



## TEACHER LEADERSHIP

# Cynicism Is Contagious; So Is Hope

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In my last post, I promised readers a special post on a topic of great importance to me. Fighting cynicism is that topic. It is one of the most important issues for me and needs to be one of the most important goals for all schools. Cynicism can rot out a school the way termites rot out a wooden home. A cynic is someone who has given up hope that things can better. They are not realists or skeptics, who often ask hard questions or demonstrate care before accepting the first new thing that comes along. Cynicism is a plague that kills dreams. It sucks the life out of teachers and robs students of hope. No student deserves to have a teacher who has given up hope.

I once gave a speech to a large number of educators in the Chicago area at an event that required attendance of the district's teachers. A minute into my presentation, a teacher from the back of the auditorium shouted out a question. "What is the meaning of professionalism?" he asked. Before I could gather my thoughts to answer, he yelled, "I mean, is it professional to make me waste my time and come to this stupid conference?" That opened the door for me to answer his first question. "No, it's not professional to make you waste your time doing anything," I said, "but real professionals will listen because, even if they learn only one insight that might help their students, it is worth it." After he walked out a minute later, I thanked God that my children never had a teacher like that.

## Six Symptoms of Serious Cynicism

I've found six ways to tell if an educator is dangerously close to hopeless cynicism. If you are a teacher or administrator and see a colleague with these symptoms, try to help that teacher regain hope by using the strategies that follow this list. Don't worry if you find yourself behaving in these ways occasionally -- we all have rough days. However, if you find yourself doing the following on a regular basis, then try the suggestions yourself.

First, the symptoms:

1. You check your watch before your first cup of coffee or before nine AM to see how much longer until you can go home.

2. What you teach becomes more important than who you teach.
3. You begin believing that nothing works with "these" kids, that they are beyond hope.
4. Every day feels the same.
5. You often wonder why no one is doing anything to make life better for you.
6. You have lost your own love of learning. Tedium has replaced wonder.

## Five Strategies to Help Teachers Stop Cynical Feelings

Here are five powerful strategies that can help when you feel cynical or that you can use to help another teacher if you are a colleague, administrator or school consultant.

1. **Remember why you became a teacher and why you stay a teacher.** It obviously wasn't for money, glory, respect or power. Teachers don't get those things. It was and is to help children. Remind yourself or others of this frequently.
2. **Adopt a hopeless student.** Find a student who has given up and appears lost. He doesn't have to be one of your own students; in fact, it might be better if he isn't. Start by saying hello everyday and begin to ask him how school is going. Gradually build up to a big brother or sister relationship. It is hard to be cynical when someone depends on you, especially a child. You can help another teacher by asking for the same kind of assistance with another student. While it is not necessary for you to be a big brother to set up a teacher you wish to help, it is better to be involved yourself.
3. **Adopt a cynical teacher.** In the same way a child can benefit from a big brother or sister, so can a colleague who has forgotten why they became a teacher. Ask for help, offer suggestions, be cheery, truthfully compliment them on something related to teaching. Become an ally in the fight against hopelessness. You can also ask a cynical teacher to help another cynical teacher break the cycle of hopelessness. Both can be rehabilitated by this method.
4. **Communicate with those who affect you in school.** Most cynical teachers complain to others about those who affect them without attempting direct communication. So many problems can be solved or improved by talking *with* another instead of *about* him or her.
5. **Feel good about what you can control.** When I ask teachers what makes them feel good about teaching, most of the answers involve things they cannot control. So many things that we can't control affect us, such as salary, the school facility, who our colleagues are, our students' family lives, and what the school board mandates. More importantly, teachers want the respect of others, recognition and administrative encouragement. Because others control each of these things, we feel hurt and helpless when we don't get them, especially when we deserve them. This leads to cynicism. We need to recognize the things we can control and feel good about them, because when we give others the power to make us feel good, we put ourselves at emotional risk. Here are some examples of what we can control:
  - Being prepared
  - Designing great lessons (see my previous post (3))
  - Helping colleagues
  - Doing things to make the school a better place
  - Organizing events that bring joy to colleagues, like a bagel and coffee morning before classes start (donuts and bear claws are better left in the bakery)

Reclaiming the power to make ourselves feel good minimizes the emotional risk that leads to disappointment and cynicism.

Cynicism can spread through the school and destroy the atmosphere, the learning and, in some cases, a teacher's career. Fight back. The antidote is hope for all.

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/cynicism-is-contagious-richard-curwin](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/cynicism-is-contagious-richard-curwin)

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