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# **Actions that Uphold High Standards— Point to the Stars**

*It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for.*

Benjamin Mays



Grace Ann was my very first student. She was the first child to walk through the door of my fifth-grade classroom the very first year that I taught school, and she was smiling. She was tall, skinny, black, and poor. She lived in the nearby project, the oldest of nine children. Grace Ann was 12 years old. She was a good reader, although I don't remember ever seeing her select a book to read during free reading time. She said that she did not like math, but she was actually quite good with numbers when she chose to be. She loved kickball and was very good at it. Some days she would do her class work, and some days she would not. Some days she would bring in her homework, and some days she would not. Still, I liked having Grace Ann in my class. Even at 12, there was resilience about her—after all, she made it through each day still smiling.

One day I was visiting with the girls in our class at recess, and I asked them to tell me what they wanted to do when they grew up. Grace Ann responded first: "I want to sleep with lots of men, like my Mama does."

My first reaction was surprise—was she trying to shock me? Then, I looked clearly into her eyes. I did not see guile or sophisticated cleverness, instead I saw a child whose only goals quite simply were framed by the person she cared for the most—her mother.

The challenging question that all teachers face was set before me at that very moment: What could I do to point Grace Ann to the stars?

Grace Ann was my student in the days long before mandated standards and high-stakes testing, but the same challenge faces teachers today. How do we point our students to the stars? How do we uphold a high standard for every child? Here again, there are no easy answers. But the truth is, we have no choice. When we decided to become teachers, we committed to do all that we can to "[sustain] success for all students so that failure is not an option" (Blankstein, 2004, p. 5). This is not an easy task. But we know that most tasks worth doing are never easy. What could be more important than committing to make the world a better place by helping its future leaders?

State and national accountability standards and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) were created to help all children achieve, but there is no doubt that they are surrounded by controversy. Many educators support these standards because they feel that when applied properly they serve as specific criteria that guide schools with clear, consistent curriculum standards for all teachers to use for all children (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Yet, I hear teachers every day who are concerned that it may be harder today to uphold a high standard for every child because of the limits of these mandated accountability standards. Despite this complexity, teachers recognize that in the quest to uphold a high standard for every child, mandated high-stakes testing is a place to begin, not the place to end. BRAVO (Building Relationships with Actions that Value Others) teachers search their soul to understand themselves more fully and examine their own beliefs about children, they accept the responsibility to uphold a high standard for every child, and they create a classroom culture of achievement. When they do this, they build valuing relationships with all students that point them to the stars.

### **Search Your Soul**

Before we can accept the responsibility to uphold high standards for every child, we must understand what we believe about ourselves as teachers and what we believe about children. When we glibly say that “every child can learn,” do we really mean it, or have we just jumped on the bandwagon because it is politically correct to do so? These are deeply personal questions, but what we believe about ourselves as teachers, and what we believe about children, is a message that comes through loud and clear to our students, their parents, and other faculty. After examining our beliefs, we must evaluate our actions, then we must commit to taking the first step and doing what we believe, just as Rosa Parks did when she refused to go to the back of the bus. She said, “I knew someone had to take the first step, so I made up my mind, not to move” (Eisen, 1995).

## Know Your Own Identity

Before you can understand the way that teachers influence the children in your classrooms, you must understand your own identity. Ask yourself the following questions (this is not a comprehensive list of identity questions, but it is a beginning):

- ◆ How do I describe myself?
- ◆ What is my family history?
- ◆ What is my purpose in life?
- ◆ What do I value?
- ◆ What kinds of careers are important to my family?
- ◆ What do I believe about gender roles?
- ◆ How do I relate to others?
- ◆ What do I believe about other people?
- ◆ Do I have friends who are from backgrounds different than mine?
- ◆ What do I do to enlarge my experiences with people of different cultures?

