

Inspiring Others

 **Inscribed upon my wrist: Emphasizing effort to empower learning**

By [Kevin D. Washburn](#) on November 21st, 2012 | [Comments\(18\)](#)

I wear an identification tag on my wrist whenever I run. Should I meet physical misfortune while pounding the pavement, whoever finds me will have at least a few critical details at hand.

When I ordered this thick rubber band with its aluminum data tag, I had one line I could customize. My choice of “mantra” to inscribe: Give the effort. My wife jokes that it’s a not-very-subtle suggestion for the EMTs who arrive on the scene. That wasn’t my intent (although maybe it’s not a bad consequence).

The message is intended to be from me to me. Every time I slip that tag onto my wrist, I am reminded to put forth the effort that will equip me to achieve my goals.

My wrist one-liner is a good mantra for our schools: Give the effort. Perhaps we should have it inscribed on student desks or chiseled into classroom walls. Why? Because more than anything else, effort influences learning, and authentic learning involves effort. (In fact, students who rarely struggle are probably learning little!)

Several studies suggest a strong correlation between effort (or perseverance or grit or willpower) and achievement — not just academic success but improved life quality beyond graduation day. If this aspect of “character” is so vital, how can we give it more intentional emphasis in education?

1. Make stories about struggle and eventual success centerpieces of class discussions. A strong example trumps a “what if” scenario every time. Rather than posing a question to students, “What if you tried to solve this problem and failed on your first try?” sprinkle tales of struggle and eventual success throughout the day. If you teach science, share stories of scientists who worked for months or years before discovering a breakthrough. If you teach history, avoid oversimplification and emphasize the struggles behind historical successes (e.g., Edison didn’t instantly “invent the lightbulb”; he worked for years to improve existing designs, trying “a thousand” possibilities before finding the right combination of materials). If you teach math, share stories of mathematicians who wrestled with equations before finding a new formula. If you coach baseball, make sure students know that Babe Ruth struck out more than 1300 times on his way to hitting more than 700 home-runs. When you read to students, select stories featuring protagonists who overcome multiple challenges to achieve a goal. Regularly and intentionally weave stories like these into your conversations with students. They are more than inspirational; they are instructive reference points.
2. Direct attention to effort-result relationships. Carol Dweck’s well-known research found that teachers whose comments emphasized effort-result relationships had students learning up to 50% more than students of teachers who did not direct attention to effort-result relationships. A teacher emphasizing effort-result relationships may say, “Wow, you worked hard on this and look at the results!” rather than saying, “Wow, you are really good at math!” This subtle difference possesses power because it conveys a) that students can get better (or “smarter”) at something through effort, and b) that effort, not IQ or gender or socioeconomic

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status, etc., is what empowers learning and success.

3. Separate strategy from individual worth. It amazes me how many adults who accomplish something significant reveal in interviews that a teacher in their past questioned their abilities to be successful, often at anything, but frequently in the field where these individuals find success. (The latest example was one of this year's winners of the Nobel Prize in medicine.) Dr. Robert Brooks suggests that classrooms should be places that welcome failure as a gateway to learning. One way we can do this is through our response to students' errors. Rather than saying unhelpful things like "Try harder" or "Put your thinking cap on," we can redirect students' focus and effort. Brooks' example: "This strategy you're using doesn't seem to be working. Let's figure out why and how we can change the strategy so that you are successful." A response like this a) directs attention to the strategy rather than the student (i.e., fixing the strategy rather than the student), b) makes the teacher a partner in analyzing the error and in determining how to change the strategy, and c) communicates the teacher's belief that the student can be successful. Such a response invites additional effort rather than withdrawal based on frustration or feelings of incompetence.

When we experience failure, our brains are in a state in which neuronal connections can be rewired, but only if we attend to our errors. When students resist analyzing mistakes and figuring out better strategies, they slam shut a window of optimal learning opportunity. The way we respond to student error can invite the opening of this window. In contrast, a less effective response can eliminate any space between pane and sill.

