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Staff Notes
December 8-12, 2008
Be Nice. Work Hard. – Rafe Esquith

Time to Write: 2 hours 34
min



Last week, Joseph, Will and I covered 6th grade math for Hannah who unfortunately is still out sick with strep throat. (If you haven't done so, please call her at 412-9335 or e-mail her with get-well wishes!) To my misfortune, I stepped in right as kids were learning how to add and subtract fractions and mixed numbers, which was the bane of my existence as a 6th grade math teacher three years ago. This particular set of skills is extremely hard to master since there are so many steps (and opportunities to make mistakes). On Tuesday, I gave a 10-question quiz to UW, and the average score was about a 50 percent. That night, I felt that all-too-familiar blanket of stress (shoulders tightening, blood-pressure rising, etc.) and pulled out quite a few hairs wondering what to do.

I went back to the famous speech that Dr. King gave 45 years ago at the Lincoln Memorial (pictured above). To quote it in length, Dr. King said:

“We have come to the nation's capital to cash a check. When the great founders of the American republic wrote the magnificent words in the Declaration of Independence, they meant for that to be a promissory note to which every American would fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned....We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot

Excellence. Care. Integrity. Teamwork. Purpose.

to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

Almost more than any other passage, these two paragraphs eloquently embody why I’ve chosen to do what I do for a living. When Dr. King spoke these words in 1963, about 7 percent of low-income kids in America graduated from college. Today, 45 years later, 8 percent of low-income kids graduate from college. For 45 years, our public education system has been writing bad checks to kids, the same kids that we’ve promised to send to college and beyond.

This time, when I re-read King’s speech, I focused on the part that reads, **“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”** It struck a chord with me because this is the time of the year when complacency starts to set in for most of us. Three months into the year, we’re tired and so we don’t plan lessons or call minor misbehaviors with the same type of urgency as we did during summer school. Whatever metaphors you want to use – the shifting saltshaker, the boiling frog, the tranquilizing drug of gradualism – it is so vitally important that we approach every lesson and every day with **“the fierce urgency of now.”**

* * * * *

On Tuesday in U W’s math class, I had graded the fractions quiz, re-taught a few of the same topics and given 10 more problems as a homework assignment. The following day, I gave a re-quiz, and – to my great dismay – about half the class (14 out of 26 kids) failed again. When a kid fails a quiz or test, there are usually three possible responses:

Option #1: Do nothing (“You scored a 30 percent...that’s ok...”)

Option #2: Do something gradually (“I’ll sign you up for tutoring.”)

Option #3: Do something immediately (“Your score is unacceptable so I’m going to keep you after school today and we are going to work on this until you get it.”)

I am a HUGE proponent of option #3, what I like to think of as the *“fierce urgency of now”* approach. The problem with option #2 is that good intentions often translate into inaction (option #1) as reality sets in. Tutoring next week doesn’t happen because...the student is absent, the teacher forgets, the teacher isn’t planned or a multitude of other reasons.

So what I did Wednesday afternoon was call the parents of all 14 failing 6th graders and ask them if their kids could stay after school (all said yes). That afternoon, I tutored the 14 from 4:15-5pm, and gave them another set of problems to do for homework. On Thursday in class, I checked their homework and if there wasn’t mastery, I would work with them afterschool again. Sure enough, I had four more kids after school on Friday, working on their fractions. The message I sent to these 14 kids was “it’s not good enough to sit in class quietly and not raise your hand and not call your teachers...at this school, 100 percent of us will learn.”

You might be wondering, “That sounds good, but what if I don’t have the time to keep kids after school?” My response is to that is “What’s the alternative? Well...if it’s kids not learning, it absolutely should be worth it to either find that time or make it.” Monica Yanez and Imagine Jackson’s futures are too important for us NOT to make time to work with them now. In the rhetoric of Dr. King, **“Now** is the time for us to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. **Now** is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. **Now** is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