Now, ask yourself the following questions that specifically relate to teaching:

- ◆ What is the purpose of teaching?
- ◆ What do I believe about teaching children?
- ◆ What kind of behavior do I expect from students?
- ◆ What do I expect of my students' parents?
- ◆ Do I believe that every child can achieve?

When you reflect on these questions honestly and answer them privately, you will become aware of influences that perhaps you had no idea existed in your life and in your classroom. You will also understand why you relate better to some people than to others in some instances. Now, let's continue this journey to examine our beliefs and our actions.

## Examine Your Beliefs

What you believe about yourself as a teacher and what you believe about all children are closely related. I don't want to sound trite, but consider this: What if you had been Helen Keller's teacher? Would you have believed in yourself and your abilities as a teacher enough to teach her? I know, I know, you are thinking you could not have been successful with someone with her deficits because you did not have the training. Well, you can't get off the hook that easily. Let's assume you have whatever training is necessary to work with any child. Would you have believed in yourself enough as a teacher to be able to teach Helen? You say, "Yes, I believe that I am an effective teacher, and effective teachers have the power to change children's lives."

Let's consider the next set of questions about what you believe about teaching: Do you believe that all children *want* to learn, regardless of their circumstances? Did Helen want to learn in spite of the dark, silent world in which she lived? You say, "Yes, she wanted to learn. Yes, I believe all children want to learn, regardless of their circumstances."

Now, take another step. Do you believe that all children can be successful or just some children? You say, "Yes, I believe that all children have the potential to be successful."

You have searched your soul and examined your beliefs, and here is what you believe: You believe in yourself as an effective teacher and you believe that effective teachers help children. You believe that all children want to learn regardless of their circumstances. You believe that all children have the potential to be successful.

## Examine Your Actions

What do your actions say about what you believe? Do your actions show that you are always learning more about your craft so that you can be the most effective teacher possible? Or do you only attend professional development seminars when forced and then sit in the back row and grade your papers? I know some can be pretty boring—but that's not the point. The point is this: Do your actions show that you are so

interested in learning more about teaching and about children that you take every opportunity to improve?

Because you believe that all children want to learn regardless of their circumstances, what do your actions show? Do you provide enrichment activities? Do you provide tutoring for children who are behind? Do you get to know all of your students so that you can understand what their needs are? Do you look for new, creative ways to motivate all of your children?

Because you believe that all children in your classroom have the potential to be successful, do you celebrate their successes? Do you celebrate individual improvement? Do you collaborate with parents to help them help you help their child? Do you team with other faculty to enhance learning opportunities for all children? You say, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes, to all of these. My actions show that I believe in myself and in children.”

### **Make a Personal Commitment**

There is a story about a 5-year-old boy who had been cured of a life-threatening disease. Soon after, it was discovered that his sister had the same illness. Her only chance of recovery was a blood transfusion from him, because he had just the right antibodies. The doctor explained the situation to the little brother and asked if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He hesitated for only a moment before he said yes. As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled when he saw the color return to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked, “Will I start to die right away?” Being young, the little boy had misunderstood the doctor and thought he had to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her. But he was willing to make a personal commitment to what he believed.

Now that you have explored your own beliefs and actions by looking deeply into your own soul, you need to make a personal commitment to uphold yourself to high standards and to hold every child that you teach to a high standard of achievement. In other words, you commit to doing what you

say you believe. You commit to making the most of every moment you have with your students to point each of them to the stars.

## **Accept Responsibility to Uphold High Standards for Every Child**

Now that we know that we believe in and are committed to holding ourselves and all of our students to a high standard of success, we are ready to accept this responsibility. To do this, it is important to look more closely at today's accountability system and high-stakes testing. Teachers must understand the dilemma created by high-stakes testing to commit to making standards work for all children.

