Seven Ways to Make High School "Suck" Less

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By giving students more paths for expression and creativity, we can make school relevant to their lives.

The current school landscape sucks. At least that would be the opinion of most students when you ask them. I have two high schoolers living at home currently, and although their schools are considered top-tier public institutions, their complaints are the same. Granted these complaints are coming from two moody teenagers, but hey, isn't that the population we serve?

The problem isn't that our schools aren't good or that our teachers aren't knowledgeable or even likeable. The complaint speaks to the rote, transactional, standardized way that we choose to teach and socialize our students, and to the lackluster, bare-minimum ways in which we choose to engage them—from physical spaces to social events to the daily systems within our respective school cultures, like lunch, arrival, dismissal, assemblies, and parent nights.

In many schools, there is also a *huge* disconnect between the "real world" that we are aiming to prepare our students for and the actual world that is happening right now. We want our students to exhibit qualities deemed essential for the workforce like creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Yet in our current value system, we prize academic learning above all else. At the bare minimum, being a "good student" is rooted in one's ability to follow directions, recall information when it counts, and perform well during test taking. At best, a "good student" has demonstrated the ability to apply and synthesize that information to an end or final result, often at the expense of the student's agency, voice, curiosities, strengths, and talents—that is, their authentic selves. As a result, intrinsic qualities like compassion, resilience, ambition, and emotional intelligence tend to fall by the wayside. Yet these are the very qualities that are necessary for our students to even *make it* through the school system as it is currently designed.

To overcome such friction, schools must allow youth to explore multiple pathways of discovering, forming, and being themselves. Students should be able to fully access their agency and identity within a responsive, inclusive, and participatory school culture that mirrors the multidimensional and heterogenous nature of the actual world around us—a culture that teaches them that "out there," they have something unique, bold, and worthwhile to contribute.

And Then What?

In a recent conversation with my son's high school guidance counselor, she relayed that in her 10-plus years of experience, most students she's known who dropped out did so during their senior year of high school. This was particularly the case with African American and Latino males. She felt that the fear of the world beyond high school has paralyzed some students who may not feel equipped with the necessary tools to thrive. Then there is another subset of students who are opting to do the bare minimum just to get through to graduation but are still not ready to answer, "And then what …?" Low SAT scores and OK-to-poor grade point averages leave many students in a lurch, which builds resentment and begs the question, "What was the point?"

The cookie cutter, decades-old way of teaching and developing youth for the pursuit of a college degree and the promise of getting a good job is proving itself ineffective for many students. Some schools mistakenly overprioritize academic achievement, missing the mark in elevating students' social-emotional skills and in leveraging their diverse talents, interests, skills, and motivations. So how can our schools build supports that are more attuned to the rhythm of the students they are serving? How can they better empower student agency at this critical time in their lives?

Move to the RHYTHM

First, let's take a brief look at how schools arrived here. Shortly after the turn of the century, No Child Left Behind was ushered in with the intention of leveling the playing field in schools and closing the achievement gap. As a result, in favor of more time for test preparation, many arts, music, and wellness programs went underfunded and were thus eliminated from schools. Moreover, common school spaces like libraries, cafeterias, computer labs, media centers, and auditoriums, along with their requisite equipment and technology, went neglected and grossly underused. These sweeping changes left schools ill-equipped to cater to students' deeper interests and values—the things that make them feel human.

Out of this artistic and musical void, my organization, Guerilla Arts Ink, was born. The program—which uses hip hop to academically engage students—was designed to recruit, train, and hire talented professional artists to serve as teaching artists in schools. Over the last 14 years, we have brought in dozens of teaching artists across all media who teach underserved youth in the Washington, D.C., area how to turn their passions into transferrable skills. On any given day, you might see hip-hop emcees coteaching English language arts classes, martial artists teaching physical education, graphic designers and muralists leading school beautification projects, or music producers using fractions to measure time signatures or adjusting beats per minute in math classes.

Our approach to developing programs that engage and empower youth—especially youth deemed "high risk"—is grounded in three areas: the program should be culturally responsive; informed by student input; and should elevate arts integration to support project-based learning, community participation, and improved school climate and culture. Additionally, we prioritize what we call "The Three R's"—research, relationships, and rigor—which not only assess school need and student interest, but also inform strategic staffing and programming.

Research: In collaboration with teachers and administrators, we regularly survey students to identify their motivations, talents, strengths, and areas of need. We also facilitate student informational sessions and talk backs, design-thinking activities, student-led focus groups, and good ol' observation of data (attendance, behavior, course performance, various event attendance, parental involvement, social media engagement).

Relationships: We recognize that relationship building with students is an ongoing process, not an occasional or transactional event. Teachers and administrators have to continuously look for ways to build this competency within themselves and strengthen their capacity for RHYTHM. In our program, we emphasize the essential practices shown in Figure 1. Getting into this RHYTHM helps educators build trust, respect, and rapport with students, families, and school communities.

