

The Challenge of Maintaining High Expectations

Chapter Three

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In the previous chapter and readings, we explored the incredible power of high expectations. Many of our students are behind in their academic achievement precisely because we have *expected* them to be. We lower our standards for them and they consequently lower their effort. Research has consistently indicated that if we, as teachers, truly have high expectations for our students, they are much more likely to experience academic success.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the following excerpt, located in the Related Readings section:

- "Identity Development in Adolescence," a chapter from *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Study after study has shown not only that teachers with high expectations have higher achieving students, but also that students in more difficult, more rigorous classes are more successful, even at the higher level of performance. In one such study, highlighted by the education policy think tank The Education Trust, students from "low," "regular" and "advanced" courses were all placed together in high-level courses. The result: ALL of the students, including those previously in the most basic courses, learned more and performed better in the "advanced" courses.⁴⁶

Results like these beg the question of what schools tend to call "ability." The conventional wisdom in American education has it that only the "top" students can handle algebra and high-level English. But not only is the identification of "top" students a slippery affair, the unlucky students classified as "low ability" never have a chance. Clearly, these students are *able* when they have *access* to the content.⁴⁷

Simply stated, "poor and minority youngsters will achieve at the same high levels as other students if they are taught at those levels."⁴⁸

These studies on the impact of high expectations are inspiring. We, as teachers, can rally around this approach because we know that it will help close the achievement gap for our students, and rigorous standards and expectations are within the realm of our control.

Unfortunately, as many corps members have experienced first hand, maintaining these high expectations is not nearly as simple as declaring one's intention to do so. Many new teachers are surprised to find just how much *work* it is to stay true to their pledge of high expectations, given (1) just how far behind their students are, and (2) the understandable but dangerous pull of sympathetic excuses that we are tempted to make for our students.

⁴⁶ Barth, Patte. "A Common Core Curriculum for the New Century." *Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust*. Winter 2003, Vol. 7, Issue 1, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴⁸ "Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap." *Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust*. Summer 1998, Vol. 3, Issue 2., p. 2.

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In this chapter, we will begin to explore and give solutions for both of those challenges to maintaining high expectations. We will conclude that discussion with an exploration of some of the concrete methods that you can incorporate into your teaching practice that will help you stem the influences of these challenges to high expectations.

I. “They’re *How Far Behind?*” Reality as a Threat to High Expectations

Perhaps the greatest challenge to high expectations is the achievement gap itself. Many new teachers enter the classroom fully dedicated to establishing and maintaining high expectations. And yet, as they encounter the stark reality of their students’ relatively low skill levels, they find their faith in maintaining high expectations is shaken, if not destroyed, by the long distance between their students’ current performance and truly high academic achievement. For example, you may discover that most of your fifth graders are reading on a second or third grade level (and the rest are just learning to read). Or, you may find that your seventh grade science students do not have the math skills necessary to perform any of the experiments called for by the curriculum, and that they struggle to read your “remedial” text. Or, perhaps you are shocked to find that your eleventh grade English students, whom you want to help apply for college, have difficulty writing one paragraph, let alone a college entrance essay.

Virtually every corps member you meet will share a similar story of shock, disappointment, and concern from the first days of school. Consider, for example, the reflection of Frank Lozier, a 2000 corps member who taught 8th grade English in Los Angeles:

Going into my English classroom, I was thrilled by the opportunity to bring in all the concepts that inspire me about literature—intertextuality across authors; complicated, innovative narration; race, class, and gender analysis. While I knew I had an enormous amount of work in getting my kids caught up to grade level, I spent the first weeks of September stunned by the stark reality. Where do I start? I thought to myself. Spelling? Sentence structure? Vocabulary? Punctuation? I was saddened, overwhelmed, and enraged by a system that had failed a generation of students. How could we discuss an author’s choices of racial representation if my kids couldn’t even independently comprehend the text? How would we produce written analyses of social injustice if they had difficulty consistently writing in complete sentences?

