

## **The Principal Connection**

Failing Wisely

by Thomas R. Hoerr

One of the advantages of schools' cyclical calendars is that every fall is fresh and bright. Schools are filled with hope and optimism. Classroom walls are painted, rooms have been scrubbed, and each child is full of promise and ready for a new start. School leaders welcome families and share information about the talents of new staff members and the merits of improved programs. They explain how each child will learn to succeed. That's as it should be, but it's not the full story. School leaders also need to explain how each child will learn to fail.

Of course we want our students to succeed, but if we want to prepare them to succeed in the real world and not just in school, then they also need to learn how to fail. More accurately, they need to learn how to respond to failure.

I often think about the disservice we do when we allow students to graduate from our schools only having succeeded. You know the students I am describing: They're on the honor roll, they may star in the school performance or on the athletic field, and they are the students everyone wants to hang around. They are seemingly positioned for a limitless future of success after success. That lofty and sharp trajectory, however, is neither realistic nor, even, desirable.

The real world is quite different from school. Absolutely there are overlaps, and definitely success in school helps prepare one for life. But unbroken success in school does not adequately prepare one for the vicissitudes, pitfalls, and pratfalls that are part of life.

Unless someone engages in a routine and predictable job, unless someone walls off others and does not open up emotionally, unless someone chooses to learn nothing new, failure will occur. (Some might argue that these conditions indicate that failure has already occurred.) Invariably, whether the path takes one to an Ivy League campus, to an air-conditioned office, or to work in an auto repair shop, over time the job will become more challenging and the responsibilities will increase. That's the way it should be. Inevitably, whether dealing with co-workers or loved ones, relationships will be tested and strained. There really is no way to avoid these things from happening other than to live a life of seclusion. This *is* life.

Our success, then, is defined by how we handle the adversity, how we respond when we don't have the right answer, what we do when we are forced to work with someone we dislike, and how we react when our personal relationships go awry. This means that just as we have an obligation to teach students how to read, write, and calculate, we also have an obligation to teach students how to handle difficulties and set-backs. They need to learn to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, to seek and accept feedback, to motivate themselves, and to be tenacious. They must be able to learn from their mistakes so that they can venture back into the fray, armed with more insight and information. In short, students need to learn to fail wisely.

Educators have a responsibility to ensure that all students will find occasionally find frustration and fail. Students' first academic and emotional bumps and bruises need to take place during the school-age years, not afterwards. We need to challenge these students so that success is not

always at hand. Differentiating instruction is as important for the top students as it is for those who struggle. All students must learn the importance of struggling to succeed and joy of overcoming obstacles, just as they must learn that occasionally their best efforts are not adequate.

Ensuring that students confront failure is just the beginning of course; we also need to ensure that they have the awareness and skills to learn from their difficult experiences. It is important that we take the time to talk about frustration and failure, to help students see how to learn from their mistakes, to teach them to be resilient, and to encourage them to try, try, and try again. The important problems are never solved on the first try (if they were, they wouldn't be important!). Providing time for students to reflect on what went wrong, how they responded, and how they might respond differently in the future can be effective. Sometimes students think that school is easy for everyone else, so it is important to create an environment in which these feelings can be shared and they can learn from other's experiences. (In the United States, when students are asked to explain why someone performs at the top of the class, they typically say "It is because she is smart." When students in Japan are asked the same question, they respond, "She works very hard.")

Sadly, for some students this may be far less of an issue. Their learning histories are replete with failure after failure. They garner much of our attention and we work diligently to help them raise their sights and see that success is possible. They need to learn to succeed. Yet even for these students, learning how to fail wisely is an integral part of their continued success. They must learn not to panic or give up when work is difficult. They need to learn that the right answer is often not the first answer and that the best answer is rarely the first answer. They have to understand that perspiration and tenacity are key factors in every success.

We also have a responsibility to educate students' parents about the need for their children to be frustrated and to learn from failure. No parent wants to see his/her child in pain, so it can be hard to help parents understand that it is important for them to step back and let their child's actions run the course. Perhaps it has always been so, but it seems to me that this is harder for today's parents. They can be too quick to intervene and offer help when the better strategy would be to allow their child to struggle. In a good school, everyone learns, and part of the role of the school leader is to educate students' parents. When we open our doors in the fall and talk about success and what a wonderful school year it is going to be, we also need to talk about the importance of students learning from their mistakes, and of failing wisely.

Finally, just as our students need to learn to fail wisely, so do their teachers and principals. But that's a topic for another column!