Figure 1. The RHYTHM of Relationship Building

RHYTHM is a type of engagement that facilitates harmonious relationship building with students through a series of interpersonal cues, culturally affirming practices, and a service-oriented approach to teaching and learning.

R = Respect is shown in how we speak to, regard, and prepare for our students, from daily greetings to words of encouragement to lesson planning.

H = Humility is remaining humble as a servant leader in all of our actions toward our students, colleagues, and families within the school community.

Y = Youthfulness is staying in tune or "hip" with popular culture and with the communication cues of your students. Know who or what they are influenced by, what they pay attention to, and how they spend their time when they are not with you. Staying youthful allows teachers to better connect with the students they serve.

T = Timing is about being present. It is also about knowing how to read a room and having an appropriately curated instructional toolbelt in order to "call an audible" when necessary—like when things aren't going right or your lesson plan falls flat.

H = Honesty is rooted in an ability to honor the value system, customs, traditions, talents, strengths, and individuality of your students through culturally responsive and affirming practices in the classroom.

M = Meaning and relevance is brought to the content you teach, as well as to managing the flow or culture of a classroom.

Rigor: Through our arts integration model, the classrooms and schools we work with develop a strong project-based learning focus, support both differentiated instruction and assessments, and take a culturally responsive and sustaining teaching approach that is directly informed by the languages, literacies, and cultural traditions of the students we teach. For example, a muralist may work with an art class to research, design, and co-construct a mural for the school. However, the real demonstration of knowledge is expressed through the scaling, distribution of tasks, post-production, and effective collaboration among students to install, paint, and unveil the mural to the school community. In essence, the students are exercising their voice; playing to their strengths; and most important, they are *learning by doing*, not just recalling information on command.

OK, so how do educators integrate and support student-centered approaches like this in schools and classrooms? Based on the work of Guerilla Arts over the years, and my experience as a veteran teacher and principal, I have discovered seven effective ways that educators can spur real student engagement and agency:

1. Make the Community Your Classroom

With the help of school leadership, parents, community leaders, and local government, conduct an asset-mapping activity of the educational, public service, and community spaces—like libraries, parks, recreation centers, after-school programs, and arts organizations—in your city and surrounding area. Prepare students for the "real world" by having them *learn by doing.* This might include designing and participating in community service projects and field trips with built-in extra credit options, and matchmaking students with volunteer, internship, and summer jobs that appeal to their respective strengths. Show them how these same skills can help them be successful both in school and beyond the four walls of your classroom.

2. Use *Everything* Around You as a Teachable Moment

Since early in my teaching career, I have always been a big fan of using classic hip-hop lyrics to add context and depth to contemporary and classic literature. In fact, I find that the juxtaposition lends value to both, drawing attention to our collective, lived human experiences. The thematic connections of these complex texts are both cross-cultural and timeless. For every coming-of-age story like J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, there's an album like *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.* For instance, I might use lyrics from Hill's song "Everything is Everything" and a passage from Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* for examples of metaphor, voice, or point of view. So whether it's an excerpt from a book you are reading, a recent episode of your favorite podcast, a movie clip, a segment on the nightly news, or a meme you saw during your morning social media stroll—little jewels of inspiration are all around us. Collect them all, like Pokémon, and use them wherever they best fit.

3. Remix the Curriculum

This is a novel exercise that allows students, teachers, administration, and other school support staff to work collaboratively in redesigning or transforming the school curriculum. Both students and teachers know that the state requires coverage of certain content, but *how* we teach that content is open to interpretation.

Hackathons, for example, allow for student voice to inform how educators can find new ways to teach the same old stuff. These one- to two-day sessions give educators and students the opportunity to collaborate on ways to tie popular culture to curriculum themes, ideas, and concepts central to a subject area or unit. This can be done through the co-creation of music and video playlists, lyric annotations, comparative digital and print media, and more. And through this process, students have more agency in what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what the measurements for success can be. Instead of a final test or quiz, try differentiated assessment options that are informed by student choice. These can include vocabulary poems or raps, PowerPoint presentations, modern recreations of classic content, and other group and individualized demonstrations of learning.

4. Create Ritual

There is power in creating ritual. It is how we build and form a sense of family and community within the larger school culture. Ritual creates ways for us to express joy, pride, and enthusiasm, and shape our collective identities. Some schools incorporate their school mascots in their school culture and ethos ("Go Spartans!" or "Doing Things the *Spartan* Way!"). Others create ritual in the form of special holiday events like dinners, all-hands-on-deck school beautification projects, talent showcases, pep rallies, chants, cheers, remixing or updating the school song, and even in everyday communication, from greetings to how we refer to our students (for example, "scholars," "champions," or "future leaders").

