



Classes in **courage**

A Massachusetts school focuses on a character trait rarely spoken of in an academic context: courage.

By Ron Berger

The graduation ceremony at Symphony Hall in Springfield, Mass., was a remarkable one. Balloons, roses, cheers, and smiles were everywhere as 75 high school students walked down the center aisle, arm in arm with parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, who ushered them one by one to the stage for perhaps the most important rite of passage of their lives thus far. An entire community beamed with pride, for on this third annual graduation of Springfield Renaissance School — and for the third consecutive year — every single graduate had been accepted to college, and almost every student who had been a freshman at the school was on the stage as a senior.

This would be an accomplishment for any school, but it is much more significant in light of the realities in Springfield: Only 52% of Springfield's high school students graduate in four years, and only 25% of Springfield's 9th graders graduate from high school and go on to college. Most Renaissance School graduates are low-income students of color — the first in their families to be accepted to college, and in many cases, the first to finish high school. That means Renaissance's 700 students spread from grades 6 to 12 consistently beat the odds.

What's going on here? What made these students so successful?

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In a word – courage

Renaissance is part of a network of Expeditionary Learning (EL) schools, a successful model serving over 150 public schools in 30 states, primarily in low-income urban and rural communities. I have worked with EL since its inception 20 years ago. EL was borne of a collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA, the well-known provider of experiential and outdoor education programs. The model is centered on the Outward Bound ethic of having youth work together to achieve a task, and by so doing to achieve more than they thought possible. What's more, EL schools take an approach to teaching and learning that elevates student voice and thinking by using real-world case studies, research projects, and by compelling students to own their learning. We call on students to continually reflect on their learning and to present their learning to audiences, affording them rich and purposeful opportunities to understand how their character affects their academic learning.

Philosophically, Expeditionary Learning resonates with much of Paul Tough's widely endorsed *How Children Succeed* (2012), which asserts that well-developed, noncognitive skills correlate to academic success. Nowadays, education literature is rife with words like persistence and grit, and schools that measure those attributes are getting noticed for shining a light on a new range of vital skills. Tough's work is built on a foundation of research from the likes of Martin Seligman, Angela Duckworth, Carol Dweck, Camille Farrington, and others. Educators have long been interested in noncognitive skills; their correlation with academic success has been studied and discussed for decades.

Other school networks — such as KIPP — are also focused on character, often through a more traditional approach to pedagogy and school culture. The EL model is very different from KIPP's, but both promote success, and the successful schools in both networks build focus, perseverance, resilience, and a commitment to collaboration and teamwork. This is at the heart of the success of all EL schools. When I spent a day at KIPP Mastery in the Bronx discussing student character with Dave Levin, one of KIPP's founders, there was little discussion of our networks' differences. We spent our time exploring our shared passion for instilling character strengths in students and our quest to find better ways of doing so.

Different kinds of courage

One of the character strengths that is explicitly named in the EL model and which I believe is at the center of its success is courage.

The most important thing I learned about courage came from my colleague Scott Hartl. When Hartl and I began our work with EL at its founding, he was a high-altitude mountain climber. He had just led a successful expedition to the summit of Pumori, a 23,494-foot peak in the Himalayas. His achievement

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exemplifies the type of courage that we usually think of when we hear that word. He had helped to keep his team alive in situations where death was possible. Nonetheless, what I learned about courage from Hartl was quite different from this traditional brand of courage. He spoke of courage frequently, but in a strange way. I use the term “differentiated courage” to describe this concept. Hartl remained humble about his climbing success because he pointed out that climbing courage is different from, for example, public speaking courage, personal relationship courage, or snake courage. People are neither solely courageous nor solely cowardly, Hartl said. All of us have more courage in certain domains and less in others. Within this framework, courage is something we can work on improving in a targeted way.

For example, when Hartl's family visited my home one day, his middle daughter asked if I could hold

Henry, our big black Labrador, as they came in. “My little brother is still working on his dog courage,” she whispered. I asked if I should put Henry outside during the visit. “Oh no,” she said. “As soon as he is up on his chair, he’ll be all right. He needs to work on his dog courage. I was the same way myself.”

