

Part VI

Teachers as Learners



Breakthrough
COLLABORATIVE

Objective

By the end of the section, readers will be able to (RWBAT):

- Identify the support system for Breakthrough Teachers
- Strategize for summer learning opportunities

The Breakthrough Challenge: This summer, take every possible opportunity to simultaneously learn *and* enjoy yourself.

Teachers as Learners

The best teachers continue to learn, even as they teach. They are dedicated to the lifelong learning, not just for their students, but for themselves as well. At Breakthrough, you will have a unique opportunity to gain firsthand experience in the classroom in a structured environment of support. Take advantage of the people there to help you. Ease yourself into new experiences. Open yourself up to the Breakthrough community. You will take away a broad range of experiences at the end of the summer, but it is up to you how, or if, you decide to use those experiences.

Five Ways of Learning

1. From Your Goals

Goals are essential to the learning process. In order to facilitate your learning process, you will need to consider what you want to achieve in the course of the summer. Then, like student goal-setting, you will need to create a plan for how you will achieve your goals and who will support you in your pursuit. The goals may include a six week goal, a goal for the end of the day, or even a goal to reach by the end of the class period. For instance, you may attempt to bring all your students to mastery on a certain academic concept. And some days, you may just want your quietest student to participate once. Set your sights high, but don't lose track of the importance of the smaller goals. They all connect: encouraging that student to participate will put him or her one step closer to mastery by the end of the summer.

2. From Your Mentor Teacher

Communicate early and often with your mentor teacher; he or she can be an incredible resource. For first year Breakthrough teachers without prior classroom experience, the mentor teacher can provide anything from a clearer picture of what to expect to advice on how to respond to an individual child or behavior. For returning Breakthrough teachers, the mentor teacher can help you to set and achieve more specific goals based on your past experiences, your strengths, and your weaknesses. Whether just for a quick question or for a class observation, the mentor teacher's job is to help you improve your teaching.

3. From Your Fellow Teachers

Collaborate with your fellow teachers. There are as many different ways to teach as there are teachers in the world. Everyone has their own vision and style once they arrive in front of the chalkboard. Yet, we should not limit ourselves to our own ideas about teaching. Many say that good teaching is good stealing. If someone else has techniques that work for him or her, the method may work for you as well. And while innovation plays an essential role in inspiring

students, you do not need to recreate the wheel. Not only can your fellow teachers share best practices, you can all work together to develop new ideas. Putting heads together can provide a richer array of experiences and approaches to contribute to the issue at hand. Observe each other, talk to each other, and help each other.

4. From Your Students

Students are inspiring. While your students learn from you, you can also learn from your students. This is quite possibly the most exciting and compelling reason to teach. Remember they have their own set of experiences to contend with, their own sense of discovery when presented with something new, and their own hopes and fears. With an open mind, you will not only learn how to teach better, but you will learn about humanity and about hope. You will be working to shape a child, and they will be working to shape you.

5. From your Own Enjoyment

One of the central tenets of Breakthrough is that students learn better in an environment where they can enjoy learning. This should hold true not just for students, but for teachers as well. Breakthrough's community prides itself on its pursuit of excellence and ever-present spirit. While people choose to work with Breakthrough for the challenges it presents, teachers and students alike, they also attend for the joy that everyone takes in doing the hard work.

Breaking it Down:

Teachers as Learners

You have accepted the responsibility for children's futures, and also for your own. You wield incredible power as a teacher and as a mentor; your students will be watching you and they will make decisions in their own lives based on what they see. Your choice to work for Breakthrough this summer is a choice to sustain twenty-eight years of excellence and commitment to the children, and to continue this into the future.

You will probably make some mistakes, things you would not choose to do again. But, more important than the mistakes is what you do with what you learn. What will you do when you encounter an obstacle? How will you move forward? You will, of course, make gains, and conquer your challenges. And you must remember to celebrate those wins even as you determine how to transform your obstacles into achievements. Use your resources to continue as a learner and to gain perspective from your experiences. And always keep the children at the center of what you do.

“Victory Within Our Failures”



By Jabali Sawicki

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The victories resonate with a deep sense of satisfaction and joy. The triumphs are to be savored one by one and the accomplishments charted like a steady course across rough seas. The achievements will always be remembered, immortalized like small plastic trophies that will forever sit above our mantles.

