

EDUCATION WEEK

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What Really Matters in Education: Compassion

By Carol Lach

The following is based on a speech the author gave upon her retirement from the Massachusetts education department in March.

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As educators, our world was upended by the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School late last year. Our response as a nation ranged from proposing gun legislation so nothing like it would ever happen again to dismissing the event as another terrible act of a disturbed child—one with Asperger's, or from a broken home, or suffering some terrible undefined problem.

Closer to home, in 2007, a 16-year-old at Lincoln-Sudbury High School (in Massachusetts) stabbed another student to death. The assailant was later found guilty of first-degree murder in the case, meaning blame fell totally on him, and the high school's reputation wasn't tarnished. His lawyer said the young man had suffered a lifetime of harassment and bullying because of his mental illness, which caused him to be fearful and anxious. According to *The Boston Globe*, as a grade-schooler **he told a psychiatrist** that his three wishes were to win a million dollars, have a lifetime supply of junk food, and to stop being bullied.

So why am I telling you this? Because ...

It's *not* about guns. It's *not* about Asperger's. It's *not* about bullying. It's *not* about legislation. You can't legislate compassion.

What it's really about is student support, community, and caring.

More than 40 years ago, one of my students at Carver Junior High School in Mississippi asked me, "Why should I care about your math if you don't care about me?"

I gave him some lame response, I'm sure, but this question has stayed with me all these years.

"Why should I care about your math if you don't care about me?" It's even more important today. We've become so far removed from the kids with legislation, policies, data, grades, improvement plans, assessments, professional

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"It's *not* about guns. It's *not* about Asperger's. It's *not* about bullying. It's *not* about

development, evaluations, and accountability that we have little time to really care about the kids, to even hear the question.

legislation. ... What it's really about is student support, community, and caring."

While I was at the state education department, I had the privilege of getting to spend a full day at Charlotte Murkland Elementary School in Lowell, Mass., and to get to know the school's leadership team. Why do you think this school is a model of a successful turnaround? Its story is about getting "the right people on the bus," as Jim Collins says in his book *Good to Great*. This team looked at the root causes of its failures, created community, and developed a culture where achievement and effort are recognized and applauded. It's a place where kids who need help get it, where families who need food get it (180 bags of groceries are picked up every week). It's a place where every child is given the opportunity to rise above the survival and safety levels on **Maslow's hierarchy of needs** and to be part of a community, to gain self-esteem and more.

We continue to look at symptoms of failure, continue to evaluate and blame teachers, and continue to look for silver bullets disguised as innovative approaches. Are we dissecting and following the Murkland Elementary model and other examples of success? Are we identifying the root causes of poor performance and then working to change conditions that truly address the issues our students face? Are we following the lead of our vocational-technical schools in helping kids find a niche, success at something, a career that will give them a future, that will motivate them to learn, to finish high school and go beyond?

We need the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats on the bus. We need to keep the students at the center of our work. We need to remember that education is not a one-size-fits-all product. While standards and expectations are important, we need to remember that not all students will be successful with four years of high school math. If I had been required to achieve similar athletic standards in physical education for four years in high school, I never would have graduated. If I hadn't had teachers who dealt with the bullies and a sister who listened and understood me, I don't know where I'd be today.

As you continue your work, please don't lose sight of the students. Look for ways to help streamline policies and regulations so school staff members have time to encourage their students' talents, and find ways to provide those students support, to be mentors, and to have the time to care.

Carol Lach recently retired after working in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for 10 years, in the agency's offices of instructional technology; and math, science, and technology/engineering. Her teaching experience spans all levels (K-16) in three states. She blogs at daythechalkboardfell.wordpress.com.