I knew I had a choice: I could a) keep lamenting and throw up my hands at the disturbing reality, b) lower my expectations and remain locked into teaching only the “basics” rather than challenging my kids to reach higher, or c) find a way to weave in the basics while pushing towards the highest levels of literary analysis. After a few weeks, I taught myself to break down and prioritize the grammar errors—first tackling my personal pet peeves, as well as the most glaring errors that would preclude my students from being respected by their readers—and the daunting reality became a challenge to undertake one objective at a time.

Even today, if I find my students not reaching objectives, I force myself to look in the mirror and ask, What can I do better tomorrow, or even next period? I’ve seen and experienced enough examples of success to know that, while difficult, it is absolutely possible. Staying connected to a community of effective teachers constantly builds my repertoire of strategies to reach every student. Observing great teachers, participating in my TFA learning team, attending workshops from the National Writing Project, reading books and articles written by exemplary educators—these are my four favorite ways to

sharpen my own saw to ensure that I am affording my students the best education. As a person of color who attended public schools, I was blessed with an education that over-prepared me for college. My students deserve nothing less.

Frank's experience is very common for new teachers in schools that serve students from low-income communities. Although we read and talk about the achievement gap frequently in preparation for that experience, the harsh reality of our students' academic needs can be overwhelming, and can quickly shake our confidence in those high expectations.

So, how *does* a new teacher maintain high expectations in the face of the stark reality that his or her students are *years* behind where they should be in terms of academic skills?

In addition to the so-obvious-as-to-be-unhelpful answers of "work hard" and "teach well," there are a number of strategies that corps members have developed and shared over the years that guide new teachers during this unsettling process of reconciling one's high expectations with the harsh reality of students' skill levels. The six principles, taken together, both provide a new teacher with a roadmap for meeting students' massive needs and help a teacher preserve the ambitious but realistic goals that the teacher has set for students' academic success:

- (1) Start with the basics.** When faced with the daunting and deflating disparity between where your students are and where you want them to be, it is often helpful to remember the great value of focusing on the most basic, fundamental academic skills first. This is not to say that you should "dumb down" the curriculum, nor should you dilute your goals to include only "the basics;" rather, this is to say that no matter what your assigned grade level and subject matter, you may need to give your students an intensive, accelerated, and on-going course in basic reading and math skills. In some cases, addressing such basics is the most valuable experience you can give your students and will set the foundation for moving on to your ambitious goals.
- (2) Take literacy instruction seriously.** A closely related idea is that all teachers of students on the low end of the achievement gap must teach literacy. Most of the time, when we say that our students are "behind," we mean, at least in part, that they lack basic literacy skills. The *Elementary* and *Secondary Literacy* texts provide you with a number of methods and tools to incorporate literacy instruction into your classroom, no matter what your original teaching assignment. Lagging reading skills trap our students in a cycle of slower and decelerating learning. Whatever your teaching assignment, you should plan on assessing and tracking your students literacy progress.
- (3) Reap the benefits of intellectual capacity that outpaces academic skills.** In addition to challenges, a classroom of students who are dramatically behind where they should be academically presents a great opportunity. Many corps members find that because students' intellectual maturity is in fact on grade level while their skill-development is not, those students are ripe for massive strides forward. That is, fifth graders who are reading on a second-grade level are able to make up that distance quickly because they do have the tools and insights of a fifth-grade mind to apply to second-grade learning. One of the common challenges for corps members is reconciling students' lower skill levels with their higher intellectual capacity; one usually doesn't want to ask one's fifth graders simply to read "baby second-grade" books, for example. (There are a few techniques to consider, including pairing with a lower-elementary class and having your older students read to them, or helping create audiobook tapes for younger classes, etc.)

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(4) Work faster, not slower. Some teachers respond to a classroom of students who are behind by setting a slower learning pace for those students. Precisely the opposite approach is needed. Your students *will* be behind. But, as mentioned above, they will have the capacity and potential for great growth. They need a teacher who will recognize that potential and drive them toward it, with an unwavering sense of urgency. They need a teacher that realizes that every second is precious. They need a teacher who thinks, “showing a video might be fine for kids who are on grade-level, but my students simply cannot afford to take the time to do that.” Think about the teachers described in the previous chapter. Would Mr. Esquith ever let a single minute go by without squeezing the most learning out of it that he can? Would students at KIPP find themselves working more slowly because they are behind?