### **Understand the Dilemma**

I talk with teachers every day, and I have never met one who is not in favor of educator accountability. Just recently I was riding from the airport to my hotel with a woman who carried a bag with a big red apple on it. I asked if she was a teacher (silly question, I know). Of course, and she was on her way to a Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) conference. When I asked how she felt about all of the testing, she grimaced and said, "I am actually glad that we are being more accountable, ...but it seems that all we are allowed to do is teach to the test when there is so much more to teaching than testing!" Many teachers are frustrated and unhappy with the mandated accountability that is in place. Not because they are unwilling to be accountable, but because of the way it has been implemented. For example, consider the NCLB that requires that only 1% of children can be exempt from testing (now waived to 3%). Yet, in Texas, for example, the average number of identified special education students is 10% in a district. What about the other 7%? What do we do for them?

Unfortunately, many parents, and the media, do not understand the testing dilemma of standardized accountability. Certainly, accountability is appropriate and a good idea. But as James Popham (2005) points out, it is possible for schools labeled as "low performing" by NCLB tests to actually be do-

ing a good job of instruction, especially considering that often these schools serve lower socioeconomic status (SES) students. At the same time, schools labeled as “high performing” might actually be doing a bad job of instruction since many of these schools serve students of higher socioeconomic status. In other words, sometimes, students in low SES schools have backgrounds that create barriers *when success is only determined by one test*, whereas high SES students tend to have the test-taking advantage and score well even though instruction has not been the best. The point of this comparison is not to question the quality of teachers in these schools, but to emphasize that the tests which are being used to determine teaching quality as they are written *do not measure teaching quality*. Success should be measured by considering a variety of factors including individual student improvement. These should be measured in a variety of ways that include portfolios and teacher observation.

Recently, I had a conversation with an excellent third-grade teacher whose class has made wonderful academic progress. However, at the beginning of the year, most of the students were below grade level, and the state test and NCLB designation of low or high performing will not be based on the individual gains of each child. Despite her good teaching and the children’s achievement gains, it is likely their performance on the test will label the school as low performing. The problem is not holding children who are so different in so many ways to the same standard, but how we determine if that standard has been met. Testing all children in the same way, usually a multiple-choice test, is a one-size fits all mentality that does not consider the complexity, diversity, uniqueness, and individuality of children.

As high-stakes tests are implemented today, they are not always benchmarks to serve as a point of reference, instead they are often rigid where there should be a level of flexibility. Policymakers believe they are serving the best interests of our children, yet, they are relying on a simplistic answer to solve a very complex problem. It is our responsibility as teachers to understand the accountability dilemma and do what we can to influence its improvement.

We must have standards. A quick look at the achievement gap of children from different SES groups and from different racial groups makes it clear that we must provide academic standards for all children that serve as benchmarks. For example, since 1990 Caucasian students' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math eighth-grade assessment have been an average of nearly 17% higher than African American scores and nearly 13% higher than Hispanic students (NCES, 2004). In reading and history the gap is somewhat less but still hovers around 10%; while in science Caucasian students score at least 20% higher. The same is true for the SAT and other tests (NCES, 2004). These data make it obvious that in the past too many educators have only believed that *some* children could be successful. But all of these children are the future leaders of our nation; clearly, it is in everyone's interest for *all* of our children to achieve at a high standard.

### **Make Standards Work**

Scheurich and Skrla (2003) point out that the research shows that all schools that are highly successful "with all students *always* have clear, consistent curriculum standards that are known and used by all teachers" (p. 30). By benchmarking and aligning curriculum to the standards, schools take a critical step to ensure that standards work for students.

Recently, a school led by an award-winning principal failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB guidelines, even though student achievement had steadily improved over several years (Carr, 2004). When the principal had taken over the school, scores were in the 40th percentile. Now, they were in the 70th percentile. But the school had not made its goal of 95% attendance. It had only achieved 94.5%.

