



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the power of a positive attitude.

The Power of a Positive Attitude



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

There are a lot of things beyond our control as professional educators. We can't control poverty, or what experiences our children have when they are not in school, or the level of cooperation we receive from parents. What we can control, however, is our attitude about children and learning.

Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year, was recently honored at a ceremony at the White House. Jason works as a middle school math teacher in Washington, D. C. and he is the embodiment of a teacher who approaches his job every day with an optimistic outlook. Even though his students come from neighborhoods characterized by poverty, Jason will not let this fact impact his attitude. In his White House remarks, Jason stated that he refused to let "negative factors shape my perspective." But he goes beyond not letting negativism influence his thinking. He carries it one step further. He approaches each day determined "never to use the negative factors as predictors of ability or potential." In short, in his brief teaching career, Jason has adopted a positive attitude that drives his instruction, his decision making, and his relationship with his students, and most importantly, it is the foundation of his personal philosophy toward his chosen life's work.

I have had the privilege of working with educators over my many years in public education who embraced this sense of optimism. They were genuinely happy people who enjoyed their children, who relished the excitement of watching their students learn, who willingly accepted the challenges that confronted them, and who continued to look for ways to better themselves and their ability to teach. These amazing educators were likewise continually confounded by the individuals around them who were disgruntled, negative and pessimistic.

In my 26 years as an administrator, I tried to distinguish the differences between the teachers with the consistent bright outlook on life from those for whom everything seemed to be an insurmountable challenge. As I reflected on the many educators with whom I have worked, a clear pattern emerged that distinguished the teachers who approached their jobs with optimism and those individuals who did not enjoy what they were doing, and who cast a negative light on most of their classroom experiences. The teachers who approached their roles more positively shared a number of characteristics:

- First, they genuinely liked the children they taught. They clearly saw their role as a teacher as being exceptionally important, and they realized that they could have an influence on the youngsters they saw each day.
- Second, they took definitive steps to get to know their children as distinct individuals from the first day of school on. They learned about their students' likes and dislikes, their hobbies and personal interests outside of school, their learning styles, their favorite ways of demonstrating their learning, and equally important, they came to understand just how much a teacher could learn from the students during their time together.
- Third, successful teachers kept the focus on learning. They constantly looked for ways their students could succeed. These exceptional individuals were not satisfied with failure, and they required genuine effort from their students. They understood that there was a distinct connection between high expectations and a caring attitude that often resulted in their students' "buying into" the required classroom work.
- Fourth, they required every student to work toward mastery learning. They knew that some students took longer to learn than others. They also embraced the idea that fair was not treating every student the same, but fair was providing each student the necessary support when he or she needed it. The students in their classes had multiple opportunities on assessments; reteaching and retesting was the routine practice in their classrooms.
- Fifth, they infused in their classrooms a balance between academic rigor and a humane approach to working with their students. They knew what they had to teach and they taught it. They inspired, they motivated, they built confidence, and they got the results they sought.
- Finally, when they determined report card grades, they "never forgot the person behind the numbers." They quickly learned that "averaging grades" did not really make sense. They clearly knew the difference between formative assessment data (data that "informs" the teacher what to do next as students are "forming" their learning) and summative assessment (data that lets the teacher know how well a student learned after lots of practice and opportunities to receive quality feedback from the teacher). Report card grades were based on how well a student ultimately demonstrated the knowledge and skills they had learned.

As I watched segments of the speech Jason Kamras gave at the White House on the evening news, I wished that I would have had the chance to work with him. Jason's positive attitude is contagious and it surely influences his students. When Jason spoke of his middle schoolers, he said, "They inspire me every day with their intelligence, creativity, and humor." He further stated, "My children simply want the opportunity to pursue their dreams."

Educators have a choice. They can view their responsibilities as difficult challenges that are perhaps impossible to accomplish, or they can embrace the career they have chosen by instilling in their children a sense of pride, a desire to learn, and the ability to dream about futures that they hadn't imagined. It is the inspired teacher's mission to show them their dreams can become a reality.

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