(5) Benchmark your classroom’s pace and progress against “excellent classrooms” regularly. One of the best ways to “pace yourself” is to keep an eye on some excellent classrooms in excellent schools and to compare your students’ pace and progress with that of the students in those classrooms. If those students are reading fifteen books over the course of the year, why aren’t yours? And if your students have so much farther to go to catch up, why aren’t they reading thirty books? As mentioned earlier in this text, new teachers often find that visiting these excellent schools and classrooms energizes their focus on and determination to meet their ambitious goals for their students because those visits so starkly illustrate the unfairness of a system that educates some students well but not others.

I am practically a West Charlotte cheerleader in civilian clothes, both in my classroom and on the street. Before we take the district assessments, I talk about how excited I am to send our good data downtown so that everyone there will spit out their coffee in disbelief at our scores. I cheer and basically act like a fool as I am grading their mini-assessments while they’re working on other assignments, and my students have eventually gotten excited about proving the negative stereotypes about West Charlotte wrong. I make sure my kids are tracking their own progress, their class, my combined classes, and the school’s data versus the rest of the district. I let them know when we outperform the school and the district on certain objectives. And I let them know that they are the ones producing the data, so the success is theirs.

Leah Nahmias, Charlotte ‘04
Resident History Education, City of New York –
Graduate Center

(6) Teach at the intersection of “comfortable” and “challenging.” When faced with students who are so far behind, you simply must gauge and push the edges of students’ “comfort zone.” You certainly do not want to demand of students tasks that they cannot complete or they will become discouraged and lose the all-important motivation that you are fostering to reach your goals. At the same time, especially with students who are far behind, you must constantly push students to take learning risks by mixing in a fair amount of performance requests that are truly challenging for them. This calls for differentiating instruction for students at different levels.

II. “Kind-Hearted” Prejudice: Lowering Expectations Out of Concern and Sympathy

If the reality of our students’ low academic skills is one challenge to maintaining high expectations, the reality of our students’ lives is another. Sometimes, the more we learn about the various difficulties facing our students, the more we may be tempted to question the appropriateness of high expectations in the first place. When you think about all of the symptoms of poverty that can affect your students, at one point do you become tempted to say “we just cannot expect as much out of these students as we expect from those students in that affluent school across town”?

Consider the following thoughts that are representative of the kinds of thoughts that may creep into new teachers’ minds as they get to know their students:

- “Camilla has to work in the evenings so I should just let her sloppy homework slide.”
- “Oscar comes to school hungry—of course he’s going to act out during the morning meeting. I can live with that.”
- “Three of my students are just not meeting the minimal standards for fifth grade, but they usually try pretty hard. I’m going to see what I can do to make sure they pass on to sixth grade.”
- “Visiting Michael’s home was really eye-opening for me. It’s just so different from my own experience—it doesn’t feel right for me to come in and push Michael to focus on school when there’s so much going on at home,” OR “I know how tough what Michael is going through can be. I should give him a break on some of the demands of the classroom.”
- “Susan’s family has such a rich Navajo culture and tradition. Who am I to come in here and push her to achieve academically by standards set by our non-native culture and government?”

These statements represent the very real pull towards lowering expectations that can come with sympathy, concern, and respect for our students’ experiences. No matter what our own background or experience in relation to low-income communities, because our students’ lives may be difficult or different, we may want to “do them the favor” of backing off on our academic demands. The fact is, however, that lowering our expectations—no matter what the motivation—will not be a favor to our students.