The principal put a notice in the newspaper for the community to read that the school had failed to meet the AYP goal. She provided information that all achievement goals had been met, math and reading scores were up, but that the school had failed because of attendance. Parents were upset and did not want their children attending a school marked as a failure, but there was no other school nearby. Immediately, parents began

contacting the school asking what they could do to help. Today, attendance is higher than the required 95%. Additionally, this wise principal with the support of faculty members accomplished three goals with this one action: understanding of the problem of high-stakes testing and standardized goals improved among the community, parents shared with the school in the responsibility for fixing the failure, and school attendance improved.

Building positive relationships with students influences their school attendance and how hard they work at difficult school tasks (Bryk & Driscoll, 1998), which in turn helps students achieve higher standards. So, the very act of building strong relationships and holding all children to a high standard helps them meet that standard.

Standardized accountability isn't going away. I expect it to be around for a long time. Educators must accept responsibility for upholding standards, even if we don't agree with the way they are being implemented at the moment. Even more, we must accept the responsibility to uphold high standards for every child that goes beyond state and national requirements. Once we understand the dilemma, we must make standards work for the benefit of all our students.

### **Calm High-Stakes Test Fears**

I was watching television in Houston, Texas, the night before the TAKS high-stakes tests were to be given throughout the state. I will never forget what I saw. The television reporter stood with a mother and a little boy who was probably about seven. She held up the microphone and asked the child how he felt about the tests tomorrow. This little boy began to describe his fears—He was afraid he would fail the test and repeat the grade, get sick while taking the test, wouldn't sleep that night, his teachers would be mad at him if he did poorly, and fail the test, but that his friends would pass. Visibly holding back tears, he listed a few other fears. Should a test cause a 7-year-old boy to have that many fears? Should one test decide whether a student passes to the next grade level?

At about the same time, the *San Antonio Express-News* printed a story detailing the story of a senior girl who had

taken all of her course work and passed all of her classes, but she was unable to pass the TAKS test, even though she had taken the multiple-choice test on several occasions, plus participated in tutoring classes offered by her school. Because of this, she would not graduate with her class, nor would she be able to accept the scholarship that a local university had offered her!

I don't know what the probabilities are for students who fail the high-stakes TAKS test the first time to pass it on the next try. But I know that for law students who fail the Texas bar exam on the first attempt, their chances of failing it a second time increase, rather than decrease, often as a result of increased test anxiety!

The high-stakes test fears do not stop with students; teachers and principals are fearful, too, as they share in the condemnation if their students do not do well on the exam. But, of course, everyone is feeling the heat. Principals are called on the carpet by superintendents who are under pressure from the school board to get the coveted Exemplary District rating that Texas schools can earn if the test scores are high enough. Some schools have even resorted to cheating so that their schools won't be labeled as a failing school.

A school principal noted that she had been hired at her school to raise the level of performance on statewide assessments (Harris, 2005). Giving in to this pressure she now feels that she actually added to student anxieties by reminding struggling children of the consequences of failing the test and constantly stressing the importance of the test. She also feels that her concern translated to teachers as a lack of trust in their abilities.

There is no way that teachers can *force* children to pass high-stakes tests. But we can put our energies into focusing on improvement and achievement, rather than testing. As we recognize children for improving, they will be enabled to achieve more. Even though the tests are hugely important, in our classrooms we must de-emphasize the test itself. As students increase their confidence in themselves and in their abilities to achieve, tension and fears will lessen and they will test better.

Teachers tell me that when they focus more on the whole child and less on the test, their classrooms become more student centered. They acknowledge that they must prepare students for the exams and expectations remain high, but in the words of one teacher, “when we balance this with an emphasis on praise and encouragement for great efforts, we become calmer with the students and the results are better all around.”

### **Uphold High Standards with Actions That Create a Culture of Achievement**

Accepting that accountability is here to stay, BRAVO teachers must create classroom cultures of achievement. This means that high standards for every child should be incremental, focus on individual expectations, and be integrated throughout the curriculum.

