

Harbor Method – Attitude and Effort Emphasis for the Workplace

By: Rebecca R. Stallcop, Administrator, Liberty Charter School, and

Founder of the Harbor Method

Questions:

- Other than the 3 r's, how do U.S. schools prepare students for the workplace?
- Who is responsible for the notion that schools are a babysitting business?
- What can be done to give our children the opportunity to be successful adults?

THE PROBLEM

Parents, students and yes, even some educators, have developed a nonchalant attitude toward education over the past several decades. There is an air of expectation that education just happens.

Adults model attitude and effort to children in myriad ways, and often it's the less direct actions that seem to have the greatest impact toward a child's work effort later as an adult. For instance, parents model to children the importance (or lack of importance) on getting to work on time, putting in a full day's work, or correctly recording one's timecard by the commitment made in getting students to school on time, taking vacations only during scheduled school breaks, taking time away from the regular school day for such things as hair cuts and routine doctors' appointments, allowing students to "rest up" for a vacation or after a vacation, keeping one child home to babysit younger children, as well as endless other situations where children see that their job, to be in school, isn't a priority.

The result can be students who justify staying home from school because they are tired, have a pimple, haven't finished an assignment, don't like school, don't

think they have anything to wear that day, don't want to deal with their friends, want to watch something on TV, etc.

Educators similarly model attitude and effort. Through the manner in which they perform their jobs which, of course, is observed by students daily, they demonstrate the traits of being a good employee. For instance, if a teacher is on time; rarely, if ever, requires a substitute teacher in his or her class; keeps the classroom appearance well organized and orderly; and manages his or her work day (the students' learning time) well, students observe competent, confident adults and the satisfaction that comes from adults who are committed to their careers.

Contrastly, educators who save up personal days (originally instituted to complete tasks that couldn't be done after the school day, such as closing on a house, etc.) to then use as additional vacation time during student contact days; routinely calling in sick, thus requiring substitute teachers to fill in; setting "collaboration, in-service or professional development" half-days or full days right before a holiday weekend, etc.; all communicate to students (and their parents) the lack of commitment by those educators to their profession.

And, unfortunately, some educators go even a step further in discouraging good work traits in students by being openly critical of their clients and customers (students and parents), colleagues (fellow teachers and staff), and bosses (administrators and principals). [And thank goodness, most students rarely see what transpires in the dreaded "teachers' lounge," where often conversations center on misbehaving or academically challenged students, "problem" parents, other teachers, administrators, district office personnel and school board members. Rarely do those leaving the teachers' lounge feel uplifted and positive.] What employees who demonstrate these work tendencies and who participate in "water-cooler" gossip succeed in their careers? Are they the ones promoted? Is this really what we want students to learn as acceptable or tolerated work traits?

When it's said children are always watching you, it's no truer than in the educational setting in which all adults, from parents to educators, play a part. As a result, when the plight of education is discussed, every adult has some responsibility to bear.

And although all students are put in jeopardy, disadvantaged students are significantly harmed. Obviously, the aforementioned impacts teaching and

learning time, but they also have long-lasting effects by seriously impacting the future for our kids.

Where do children learn that, as adults, they must get to work on time, have a great attitude toward their work, their colleagues and managers? Where do they learn that all work is honorable? Where do they learn that as they're interviewing for a job they demonstrate all they can do for that company, rather than coming in with their "hands out" feeling entitled to make demands of the business and what all it should provide for them?

As earlier illustrated, as educators we do our part in paving the road positively or negatively for students to follow in developing a strong work ethic. Educators affect this further by, in recent years, buying into the idea that they are to give stickers for everything: pass out coupons at recess that say, "Caught You Doing What is Right," or first thing in the morning saying, "Good for You for Getting Your Work in on Time!" Often, these coupons and stickers are given to the students who usually are the problems, not to those who are acting appropriately most of the time. These reward systems have attempted to improve behaviors of students who are behavior problems without really addressing the behavior itself, and carry with them the added downside of ignoring students who consistently do the right thing. What message does this send?

Additionally, educators have been taught that it's most important to develop the self esteem of students, meaning there's an expectation that teachers do not identify publicly any student misbehavior even if that behavior occurs in class, on the playground, in the lunchroom, etc. Instead, educators have been told misbehaving students should be dealt with privately to protect their fragile self-esteem. Students must not be "embarrassed" by seeing late work identified on a whiteboard. They mustn't be told in front of the class that they answered a question incorrectly, even if it's stated politely by the teacher but, rather, "I like the way you think; you are very close," even though the answer is oceans away from the correct outcome. And even though a student openly teases or bullies another student, he or she should never be humiliated by being called out where the action took place. How do these false statements and actions support future career success and the ability to cope in an ever-changing workplace environment?

They don't. Rather, these messages send our students into the workplace with the inability to take, accept and use constructive criticism from their bosses; to know what is acceptable behavior among their peers, and to understand that

negative actions do carry consequences. Students have become so use to expecting the adults in their lives to list only positive things they do (and frame the negatives in a positive light) that they are unable to accept direction with an appropriate attitude.

All children are at risk, but the disadvantaged are in the most danger. Students from disadvantaged homes where families must live on welfare, where single parents are rarely home for having to work long hours at one or more jobs, or where the family is homeless, have little hope of breaking the poverty cycle unless today's educational system moves from protecting a child's self-esteem to instead preserving his or her dignity and expecting academic and social accountability.

With all this said, what can be done to improve all children's chances of being successful in their adult lives?