Effort is applied power that possesses immense power. It empowers learning, which is a significant benefit while in school. However, the ability and determination to "self-teach" is a life-long skill that enables success in the home, marketplace and any field of personal interest. Additionally, the ability to work at something until success is achieved is itself a profitable character trait.

Give the effort. Perhaps we should all strive to make this part of our identification. And that of our students.

*Kevin D. Washburn is the executive director of **Clerestory Learning**, author of instructional-design model *Architecture of Learning* and instructional-writing program *Writer's Stylus*, and co-author of an instructional-reading program used by schools nationwide. He is the author of "**The Architecture of Learning: Designing Instruction for the Learning Brain**" and is a member of the International Mind, Brain and Education Society and the Learning & the Brain Society. Washburn has taught in classrooms from third grade through graduate school.*

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RESchmutz · 1 week ago

+3

One of the characteristics lacking in many of today's youth is perseverance. Confronted with failure, they give up. "Give the effort" is a simple phrase which captures the essence of what our youth need to do.

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Katja · 1 week ago

+1

I think it's not surprising because students have come to believe that success is anything and as parents and teachers we heap them with praise which basically tells them "you are smart, intelligent" etc. It's the wrong kind of praise because it signals it's something you can't change. If a student has to work for something she more often than not is led to believe she is not as smart, so to see her struggle as a sign that she isn't bright and therefore successful.

That needs to change. I can remember that in Maths class my eventual success was never regarded as highly as the next person's and that really hurt because in the eyes of my Maths teacher the student who got it in an instant was more worthy of attention and praise. More often than not I got a "Ah, now she's got it!", and I felt really patronised.

Reply

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Ann · 1 week ago

+2

Today's society and its "instant gratification" within has helped to create the lack of perseverance among all people. If we wait longer than 2-3 minutes in the drive-thru lane, we get angry. We can contact a person on the other side of the world via call, text, twitter, and skype. We use microwaves, remote controls, computers, and planes. Fast food, laser printers, online shopping, and EZ passes make waiting a lost art. As an educator, I completely agree that we need to support our youth in perseverance. The article had several great ideas that I plan on sharing.

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Char · 1 week ago

+1

I answered in a similar fashion without reading your comment. You were so specific and right on the money. We have to do some serious analysis with our child-rearing and with what we do in the classroom to help children to become stronger. It is a sad commentary on life and something has to be done to rectify it. It has to start with parents learning how to say no to children to set boundaries...maintain the consequences and make sure their children are growing up capable.

Reply

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Sylvie · 1 week ago

+3

from what i have researched, the ability to delay gratification is one of the best indicator of academic success. should we not pay more attention to developing that ability in our students?

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Wisconsin note · 1 week ago

+1

Saw an article in the Wall Street Journal last July referencing the work of Carol Dweck, psychologist at Stanford. She has done research illustrating the point of Mr. Washborn's article. Focus on effort and perseverance to raise achievement and move beyond the frustration of difficult tasks. An important lesson for all of us, especially those who are gifted, disabled or disadvantaged. Being smart does not mean all learning should come easily. Life circumstances that make learning more difficult is not a reason to conclude learning at a high level is not possible. Learning at some point will become a challenge for all who stay in the game.

Reply 1 reply · active 1 week ago

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RBGood · 1 week ago

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Her name is Carol Dweck. Her work is excellent!

Reply

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Charlene · 1 week ago

+1

Excellent article. I think too often if things get hard, kids and adults quit. We are such an "instant" society that we are losing our ability to stick with it when things get tough or challenging. We need to hear more of this....

