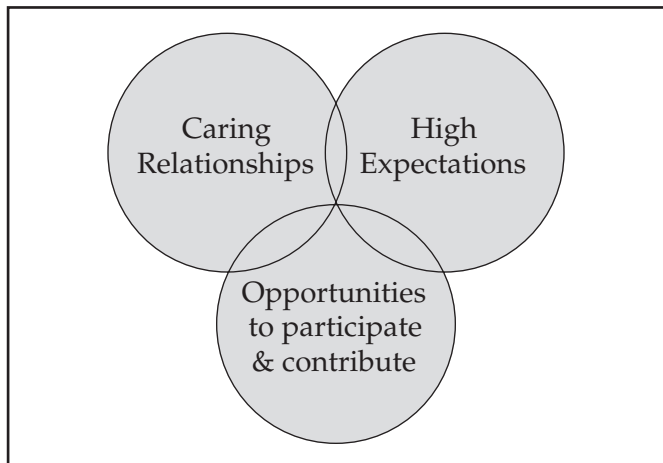


Introduction: Why Don't We Get This?

I believe we know with certainty what works in schools. In fact, we can synthesize all the thoughts of our educational leaders and experts and come up with a fairly short list of effective teaching methods. Good education has never been a mystery. Bonnie Benard, in her research on resiliency, found three essential protective factors necessary to support the development of young people. She found that caring relationships, high expectations and providing students opportunities to participate and contribute are fundamental factors for youth success.¹ Each of these factors can be found in the circles appearing in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1 Protective factors in young people's environments



Adapted from Bonnie Bernard (2004)

¹Bonnie Benard (2004). *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*. West Ed.

Caring Relationships

Benard's findings are not a rarity; you can sift through the works of countless scholars and researchers and find startling commonalities. All the educational leaders that I site in this section speak of educational success in the context of three very similar areas of focus. What Benard calls a caring environment, Robert Evans terms nurturing,² and Michael Fullen refers to as personalization.³ Bill and Melinda Gates chose forging relationships as their first of three "R's",⁴ while Russell Quaglia, from the Global Institute for Student Aspirations, speaks of giving each student a sense of belonging and accomplishment.⁵ In similar fashion, Alfie Kohn speaks of building a caring community as a key to creating a successful school.⁶ We could continue by adding more names of educational visionaries and their corresponding terminology, but the point has been made. Many educational leaders advance an interpersonal idea to coincide with Benard's notion of caring relationships. Virtually every successful person I know was, at some point in their educational years, touched by the interpersonal aspects of teaching that are represented in the "Affective" column in Figure 2 on the following page. We can call it nurturing, caring, relationship building, personalization, or, as Steven Covey⁷ would say, "loving," but most importantly we know that it is central to educational success.

The interpersonal side of education formulates one of the key elements of a school for each student, and ideas to advance emotional connections will be woven throughout this work. I will assert and offer support for my thesis that if we intend to accomplish great outcomes for our students, we first have to impact them emotionally.

²Evans, Robert. *Family Matters: How Schools can Cope With the Crisis in Child-rearing*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004.

³Fullen, Michael, Peter Hall, and Carmel Crevola. *Breakthrough*. Corwin Press, 2006.

⁴The Gates Foundation, www.gatesfoundation.org

⁵Quaglia, Russell. Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, www.qisa.org/about.php

⁶Kohn, Alfie. "The Risk of Rewards" *Teachers.net Gazette* 2, no. 4 (2001).

⁷Covey, Stephen. *The 8th Habit*. Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Figure 2 Essential components of successful schools

	Affective	Substance	About Them
Benard	Caring relationships	High expectations	Opportunities to contribute
Gates	Relationships	Rigor	Relevance
Quaglia	Sense of belonging	Challenge and motivation	Leadership and taking action
Evans	Nurturing	Structure	Latitude
Kohn	Caring community	Engaging curriculum	Student choice
Fullen	Personalization	Precision	
Covey	Love	Learn	Leave a legacy

High Expectations

The recent standards and accountability movement directs us toward the second circle on Benard’s short list of what is vital for quality schools: high expectations. Again, using varying terms, they all say essentially the same thing. Benard calls for high expectations; Gates talks of rigor; Evans stresses the need for structure; Quaglia stresses challenge and motivation; Covey brings the forth the idea of learning; Michael Fullen promotes the thought of precision; and Kohn stresses the need for an engaging curriculum. They all refer to the standards or learning outcomes educators strive for. What is it that we are trying to get students to learn and be able to do? What is the substance of our work and how can we improve our practice to help our students get it? This book will consider these questions of how we can go about the work of improving teaching and learning, or the “Substance” column as seen in Figure 2, by adopting a mission that supports the success of each student. Within the context of putting teaching and learning in the forefront, rigor, structure, standards, and motivation will be included in the discussion; not so much what we should teach in terms subject specific content, but how putting students in the center of the process can be used to lead them to great achievement.

Throughout our examination of creating a school for each student; we will consider the idea that schools cannot improve

unless we put great teachers in the classroom. Regardless of how invested we are in the other areas of importance in education, we cannot possibly reach our objectives without great teachers; who trump everything else in education. Here again, the idea that we already know the answer to the question about what quality teaching is will be highlighted as we explore what great teaching looks like in a personalized school setting. As much as this work is intended to challenge and aspire teachers to greater achievement, it is written knowing full well that many teachers labor painstakingly to accomplish great things in nearly impossible settings. I hope the focus on quality teaching will validate their work and encourage educational policymakers to provide them with the resources and support needed to achieve their mission.

Participation and Contribution

The third component for achieving successful academic outcomes is my favorite and, arguably, the one that gets the least attention. In her third circle, Benard challenges educators to not only hold young people to high expectations in a caring environment, but also to give them opportunities to participate and to make a contribution. The Gates Foundation similarly suggests that the third “R” should be to make learning relevant. Evans suggests that providing students with latitude is essential to their success, while Alfie Kohn advances of the importance of student choice. Quaglia proposes that students be given opportunities to lead and take action. All of these ideas are really about giving students a chance to make a difference, or what Covey refers to as “leaving a legacy.” The belief that this slant on education belongs on our short list of what works in schools comprises a significant part of this book. The third column in Figure 2, “About Them,” describes how educational leaders refer to this third component of quality schools.

We will continue to further develop the idea of students making a contribution and explore ways in which we can help accomplish this objective. You will see that when this is done well, it can become the underpinning of exceptional schooling. You will learn that, above all else, we must strive to help our students become relevant. The philosophy of, “helping students

become relevant," has been at the heart of my work for nearly two decades. With each passing day, I become even more convinced that we must make an effort to help students become somebody, or, as Sam Chaltain—the former co-director of the First Amendment Schools Project and executive director of the Five Freedoms Project—says, "to make them visible."⁸ Stated in another way, adults need "to teach," while students need "to be."

A chapter of this book will be devoted to each of these three necessary components of successful schools: caring relationships, teaching and learning, and helping students become relevant. A fourth chapter has also been included to look at leadership strategies, promoting change, and other ideas intended to widen educational perspectives and to help develop a culture in our schools that focuses more on each student.

While the ideas advanced in this book are deceptively simple and straightforward, the ideals they represent are vitally important. But this does not mean the tools needed to improve our schools are complicated or mysterious. Every resource we need resides within our own beliefs and attitudes about young people. School improvement and success for each student will only become possible in a climate of hopefulness and trust. Hopefulness and trust are cultivated in an environment that recognizes the power of effective education, the substance of what we are trying to accomplish with our students, and an unwavering commitment to make schools about them.

⁸Chaltain, Samuel, www.fivefreedoms.org