



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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## Word Power



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning* published by Just ASK.

Perhaps it is stating the obvious by saying that words have power. Important ideas may be expressed in a single word, a quote, a short paragraph or a long treatise. When we encounter words, they can inspire us, evoke a mental picture, change the way we think, cause us to react emotionally, or just leave us unresponsive. Words may excite us to act, change our goals, take on a new way of behaving, or reaffirm a belief we already hold. Common responses may be “I never thought of it that way,” “That made me smile,” “I want to share this with my colleagues,” “Good old common sense,” or “Really?”

In this issue of *Just for the ASKing!* you will see a word which captures the essence of the message that follows. Both the word and the quote have the potential to be to be powerful depending on each reader’s reaction.

### Realization

I recently saw a sign posted outside the conference room of a local business. The sign read:

#### Ten Things That Require Zero Talent:

- Being on Time
- Work Ethic
- Effort
- Body Language
- Energy
- Attitude
- Passion
- Being Coachable
- Doing Extra
- Being Prepared

The list affirms how important it is to approach any new challenge with the right frame of mind, the right optimism and the “I Can Do This!” mindset.

## Wisdom

**“Cherish curiosity, gently rub away innocence, spare the rod, secure attention, provide recreation, treat children as rational, and explain the purpose of instruction.”**

When I read the quote above, it reminded me that wisdom is timeless. Surprisingly, the statement was written by John Locke in his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding” published in 1693.

## Insight

**“The one student who challenges us the most may be a gift in disguise.”** The statement is contained in a book entitled *Resilience in the Classroom* by child development expert Dr. Lisa Medoff. As adults, when we apply the concept of resilience to our own behavior, and when we finally find the key to helping a student overcome a learning obstacle, it can cause us to feel a strong sense of accomplishment, and result in our using similar methodology in our work with similar students.

## Encouragement

**“I can live for two months on a good compliment”** is a quote from Mark Twain who is famous for his many insightful statements that still resonate today. A kind word, a validation for a job well done, or an affirmation that we are moving in the right direction can brighten a day and motivate us to keep trying. Likewise a timely compliment can have the same impact on a young mind.

## Revelation

**“Students need to know that if they’re stuck, they don’t need just effort.”** Carol Dweck’s words are important because they remind us that we cannot simply encourage students to keep trying; we must provide them with strategies or ideas that can accompany their effort. If students are left to their own devices, they may just be “redoubling their efforts with the same ineffective strategies.” We must remind our students that it is okay to ask for help and that additional resources are available to them.

## Reality

**“Boredom is the root of all evil”** comes from philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. **“If you put me to sleep, I will go,”** is a statement shared by principal Kristian Herring in a recent workshop. Both statements are reminders to each of us to take stock of how we are delivering instruction to our students and the importance of paying attention to their demeanor and reaction.

## Alternatives

**“It takes courage to step aside and watch kids struggle and fail”** was a statement in a presentation by educational consultant Lee Watanbe Crockett. In a different keynote address, Robyn Jackson made the following point about the cycle of failure and how students react:

**“The three P’s of chronic failure:**

- **They feel failure is permanent. (It will never change.)**
- **They feel failure is pervasive. (I can’t do anything right.)**
- **They feel failure is personal. (It’s my fault I’m a failure.)”**

In actuality, both presenters are correct. Students must understand that not everything in life comes easily. Struggling is a part of learning and too often teachers want to provide relief to students who seem to be frustrated. On the other hand, it is important for us to recognize the students who have a determined belief in their inability to learn. In these scenarios, we must intercede more quickly in order to help students break the cycle of insidious inadequacy.



## Essentials

Author Daniel Pink has written, **“The arts are not ornamental; they are fundamental.”** Child advocate and author Sydney Gurewitz Clemens has stated, **“Art has the role in education of helping children become like themselves instead of more like everyone else.”** Both statements are testimonials for the absolute necessity of supporting the arts in all forms in our schools. The significance of its importance is supported by its inclusion of the definition of a “well-rounded student” in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

## Brilliance

Pure genius is reflected in famous quotes from indomitable scientists from our past. Albert Einstein once stated, **“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.”** His statement reminds us of the obligation all educators must assume to find the strengths in our students and to help them nurture the natural talents they bring to the classroom each day. The quote from a second renowned scientist was posted in a STEM class in an elementary school. It reads, **“To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.”** It is a reminder that Edison never gave up in his efforts to find the right combination of materials and approaches in order to produce his inventions.

