

Learning from Teachers of the Year

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Several months ago, I wrote about “appreciative inquiry,” an improvement process very different from problem-solving. In problem-solving, you take something that is broken or inadequate and you fix it.

In appreciative inquiry, you focus on something already good, and consider why it is working so well. Participants imagine how they can make that success happen even during trying circumstances.

Several months ago, I read in the newspaper about the Houston County “Teachers of the Year.” I thought it would be terrific to orchestrate an “appreciative inquiry” among several of these competent, deeply committed individuals.

I suggested the idea to a friend who had just been selected by her peers as her school’s Teacher of the Year. She thought it was an interesting idea, so I contacted other finalists for Houston County’s Teacher of the Year.

We arranged a Sunday afternoon conversation. Three of the finalists were able to participate, and they had a grand time together. The contributors were Lisa Barnett from Kings Chapel Elementary School, Liz Carroll from Perry Middle School, and Nikki Brewer from Thomson Middle School.

Unfortunately, Dawn Hardy from David Perdue Primary School and Meredith Fletcher from Tucker Elementary School were not able to attend. (It’s hard to arrange a meeting of such busy people!)

Lisa, Liz, and Nikki are humble individuals, actively using their gifts to serve. They are willing to speak up for the good of all—students, parents, administrators, and teachers. They are passionate about their work, and very aware of their influence with students, parents, and other teachers.

Thinking there might be some similarities among their backgrounds, I searched for a common source of their tenacity and diligence. I couldn’t find it. After extensive discussion, we concluded that a person’s upbringing doesn’t matter—it’s what you do with what you’ve been given that matters.

These women do a lot to serve our students! They talked about how much focus there is on measurable results. Though they understand the desired outcomes, heavy emphasis on test scores creates pressure on students. They feel that if a teacher is skilled and confident, and the process of teaching is healthy, the students enjoy learning and the measurements take care of themselves.

One observed that the influence of media is so extensive that pressure to be an entertainer is intense. However, they agreed they all work to keep their focus on the education of the students.

Another commented that the community desires that teachers be a positive influence for good. However, teachers are often portrayed poorly by television shows and the news. It’s easy to let these negative influences get you down. However, with limited time to influence their students, these teachers focus on building character and a desire for learning.

All agreed that their work does not stop when the school day ends. One works with an after-school program for latchkey kids. Another helps students and families with transportation, food, and linkage with social workers. All like to visit schools that are recognized for good performance.

The teachers emphasized the need for cooperation among teachers. They recognized that skilled, caring teachers on the team are a huge help to new teachers just getting started.

The three teachers enjoyed this unique experience of sharing with other excellent teachers. They share the same goals and similar commitment. They would love to have more opportunities to conduct this kind of positive dialogue about perspectives and methods of engaging students.

We should give thanks for these capable teachers who care so much for our county’s students.

You may phone Dennis Hooper at 478-988-0237 or send an e-mail to dhooper2@juno.com.