hopeless.

Try to be a sentry against this hopelessness. Let your classroom be the *one* place where they feel safe, secure, and valued. Demonstrate that you accept them and provide them with much needed attention and affection.

This can be done in three ways. When William Blake turned eighteen, he asked his mentor Henry James what three things he should do in order to be a good person. James responded, "*Do these three things. Be kind. Be kind. Be kind.*"

Small, unsolicited (and often undeserved) acts of kindness can do much to soften and reach the troubled child. A smile, an encouraging note, a positive comment on the top of a homework assignment, asking about his dog, greeting him at the classroom door, a hand on his shoulder, using his nickname, or sending him a postcard from your vacation can truly make a difference.

Because this child faces challenges and problems that are beyond his ability to understand or solve, he will often strike out by disrupting your class. Don't take this behavior personally. Rather, continue to provide him support and warmth. Kids need love most when they deserve it least.

When this child has ruined your lesson, disrupted your class, and challenged your authority for the tenth time that month, try (and try, and try, and try!) to remember the sage words of L. Tobin:

*The pain that a troubled child **causes** is never greater than the **pain** that he feels.*

These kids are in pain. They hurt. They strike out against that pain. *Remember:* Hurt people hurt people. Don't take it personally.

E — Entrusted, so act *in loco parentis*

In a few weeks, twenty-five sets of parents will be entrusting you with their most precious possession — their child. They are not dropping off their air conditioner or their lawn mower for repair, they are giving over the care of their baby.

You must view this trust as a sacred and humbling responsibility. Quite simply, there is no greater privilege or responsibility that one human being can give to another than to surrender temporary care of their child.

Take this responsibility seriously. It is unrealistic to expect that you will care for your students as deeply as you care for your own children. But, it is realistic to expect you to treat your students with the same respect and sensitivity that you would hope that your kids' teachers would give to them.

Every one of your students is somebody's child. Give them the dignity and respect that you would want for your own kids.

You are late for a meeting in the school's conference room. You are running down the hallway with your overstuffed file folders tucked under your arm. Your mind is reeling with test scores, agendas, assessment results, and curriculum details.

Suddenly you see an eight-year-old on her knees in the hallway. Tears are welling in her eyes as she attempts to gather the reams of worksheets and homework assignments that litter the floor along with the five pencils, a dozen scrunchies, 50 paper clips, a ruler, and a half-eaten Snickers. She has dropped her backpack and the contents have cascaded in every direction.

But you are late for your meeting... and she's not in your class... you don't even know her. But, stop for a moment. Think. Reflect. What would you want a teacher to do if that were your child? What if it were *your* Josh, or Jenny, or Emma, or Shirana? You would hope that the teacher would stop and provide your child with the care and comfort that s/he needs. So do it for somebody else's kid.

Parents surrender their child to you with the expectation of *in loco parentis*. You are the parent in the parent's absence. An awesome responsibility... and privilege.

M — Multidisciplinary education doesn't work

The 1970s heralded a significant movement in the field of special education: multidisciplinary teams.

These teams consisted of representatives from a number of disciplines involved in the child's program (occupational therapists, physical therapists, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, etc.). In theory, the input of these various professionals would allow us to understand and serve "the whole child" by considering all areas of the child's development.

Great idea! But it didn't work.

In many school systems, the effectiveness of these multidisciplinary teams was negated by territoriality, turf wars, egos, and infighting. Professionals often enter these meetings with the intention of defending and protecting their departments and their budgets. The needs of the child became secondary.

The prefix "multi" comes from the Latin meaning "many." Multidisciplinary meetings often deteriorate into battlegrounds between and among the "many" professionals who design and implement the child's program.

We need to drastically modify our approach and adopt a transdisciplinary model to our teams. "Trans" is from the Latin "across," and this indicates a spirit of cooperation and collegiality among team members. Problems and issues are put on the table and *everyone* offers input and opinions.

When twelve highly trained professionals and the child's parents sit around a table, you have a virtual treasure chest of wisdom, training, and experience present. Who is to say that the English teacher might not have a great idea about how to get the kid to show up on time for his math class? Who is to say that the math teacher might have a strategy that will help the kid memorize the state capitals? And maybe Mom can contribute a method that will be useful for the counselor when the child is overly anxious.

Transdisciplinary meetings allow the team members to "take their uniforms off." They are no longer at the meeting to defend, represent, and protect *their departments* — they are there to defend, represent, and protect *the student*.

I promise you will find that transdisciplinary meetings are lively, stimulating, productive — and effective. A teacher once told me, "At a transdisciplinary meeting, I feel valuable and

valued. We discuss important issues and solve real problems. Solutions are based upon the child's best interests, not on the needs of the adults. I never feel more like a professional than when I sit around that table."

B — Bad versus dumb

I conduct a seminar titled, "Developing a Philosophy of Education: If You Don't Stand for Something, You'll Fall for Almost Anything." In the workshop I discuss twelve basic philosophical tenets that we need to embrace in order to understand and serve our students. Primary among these is:

At any given moment, any kid would prefer to be viewed as a *bad* kid rather than a *dumb* kid.

