

Introduction

I believe in the power of teachers. But I have found that some teachers fall into the trap of looking for the latest “magic pill” to deal with the ever-increasing challenges we face in teaching today’s students. The pressure to find an immediate solution to prove that our students are learning—according to a test score—outweighs our focus on long-term growth.

I am the daughter of a teacher and a school secretary. I taught in an elementary school and junior high school and taught beginning swimming to preschoolers and lifeguard training to high school and college students. Currently, I teach teachers in a graduate program at a university. I also worked for three educational publishing companies.

Those experiences taught me an important lesson. Teachers are *always* the key to effective instruction. It’s not the textbook or the latest program on the market. In classrooms in which all students learn—regardless of gender, ethnicity, poverty level, or background—teachers do two things. First, they care about their students. The old saying is true. Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. But caring alone isn’t enough. You also must connect with your students in ways that will help them learn. Throughout this book, the focus will be on foundational instructional strategies that will help you connect with your students. The best teachers use a set of core instructional strategies to positively influence the learning of their students. They don’t jump from bandwagon to bandwagon; they do the things that work.

This book will not provide you with a lockstep program, nor does it offer a checklist. It is a set of recommended actions that, when persistently and consistently applied, will help your students learn more effectively. As you read, you’ll find 26 chapters—one for each letter of the alphabet. The chapters are not sequential; rather, they are designed so that you can start with any area that interests you or that meets a current need.

Throughout the chapters, you will find stories about how teachers have helped their students succeed. In addition to reading about my own experiences, you’ll meet teachers of all levels, from preschool to college, and teachers of various subject areas such as science, math, social studies, language

arts, and music. The stories serve as lampposts, guiding you and your classroom in new directions.

You'll also hear the voices of students, whose names have been changed, in most instances, to protect their privacy. I love talking with students; they are, in many ways, our best teachers. If they believe you respect them and are truly listening to them, they will tell you anything you want to know.

It is my hope that you will connect with your students in new ways as you apply the strategies in the following chapters. But I also hope that you will feel a sense of renewal. As I travel across the nation, I am saddened as I listen to teachers share their feelings of discouragement. As you read, you'll find a common thread throughout every chapter. Teachers do make a difference in the lives of their students. Despite what you may feel, in spite of the negativity that can drag you down, never forget that you are important. You make a difference for your students, and you can positively influence them in exciting ways as you try the strategies suggested here. Learning is an adventure—enjoy the journey!

FYI

Electronic versions of selected figures from this book are available at <http://www.barbarablackburnonline.com>