

Why Not Your Best?

Creating a Culture of Excellence in the Classroom

by Hal Urban



BEST?, in a prominent spot to serve as a visible reminder.

I was always confident that I planted some important seeds during this lesson. Hundreds of times students told me,

“I can’t get that question out of my mind.” It was music to my ears.

Integrating “Doing Our Best” Into a Mission Statement

Until the early 1980s, I paid scant attention to mission statements. That changed dramatically when a number of my friends and I attended a men’s retreat in the Santa Cruz mountains.

The leader of the retreat posed this question: “How many of you have a written personal mission statement that you look at and think about every day?” He said, “All good organizations with a purpose have a well-crafted mission statement. It gives the people within them both focus and clarity, and it inspires them to fulfill that purpose.”

I went away from the retreat with a concise personal mission statement that I look at and dwell upon every morning. But it wasn’t specifically tied to my responsibilities as an educator, so I decided

When I was a high school history and psychology teacher, one of the life lessons I wanted to pass on to all of my students had to do with effort, determination, diligence, and good old-fashioned hard work. When I was growing up, the message I received about being successful in life was pretty straightforward: If you wanted to be good at anything, you’d have to work hard.

Unfortunately, that’s not the message our young people are getting today. In fact, they’re often bombarded with messages that claim the opposite, such as:

- The good things in life come quickly and easily.
- You *deserve* a good life.
- You can have it all, and you can have it all now.
- You don’t have to make any sacrifices to get what you want.

As I usually did when teaching life lessons in my classes, I started with a question. I asked my students, “Why would you ever want to give less than your very best?”

They responded by asking, “Where?”, “When?” My answer: “Everywhere and all the time.” Most of them thought it was impossible to always give your best, so we would get into a provocative discussion. Here are some of the specific questions my students asked, followed by my answers:

“How do you give your best when you’re just socializing with your friends?” *Give them the best you have. Have fun with them, laugh with them, play with them, let them know how much you enjoy being with them.*

“How do you give your best when you don’t feel well?” *You give the best you can under those circumstances.*

“Do you think there’s anyone who gives his or her best all the time?” *Yes, I think millions of people do.*

“How often do you give your best?” *All of the time—when teaching, meeting home responsibilities, being with my family, writing,*

reading, working out, playing sports, spending time with friends.

Can You Always Give Your Best?

The concept of always giving your best was obviously new to my students. They found it hard to believe that there were millions of people, including me, who always gave their best. Most of them equated giving your best with struggle, superhuman effort, stress, exhaustion, and being too serious all the time.

I explained that life is far more rewarding when we do the best we can, no matter where we are, whom we’re with, or what we’re doing—even if we’re resting or having fun. It’s a matter of being in the moment and making the most out of it. An example I always used was teaching. It requires very hard work, but it can be fun at the same time. In fact, the harder I worked at it, the more fun I had and the more rewarding it was.

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I asked them if they wanted me to give my best every time they came to my class. The answer was always yes, along with this little addition: “You’re *supposed* to give your best because you’re getting paid.”

That always brought a smile to my face. I responded that I was paid to teach, not to give my best. There’s a big difference. I chose to give my best because it made my teaching so much more enjoyable and fulfilling. They were starting to get it.

My students decided that there were primarily two reasons that people often chose to not give their best: laziness and self-centeredness. I agreed. I pointed out that we reap what we sow: We get out of life what we put into it.

Then I asked them the same question I started the lesson with. “Why would you ever want to give less than your very best?” I put up a sign, WHY NOT YOUR

to write a separate mission statement, one that applied solely to my role as a teacher. After about six or seven hours, I finally had my mission statement as a teacher (see box, next page).