Children, particularly adolescents, live daily in paralyzing fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers. If they are put in the position of looking *bad* or looking *dumb*, they will invariably choose to look *bad*.

Therefore, the poor speller disrupts the spelling bee; the kid with verbal difficulties acts up during class discussions; the student with math difficulties gets thrown out of his algebra class.

This year, if a child is acting consistently "bad," reflect for a moment: are your approaches and activities making him look "dumb?" If they are, he will choose to look "bad" and disrupt the activity in an attempt to prevent his weakness from being displayed for all to see.

Before you change the *child's* behavior, maybe you need to change your own.

E — Each year is a new year

It is important that you take this perspective in order to make the year successful for you and your students.

I had a gifted professor during my undergraduate years who taught courses in "methods and materials." She constantly told us to try new strategies and approaches and avoid getting in a "classroom rut" when you use the same materials and methods year after year after year. She would remind us, "There are two ways that you can get twenty years of teaching experience. One way is to get twenty years of experience....the other is to get ONE YEAR of experience twenty times."

Learn new teaching skills. Try different approaches. Change your bulletin boards. Modify your methods. Re-arrange your room. Keep your teaching fresh!

You should also remember that September marks a "New Year" for your students, too. Give them an opportunity for a fresh start. Don't let difficulties or issues from *last* year spill over into *this* year. Wipe the slate clean.

Read the kids' files and seriously consider the input and opinions of the teachers who worked with the child in the past. BUT don't let these reports shade your opinions about (and treatment of) that child. Let him begin the school year with a clean slate.

I was a bad boy when I was in fourth grade! My undiagnosed ADHD made school a very confusing and threatening place for me. The increased curriculum demands in fourth grade made it necessary for me to read longer chapters, sit still for lengthy class discussions, and pay attention to mind-numbing details related to grammar, math, and science. In response to these challenges, I was often disruptive and disorderly in the class.

Miss Moran and I had skirmish after skirmish, and I generally lost these battles. That only served to strengthen my resolve to fight the system.

All in all it was a very rough year. Over the next summer, I made a strong commitment to myself that I would *not* have trouble in Miss Counihan's fifth grade class. I'd be good. I'd sit still. I'd do my classwork. I'd volunteer. I'd answer questions. I'd behave. I'd make it my best year *ever*. Promise.

I entered Miss Counihan's class in September of 1959 with commitment and resolve. I could change. I would change. I took a seat between Jimmy Root and Patty Straka, two kids that

I did not know or like very much. I purposely avoided sitting between Tim Molaghan and Barry Cringan, despite their pleas to joint them. I figured that it would be easier to behave if I didn't sit near my posse. Anyway, I'd see them at recess.

Miss Counihan entered the classroom and began calling off the role from her gigantic blue plan book. When she got to my name, she peered over her glasses.

She pointed at me and motioned for me to follow her into the hallway. She pushed me up against the porcelain water bubbler and put her face directly into mine.

I've heard about you, Mr. Lavoie. You're the class clown. You think that school is a joke. Well, you have Alice B. Counihan to deal with now. One step out of line... one wise guy comment... one missed assignment... and you will have to deal with me. Get back to your seat now!

As I turned to re-enter the classroom, I could feel my commitment and resolve morph into embarrassment and rage. So *that's* the way it was going to be, huh? Fine. I can play that game. And pretty well, too. Let's put on the gloves and get ready to rumble. I can take your best shot. Fifth grade was a year of struggle, conflict, and self-imposed failure from me. I was going to win this battle, and academic progress meant points for *her*. My effort, commitment, and resolve were eliminated at that water bubbler meeting that September day.

Why couldn't she have given me a chance to have a good start to the school year? Why couldn't she give me the benefit of the doubt? Why couldn't the past be the past? Why couldn't I have a clean slate that September?

September marks a new year with new possibilities. Allow each child to enter your room with a clean slate. Give them an opportunity to re-invent themselves. Let them start over. For some kids, this may be the greatest gift you will give them all year.

R — Reward direction, not perfection

This school year, as you attempt to change kids' behaviors and attitudes, you'll do well to remember the concept of *successive approximations*. This concept holds that behavior and attitudes will change gradually and slowly. Progress will often be plodding. But you must *recognize* and *reinforce* each step toward the target behavior.

Michelle interrupts you Reading Circle a dozen times a day. Your goal is to totally cease the interruptions. But, on a day when she only interrupts *six* times, you *must* praise and reinforce her effort and progress.

Jameson constantly runs across the schoolyard to board the school bus. Your goal is that he walks slowly to the bus. But you must reinforce him every time he canters, trots, or skips.

You cannot wait until he walks appropriately before praising him. You must reinforce each bit of progress and effort, or the progress and effort will stop!

Some teachers say, "I don't have time to do that sort of thing. I'm so busy dealing with behavior."

That's like the farmer who laments, "I don't have time to build a fence, I'm too busy chasing the cows."

Well, I hope that this advice has helped and I wish you, your colleagues and your students a wonder-filled school year.

Oh, yeah... one more thing... STOP USING WORD SEARCHES!

Sure, the kids love 'em, AND they take up a lot of class time, but who cares if Johnny can read the days of the week backwards and on a diagonal?

With every good wish,

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