Links to News Here and Elsewhere

- On Saturday night, Marcela and I went to an amazing BBQ place in Clovis called QN4U. The first sign that this would be a meal to remember was the dozens of trophies from regional and national BBQ competitions. It was good. To quote a visitor on their Myspace website, “I love your ribs.....and meat.....and.....chicken.....andmeat..... mmmmmmm tasty tasty meat.....mmm bread pudding..... oooooo mac and cheese con beans..... mmmmm =D” For those of you interested in BBQ ribs, tri-tip, chicken, mac and cheese and potato salad at reasonable prices, it’s located at 1414 Clovis Ave. (just north of Shaw) at the Barnyard.
- There’s an interesting New York Times article on “contagion effects,” which cites a study showing that your happiness is influenced by how happy your friends are. According to the study, if you become happy, good friends of yours living in close proximity have a 25 percent chance of becoming happier themselves. Here’s the link:
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/05/health/05happy.html?_r=1
- In the next few days, President-elect Obama will announce his nominee for Secretary of Education. It’s an important decision because there are two education camps in Obama’s administration: a “reform” camp (which supports charter schools, TFA, higher standards and is embodied by Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee) and an “establishment” camp (which supports teachers unions, more funding and smaller class sizes and is embodied by Stanford professor and TFA-critic Linda Darling-Hammond). The first group believes in disruptive change whereas the second group believes in incremental change. It’s an interesting debate, one worth following. (As an aside, a friend of mine from college and the author of *In the Deep Heart’s Core*, Michael Johnston, is one of Obama’s leading education advisors)

Here are a few articles on Obama’s imminent Secretary of Ed selection:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/05/opinion/05brooks.html>

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/04/AR2008120403655_pf.html

Reflections from Life and Thoughts for KIPP

(*Formal Space for Random Thoughts*)

- Last Tuesday morning, Ida Jones - a professor at the Craig School of Business and prospective board member – came and visited us. She shared her inspiring story: growing up in the housing projects of Omaha, raised by a single mom and pushed to go to law school. Afterwards, she and I went into Mr. Ammon’s room where the 8th graders were reviewing vocab quizzes. Here’s what Professor Jones told me: “These students were using college-level vocabularies. I have kids at the Craig School at Fresno State who would not be able to use words like ‘utilitarian’ and ‘dubiously’.” After leaving the class, we stepped outside to chat, and Brittney Lockhart walked by to use the bathroom. Ida was extremely impressed with how politely Brittney walked by and said “excuse me...”
- Last Thursday, the Hall of Fame basketball player Magic Johnson was on my favorite show, Charlie Rose. Rose asked Magic how he went from basketball to owning 119 Starbucks franchises, movie theaters and TGI Fridays. Magic attributed his father, who worked for GM for 30 years and also had a trash pick-up service. Every Saturday during the school year, Mr. Johnson would make Magic go out and help him pick up trash. One freezing cold winter day in Michigan, Magic was picking up trash and there was some trash stuck in ice in a barrel. He ran back inside the warm truck. All of a sudden, his dad opened his door, grabbed him by the collar and yanked

him back outside. His dad told him, "Son, when you do a job, you gotta give 100 percent effort. And not just here today but everywhere in life. So you're going to chop up this ice, pick up the trash and put it inside the truck." From this one experience, Magic intuited that he needed to do things the right way, and he transferred that perfectionist attitude to basketball and business. For the full interview, go here: <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/9673>

- Last Friday morning's inaugural "Pastries with the Principal" went very well with 20 parents sharing donuts, coffee and information. At the end of the meeting, I opened it up to suggestions and feedback. Parents suggested a more-formal "Back to School" night at the beginning of the year; grades posted online (100 percent of the parents there have internet access at home); and a foreign language class. Interestingly, for both Ruth and Isabel at Cate, Spanish is their most difficult class. That makes sense because they never took a foreign language here.
- On Friday, I was talking with 5th grader Charles Brummett's mom in the office. She cornered me to tell me how Charles has made such a huge improvement since being at KIPP this year. Last year, it used to be a 30-minute fight to get him to do homework every night. Now, Charles wants to go to school. He now talks about the esophagus and the digestive system at night. He's gone from straight D's last year to mostly A's and B's, and they can't be happier with KIPP. ☺
- I saw online a great story from Alonzo Mourning's new book *Resilience* about the famous men's basketball coach at Georgetown, John Thompson. It's such a powerful story that I'm going to reprint it below:

"On November 9, 1989, the Georgetown basketball team was, not surprisingly, at practice. The session was physically and mentally demanding. John Thompson towered over every small detail of the game.

"Then, for no apparent reason, he sent his players to the sideline bleachers. No one was sure what was up. Thompson is a serious and intimidating man, who for decades made college players cower. It was no different that day, as he made eye contact with his players.

"Can somebody tell me what happened today?" he barked. None of the players knew what he was talking about. Did he mean what happened at practice? Had someone screwed up off the court? No one said a word.

Thompson pressed on, feigning surprise. "No one? Who read the paper today? Raise your hand if you read the paper today." None of the players raised his hand; none had read a newspaper. Thompson wasn't happy.

