

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility: It Starts with Success in Your Classroom

Chapter Nine

- I. Effecting Change as a New Member of a Community
- II. Getting Started: Tangible Steps Toward Effecting Positive Change
- III. Conclusion: Do Choose Your Battles—Wisely

As mentioned at the start of this text, your commitment to propel your students to achieve ambitious academic goals is an effort to make change. As new members of our school and community, we must approach any attempts to make change with great respect and humility.

This is even more critical if you seek to change policies or practices at your school that you believe to be inhibiting your students' academic achievement. Your quest to close the achievement gap for your students in your classroom may lead you to encounter other, related problems that you are eager to take on and overcome. Perhaps there are special education placement policies that you believe could be adjusted to better serve the needs of your students. Perhaps a mandatory dress-code check is leading to excessive tardiness to first period. Perhaps you have opinions about how money should be spent. As a member of your school community, you may be able to influence some of those policies and decisions. If and when such issues truly hinder your students' learning, you may feel the need to engage in those issues to maximize the likelihood that your students can meet their academic goals. Of course, *how* you choose to approach the issues can be just as important as which issues you choose to address.

Your greatest influence will come if you approach both your efforts to achieve significant gains with your students and your efforts to change policy or practice with sensitivity to dynamics of diversity that we have discussed thus far in this text.

I. Effecting Change as a New Member of a Community

Among the dynamics of difference that virtually every corps member encounters during his or her initial two-year commitment to the classroom are the challenges inherent in being "new" to a community, or campus, or faculty, or classroom. No matter what our race, ethnicity, religion, culture, background, sexual orientation, or gender may be, as new corps members we are entering a role with which we are unfamiliar, and in which most of those around are unfamiliar with us. When one considers the additional layers of dynamics of difference and sameness that come from our and new colleagues', neighbors', and students' wide range of identities, one is faced with a complex tapestry of expectations, assumptions, and relationships that must be acknowledged and navigated in order for you to become a successful agent of change.

These dynamics pose an interesting challenge for you as a new teacher. On one hand, you have been recruited, selected, and trained because of your potential to effect significant gains and your demonstrated leadership ability. Our collective mission as an organization, in fact, calls on corps members and alumni to bring their leadership skills to bear on difficult problems and to change an inequitable system. On the other hand, you are new to your classroom, school, and community, and you may have little or no education experience. You have not yet proven yourself in this context and may be lacking credibility as a leader when you begin. Who are *you* to enter this unfamiliar system with the intention of changing it?

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

This tension—between your great potential to effect change and your status as a newcomer with little initial influence in your community—has a profound impact on many corps members' experiences. All of us, as new teachers, struggle with gaining the necessary influence to be in a position to effect change and with choosing which challenges to take on and which ones to let pass.

I knew early on that the only way to be "heard" at my school was to gain respect as an educator. My first year, I worked extremely hard to get my children to master the standards and to do well on state standardized tests. During my 2nd and 3rd year, my hard work paid off as my colleagues and administrators listened and treated me as an equal contributor to help solve the pressing issues occurring at our school.

**Jenny Tan, Los Angeles '00
Elementary School Principal,
Clark County**

On occasion, some corps members have failed to make those choices wisely. They have instead charged into their new arenas with well-intended, but overly aggressive plans to change long-standing policies or practices. They have attempted to solve a problem or make a change without the necessary sensitivity to the dynamics of diversity that are at play in a particular context, and have therefore failed. Imagine a corps member who, in his or her first week, marches into the principal's office and demands that the policy barring field trips be changed. Or imagine a new teacher who promptly tells his department chairperson how to restructure the literacy program. Or imagine a corps member writing a letter to the editor of the newspaper to report on what she sees as

misappropriation of funds in the school district. Whether or not those corps members are right on the merits of their concerns, they probably doomed their cause with their somewhat arrogant assumption that they, as newly arrived members of the school community, could immediately effect policy changes in their districts.

Of course, many, many more corps members have been successful agents of positive change in their schools—effecting significant gains among their students and on a whole range school policies and practices. These positive changes are a fundamental part of your teaching experience. In seeking to effect change, however, heed the lessons learned by those who have done so before you.

The sum of our "lessons learned" about successfully making changes and solving problems as a new member to your community can be boiled down to two critically important principles. First, the path to meaningful leadership in your school and your community can only begin with success in your classroom. Second, you must work toward your primary goal of success in your classroom and any derivative goals that impact school policy or practice with the utmost respect and humility for those around you and the task before you.

Rule for Change #1: It Starts With Success in Your Classroom

As we have talked to hundreds of corps members who have in one way or another positively impacted their schools and communities, we have seen an unfaltering pattern. In virtually every case, the teacher who is successful in making changes outside of his or her classroom first built credibility through success inside his or her classroom. Until you have your own successful program in place in your classroom, your suggestions for how to fix other systems have little credibility and therefore are unlikely to lead to any change in policies or practices that you believe hinder your efforts to achieve those gains.

Rule for Change #2: Respect and Humility Moves Mountains

A proven record of achievement is a necessary prerequisite to having ability to lead people to make positive changes for the sake of your students. At the same time, as a new member of your community, you are undeniably ignorant of much of what is going on and has gone on around you. Somewhat paradoxically, we have found that a key to successfully effecting change in a new community is focusing on what you do *not* know rather than on your proven record of leadership. Your best bet for succeeding in making meaningful change is to approach each issue with an unmitigated and continued sense of respect and humility.