Yet it is the failures, the ones we let get away, those with whom we never make that connection, those who reveal our own mortality as teachers and as human beings that make this experience worthwhile. For it is through these failures that we can begin to measure our impact and the extent of our influence. In the face of failure and challenge we begin to identify our resolve, our resiliency our passion, our faith, our beliefs, and our values. When, where, and how we fail illuminates the depths of our character and the distances we are willing to travel for ourselves and for those to whom we are committed. It is therefore Michael Wade, that even today years later, I think about often because it is Michael Wade that I failed many years ago.

He was brilliant. He was cool. He was brave. He was a talented young brother. I was passionate. I was dedicated. I was enthusiastic and confident. I possessed the boundless energy of a young high-schooler ready to change the world one child and one summer at a time. I was ready for anything and everything, everything that is but failure.

He was a student in my math class and my basketball elective. I was naturally drawn to him because like so many of those to whom we gravitate he reminded me of myself. I saw that same glimmer of curiosity in his eyes, the same desire to succeed in his stride. But I also saw the fear of the unknown trailing him wherever he went. I saw his reluctance to take risks and his fear of failure mixed with his belief that success was out of his reach. I saw someone willing to hide in the shadows of his own cool aloofness and hip detachment as long as he could avoid the awkwardness of opening himself up to making and learning from his own mistakes. I saw someone slowly being exposed to what they would one day become and achieve, frightened away by what they saw, because what they saw was foreign and therefore spooky and not worth the effort.

I tried. I tried with all of my might, with all of my heart, and all of my soul. I tried to make a difference in his life. I tried to get Michael excited about himself and about his potential as a student, as an athlete, as a scholar, as a thinker, as a leader, and as a young man. I tried to get him to push himself, to challenge himself, to dream big outrageous dreams and work hard to make those big outrageous

dreams big outrageous realities. I tried to get him to speak with confidence, to express his ideas with passion. I tried to get him to question, to demand respect, to carry himself with purpose, and lead with faith. My goals were lofty and my expectations high but I truly believed that the heights to which Michael would soar would and could be dictated by my effectiveness at convincing him that there were in fact no limits.

My work seemed simple enough. Boost his self confidence, get him excited about school, motivate him to take himself seriously, and provide him with opportunities to feel successful. Despite my grand intentions my hard work took place at a much more grass roots level. The battles waged daily were to get Michael to come to school. To get him to wake up on time in the morning and catch the school bus. To get him to complete his homework. To get him to stop saying he didn't care. To get him to try. To get him to participate. To get him to put forth effort. To get him to be engaged in class. When my pleas fell on deaf ears and when my efforts were ignored I kept at it relentless and resilient. I wasn't about to lose Michael to peer pressure, apathy, or competing distractions of summertime and neighborhood lure. I wasn't about to lose someone as bright and promising as Michael. That was my reason for being there that summer. My hope was to reach kids on a level that would change their lives forever. I knew that if I failed Michael, Michael's life wouldn't be changed. I sensed the power of the program and if effective the power of one person to deeply impact others in profound ways that shake them to their core and arouse desires to strive for even greater success.

I called him every morning at 5:45AM to wake him up. I called him back again at 6:15 to make sure he got on the bus. I called him every night to make sure he was getting his homework done. I sat with him during lunch reminding him of how proud of him I was. I shot hoops with him in the afternoon and spoke about our separate plans for the future, goals, and hopes. I spent every ounce of extra energy I had on devising new and creative ways to spark a fire in this kids belly, mind, and heart. I went to sleep thinking of new stories of inspiration I would tell him in the morning. I woke up and called him devastated when as the summer progressed even after all my attempts at intervention he stopped picking up the phone and started strolling casually into school at 10:00AM with none of his homework completed and his attitude traveling south faster than LeBron James gets up and down the court.

I did all I could but eventually I and the program had to say goodbye to Michael. He was my first failure as a teacher. Was it my failure? Was it his failure? Was it the program's fault? It doesn't matter. I have no idea where Michael is today. I have no idea what he is doing. What I am crystal clear about however is where I am and what I am doing. I'm in New York opening an all boys K-8 charter school serving 470 young Michaels. I'm looking to hire 8 teachers exactly like I was 10 years ago. These are teachers who are willing to see the hope in all children, who refuse to accept a loss, and refuse to throw in the towel. I'm looking for people who fight until they have no strength left and continue to fight feeding on faith alone. Because with the right attitude it is from these failures that the strength of character and power of conviction arise with an eye to the future and all of the work that lies ahead.