This framework for courage has been a tremendous help to my family. We all have adopted this language. Instead of becoming critical or self-critical when it comes to fears of sleepovers or airplane flights, we work to develop our specialized courage. One grandson struggled to eat different things — a category that included most of the supermarket — and he has worked hard to develop his food courage. (He pointed out that his dessert courage was not so bad, however.)

Academic courage

Seen with this lens, the Springfield Renaissance School is a place where students work on courage all the time. The culture and structures of the school are designed to compel students and teachers to take risks, even to fail, in the pursuit of getting better — risks with difficult texts or math problems, risks with questions, discussions, and presentations in class, risks with artistic and athletic challenges, and risks to cross boundaries and support others socially.

At Renaissance, for example, students participate in group critique lessons where they work through multiple drafts of their work and reflect on their steps to achieve a high-quality finished product. Through

Springfield Renaissance School Springfield, Mass.

Type Public
Enrollment 700

Demographics %

Hispanic 41
White 27
Black 24
Other 8

Low-income
(free/reduced lunch) 64
Special education 10

Source: <http://spsrenaissance.com/>

this process, students demonstrate both mastery of academic skills and content and the equally important skills of persistence and grit.

School founding principal Stephen Mahoney sees his students display courage in many ways. “I am so impressed when watching students debrief learning at the end of each lesson. They are required to reflect on their individual and collective progress, and to give affirmations and critique. Watching boys muster the courage to give powerful, genuine compliments to other boys in the class for their learning . . . it’s incredible. For a 14-year-old boy from this neighborhood to take the risk of sounding sensitive . . . of saying kind things in public to another boy! And for all the students, to take the courage to give compliments to students who are not in their crowd, who might not be seen as cool. It’s inspiring,” Mahoney said.

When Julia St. Martin, English teacher and department chair at Renaissance, spoke to a graduate education course at Harvard, she showed a video of her students engaging in a Socratic fishbowl discussion. Students contrasted a novel’s theme with various nonfiction texts on a common issue, holding fast to citing textual evidence, a key focus of the Common Core standards. The group in the fishbowl changed twice, and the outer circle offered observations and critique about the quality of the discussion in the inner circle. The graduate students asked St. Martin how she created a classroom environment with deep and honest discussion. “We spend a lot of time working on courage,” she responded.

St. Martin went on to offer examples of the kinds of courage they work on in her class: the courage to use new vocabulary words in public, the courage to

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ask the meaning of words, the courage to try new ideas and concepts in front of the class, even when you're unsure you fully understand them, the courage to admit when you don't understand something, the courage to offer candid critiques to classmates in a kind, specific, and helpful way, the courage to take on a difficult text and stick with it, and, more generally, the courage to show that you're trying hard and that you care about school.

Throughout Renaissance, students build their courage in each discipline — math courage is different from reading courage or art courage. In all cases, students build courage by stepping beyond one's comfort level to engage in text, problems, or challenges that are harder than one can easily handle — exactly what the Common Core requires. What is striking at Renaissance is that discussion and acknowledgement of students taking risks happens every day. Students use the word courage frequently in conversation and in reflecting on their academic work.

Research by Carol Dweck on student mindsets finds a fundamental dichotomy between students with a fixed mindset who believe intelligence is a natural talent that can't be improved, and students with a growth mindset who believe one can get smarter by working harder. With a fixed mindset, students believe smart students don't need to work hard. They hold that students who show effort and try hard in class are weak and look foolish. They tend to hide their confusion in class and take few risks. If they're struggling, they act cool so as not to show it. Any school that wants to improve achievement through noncognitive skills, such as courage, must develop a growth mindset in all students and staff. Everyone must believe that they can improve with effort and practice and that demonstrating academic courage will lead to success.

At Renaissance, classroom lessons intentionally build in academic courage and a growth mindset:

- Clear learning targets that students own, work toward, and publicly reflect upon;
- Character targets that require students to demonstrate academic courage;
- Challenging work that compels students to struggle individually and collectively as they learn;
- Discussion protocols that compel students to take risks and share ideas;
- Critique protocols that compel students to offer kind, specific, and helpful feedback; and
- Debriefs with public affirmations of successes and problems.

