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Leading With Love at Booker T. Washington

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Shortly after I learned that President Barack Obama would be speaking at my high school's commencement this spring, I began receiving a great deal of attention. The question on everyone's lips: How did you make such massive gains at Booker T. Washington? The question revealed an underlying assertion that the presence of my students near the top of lists on high school completion and academic achievement is an anomaly. Although I was thrilled beyond belief by the opportunity to meet the president, a part of me was disturbed, angered even, by the low expectations for my Booker T. Washington High School babies. After all, children rise to the expectations we set for them; they thrive on the support we give them to meet those expectations.

But before we set high expectations for children, we have to love them.

Education theory and scholarship focus on typologies of effective leadership. Leadership styles and theories sometimes consider the human-interaction aspects of the work, but the idea of love, especially in school leadership, is largely absent. In academics and politics, we try to capture the idea of love by speaking and writing about "the ethic of care," "caring adults," and "emotional intelligence." It is almost as if we are afraid to say that our work is a purely human endeavor—that our jobs are to develop human beings.

Debates about how to reform urban public schools overwhelmed by poverty and surrounded by neighborhood violence focus on everything from the quality of the education professionals in the buildings to the specificity and rigor of course standards and content. We spend a great deal of time in education focusing on inputs and outputs as if we were monitoring a manufacturing process. Yes, I monitor student data. Yes, I try to stay on top of research to provide the best instruction and programming for my students. And yes, I make sure what is happening in my school is aligned with state standards and policies. I am a professional. I hire professionals. What we do is what anyone who is well prepared to be a professional educator does on a

regular basis.

This issue of dehumanizing the work of human development is not restricted to schools. It is part of the fabric of our politics and economics. Saying that our economic future rests on the success of our schools while ignoring the connection between our schools and the daily lives of people living in poverty is fundamentally dishonest. Focusing on schools with laser-sharp intensity without integrating housing, food, health, and other social-policy matters sets a trap for educators and children alike. The way we approach the education and development of children living in poverty is simply unloving.

Love is greatly misunderstood in politics and scholarship. From the appearance of women as teachers in the 19th century, love has been marginalized as a soft and feminine characteristic. But love is hard and defies gender restrictions. For school leaders, it requires rising above the human instinct of self-preservation and exposing oneself to pain and disappointment. It requires seeing other people's children as valuable and worthy of love even when their parents and communities may not. It requires weeding out staff members who lack love for other people's children, even when they are highly skilled teaching technicians.

In the political realm, love requires exposing the bigotry and hate that serve corporate wealth instead of addressing human poverty. It requires acknowledging that poverty is indiscriminate and working toward an equally indiscriminate solution. It requires being steadfast in the face of wily political maneuvering intended to capitalize on fear and poor critical-thinking skills. And it requires us to do so with love for those who would seek to do us harm for challenging the status quo.

"How did I make such massive gains at Booker T. Washington? I loved my children. I hired people who would love my children. And then I did my job."

The English language is insufficient in the face of love. The mere mention of the word "love" can elicit eye-rolling because it is used so often in meaningless ways. We have reduced the word to the heart symbol and no longer need to spell it out to communicate our shallow intentions. But love is far more powerful than our language can capture.

When I was a girl, my father would send me off to school every day by letting me know he loved me, I was special to him, and he expected me to do great things. I let my Booker T. Washington children know I love them, they are special to me, and I expect them do great things. I hire professionals who are willing and able to communicate the same messages in word and deed. Before we can put any of our knowledge and skills to use, we have to love our students.

Children cannot eat love, but our love for them directs us to help them find sustenance. Love cannot shelter them, but our love for them directs us to support them by acknowledging the academic challenges that can result from homelessness and, when we can, helping them to secure shelter. Love cannot stand between children and abuse, but it can help them heal.

Success with children who have been cast aside by our society begins with love. Typical reforms may succeed through early adolescence when they depend on technical capacity and behaviorist methods, but by the time children reach adolescence and have fully absorbed the negative messages about their value to the larger society, the only thing that will get through is love. We can try to capture love through lists of characteristics and action steps, but until we delve into the real meaning and value of love in education, we will all be spinning our wheels.

How did I make such massive gains at Booker T. Washington? I loved my children. I hired people who would love my children. And then I did my job.

Alisha Coleman-Kiner is the principal of Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Tenn., which was chosen as the 2011 Race to the Top High School Commencement Challenge winner, entitling it to a graduation address by President Obama. The White House cited Booker T. Washington's graduation rate —which rose from 55 percent in 2007 to 81.6 percent in 2010—in announcing the honor.

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