

The Award for Every Student

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I was a high school principal for 11 of my 40+ years in education. Prior to that experience I'd worked with high school dropouts for a dozen years in alternative education programs that were quite different from the traditional high school to which I moved.

When you work with students who struggle, you learn that their successes are real – if not newsworthy on a worldly way. The celebrations of their successes – even if just between the teacher and the student – are important. There are high fives, hugs, hair ruffles, handshakes and any other spontaneous celebration of that success that fits the moment.

My oldest son struggled in school. He was so unrewarded for school successes that he began to become celebrated for his anti-school behaviors. Fortunately, there was an alternative high school in our school district that helped him find his way to graduation and then through few semesters at a community college. Today he is a good husband, father and son. He is surrounded by loving people who he loves. He is among the working poor yet never discourages for what he doesn't have. In short, he turned out to be a great success to me in all the ways that matter most.

Award Season in Schools

Springtime is Award Season in our schools. There is nothing wrong with awards. When I was a high school principal we did our best to award achievements in every part of the curriculum. In the late spring we had an annual Awards Night in which each department of the school honored students for their achievements in art, language, family sciences, math, science, social studies, food service, auto mechanics, etc. It was a night of great pride for some parents and students. It is wonderful to be the best at something, and to be recognized for your achievements.

I, however, was uneasy about singling out an awards ceremony that left out about 95% of the student body. If we celebrate every child, then what can we celebrate about the child who is not one of “the best”?

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – A Metaphor

One of the most moving tributes I've ever seen is the one where the guard changes at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The celebration there is not about some ONE. The celebration there is about the bravery that lives in many; about the sacrifices that were made by many; about the invisible and anonymous bravery and sacrifice that took the life of one whose identity will never be known, even as his bravery and sacrifice will always be remembered, appreciated, and honored.

Is there an equivalent anonymity among our students? Are there those who struggle anonymously, bravely studying without accolades, determined to become the person he or she is created to become, without applause, without recognition? Of course there are. In some ways, every student bears the weight of ‘doing one’s best’ even if that ‘best’ does not rank as *the best*.

To honor these invisible students, and to make clear to those who are very successful that our regard for them does not depend on their successes, we created an “Award for Every Student.” It is reproduced below. Please feel free to borrow heavily from this Tribute.

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Award

EVERY STUDENT

Not for what you have or have not achieved.

Rather for the reality
of what you are;
and for the hope
that you will find your gifts,
cultivate your gifts,
and express your gifts,
for your own delight
and for the need in the world
that your gifts can satisfy.

If we didn't notice, forgive us.

Don't let our noticing or not noticing direct your doing and being.

Reward yourself.

Love yourself.

Forgive a world that's too self-consumed to notice.

Love a world that needs your love more than it deserves it.

Finally, celebrate yourself as you celebrate the other miracles in life.

At this moment, we celebrate you...

All of you...

Not for what you have or have not achieved.

Rather, as we celebrate a sunset, a rainbow, a landscape, a starry night,
and nature's other natural wonders.

We celebrate you,

Now and forever,

With Love,

The staff, faculty, and administration of your school.