There are also many whole-school structures at Renaissance that help students build their academic courage by reflecting on their growth and learning over time. They include:

■ **Student-led family conferences.** All students in grades 6-12 conduct conferences multiple times each year in which students present their progress in academics and character to their families and address questions about their growth and goals. Even with travel and language challenges, parent participation is near 100%.

■ **Passage presentations.** In grades 8 and 10, all students conduct passage presentations that require them to present evidence of meeting academic and character targets to a panel of education and community experts in order to be promoted to the next grade.

■ **Senior talk.** In their senior year, all students write and deliver a speech to the community that describes their journey at the school and in life and the challenges they have faced along the way.

■ **Exhibition nights.** Classes regularly hold exhibitions where students present their learning to the broader community.

Community courage

The Springfield Renaissance School begins its explicit focus on courage as soon as students enter. The school has seven character traits: *respect, courage, responsibility, friendship, cultural sensitivity, perseverance, and self-discipline*. Everyone in the building is held accountable for modeling these traits in everything that they do. When visitors arrive, student ambassadors who show them around invariably take them to the entryway and show them the poster on which the school's character traits are described. Filled with student signatures, the poster also includes statements that students wrote in their own words about what each character trait means and how they live up to them in and out of school.

All students are members of a small "crew," an advisory group that meets daily. During crew, students sit in a circle and work on the courage to present their challenges, successes, and feelings honestly to their peers. They hold each other accountable for academic effort, academic success, and character values. They work on the courage to compliment or critique classmates, even when it is socially risky to do so. They work on the courage to speak up in ways they would not in their neighborhoods and to show kindness and vulnerability

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instead of just toughness. They work on the courage to build friendships that cross boundaries of class, race, and gender.

One of the most significant courage-building experiences at Renaissance comes in the first month of freshman year when students, teachers, and school leaders journey together on an Outward Bound course. For a week, students push and support each other to climb mountains with heavy backpacks. For much of the week, the students are miserable. They are cold, tired, sore, and scared. Their clothes are filthy, and their hair is a mess. They have no cell phones, no music, and no soda. They are not with their usual crowd of friends. They argue and judge each other harshly.



“Our brains aren’t fully developed until we’re 19, so what’s the point of going to school when we’re just six?”

But something changes during that week. Somehow they make it to the top of the mountain, together, and get to wash up in a freezing stream and sit in the sun and laugh. Somehow they learn to help other kids who they thought were weird and different. When they return to civilization and take their first glorious shower, they are different. They feel like heroes. For the next four years, they bond over stories — mostly of being miserable — and remind themselves when their classwork and homework is difficult that they have been through much worse together and survived. Ask Renaissance students about their Outward Bound trip and the stories and smiles come instantly; they can’t wait to describe with pride the awful times and challenges they experienced together. Even more than the joy of the wilderness, what sticks with them is the courage they built to overcome hardship. Together.

Courage is built daily in the noble effort to create a kind, just, and civil community at the school. I was at the school this winter when a rare thing happened: A serious fight broke out in the cafeteria between two students, and a teacher intervened and was injured. Fights are almost daily occurrences in some urban high schools, but it is not that way at Renaissance. This was shocking. There was an immediate response. The entire school shut down for an assembly to discuss the issue. The full staff met after school to discuss and support each other. Crew meetings for the next few days discussed nothing else. To build a different culture takes courage from everyone.

Courage to succeed

My understanding about the relationship between courage and academic success blossomed for me at that June graduation at the beginning of this article. It was then that a young man I met as a 5th grader led his parents up the marble steps of Symphony Hall to meet me. He reminded them that I was the man who came into his class at his elementary school to teach lessons and that I was one of the people from EL who helped to open Renaissance. His father gripped my hand in both of his. “Thank you, Mr. Berger,” he said. “Thank you for giving my son the courage to take a different path than the kids in our neighborhood, to go to college, to become something great.”

References

- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine.
- Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.