Respect, Trust Are Part of the Bargain for Learning, Teens Say

In urban schools, the key to success is relationships, assert 40 high school students of color in a new book they co-authored with journalist Kathleen Cushman. In FIRES IN THE BATHROOM: Advice for Teachers from High School Students (The New Press, May 2003), kids from Oakland, San Francisco, New York City, and Providence speak bluntly about their school experiences. Their insights, excerpted below, can help teachers break through the barriers of adolescent culture to transform classroom skirmishes for control into partnerships of mutual understanding.

Respect, trust, and fairness, these young people say, lay the foundation for fruitful academics. They spell out an unspoken bargain teenagers make with good teachers; students are willing to pay attention, work hard, and behave responsibly if teachers know and care about their material and treat kids with respect and fairness. From school’s opening day, students are alert to whether the teacher will uphold the deal—and that largely determines whether they in turn will do their part.

We were prepared to get on my teacher [by giving him trouble], but he grabbed our attention from the start, and we were with
him for the rest of the class. A kid can tell when a teacher knows what he’s doing, and believes in what he’s doing, then they don’t have to get into some authority struggle. — Vance

If teachers signal an unwillingness to keep the bargain, however, kids will act to right the balance. What some consider an “out of control” classroom often can be seen as students’ response to a teacher’s perceived violation of the deal.

If a teacher’s done something wrong but doesn’t believe it’s wrong, I want to give him trouble, to try to change his view. — Daryl

If a teacher shows that they’re scared of the students, the students are going to try to take control. — Veronica

If teachers can get used to evaluating a situation by seeing the bargain from both sides, their interactions with students will have clear consequences, and so will their students’—a fair deal to remind them of whenever necessary. For at bottom kids want to learn, and an orderly, purposeful classroom matters just as much to them as it does to teachers.

It doesn’t feel so good when I’m in this class where half the kids are taking over, jumping, screaming, taking over the conversation, not letting the teacher talk. — Maribel

Capturing Kids’ Interests and Energies

All the firm discipline in the world can’t keep teenagers from sabotaging a classroom where they don’t feel any personal involvement. Common sense suggests that students are less likely to misbehave when they are interested and committed to the task at hand. Teachers can channel teenagers’ eagerness to expend mental energy on things that matter to them into productive academic work.

When we were reading James Baldwin we did a Socratic seminar... One question was: “Do you think religion is a positive influence in society?” Usually when I’m sleeping, I wake up with an idea and have a pencil by my bed, and after that I had a lot of ideas on this—it really made me think. When we had to construct the essay, I read through all my little notes from when I woke up. I already had the answer, and he found the right question to ask. — Andres

I wrote this poem about this fifteen-year-old girl
getting pregnant. I just had to make it the best, because there [are] so many young girls getting pregnant at a young age that I know people would want to read it. — Porsche

Students say teachers who are passionate about their subject and who value students’ opinions increase their motivation.

The mark of a good teacher is that no matter how weird or boring you might think their subject is, their love for it is what pushes you to learn something. It could be rat feces or some nasty topic and the fact that their eyes are glowing when they talk about it makes you want to know something about it. — Vance

I like when you ask them a question and they don’t give you a direct answer. They ask, “What do you think? What if that were true? What’s the evidence?” — Latia

Students also recognize when a teacher is eager to learn new things and raises genuine questions to explore together. Such actions send a powerful message to kids about the value of curiosity, hard work, and lifelong learning.

It’s great if teachers say that they are learning with the students... Be curious and share that with students—talk together about things you don’t know and want to learn about the subject. — Hilary

And they appreciate teachers who hold them to high expectations, pushing them to do their best.

I knew my algebra teacher liked me because when I got a C in his class, he was upset. He just pushed me to keep my head outta them boys and into the books. — Porsche

When Things Go Wrong

The developmental business of adolescence assures that teenagers will not always make school their top priority. At a time when students are becoming adults, they need some leeway to make mistakes.

They shouldn’t expect me always to do good. Sometimes you go through lots of stuff—if something happens in your family you might not be going to school... It’s important for a teacher to let
you know that even if you don’t do the very best this time, they still expect that you’ll be able to in the future. — Veronica

Teachers need to make allowance for the fact that we change from year to year and even from week to week. Sometimes I’m just acting hotheaded, I need to clear the air and then come back and apologize. I can acknowledge the things I do wrong. — Alexis

When, inevitably, things don’t go well, students offer teachers this advice: Don’t take a bad day too hard. They know their teachers are only human; they don’t harbor unrealistic expectations of them.

Relax and take your mind off school for a while. Think about the kids: we need you, we want to get out of school and become someone. [Try to] stay organized but relaxed. — Montoya

One problem with teachers is they want to be crusaders, they’re so gung ho—“I’m going to go their house,” or “Together we can do that, Billy, together we can do it!” And then if that doesn’t work they feel like failures; they get depressed because they didn’t save that one kid, and so the 20 others suffer. — Vance

Students accept that a teacher’s main job is to teach. Do that well, these teenagers say, and the rest will follow. Come back tomorrow and the next day, they urge, come back and teach us well.

You really affect kids when you just do your job day in and day out, do it well—and everything doesn’t have to be about bonding with the kids and changing their lives. That’s artificial. The bond will develop on its own if you just do your job well. — Vance

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