Once again, perhaps the most compelling way to digest this idea is through the experience of new teachers before you who have dealt with this struggle to maintain their focus on academic success despite all the challenges in their students’ lives. Consider, for example, the written reflection of Kate Sobel, Los Angeles ’98. She taught first grade and agreed to share her experience with one student, Ernesto—an experience that, for her, has always reminded her of the challenge and importance of maintaining high expectations for every student:

“Mm Mm Miss Sobel,” Jaime stuttered. “My brother’s gonna be in your class this year. Mm Ms Powell said so.” I looked to the door to see two little heads peeking into Room B. “Come on in boys,” I said. “I’d love some help setting up for the first day of school.” Ernesto came into my room for the first time, looked around and grinned a wide smile. Four years in the classroom and my eyes looked past the too-big shoes, too-short pants

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and backwards t-shirt to see the excitement in this soon to be a 1st-grader's eyes. Ernesto and Jaime spent the day putting up butcher paper, organizing the library and unpacking boxes of fresh-tipped crayons. Ernesto was off to a good start. I had big plans for the students of Room B, and Ernesto was already high on my list.

Looking around my room at the end of that year and thinking back to that initial encounter, I wondered how I had managed to put my high expectations for Ernesto aside. I spent so much time with him that year - I grew to love his toothless smile and misfit uniforms. But all of that time and I lost sight of my expectations and my primary responsibilities as a teacher. I let Ernesto go through an entire year of first grade without learning to read.

I think about it all the time. It's one of those things that seemed to be part of a year flying by. I remember each incident clearly but I can't remember when I decided to put my academic priorities aside for Ernesto. There was the time when, with a tooth so rotten it made his face swell like a football, I sent him home with explicit directions to stay there until he had seen the dentist. And the afternoons when he and his brother ate peanut butter and crackers, content to use tutoring time to eat a much-needed snack. And all the time I spent talking to his mom about bedtime, and visits to the clinic, and getting new clothes. Somehow, when Ernesto walked through my doors in the morning my mind spun through a checklist that was different from when I greeted other students in the class. Instead of: Homework? Check. Does he know his spelling words this week? Check. Have I talked to his mom about the research project we're doing on ocean animals? Check... I jumped to sending him to the bathroom with soap and a toothbrush, checking to make sure he was wearing socks, and that he brought a jacket for recess. I had so much to give but I forgot to teach.

Ernesto spent a year in first grade with me better fed and cleaner than perhaps he is now as a fourth grader, but because I forgot to teach Ernesto he spent two years in first grade. The year he left room B to join a first grade class for the second time, Ernesto learned to read with his peers. Another teacher looked past the too-big shoes, too-short pants and backwards t-shirt to see his potential as a student. She may not have had a secret stash of snacks in a drawer with his name on it, but she gave him what he really needed - and he lived up to her expectations.

As Kate's experience suggests, succumbing to "kind-hearted" temptation to lower expectations can be just as damaging, from students' perspective, as believing that the students cannot meet the high expectations that you have set for them. In fact, if you think about the implications of this idea, you come to realize that the teachers who believe and act on statements like those above are just as guilty of limiting their students' academic achievement and life prospects as a teacher who flat-out states that "poor kids can't learn." The teachers who conform to those statements are essentially creating the achievement gap with their supposed "kindness."

In order to be more aware of times when "benign" discrimination like this is sneaking into your teaching practice, it is helpful to parse this tendency into several common strands as experienced by new teachers. Consider each of these four guidelines for avoiding these forms of "well-intended" lowered expectations. Ask yourself which of these principles you are most and least likely to have trouble following:

- (1) Define kindness in terms of learning rather than excuses.** Kindness takes many, many forms, but making excuses for poor performance is not one of them. If you see a problem in your student's life, you do what you can to take action to help, but you must also maintain focus on

instruction. As you develop your own teaching practice, take the time to think about your interactions with students—especially those that initially seem like kind acts. Are they all aligned with your goal of maintaining high expectations? Are you doing students any “favors” that are actually lowering your expectations for them?

(2) Recognize that *problems* that are outside your control do not necessarily mean a lack of achievement-related *solutions*. Sometimes, we find ourselves facing students’ living conditions that are simply not in the realm of our influence. Perhaps a student is a migrant worker and has to leave in the spring to go north to work. Perhaps a student is pregnant. Perhaps a student has asthma related to environmental hazards in his neighborhood. We look at those situations and we may be discouraged that we cannot change the root condition or problem; and yet, we should not allow that discouragement to blind us to possible achievement-related solutions. In every case, there are creative means of ensuring students’ achievement despite the obstacle (without necessarily taking on the obstacle itself). You may not be able to affect the fact that a student’s home arrangement is not conducive to homework, but there are a number of creative ways of getting that student the quiet time and space elsewhere he or she needs to complete it. You may not be able to change the fact that a student does not have a structured environment at home, but that does not stop you from creating structured expectations around behavior and academic performance at school.