#### **Consider Standards as Incremental**

The students in our classrooms are at different stages of growth. Every child *can* learn, but they learn at different paces and in different ways, or as the saying goes: Every child can learn, but not always on the same day the same way. Some are doing their very best, some are not making any visible progress at all, and others fall somewhere between those extremes at any given time. Some are ready to read when they come to school, some are not. Some are ready for Algebra in the seventh grade, some are not. Some are ready for calculus as juniors, some are not (I’m still not ready!). If a kindergartner is not ready to read at the age of 5, that doesn’t mean that she will not learn to read. It means that if she is not *yet* ready to read; teachers must provide the structure and support necessary to increase her readiness. Teachers must be proactive. This is why it is so important for educators to consider standards incrementally. By this I mean that standards should be considered in three stages: good, better, and best. St. Francis said it this way: “Start by doing what’s necessary, then do what’s possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible” (Blaydes, 2003, p. 81). It’s not about getting more, but becoming more.

Believing that all children can achieve high standards, our first goal is that they achieve a minimum or good standard. But learning should not stop there, and this is where it gets messy. In a test environment such as we have today, when so many decisions for children, teachers, and schools are based on the test results, the tendency is to teach to the test. This is happening all over the United States as teachers tell me that they no longer are allowed to take classes on field trips, participate in special programs, or other enhancing activities. Instead, many are limited to drills and test reviews in preparation for the all-important tests. Consequently, when everyone passes the test at the required score, the tendency is to say that we have reached our goal, the standards have been met.

### **Focus on High Expectations**

Once reached, standards are never a place to stop, instead they are a place to start anew to achieve higher standards. When students achieve the minimum or good standard, this should be celebrated. Then we work to motivate our students to be *better*. Then, having achieved *better*, we encourage them to reach the *best*. Teachers must establish this climate of achievement on an individual basis because different students will be at different levels of achievement. The differentiated classroom at work! Teachers who know their students are able to discern student readiness for the next standard.

Teacher expectations are keys to creating a culture of achievement. I'm reminded of a poem that emphasized the importance of expectations. According to the poem there was a pretty good school where a pretty good student sat in a pretty good class taught by a pretty good teacher who always accepted pretty good work for students to pass. It goes on to say that even though the student wasn't great at anything he was pretty good and that was okay. It wasn't until the student went to look for a job that he began to realize that pretty good might not be good enough. Teachers should celebrate a student's achievement of pretty good, but the expectations for achievement must not stop there. Michelangelo said, "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high

and we will miss it, but that it is too low and we will reach it” (Blaydes, p. 137).

Teachers have opportunities every day to encourage student expectations. We verbalize high expectations of our students in many ways throughout the day. We ask a student to continue working on a paper because we know the student can do better. We don’t accept work that we can’t read. We help a child find a library book that is doable but a challenge. We encourage and inspire a high standard when we remind students that “I know you can do this,” or when we note on a creative writing assignment, “You are a good writer. I enjoyed this.”

We increase expectations in a student’s ability, which leads to higher standards when we increase responsibility. Shane was a junior in a small high school that shared a campus with all grade levels from 1 to 12. He was a minimal student, had a short temper, was often rude to other students his age, and was often in trouble for talking back to teachers. One teacher referred to him as a “bull in a china closet.” One day a teacher observed him getting off the school bus with an elementary student, and as they parted, she heard the younger student thank him. The next day she noticed the same thing. She went to the elementary student and asked why he was thanking Shane. The child said, “Oh, he listens to me read my stories on the bus.” To make a long story short, Shane was invited to help with the school’s new tutorial program, which paired high school students with elementary students who needed extra help. The change in his behavior was almost immediate. At the end of the year when the students evaluated the program, Shane wrote that he thought he would go to college after all, because he would be a good teacher. Expectations lead to upholding higher standards for individual students! Expectations tell students that we believe in them and know they can achieve more.

