
Preface

Defining the Legend

Everyone knows a legend—the teacher who is successful at bringing out the best in students, regardless of the location of the school, the diversity of the students, the conditions of the facilities, or the availability of resources. At least one legend can be found in every school. This is a book about the characteristics that define the legendary teacher, about how you can recognize and acknowledge those characteristics in teachers, and about how you can foster the development of those characteristics in yourself and colleagues. Throughout the book, you will find hundreds of examples and strategies for becoming a better teacher—for being a legend.

We're into the second century of American public education, and if the press is at all correct, we haven't become much better at it. In fact, many people think we've gotten worse. Nevertheless, referendums continue to be defeated, classrooms continue to grow in size, and state and federal dollars continue to disappear. At the very same time, however, curricula continue to grow as education is given more and more responsibility to cure society's ills. Traditional families are a thing of the past, as, apparently, so too is school authority. (*In loco parentis* has changed from meaning "in place of the parents" to "the parents are crazy, too"!) The situation has so deteriorated that it seems many decisions are no longer based on what is best for students but what is legalistically tenable. Left all alone in the front lines is the classroom teacher.

But surprisingly, despite the litany of what's wrong with public education today, there are teachers who not only survive in this environment, but thrive. There is probably not a school in America where there is not, at least, one teacher who continues to make a positive difference in the lives of children. Despite the financial pinch, despite the lack of support from a graying population, despite the changing demographics of the community, there is at least that one teacher who seems to make everything work—all the time; who inspires the slow learner, challenges the gifted student, and somehow gets the problem student focused successful on learning—all of the time. Where other teachers have struggled, have given up—this one succeeds. The programs and activities this teacher sponsors blossom while others shrivel and wither away.

This teacher's presence is no secret—the community knows about him or her. At registration time, parents lobby: "I want my child in that teacher's class." Somehow, in spite of all that is wrong with education today, this one teacher has earned the respect of students (who otherwise don't like classes), the school (that seems diametrically opposed to ever recognizing merit within its own ranks), and even the community (that somehow believes schools have existed in a vacuum untouched by inflation since the 1960s). This teacher has become what this book is about, a legend.

Legends are life-touchers. They are the reason students want to go to school every day. In a time when role models are in decline elsewhere, legends shine brightly, daily exemplifying their values, making things work. This book is dedicated to those classroom legends, to examining what they have that makes them so preeminent in their profession, that makes them so important to the lives of so many children. This is a book about them.

The work is broken down, chapter by chapter, into what we think makes legends so very successful in their schools. We do not suggest that what is presented is causal in nature; rather, we see those characteristics described as correlative to successful teaching. They seem to be pretty much unvarying among the most successful teachers regardless of locale or grade level. We think they apply to elementary teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, and college teachers—and certainly to administrators throughout education.

Here's the plan:

Chapter 1, "Piecing Together the Personality Puzzle," discusses the character traits, attitudes, and habits shared by legendary teachers.

Chapter 2, “Nothing Succeeds Like Success,” presents the strategies that legends use to ensure student success.

Chapter 3, “Establishing High Expectations,” describes methods of creating and maintaining standards for student performance and helping students achieve at those levels.

Chapter 4, “Practicing Skillful Communication,” enumerates practices of effectively communicating with students, parents, and community both in and outside the classroom.

Chapter 5, “Defining Instructional Protocol,” presents an approach by which teachers can maximize their own efforts, eliminating counterproductive practices.

Chapter 6, “Winning the Crowd,” examines how teachers can sculpt a solid image of themselves and their efforts, engendering more support for their efforts.

Chapter 7, “Understanding Practices and Assessments,” looks at how legendary teachers are analytic in their approach to improving their own skills.

Chapter 8, “Motivation,” presents strategies for motivating even the reluctant student.

Chapter 9, “Motivating High Student Achievement,” attempts to offer insight into the debate about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the ramifications for the classroom teacher.

Chapter 10, “Recognizing and Promoting Excellence,” proposes additional practical concerns about reaching students.

Chapter 11, “Developing Powerful Classroom Management Skills,” introduces the fundamental competencies necessary for teachers to have to maintain a successful learning environment.

Is it possible for any teacher to become a legend? The question is so hypothetical as to be virtually meaningless, but what is meaningful is the belief that by careful study of the characteristics of these legends, by dedication and determination, every teacher can improve his or her effectiveness in the classroom, his or her ability to be a life-toucher. We have seen that kind of success often over the years, in brand new teachers fresh out of college and in very experienced teachers with decades of experience. Whether you will be a success in the classroom, whether you will make a difference in a child’s life, in short, whether you become a legend, depends on one thing and one thing only—“YOU!”

Before we turn you loose into our book, we'd like to share a simple story with you—a real experience we had several years ago. One of our better friends was the plant manager of General Foods' facility that manufactured Gaines dog food. He was an important man in town, well respected and handsomely rewarded for his efforts—six figures at a time when most teachers had just broken five.

