Your biggest responsibility

We hear constantly about the need and importance of being student-centered. We should. Rarely will any educator admit to not being student-centered. In fact, to do so would be equated with being unprofessional, self-centered, or even anti-student. But what does it mean to be student-centered? And what difference does being student-centered make in our work with young people?

While each of us might consider ourselves student-centered, we need to recognize what behaviors and other visible signs define us as professionals whose center and work are really student-centered. Obviously, being student-centered is exhibited and expressed in a variety of ways. However, there are six sure signs that define a teaching professional as student-centered. Let's examine these six signs and how you can recognize them in yourself and others.

Search for student gifts, talents, and potential.

First, do you frequently look for and see more in students than they see in themselves, or than their parents see in them? When we are student-centered, we constantly look for the talents, gifts, and potential in each child. The gifts we see and the possibilities we sense may be unnoticeable to others. Yet these gifts will become reality as we are able to convince each student of the gifts' presence and lead students to discover the possibilities and potential hidden within themselves. Before long, what we alone knew or sensed begins to be reflected in student attitudes and behaviors that lead to higher performance, a growing willingness to take learning risks, and increasing pride in their own accomplishments.

Second, when students don't learn, do you make it a professional practice to find out why and change the situation? When we are student-centered, a lack of learning success is met by examining what we can do to change the situation. Our resulting actions are driven by our commitment to see that all students find success in learning and life. Even our relationships with students who struggle are reflected in our interdependence and shared commitment to overcome any barrier or resolve any problem that stands in the way of learning. We understand that teaching students is the reason for our existence as professionals and that we cannot be successful teachers unless students are successful learners.

Third, do you employ and adjust teaching strategies in response to what a student needs rather than how you like to teach? Modifying, customizing, and personalizing are consistent descriptors of the efforts of student-centered teachers. The watchword of the student-centered professional is "adjust, adjust, adjust" until the right approach, combination of strategies, and unrelenting persistence yield learning success. Student-centered teachers see themselves as the primary and most important adjustors when they face learning challenges.

Always look for opportunities to teach.

Fourth, do you constantly look for opportunities to teach—even if the opportunity is not directly a part of the day's lesson? An observation, an insight, a newly discovered interest, or even a current event can be the stimulus for the student-centered professional. Any of these stimuli are seen as opportunities to encourage further exploration, connect with a past experience, or even establish a tie to the lesson or life experience at hand. Being student-centered does not mean losing our focus or becoming distracted from important concepts students must learn, but it does mean being opportunistic in our teaching and sensitive to just the right moment for learning. Our choices at these times can add spontaneity, surprise, and meaning to our teaching while showing students our commitment to being responsive to their interests.

Fifth, does your greatest joy come in the success of your students? When this aspect of student-centeredness is at the core of our work, students know it. They see us as among their greatest advocates, cheerleaders, and resources. This aspect of being student-centered positions us to be influential in the lives of students. It also allows us to expect more of students than they may believe possible and to share completely in the joy of their success.

Sixth, are you surprised, even disappointed, when you hear colleagues place limits on what they are willing to do to ensure that students learn? Obviously, there are practical limits to what we can do to ensure that every student learns. However, the limits we encounter should not be the result of our unwillingness to commit, our desire to protect our ego, or our attempt to avoid personal inconvenience. A student-centered professional's first concern is how students will be affected and how we can enhance opportunities for them, not whether it is convenient, easy, or safe for us.

The Master Teacher knows the strength of our impact is determined by our focus on and commitment to students.

The Master Teacher understands that our impact on the learning life of students will largely be determined by the extent to which our attention and efforts are centered on them. When students understand that we know them, believe in them, are committed to them, and see our success intertwined with their success, there is almost no limit to what can be accomplished together.

The Master Teacher knows that when we are student-centered, the levels of success and satisfaction we enjoy through teaching and nurturing students moves beyond mere work or a job. A commitment to being student-centered can be the difference between a career and a calling.
Staff Relationships

More and more, educators are working in teams. Working in teams requires different skills and strategies than working individually in the classroom with students. One strategy that may lead to a higher level of functioning is to treat the colleagues on your team as if they were school board members. This strategy will help you focus on their strengths and concerns. It will also help you be respectful of their fears. This one action will build staff relationships in all the work you do as a team.

Just as we need to bolster the attitudes and behaviors of students continually, we need to do the same with our colleagues. We all have ups and downs. We even have seasonal slumps that affect our morale. If you want to build better relationships, pay attention to the role you play at such times and take two actions. First, recognize the efforts of colleagues, and give a pat on the back every chance you get. Second, when you’re excited about a project or a colleague’s success, don’t pass up any opportunity to share your enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is contagious and it will rekindle the fire in your colleagues.

In “Resolving Workplace Conflict” by William Cottringer, it is revealed that people in a group must move beyond symptoms to assess the true source of any conflict is three-quarters of its resolution.” He suggests that each member of the group answer three questions: What can I do to help other people succeed? What are the conditions that create the problem behavior or situation that is affecting us? What am I failing to understand about this conflict? You’ll find answering these questions will go a long way toward reducing conflicts with colleagues.

Points To Ponder...

privately...or with colleagues

Learn more from how other teachers are responding to these questions: register at

1. Share your definition of “being student-centered.”
2. How can being responsive to students’ interests lead to spontaneity in teaching?
3. What types of adjustments must a teacher be willing to make to be a student-centered professional?
4. Give examples of (appropriate) (inappropriate) limits teachers set when trying to ensure that students learn.

There is no greater joy nor greater reward than to make a fundamental difference in someone’s life.

—Sister Mary Rose McGeady

The MASTER Teacher
Leadership Lane
P.O. Box 1207
Manhattan, Kansas 66505-1207
800-669-9633

To earn Graduate or Professional Development Credits for this reading, go to: http://my.masterteacher.com.

...And Tips For Staff Relationships