## Resilience

Posted on Facebook was the following reminder:

**Life is like a camera...**

- **Focus on what’s important**
- **Capture the good times**
- **Develop from negatives**
- **And if things don’t work out,**
- **Take another shot.**

We may become discouraged when our efforts (as teacher or student) do not lead to the pay off we expected. Not only should our learners press on but we must set an example by sharing our past experiences during which we kept moving in the right direction.

## Truths

National Teacher of the Year Jeff Charboneau recently shared his perspectives about teaching in a keynote address. Three of his most important points were:

- **Good teaching is messy, terribly messy.**
- **You don’t have to be a perfect teacher every day. One of the most powerful things a teacher can say is ‘I’m sorry.’**
- **Put relationships first and content second.**

When we share our humanness with our students, it may be the thing they most remember about us; it makes us more real in their eyes. Additionally, there is no substitute for genuine kindness. When treating our students with respect and dignity supersedes the content we are teaching, it is a life lesson they will not soon forget.



## Enlightenment

**“School readiness seems to mean pushing four-year olds to behave like six-year olds so they do well on tests when they are ten-year olds. What if it meant pushing schools to be ready for kindergarteners with developmentally-appropriate and play-based learning opportunities.”**

This perspective reported by early learning advocate Alisha Allie Barrow is a convincing argument for meeting children where they are rather than pushing them too far too quickly. It is likewise an indication of the importance of play in early childhood education.

## Awareness

A sign displayed in the hallway of a school I recently visited read:

Different  
Individuals  
Valuing  
Each other  
Regardless of  
Skin  
Intellect  
Talents or  
Years

The sign had been created by a student; it reminded me that the school is a place where students are learning important lessons that will last them a lifetime.

## Perception

We are often read about the importance of educating the “whole child. “ We cannot limit ourselves to just the course content but, as well, we must provide time for students to grapple with situations that will help them form their belief systems. As Theodore Roosevelt said a century ago, **“To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.”**

## Limitations

Educational leader Charlotte Danielson has recently written about “initiative fatigue,” a practice in education of moving too quickly from one practice to the next. As she noted, when there are too many pursuits going on at the same time, “educators experience these changes as discordant at best, contradictory and confusing at worst.” Mike Schmoker has also offered his opinion when he wrote, **“Time and energy are precious, limited resources, and if we squander them on too many initiatives or the wrong ones, we will fail....less is more.”** Leaders should take these wise words to heart if they want to truly impact our practice.

## Respect

In a recent discussion among school leaders, one of the participants offered up an insight he had read. He said, **“The first rule of respect is that no one in the school is invisible.”** He received a round of applause for his comment. The rule should apply to everyone but especially to students who may be loners or who do not take an active part in class activities. We must acknowledge them, draw them in, and let them know that they are valued.



## Rejuvenation

In a recent visit to a high school class, the teacher played a song for her students that had been a recent radio hit. As it began, it was obvious that many of students were familiar with the song written by Calvin Harris and performed by Ne-Yo. The lyrics had an important message:

“Let’s go.  
Make no excuses now,  
I’m talking here and now.  
Your time is running out,  
I’m talking here and now.  
It’s not about what you’ve done,  
It’s about what you’re doing.  
It’s all about where you’re going,  
No matter where you’ve been.  
Let’s go.”

It was the teacher’s way of reminding her students that it is never too late, our future lies ahead of us, and we can take the right action. She then projected the lyrics on the board so that students could carefully read them. The ensuing discussion was productive and powerful. The teacher had discovered a way to relate to her students.

## Revision

The headline in the newspaper story read, **“Letting Students Sink Doesn’t Teach Them to Swim.”** The item focused on remarks made by Rick DuFour in a recent presentation during which DuFour stressed that “F’s do not build character.” He believes that some students may need extra time, different kinds of support, and close monitoring while they are in our K-12 classrooms. He further noted, **“If a student is truly going to enter a sink-or-swim situation in higher education, the best preparation is to teach the student to swim – to provide the students with the knowledge, skills and habits essential to success in that situation – rather than allow the student to sink first in high school.”** His powerful words were aimed practitioners who believe that failure builds character with the hope that they would revise their way of thinking.

## Implications

**“Being a leader is not about being above others.”** Blogger Lee Watanbe-Crockett wrote these words to remind all those in leadership positions that we must set aside our ego, hear other’s pain, listen to their words, and help to lift them up.

## Receptivity

In closing, I present a quote that I have seen many times and which captures the essence of this newsletter. The quote reads, **“Don’t be afraid to be open-minded; your brain isn’t going to fall out.”**



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