One ritual that I incorporated as a former high school administrator was a morning meeting called "Harambee," a music and performance ritual created and facilitated by a community educator and teaching artist, Baba Ras D, as a celebration of learning. Although originally designed for early childhood audiences, we adapted Harambee as a daily affirmation ceremony for our ED/LD (emotionally disturbed/learning disabled) students, complete with group songs, call-and-response, and open-mic segments like read-aloud, group sharing, and school announcements. At first, students rejected the notion of a morning circle as being too "kiddie" for high school, but it quickly became a daily ritual that students looked forward to participating in. In keeping with the concept of *harambee*—a Swahili term for "all pull together"—the morning circle included teachers, administrators, support staff, counselors, and even the school secretary and lunch servers. This allowed students and educators alike to build mutual respect and trust, and to see each other in a different light.

With Baba Ras D leading the circle with only his voice and a single djembe drum, Harambee was our source for feel-good moments—a positive way to start the day, to receive a shout-out, and to be in sync with the whole school community. Harambee even helped us in times of loss, like when we lost a student to gun violence during the second year of the program. The practice was so successful, in fact, that a "Harambee room" was built into the school's state-of-the-art $140 million renovation and is still in use as a space for reflection today.[1] What ritual will be your legacy?

5. Rename and Repurpose Spaces

Many students aren't aware of the story behind the historical figures after which their schools or facilities are named. As a result, student pride is often attached to arbitrary elements of school culture (band, athletics, teachers, famous alumni), its pubic reputation—good or bad—and the location or neighborhood of the school. Therefore, it is necessary to empower students to take ownership of their school spaces and to co-construct the changes they would like to see.

Some of the student-informed ways I've done this as a principal, and seen done by others, include creating a playlist of music to play on the school PA system during class transitions (like a whole-school game of musical chairs); hosting cafeteria open-mics during lunchtime; and designing and placing murals and galleries of student artwork, photos, and writings in key locations throughout the building. Other ways include creating a student lounge or safe spaces to support various school organizations and interest groups; designing cooperative workspaces for students to study, tinker, make art, play, and socialize; renaming school academies ("The Class of 2023 Bumblebees," or "The Talented 10th Grade," or

"Arts and Technology Academy"); and even renaming campus buildings (for example, Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia recently changed J.E.B Stuart High School—named for a Confederate general—to Justice High School).

6. Try Restorative Justice

The restorative justice model is being implemented in more and more schools every day. The concept itself is borrowed from similar models such as the one practiced by the Maori tribe of New Zealand. Through restorative practices, the tribe transformed its communities by addressing the urgent needs of its failing juvenile justice system. Restorative justice is designed as a framework and process used to resolve conflict, to address wrongdoing or harm, and to have the offended and offender work collaboratively in repairing that harm—not only for themselves, but also for the larger school community. The process is voluntary and designed to support, not replace, existing school discipline procedures. When incorporated with fidelity, restorative practices hold students and school communities accountable to strengthening the necessary conflict resolution, empathy, and relationship-building competencies that are so critical in forming a strong school culture.

7. Break the Wall of Authority

As teachers, we often operate in the role of facilitator: we chaperone field trips, dances, assemblies, games, and events; we monitor lunch and recess blocks; and we provide "coverage" for absent teachers. But what if we could more actively leverage this facilitative role to address the many needs, interests, and desires of our students?

In my experience, adult buy-in and *active* participation in school events and programming strengthens bonds and encourages students' freedom of expression and choice. It breaks down the "I'm the adult, you're the child" dynamic that often shapes our concept of teacher authority. And it communicates to students a spirit of encouragement, support, and most importantly, collaboration. It also allows students to "show off" by being their authentic selves, with all of their strengths, talents, and abilities. Conversely, it makes space for teachers to let their guard down, and to "see" students from an asset-based and more empathetic place.

Making a conscious effort to break the wall of authority requires key stakeholders (teachers, administration, support staff) to secure community partnerships, for example, or to volunteer time to sponsor the after-school robotics team, book club, or photography group. It may look like teachers securing donations of equipment or funding for a digital media studio, participating in school spirit activities, hosting shadow-a-teacher day, leading talent showcases, or just being silly at a school pep rally. We were all children once—sometimes it's OK to tap into your inner child and let it run free!

A Simple Formula

Maybe it really is that simple. To make our schools "suck" less, we have to be more inclusive in our approaches and allow students to exercise their influence in co-creating the changes they want to see in their schools. As educators, we must be willing to facilitate the ongoing process of remixing and customizing the use of spaces, resources, systems, and processes that best support the culture and climate that it takes to make successful schools. Why not create schools as spaces where students can feel "seen" and affirmed as valued community members? Where their talents and interests can meet outlets for discovery as educators seek to, as an old professor of mine used to say, "make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange"? Where we intentionally prepare youth for the "real world" by offering access to resources and opportunities that lie outside of classroom walls? This is what gives meaning to the work, and an end goal of preparedness to the youth we serve.

Endnote

[1] Watch a Harambee at Ballou High School in Washington, D.C., at www.youtube.com/watch?v=AipKcMf2eos.

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