

What to Do with Failing Students

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Why does failure bother teachers so much? When the student fails, we feel we have failed.

Over the years I have found that one of the biggest problems my colleagues have is the feeling of personal failure that comes when their teaching doesn't work, when they teach, but some students just won't learn. I always encourage them not to ignore the problem, but instead to make it their responsibility to try to help those failing students find a way to succeed. Success does not always mean passing a class or even learning the material. Sometimes it means students must learn other lessons about themselves and how to work in school and the world. Sometimes the results of your work still seem negligible or even negative, but trying to help is our solemn responsibility. Looking at the whole student and trying to help him learn how to accomplish his goals or choose other goals is a major part of our jobs. What is failure? Failure is when a student doesn't leave the class knowing more than when he entered. There are many types of failing students. They all deserve our help.

Helping Students to Succeed: A Twelve Step Program

1. Identify failure early and act on it. This includes getting evidence of students level and abilities within the first week of class through testing, in class writing, and interviews.
2. Confront the student privately with facts (test papers, lack of study and homework, class requirements including time, etc.). Many students are anxious to deny there is a problem. "Don't worry, teacher. No problem." Be specific and blunt. " There is not a single correct sentence in this composition." Also use your good judgment. Some students need this more than others.
3. Get the student to verbalize her own problem and identify causes and solutions. Don't allow the student to minimize the problem. Analyze the problem with the student. This self recognition is the key to any self help program. The student must recognize the problem and decide she wants to fix it.
4. Listen. Be honest and direct in your responses. Offer respect and encouragement. Listen and look with great attention. Look at the distance a student holds the book from him as he reads. Listen to what she says about her study time. Let the time you spend with this student be exploratory. You may have only seen symptoms of the problem, but not have any idea of its source.
5. Help the student create a plan of action with realistic goals. Help her to move back to a reasonable starting place. Help her develop steps to reaching her goal. Don't guarantee her a passing grade. Offer her a chance to make progress.
6. Make sure the student adopts the plan as his own set of goals and responsibilities. Let him write or articulate his plans. Check carefully to see if you are on the same track. Make sure he includes his own ideas.
7. Follow up on the plan daily or each time you meet. Let the student know you are interested in her success. Congratulate her on daily successes in front of others if it's appropriate. "Your grammar was much better in this paper." "This is your highest grade this term." Your reinforcements can become less regular as the student improves.
8. Remind the student of his goals. Be positive, but firm. Don't reinforce the student's bad reputation. Don't make negative comments in front of the class, but do ask him to come and see you. He may need help. Watch for backsliding. Old habits are hard to break.
9. Be a resource. Offer or locate additional instruction and materials at an appropriate level. Keep files to help you come up with materials easily. Peer tutors are another valuable tool. Know what other classes and community resources are available to help

a student in need.

10. Vary your approach to help keep students interested and to accommodate varied learning styles, and intelligences. Give your failing student a chance to shine. Don't lower your standards to accommodate a student who is "working hard." Your whole class will benefit from this step.
11. Acknowledge growth even when it does not include passing a test or class. Make sure you spend time with that student before she receives an F on a major paper, a test, or the class. A minute before class begins is all it takes to say, "Those passive verbs are still really hard for you, but I could see you worked on them. Let's try again." Once again, let the student verbalize his own growth. "Do you read better now than you did nine weeks ago?" "Yes, I do. I know more words, and I read better." Don't give a student a passing grade for trying hard. It only takes her to a harder, more impossible level.
12. Keep a professional outlook. If you have followed this plan, you have done your best. The student is responsible for his successes and failures.

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