(3) Maintain your convictions about the value of academic achievement despite your (possible) unfamiliarity with students’ lives and lifestyles.

We all want to respect and appreciate the difficult cultures and lifestyles that we see in our students, schools, and communities. We must not, however, confuse that important principle with a relativistic view that we have no business “imposing” the value of academic achievement on our students. We are committed to the value of academic achievement, as it will inevitably expand our students’ life prospects, giving them more and better choices in life. Imagine, for example, that you are teaching on a reservation in New Mexico, and you have the utmost respect and admiration for Navajo culture. That respect should not in any way compromise your dedication to academic achievement—these are not mutually exclusive interests. Our students’ families want their children to learn, and they may express that interest in a variety of ways. While we might adjust the manner in which we strive for academic excellence given the cultural norms of our community, we should not confuse our respect and admiration for that culture with a need to change or lower our high expectations for student achievement.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned as a teacher has been to distinguish between the things I can't change and the things I can change. Hearing about the pressures and challenges my students face outside of my classroom can be overwhelming and often leaves me with a sense of hopelessness. Hearing my student struggle to read aloud only re-energizes me because I know that IS something I can change.

**Martin Winchester, RGV '95
Chief Schools Officer, IDEA Public Schools**

Relaxing your expectations for any student—whether out of concern for difficult situations at home or in the community, or out of respect for a culture that is different from our own—in the end only hurts that student by lowering achievement and thereby limiting life-prospects.

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III. Fighting Lowered Expectations for Your Students

Clearly, maintaining high expectations is not as simple as pledging to do so. As impassioned as we might be about the importance of high expectations, and as sincere as we may be in our promise to act on and implement them in our classroom, all of us face an uphill battle to maintain them. We must accept the challenge posed by the reality of our students' low skill levels, and we must be careful not to be an accomplice to lowered expectations through "benign" factors such as sympathy and certain school structures.

Generations of new teachers have discovered the difficulty inherent in maintaining high expectations for their students. Here we have collected a few of the "best practices" for ensuring that you are successful in overcoming that difficulty:

(1) Proactively and incessantly affirm and nurture high expectations. Given the background of forces constantly eroding high expectations for our students, you must recognize that affirmative energy and work is required even to maintain the high expectations you have already established. Every day your students are being exposed to messages that conflict with your messages of high achievement. Every day you may be tempted by well-intended sympathy or concern or respect for your students' experiences to give in a little on the rigorous standards of achievement that you have set for them. You must be perpetually vigilant and re-assert your messages of achievement.

Before entering my classroom, I knew that low expectations and negative stereotypes for my students existed, but I think I was surprised by the extent to which my students had internalized them. To counteract this, I had to make sure that I was constantly rewarding and recognizing them for positive behavior and academic achievement. It took a while for students to want to behave and achieve this way because the stereotypes and expectations were so powerful.

**Stephanie Crement, Bay Area '99
Special Education English/Language Arts
Teacher, Boston Public Schools**

(2) Challenge others' statements of lowered expectations swiftly and with real-world evidence. As a teacher of students in low-income communities, you will encounter messages of lowered expectations frequently. Sometimes those messages will come from surprising sources: not just television, but from co-workers, administrators, and sometimes even students and students' families. Address those comments when you hear them. And, just as importantly, demonstrate those comments' fallacy by introducing the speaker to the success of your students—even if (and especially if) that speaker is your student. Consider, as examples, the following actual statements heard by corps members and the corresponding ways to answer those statements:

Statement	Response
<p><i>From an administrator:</i> “Those students don’t get a thesaurus, because that level ESL is too low for the blue dictionary.”</p>	<p>This teacher might respectfully explain that her academic goals for these students will actually take them well beyond the level of the blue dictionary and explain, using data from her benchmark assessments, that her students are already handling material in the blue dictionary. She could then set an appointment to return to get a thesaurus.</p>
<p><i>From a fellow teacher:</i> “It is too much to expect parents here to have their students read 21 minutes a night.”</p>	<p>The teacher who is told this might explain that, actually, her students’ parents have really rallied around the ambitious goals he has set for the students and, based on his Reading Time Reporting system, every single student is reading AT LEAST 21 minutes a night. In fact, his students are up to an average of 33 minutes per night. This teacher might go on to describe a few of the concrete signs of the benefits of this campaign on the academic achievement of students in class.</p>
<p><i>A corps member who taught a self-contained class for students with emotional disabilities, reports:</i> “Other teachers would frequently walk past me in the hall and, often in front of their classes, say ‘I have a student for you!’ or ‘I don’t know how you do it, you must be a saint!’ These statements undermined the self-esteem of all the students involved.”</p>	<p>This teacher might discuss with her students why those teachers said those things. (As described in Chapter 3 of Learning Theory in the section on “Demystification,” students often respond positively to an explicit and respectful discussion of their learning differences.) Once those differences are named and the students know that this class is designed to teach to those differences, discussions of each student’s highly ambitious goals (as described in his or her IEP) are possible and fruitful. Finally, the teacher might follow up with the teachers who said those things and describe to them some of the progress students have made. It might be a good idea to ask those other teachers for help in communicating high expectations of success to the students, perhaps even “planting” with the teacher a few specific statements to mention in front of and about particular students that acknowledge those students’ achievement so far.</p>

(3) Flip the “malleable intelligence switch.” If you will recall from the *Teaching As Leadership* book (Chapter Two), a considerable and growing body of research indicates that one negative effect of low expectations is that students internalize the idea that no matter how hard they work, they will not achieve success. As a result, they often see their academic ability as fixed and thus tend to choose easier assignments and be less resilient about failures.

As a teacher, you must indoctrinate your students with the idea of “malleable intelligence”—that the notion of “intelligence” is not a fixed, permanent idea that cannot be improved. Students that believe their intelligence is correlated with their effort are more likely to tackle risky, challenging tasks and to rebound from failures by redoubling their effort. Part of your role as a teacher of students who may have been deflated by low expectations is to “flip this switch” in their mind, to make them realize that their hard work will in fact lead to academic success. (For more on these two different perspectives and how to drive home this idea with students, see *Teaching As Leadership*, Chapter Two.)

The first thing I teach my students is the theory of malleable intelligence. We look at examples of people who have worked hard, overcome obstacles, and achieved audacious goals. I point to the students’ own accomplishments in school or in extra-curriculum activities and show them role models in their community who genuinely want them to succeed. Students need to know that they have family, faculty, and staff members who want them to achieve their goals.

Christopher Arnold, RGV ‘04
Instructor, Purdue University

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- (4) Search for your own hidden biases and “unpack” your own privilege.** One of the most important methods of fighting the barrage of lowered expectations that grind away at your and your students’ visions of academic success is to monitor your own thoughts and perspectives for hidden biases and prejudices. We have found that corps members of all backgrounds and perspectives can benefit from the self-reflection involved in searching for our personal hidden biases and privileges. What stereotypes about your students (that you see and hear on a daily basis) have impacted your perspectives? In what settings, if any, have we enjoyed some unearned privilege because of our race, ethnicity, gender, age, or socioeconomic status? No matter to what degree we identify with our students’ identities and backgrounds, by becoming aware of our hidden biases and unearned privileges, we are much more able to check and correct the ways in which we might be inadvertently contributing to the lowered expectations that we are trying to fight for the sake of our students’ achievement.

IV. Conclusion

The high standards of excellence that you have pledged to expect of your students will immediately be challenged when you start teaching. You may find your own dedication to those standards shaken by the shockingly low performance of your students at the beginning of the year. You may also find yourself tempted to lower your expectations out of misguided sympathy, concern, or respect for your students’ lives. You must not allow these influences to undermine your high expectations for your students’ success.

At this point, please turn to the Related Readings section and read “Identity Development in Adolescence,” a chapter from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*