Reply

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Flor · 1 week ago

+1

Your article made my day complete. Earlier today, I gave a short 'lecture' to my 8th grade reading class because I was so disappointed after reading about their negative comments on the book I assigned. Our class novel was "Harriet Tubman: the Underground Railroad" By Ann Petry. After weeks of reading it and doing enrichment activities, I read comments from their writing journal that this is the first time that they think I picked the most boring book 'ever' and they hope I don't assign this to other students in the future. They think that there's no action, thrill, suspense, etc. I couldn't believe it! I started second-guessing myself at first but later on I told them that maybe they've been reading too much fiction like the 'Twilight' saga or 'Hunger Games' that they have lost touch with reality. I'm concerned about the lack of effort to empathize with Tubman or the absence of realization and gratitude for the noble cause that she championed to abolish slavery. It's unbelievable that after drawing out the remarkable details from her

biography , the students have detached themselves from one of the most inspiring historical figures in American history. So I'm saddened by their lack of effort to be inspired or enlightened because they're so full of themselves and of what they want. It's frustrating when one seems to be a voice in the wilderness or passé because this generation does not exert enough effort to look back and to be appreciative of the indomitable spirit and unconditional effort our forebears have displayed in the past. Quo vadis? Where do we go from here?

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Joseph · 1 week ago

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Flor, perhaps you could try talking about the slavery that still exists today in the world? Have students research human trafficking, especially child trafficking. Also, talk about what it is like to be controlled by another person. Slaves were controlled. Try to make connections. I would have a difficult time empathizing with the story too.

Reply

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Flor · 1 week ago

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This is a great idea. Thanks a lot.

Reply

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pragmaticmom 8p · 1 week ago

+1

What a great point you make and not unlike what parenting gurus coach us to verbalize: "Wow, you worked hard on this and look at the results!" rather than saying, "Wow, you are really good at math!" You so nailed it on the head. It's hard to do it though ... we, the adult whether we are parent or teacher, also have to rewire to verbalize a different message.

Reply

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Dennis · 1 week ago

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Kevin's work is "spot on". As both a school principal and more importantly a dad, the lifelong benefits of effort and perseverance are characteristics that transcend every aspect of life, social growth, and personal development.

Reply

Report



Kevin D. Washburn · 1 week ago

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NPR has a fascinating report on the difference between Eastern & Western educational ideologies that relates to this post: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/11/12/164793...>

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Babs Freeman-Loftis · 1 week ago

+1

Thanks for this post. Last week I blogged about a similar topic, The Value of Struggle, on the Responsive Classroom website. This intention to "give the effort," speaks to a quality that is vital to teaching and to learning. I appreciated the strategies that you shared, especially the "separate strategy from individual worth." As you point out, a teacher's attitude toward struggle and the language that a teacher uses with students who are struggling (academically or socially), have the potential to communicate a strong belief in children's potential. If we want classrooms and schools to be places that welcome struggle and failure as opportunities for learning, then attention must be paid to building a strong sense of community within each classroom and throughout the school. I know that I am more open to taking a risk to learn something new when I have supportive and trusting relationships, and the same is true for students in our classrooms.

Reply

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Elizabeth · 1 week ago

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The timing of this article was ironic. I just created a necklace that says "PERSEVERE" and wore it to school today. I have had to explain what it means to some of my students and why I think it is so important to do it. It is important for teachers to create a classroom environment where it is okay to make a mistake and to talk about how they made the error/why they made the error and then discuss other options. Teachers learn from student errors how to teach concepts more effectively, and other students learn as well.

Reply

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Krista · 6 days ago

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It's important that teachers act as role models for students and show perseverance when things get tough. Students need to understand that learning can sometimes be a struggle, and that it's okay if they don't succeed the first time, as long as they continue to try. Often times it takes many attempts before students realize the benefits of applying themselves and putting forth an effort.

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Toni · 5 days ago

0

You are right about many things, but not about Edison. He had other people do many of the experiments and he took all the credit. I have always told my students that you need brains and good habits to make it go. I think you also need to be honest about giving credit where it is due.

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