THE SOLUTION

As the founder of the Harbor School Method, I believe that all adults in schools need to be truthful with students. Discipline of students **MUST** be handled where the problem occurred. Otherwise, how will other students know that the adult addressed the problem? This is one reason students feel unsafe in a school setting. If Johnny is sent to the principal's office for bullying on the playground, he builds his reputation by returning to class and announcing, "Yeah, we talked about sports and then the principal gave me candy." Other students then think, "Wow, even the principal is afraid of Johnny." The practice of preserving the self esteem of a disruptive student does not evoke confidence in other children. And it tells them whether you're good or bad, you'll get the same consequences, so what does it matter? In the real world, it does matter. Adults who do not follow rules and laws get their names in the newspaper. Think of those folks who drink and drive and then get a DUI. Does the real world provide for those who break the rules the opportunity avoid the consequences in order to save their self esteem? To prepare our children for the real world, we can preserve their dignity at their young age while still being honest with them first and foremost, and holding them accountable for their actions.

When we look the other way when students are unkind, dishonest, or disruptive, we are not doing our job in preparing them for life beyond school. How many adults receive promotions and raises for bad behavior in the workplace? If an employee harasses another employee, whether sexually or verbally, does he have job security? If an employee is found to have lied on her resume, does she get to keep the job for which she was hired? If an employee is a "pot-stirrer" is she the one the boss promotes? Do businesses and companies typically allow swearing in the workplace? Do they allow employees to be insubordinate and defiant to the boss? Are we as educators doing students a favor by not confronting and giving consequences for misbehaving? What can we do to support the success of our students in their careers?

The Harbor School Method sets forth the importance of focusing on student attitude and effort while students are in our schools. Adults both at home and at school must model attitude and effort. We learn what we see, not what we are told. As adults we must model a positive attitude toward our colleagues, students, supervisors, parents, etc. We must model flexibility in our jobs. We must model a "can do" attitude toward our work. Only then do we have the right to have those same expectations of our students.

Parents must impress upon their children the importance of getting to school on time, having their homework finished, and making the effort required at school with the best attitude possible.

Educators must stop blaming parents and dysfunctional homes. We must accept the students we receive and stop making excuses. We take the cards we are dealt and do everything we can to ensure a winning hand. Comments like, "How can I be expected to teach when I know the parents let Jane stay up and watch TV all night?" Or, "Jane is never here. How can I be expected to ensure that her scores go up?" Or, "The reason my class scores are so low is that the principal gave me all the special education kids this year." All of these comments become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Educators must welcome all students with a "can-do" attitude. When that attitude is accepted, only then we will be able to start breaking the cycle for those students who most desperately need to have a vision of what life can be for them.

And educators must demonstrate the attributes of being good employees: positive attitudes, and being prepared, flexible, and professional.

THE HARBOR SCHOOL METHOD WAY

What we do in a Harbor Method School is develop a school culture that most likely mimics what will be expected in the workplace. Our students are instructed from the first grade on in the importance of attitude and effort. Awards, such as Citizen of the Week and Citizen of the Month, are presented for getting to school on time, for homework being completed on time, for displaying a great attitude inside and outside the classroom to other students and adults alike.

Other activities that offer students the ability to develop attitude and effort work traits:

- In 1st – 3rd grade we have implemented a program, *Scholar Dollars*, developed by Liberty Charter School's Jackie Ecker, a master teacher. This program starts after spring break and continues to the last week of school. Students in these grades receive scholar dollars for getting to school on time, for homework being finished in a timely manner, for attitude and effort in the classroom, and for kindness toward peers. At the end of the 10 weeks, the students are able to spend their scholar dollars at a carnival put on by the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade teachers and parents. This gives students an early start in the basic understanding of what it will take to be successful in post secondary/college education and future employment.
- 4th grade students are responsible for picking up the PE equipment left on the playground each day before the end of the school day.
- 5th grade students are responsible for picking up trash on the playground and parking lot on a regular basis.
- 6th grade students mop the floor in the café, vacuum the floor outside the café in the hallway, and wash the lunch tables.
- 7th grade students prepare fresh vegetables and fruit each morning in the cafe, 2 students at a time for a period of one hour each day for one week.
- 8th grade students are instructed by the principal in the café in a school-to-work program for a period of 2 hours per day for 10 school days.

By the end of their 8th-grade year, Harbor School students have culminated 8 years of focus on attitude and effort, and formed life-long habits and skills in these social development areas. (See Attached)

When students leave a school effectively utilizing the Harbor School Method, they have been thoroughly instructed in the qualities expected as successful future employees. Students have seen the traits modeled on a daily basis by adults and have had the opportunity to practice, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes through the opportunities listed. They have been able to develop not only through their successes, but safely through trial and error. So not only are Harbor students building successful work traits, they're also developing strong character traits as well.

As educators we have a mandate: prepare our students for the real world. As Harbor educators, we take it even further so that our students are not only prepared for the real world, but that they are overly prepared – that they will become the employees that every employer wants.

Parents, educators and significant adults in a child's life know that character is not built in a vacuum. And while parents may hope their kids won't experience embarrassment, have a bad day, make a mistake, or have a problem of any kind, they will. If they didn't how would they learn that bad things do happen and they still must get up and face the next day? And for children where bad days are the norm because of the environment in which they're being raised, it's imperative they have a place (i.e., school) where they learn that one can rise above the obstacles. *All* children need to learn and *can* learn that problems and our reaction to them are what build character. Rather than ignoring problems when they occur, a Harbor School recognizes them, and has methods in place to address them effectively, while providing experiences for children in which they can grow and achieve in these critical social developmental contexts. Ultimately, we want Harbor students to have experiences that will help them build character and face life head on. That is the "Harbor" way.