On many weekends, we made plans to meet him at his house before we headed out to one of several local golf courses, his house being on the way. Weekend after weekend, we'd get to his house only to have to wait, impatiently and not very graciously, for him to get home. He'd be doing volunteer work at the local YMCA or setting up a youth basketball program through the United Way or arranging visits to hospitals through his church—regardless, he wasn't there and we weren't playing golf and while we supported these noble efforts—it was Saturday and he had apparently failed to understand that our golf time was sacrosanct.

Finally, one Saturday when we had waited for the better part of an hour, we had to ask, "What's with all this charity work? Saturday is golf day, remember?"

"Well, guys," he responded, looking only a little guilty, "I'm not as lucky as you—I'm not a teacher."

"Lucky?" we both asked, not being able to see past his six-figure salary or the Mercedes he was driving.

"Yeah, lucky. Look—I make dog food for a living. I make certain the dog food is safe and well packaged and sells well, but I make dog food. You guys are teachers. You make people. . . . And every chance I get I have to do something else to put meaning in my life . . . you know, so my life makes sense."

Step
1

We're not foolish enough to believe we can produce a simple 10-step procedure by which you achieve teaching excellence. Teaching is a diagram far more complex and difficult than that. But we do believe there exists a set of correlatives shared by many teaching legends and that conscious knowledge of and adherence to those correlatives may indeed make you a more effective teacher.

Step
2

Individual teachers must be attuned to what works for them, what fits their teaching style—for teaching, more than any other profession, is about style; it is an art. Legends find their own stride, are in harmony with the rhythm diagram of their classes. They understand that there are no quick fixes, no simple answers. They have often dedicated their lives to their profession.

Step
3

Instead of offering you a simple-minded panacea, a new paradigm, we suggest instead that you invent your own, and that doing so is made easier by the concepts presented within this book. Borrow from everyone. Steal unashamedly. Our belief is that every legend is his or her own invention.

Step
4

We invite you to be creative. We invite you to invent or reinvent yourself. We think that what we have to offer herein will make that imminently possible. We, like you, are makers of people, and we challenge you to make the best people you can, by being the best teacher you are able to be. It is the world's most important challenge.

This is the sentiment we hold most dearly.

This book is written for the people we believe do the most meaningful work on earth—it's written by and for teachers.


Final Note: NBPTS

The authors recognize the contribution the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has made to education in America and encourage teachers to consider seeking their NBPTS certification. In that vein, our text includes “key” symbols whenever we think our discussion is particularly relevant to one of the Five Core Propositions of the NBPTS.







This “key,” for example, indicates that we believe the discussion at this point is particularly pertinent to Proposition 3 of the Five Core Propositions. We hope this reference system assists those educators working to become national board certified teachers (NBCTs) and gives a general unity to our work as well.

The Five Core Propositions

	<p>Proposition 1: Teachers Are Committed to Students and Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBCTs are dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students. They believe all students can learn. • They treat students equitably. They recognize the individual differences that distinguish their students from one another, and they take account for these differences in their practice. • NBCTs understand how students develop and learn. • They respect the cultural and family differences students bring to their classroom. • They are concerned with their students' self-concept, their motivation, and the effects of learning on peer relationships. • NBCTs are also concerned with the development of character and civic responsibility.
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	<p>Proposition 2: Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBCTs have mastery over the subject(s) they teach. They have a deep understanding of the history, structure, and real-world applications of the subject. • They have skill and experience in teaching it, and they are very familiar with the skills gaps and preconceptions students may bring to the subject. • They are able to use diverse instructional strategies to teach for understanding.
	<p>Proposition 3: Teachers Are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBCTs deliver effective instruction. They move fluently through a range of instructional techniques, keeping students motivated, engaged, and focused. • They know how to engage students to ensure a disciplined learning environment and how to organize instruction to meet instructional goals. • NBCTs know how to assess the progress of individual students as well as the class as a whole. • They use multiple methods for measuring student growth and understanding, and they can clearly explain student performance to parents.
	<p>Proposition 4: Teachers Think Systematically about Their Practice and Learn from Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBCTs model what it means to be an educated person—they read, they question, they create, and they are willing to try new things. • They are familiar with learning theories and instructional strategies and stay abreast of current issues in American education. • They critically examine their practice on a regular basis to deepen knowledge, expand their repertoire of skills, and incorporate new findings into their practice.
	<p>Proposition 5: Teachers Are Members of Learning Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBCTs collaborate with others to improve student learning. • They are leaders and actively know how to seek and build partnerships with community groups and businesses. • They work with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development, and staff development. • They can evaluate school progress and the allocation of resources in order to meet state and local education objectives. • They know how to work collaboratively with parents to engage them productively in the work of the school.

Note: NBCTs = National Board Certified Teachers.

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