## **Integrate Expectation Throughout the Curriculum**

The expectation of achievement should be integrated throughout the curriculum—the test should not be the curriculum. Now you take a test. Which teacher is integrating high expectations throughout the curriculum, Teacher A or Teacher B?

Teacher A: Bob believes that knowledge is assessed by achieving the right answers to questions on the test. Lesson plans are coordinated with state curriculum guides. As the teacher, he does not need to explain why these are the right answers, it is enough to know that this is what the experts have learned and we should learn from the experts, although he does patiently point out where the correct answers are in the test. The syllabus for the class consists of mastering each objective as outlined in the state curriculum guide for the subject being taught. Students are prepared for the high-stakes test with practice and drill.

Teacher B: Bill loves the class that he is teaching. He is eager to share information and engage the students in dialogue about the topic. Students prepare projects utilizing a variety of media and present these to the class. Bill is careful to help the students relate the topic they are presenting with experiences from their own lives. In the process, the students identify objectives outlined in the state curriculum guide and relate these objectives to their presentation. Students have fun preparing for the high-stakes tests and master the content under the direction of their teacher.

Which teacher, A or B, is integrating high expectation standards throughout the curriculum? You selected Teacher B? Congratulations, you are right! I knew you could do it! When teachers integrate a high expectation of learning throughout the curriculum, the standard becomes higher for all—teachers and students.

I have a friend who tells this story about her 9-year-old son. It seems that she was always telling him that he couldn't have everything he wanted, and she invariably ended this little speech with, "Even if you had it, you wouldn't want it, af-

ter all.” One time they stayed at a really fancy hotel for a night. When he walked in and looked around at the beautiful lobby, he was just in awe. Finally, he turned to his mother and said, “Tell me again why rich people aren’t happy?” We tell our students and our own children that in life one just can’t have it all. But this is not true about upholding high standards. When our actions uphold high standards for all students, we increase their chances to have it all.

## **Tactical Actions That Uphold High Standards**

What tactical actions upholding high standards can teachers implement that build relationships that value others?

- ◆ Understand what you believe.
- ◆ Assess your actions to match your beliefs.
- ◆ Acknowledge responsibility to hold every child to a high standard.
- ◆ Communicate that all students are held accountable to achieve.
- ◆ Provide enrichment activities for all students.
- ◆ Provide tutorial support for all students.
- ◆ Build on standards that are incremental.
- ◆ Reflect on where the student is in his growth.
- ◆ Create a plan for the student to improve.
- ◆ Acknowledge improvement.
- ◆ Verbalize the need to move to higher standards.
- ◆ Calm test fears in the classroom.
- ◆ De-emphasize the test, emphasize improvement.
- ◆ Build student confidence.
- ◆ Expect great things from students.
- ◆ Be specific about expectations.
- ◆ Plan lesson plans with high expectations integrated throughout learning objectives.

Our students need to be challenged with high expectations that are tailored for each child. BRAVO teachers uphold high expectations when they have relationships that are strong and that value each child as an individual. High-stakes assessment standards when not integrated throughout the curriculum with student needs in mind—are like a hammer. When we make the most of each moment and search our soul to know what we believe, accept the responsibility of upholding high standards for all children, and create a culture of achievement in our classrooms, high standards become the telescope for students to find their star. As a teacher, I could not change the home circumstances of Grace Ann’s life. But I could give her a telescope.

Remember, BRAVO teachers build relationships that value others by upholding high standards for all children.

### *Actions That Uphold High Standards*

#### **Point to the Stars**

##### **Search Your Soul**

- Know Your Own identity
- Examine Your Beliefs
- Examine Your Actions
- Make a Personal Commitment to Uphold High Standards for Every Child

##### **Accept Responsibility**

- Understand the Dilemma
- Make Standards Work
- Calm High-Stakes Test Fears

##### **Uphold High-Standards with Actions That Create a Culture of Achievement**

- Consider Standards as Incremental
- Focus on High Expectations
- Integrate Expectation Throughout the Curriculum