When I was finished, I hand-printed my mission statement (there were no computers in those days) with a black felt tip pen. (While my personal mission statement has changed a few times over the years, this teacher mission statement never did.) The next morning I taped it on my desk at school. I shared with my students that I had both a “philosophy of education” (a long quotation by Haim Ginott) and a “teacher mission statement” taped to my desk. I read them out loud to each class and invited them to look at them any time they wanted. I also told them to bring it to my attention if they ever thought I was acting in a way that was inconsistent with my philosophy or

my mission. (Yes, it did happen a few times. Posting your mission statement for students to see keeps you focused, diligent, and accountable.)

Then it dawned on me that I was the leader of five “organizations with a purpose”—my five classes. This realization led to some questions:

- *Did my students know what a mission statement was? If they didn't, could I teach them?*
- *Could I help my students see and clarify their purpose?*
- *Should my class write a mission statement together?*

The Students' Mission Statement

I began by asking the students in all of my classes if they knew what a mission statement was. Out of more than 160 students, about four or five did.

I explained that another term for “mission statement” was a “statement of purpose,” and that businesses, service organizations, charitable foundations, places of worship, schools, universities, and even individuals used them to stay focused on their goals. I showed them the mission statements of our school, the University of San Francisco, the Girl Scouts, the Rotary, a local church, Apple Computer, and UPS.

I asked the class if they thought I should write their mission statement for them, or if they should write their own. I knew what their answer would be. One girl said: “It wouldn't really be our mission statement if you wrote it, would it?” I answered “No. I think you'll honor it more if you own it.”

I divided them into six groups of 5-6 students and gave them these instructions:

- The class mission statement could not be longer than two sentences.
- Their mission statement could be about one of two topics—either the environment we were going to create in the class, or the process of learning itself.

My students took this activity seriously and enjoyed the process. Over the years they came up with some wonderful mission statements. Here are a few:

THIS IS A GOLDEN RULE CLASSROOM.

WE PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH.

THIS IS A NO PUT-DOWN ZONE. WE LOOK FOR THE GOOD INSTEAD.

LEARNING IS NOT AN OBLIGATION; IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY.

It's important to post the mission statement in the front of the room where every student sees it every day. Any time my

students looked at the front of the room, there it was, staring them in the face and reminding them of their mission.

This was a remarkably simple activity that took only about 40 minutes, and it paid dividends for the rest of the year. Writing a teacher mission statement and reading it the first thing each morning had always affirmed my purpose. It worked the same for my students.

“What Do You Expect of Me?”

At the beginning of each school year, I put my expectations of my students (regarding class participation, homework, tests, punctuality, courtesy, etc.) in writing and discussed them with the class. Then, I asked them if they had expectations of me. They assured me that they did. I asked them each to write them down. These are the “Top Ten” expectations they came up with over the years:

1. Make the class interesting, not boring.
2. Have control of the class.
3. Be nice, not mean. Don't yell at us.
4. Be fair in the way you treat people (no favorites) and in grading.
5. Be reasonable on homework.
6. Return tests/papers within a week.
7. Explain things clearly; don't assume we already know everything.
8. Have a sense of humor; make class fun.
9. Be understanding; try to remember what it's like to be a kid.
10. Give us help if we need it.

I was always impressed with their lists. I told them they could expect two other things from me that weren't even on their list. I promised them that I would come to class every day with a good attitude and fully prepared. I said, “I will give you the best I have every day.”

And I challenged them to give me *their* best—every day, in every way. ■

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My Mission as a Teacher: A Promise to My Students

My ultimate responsibility as a teacher is to bring out the best in my students.

1. I'll help you perform at your highest levels in both academics and character—to do your best work and be your best self.
2. I'll treat you with the utmost respect—the same way I expect you to treat me and your classmates.
3. I'll do everything in my power to create the best possible classroom atmosphere—one in which I can teach and you can learn.
4. I'll come to each class prepared with a meaningful lesson plan.
5. I'll be consistent in maintaining high academic standards, while following my very strong belief that there's no substitute for hard work.
6. Whenever possible, I'll try to connect school to the larger world outside.
7. I'll teach “life lessons” along with academic lessons.
8. I'll make myself available to help you in both academics and personal matters.
9. I will always give you my best.