

The Principal Connection

What Is Success?

By Tom Hoerr

“Are there differences between success in school and success in life?” That’s a question that I’ve been asking in a variety of settings to a range of people. Indeed, it’s one of the essay questions on the teacher application form at New City School. Please take a moment now, and think about your response before you read any further.

You see, that’s an easy question, and it’s not. From just about everyone with whom I’ve spoken, there’s a strong consensus that there are differences between success in school and success in life. Don’t misunderstand: The factors which lead to success in school are important. Students *do* need to learn how to read, write, and calculate. We’re all grateful for spell-check and pocket calculators, but their presence doesn’t change that we still need to be able to perform these tasks. Being a math whiz or poet laureate opens up job opportunities and career pathways. Conversely, having poor linguistic or math skills closes doors. The 3 R’s matter.

But there’s an even stronger consensus that success in school is just a beginning. Person after person said that students need to do well in school, but this is not enough. Regardless of their background or profession – architects, bankers, coaches, stay-at-home parents, or workaholics – people talked about success in life being dependent upon EQ, the personal intelligences: knowing yourself and being able to work with others.

The thoughts that others shared touched me deeply. The length of this article does not allow me to capture the range or depth of their responses, but here are some of their ideas to ponder. Success is:

- the capacity to face the unknown with confidence
- all the little things you do every day that give you growth and satisfaction and others joy
- the courage to go against the norm and try something contrary to popular belief
- being able to deal and work with other people
- being satisfied with who you are and what you have done
- a connection to something larger than yourself
- knowing you’ve made a difference in someone’s life
- pushing oneself to learn and do new things
- being able to say “I’m sorry”
- a life free from poverty and debt

And “one is never successful; one is always in the process of becoming successful.”

Quite a few people said that schools are focused too much on grades and offer too few ways for students to shine. One person noted that schools need to teach students how to define success for themselves. The importance of attitude and effort were frequently cited. Several individuals said that students need to self-reflect so they can see their growth and change.

A couple of years ago I was making a presentation at an ASCD Conference, and concluded by asking the audience whether there were differences between success in school and life. Afterwards, a principal from Colorado told me how her district had just concluded a two-day administrative retreat focused on student outcomes. “But no one ever asked or talked about

what happens after age 18!” she said. She was shaken by their missed opportunity. I hear this kind of response quite often when I talk with educators. Too often we set our goals on what students will gain by June, or maybe June four years from now.

To be fair, teachers and principals naturally focus on teaching the skills and attributes which are readily measured (and sometimes on which they are measured). The current test score mantra only exacerbates that tendency. No one talks about whether a school makes AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) in caring for others or in giving your best effort. Many of the factors which determine success in life – caring, tenacity, integrity, and creativity, for example -- aren’t measured well on multiple-choice tests. But how can we talk about preparing students for the future if we ignore the qualities which are necessary for success?

When we talk about excellence in education, we need to remember that our job is to prepare students for success in life, not just to succeed next year. Thinking about that goal and our role is rife with implications for us.

Principals need to take the lead in their schools and initiate a dialogue about what is important. Granted, our students need to perform well on standardized tests; we know that. But let’s not stop there. Let’s teach *The Whole Child*. What are the other skills and qualities that our students will need to be successful in life and how can we work to teach them?

If we want to develop students who demonstrate compassion, for example, it has to be part of our formal curriculum. We must model caring, teach compassion, and let our students know that it is truly valued. We need to proclaim the importance of students caring and share examples of it at assemblies and on bulletin boards, we need to talk about it at faculty meetings and parent nights, and we need to find ways to applaud the students who exhibit it. This holds for all of the other characteristics that students need to succeed in life. When we limit our assessment of a student’s person to “Works well with others” or “Displays good conduct,” we have failed him.

As we talk about excellence in education, we need to make sure that we focus on both success in school and success in life. What’s your opinion? How do you define these successes and what should educators be doing to help students achieve them? I’d like to hear from you.