



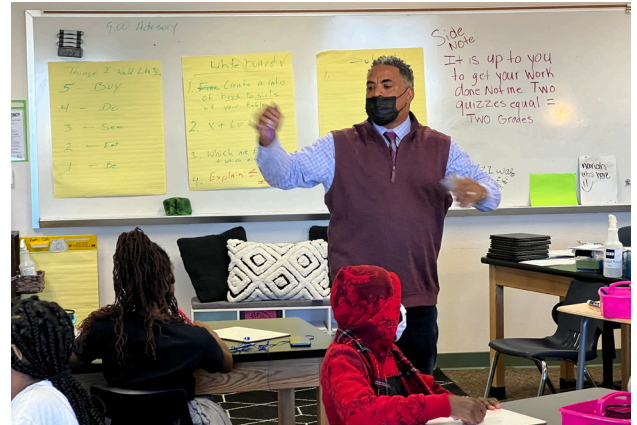
The Struggle Is Real

January 24, 2022

During my reflection time this weekend, I found my thoughts going back to lessons I learned last Friday as a sixth-grade math substitute teacher at Summer Creek Middle School.

All I can say is wow!

It has been 25 years since I've been in a classroom for an entire day and been responsible for delivering high-quality instruction all day. My intent was to ensure that the instruction and the activities engaged in by the students would reinforce the student learning and enhance their ability to solve one variable, one step, inequalities using mathematical operations. Mrs. Monroe had obviously done an outstanding job with 6.10A, and my ultimate goal was not to mess them up. As I was preparing to leave the classroom Friday afternoon, I realized that although I was sent to this class as the teacher, I was leaving as a student.



As I got in my vehicle to leave, I was not thinking about TEKS 6.10A or the results of the exit tickets. I sat there dog-tired and completely out of gas. All I could think about were the lessons I learned that day in a sixth-grade math class, and I pledged to never forget as I returned to be superintendent.

My first order of business as superintendent before I left the parking lot was to tell Dr. Berry in Human Resources to make sure that every central office administrator spends at least a day in a classroom. Being reminded firsthand of the struggle, the sacrifice and the success were lessons that I will not soon forget.

First period taught me that **the struggle is real**. Teaching is hard work intellectually, emotionally and physically. I entered first period excited about the day and the opportunity to engage students in what I knew would be fun and creative activities. In my head and on my paper, these engaging activities would have all of the students on point and excited about solving inequalities and modeling solutions. I had the whiteboards and chart paper ready, and everything was set to go. And then, the bell rang. The problem is, I didn't hear the bell. And when I realized it, there was a conglomeration of kids outside the door looking like, "Who are you and why you are here?"

The kids were excited and we finally got started after I herded the students into the room. I'm actually not real sure what happened after that. Maybe I blacked out. What I do know is that the best-laid plans are off to go astray when they come face-to-face with sixth-grade students.

By the end of first period, I can remember texting Dr. Berry, "Call me ASAP!" I remember thinking, "I am a superintendent, but these sixth graders are winning." I took a deep breath and returned my focus to the class. Of course, they were working and having a great time, but I was struggling to find my way. Thankfully, the bell rang, and the class ended. I then realized, "OK, this could be a long day if I don't get it together." There was an assembly second period, and during that time that I reflected on first period and realized what I believe were the first two lessons of the day.

As we were walking to the assembly, a young lady in the class whispered to me, "Thank you Dr. Mac. I think I get inequalities now." She quickly ran on to catch up with her friends, and I think I shed a tear. I forgot what it felt like to help a student learn. She couldn't have known that I was about to call Dr. Berry and tell her to send somebody over here to get me. My pride and Hailey's short, kind word was all I needed to hear to be reminded that I can do this.

The first lesson I learned was that even when it feels like things are not going well, success is possible if we don't quit. I was reminded that teaching is hard work, and your efforts don't always equal immediate observable success. But keep doing it anyway.

As I sat in the assembly, I reflected on what went right and what had gone wrong during first period, and it was like a light bulb went off. **The key was me!** I needed to ensure that more structure was in place.



I was ready when we returned to class and made a few modifications. I needed to change me and my approach. The students needed structure and predictability. They needed to know what was next, what was now and what I expected them to do. I realized that they needed constant monitoring and very clear directions. They needed order and they needed someone to be firm, direct, focused, present and in control. When I decided to be and to do all these things, it was amazing how all of the other classes responded. I set the expectation high at the beginning of class and provided structure and predictability. They did not have time to deviate, and it worked like a silver bullet. I was supposed to leave at noon, but by noon I was in my groove, and we were having fun solving inequalities. **It was amazing to realize that when I changed myself and how I was doing things, then things changed.** The students were the same and the content was the same. The thing that changed was me and my approach. That was my silver bullet.

I think about how this experience can inform my decisions as superintendent. It makes perfect sense for students to desire structure and predictability, especially since we have all been experiencing such unpredictable circumstances in this pandemic. Think about the fact that for students and for all of us, everything is uncertain and unpredictable.

The students in the sixth-grade math class taught me and reminded me that in times of crisis, conflict and confusion, we all long for structure, predictability and dependability. In this time of constant change, stability is desired, and structure is needed by all. I challenge each one of you to provide structure, clarify your expectations and hold students to the highest expectation, and you will see them rise to their potential.

As I sat in the car dog-tired, it caused me to realize just how hard teaching really is. I can only offer my words of appreciation to each of you for giving your all every day – intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically. **The struggle is real, success is possible and structure is necessary.**

With something about, this is Mike McFarland, superintendent/sixth-grade math teacher for life.



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