"Can somebody at least tell me what happened on the headlines today -- something of historical significance? Did any of you even bother to glance at the headlines?"

Still no one had any idea what Thompson was talking about. Finally, one of the student trainers, Markhum Stansbury, raised his hand. "Coach, they tore down the Berlin Wall."

"Right," Big John said. "They tore down the Berlin Wall." Then he turned to his team, almost all black kids, most from poor backgrounds, all receiving the opportunity of a lifetime to attend one of the elite institutes of higher education in this country. He shook his head. "That's a shame. You guys go to Georgetown University, a prestigious, world-renowned university, and not a single one of you can keep up with current events?" Then his voice got louder, turned into that powerful blast that Thompson was famous for. "The damn world could be at war, and you wouldn't even know about it."

The players were humiliated, which was the point. Thompson was relentless in pushing his players off the court. But it was about more than just earning diplomas, which virtually all of them did during his nearly three decades at the school. It was about making them grow intellectually, socially, and spiritually. It was about setting up the habits that would continue that growth through the rest of their life. **It was about pushing them, maturing them, and making them aware of the big world outside of basketball. Thompson just could not tolerate anything less. There are no small lessons with him -- just lessons.**

Not knowing what was on the front page was no more acceptable than failing a class or not trying for a rebound. It might seem minor to many (plenty of college kids are blissfully unaware of the world at large), but it wasn't to Thompson. There was no excuse for an educated adult not to know that the Berlin Wall had been knocked down, so he sure wasn't going to accept such ignorance from his players."

- A few weeks ago, I wrote about the Jonathan Freedman robot study, which showed that getting kids to grapple internally with a dilemma is much more effective in the long-term than imposing an external consequence. Last week, there was a nice example of that. On Friday, I gave all the 5th graders a memory test where they had to write out the first five stanzas of the poem, "Pretty Good." Afterwards, Ethan Ceballos came to me and reported that Anthony Vasquez had cheated on the test. Anthony had asked Ethan and others to tell him a few lines. First, I mailed home a thank you note to Ethan. Then, rather than lambasting Anthony (as I would have surely done a few years ago), I sat down and reasoned with him, explaining why cheating was wrong. Finally, I made him articulate why it was wrong. At the end of the day, he left me an unsolicited letter, which I am attaching below. Clearly he needs help with spelling but the point should be clear. (My note to Ethan is also below)

Dear Mr. Tchang,

I've bin thinking what i've done.
I wish I didn't did that. Because it
is low in teget dy. And I knew that
is rong. I know now that i'm not not
going to the felid trip to see the
move bast on the book were reading in
mis Sosa's class. Becuce I have to hake
More than 36 pay check dollers each
week.

I know in fleters felid trip I have
not of a charts to go.

The only thing I want bi you to
see give my and i hope we can
still be friendi. I'll show you a better
student next monyday your kippster
trough the year. Anthony Vasquez

If you want to
talk you my call: 264-3831
have a great Ening.

Dear Ethan,

12/5/08

I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate you telling me Anthony was cheating. You did the right thing and showed great integrity, much like Joe Darby in Iraq and the boy who found \$16,000. You also made KIPP a better place today, and I know I can trust your judgment. Thank you again and have a great weekend!

Your fan,

Mr. Tschang

Calendar

(Failing to plan is planning to fail.)

This Week

Monday (12/8)

- ☞ All KIPPsters MUST have a KIPP sweatshirt
- ☞ All grade levels have 1st Quarter Awards Ceremonies, 3:15-4:00pm
- ☞ Boys Basketball vs. Valley Prep (@ Valley Prep), 3:30-4:30pm

Tuesday (12/9)

- ☞ College shirt day
- ☞ Staff Meeting, 4:30-5:30pm (*The focus will be on the strategy "Do It Again"*)

Wednesday (12/10)

- ☞ Uniforms are on sale, 4:00-4:30
- ☞ Boys Basketball Practice, 4:15-5:30pm
- ☞ KIPP staff invited to walk Christmas Tree Lane, 7:30pm

Thursday (12/11)

- ☞ Weekly parent letter goes home
- ☞ KIPP Parents Association meeting, 5-6pm

Friday (12/12)

- ☞ "Pastries with the Principal" (families with last names H-N), 7:30-8:00am
- ☞ Fancy Dress Friday
- ☞ ELA Department Friday
- ☞ Boys Basketball Practice, 4:15-5:30