I approached every interaction with the notion that I was an outsider in my new school community, and I needed to rely on the expertise of parents, fellow teachers, and other community members. I made sure that I was respectful and humble in every interaction in which I engaged. They were the experts about the community, the school, their children, and I wanted to work as a partner with them to make sure their students achieved. I believe that, because of the way that I presented myself, I was well-received in my community as someone who had come from the outside but was interested in achieving the same ultimate goal as my students' families, other teachers, and community members—student achievement.

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

The fact is that no matter what your background and experience, you have much to learn about how things work in your new community. Where you may simply see a problem that needs to be solved, others around you may see a whole history and context that you do not. Where you may see an opportunity to change some policy or practice for the benefit of students' learning, others around you may see a web of political dynamics that can only be navigated in a particular way. And, where you may see what you believe to be an obvious solution, others around you may, with the benefit of their experience, know that solution to be fatally flawed.

Thus, to be most effective as a leader for change—no matter how big or small the issue may be—you must approach the project with profound respect for the perspectives and opinions of those around you and with the humility to recognize how little you may know about the context of the problem. This approach will lead you to ask the right questions of the right people, and to garner the support of those around you so that the change will be lasting.

Clearly, one of the messages of this chapter is to check any inclination you may have to burst on the scene in your community with plans to “change the world.” Such an approach and attitude is disrespectful of the norms and culture of your new community. It is also usually ultimately ineffective because you have not yet built the credibility you need to have an influential voice on key issues.

We want to make clear, however, that this chapter is not a call for passivity; rather, the point is that to be effective in your leadership for change you must (1) build your credibility with success in the classroom and (2) approach every interaction with the respect and humility appropriate for a newcomer.

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

II. Getting Started: Tangible Steps Toward Effecting Positive Change

Here, we describe a number of concrete ways to establish yourself in your community as a leader, and discuss methods that are particularly pertinent to proceeding effectively in your efforts to excel as a teacher and, where important, bring about policy change:

Learn From Those around You. Successful teachers have found that they are most effective when they remain open to learning (and are in fact on a constant mission to learn) from the community of teachers, administrators, students, and students' families with whom they work. Most corps members can share inspiring stories of the guidance and support they received from their veteran colleagues. Do not wait to take advantage of opportunities to learn from colleagues who have considerably more experience than you working in your community. A wonderful way to "break the ice" with your co-workers is to ask them for advice and suggestions for your teaching.

If you have grand ideas to engage, motivate, and create with your students and community, first and foremost acquire the capital that is necessary to get these BIG projects done. Humbly asking, "What can I help other people accomplish?" will garner you the relationships and experience necessary to carry out your vision. By volunteering to help fellow staff members and administrators at concession stands, organizing a Veteran's Day program, and leading an activity that no other teacher wanted, my students were the beneficiaries because we were able to get a grant for reading incentives and prizes through the administration.

Krishnan Subrahmanian, South Dakota '04
9th-12th Special Education

At times, corps members may encounter situations where they feel that their "values" differ from those of the communities in which they're placed. When you encounter a situation where community practices or norms seem to conflict with your own values, talk with community members to understand the roots of the practice or norms so as to be able to view the issue through another lens. You may discover that it is possible to accept different practices or norms even if you don't agree with them. Even teachers whose methods you may be determined not to adopt can often teach you an enormous amount about how to be effective in the classroom.

Develop Positive Relationships With Co-Workers and Community Members. Not only can other teachers, administrators, and community members help make you a better teacher, but they can prove to be invaluable allies in helping you access the resources you need or helping you work around obstacles, whether small or large. Conversely, if your colleagues do not support your efforts, they can make it more difficult for you to accomplish your goals for students.

Professionalism for a new teacher in a new community is listening without judgment, keeping opinions to yourself for a while, making an effort to understand others' perspectives, learning as much as you can about the community, your students, and their families, and engaging in community events on the residents' terms (not your own).

Jane Henzerling, Phoenix '98
Fellow, Building Excellent Schools

To develop positive relationships, it will be important to understand how you are perceived by others, as this self-awareness can help you determine how best to form positive relationships with co-workers and community members. The fact that you will be newcomers to this role in your schools and communities can in and of itself be a reason for skepticism (however, new energy and enthusiasm can also be warmly welcomed as an asset to the school); you may be entering a system where new teacher retention rates are very low, so whether you plan to teach for two years or more,

your colleagues may believe that they will be around long after you leave. If your race, ethnicity, religion,

sexual orientation, educational background, economic background, or any other aspect of your identity is different from that of most of your co-workers, it may take time for some teachers to warm up to you. If the different characteristic or characteristics make you part of a more privileged group, some colleagues may express skepticism toward your presence, particularly if you somehow convey that you “know it all” and are out to “save” the school.

Finally, your participation in Teach For America may work either for or against you as you work to develop these relationships. Teach For America is controversial in some parts of the teacher education community given its abbreviated pre-service training program and two-year commitment that some perceive as short-term, and various individuals may have either misconceptions or philosophical disagreements with our program. While many principals and teachers of the schools in which you will teach are huge fans of Teach For America, in some rare cases, your colleagues will have had negative experiences working with a corps member.

Very often, however, persistent efforts to get to know others and to ask them for help and guidance pay off as others sense your commitment to their students and discover commonalities on which to base their trust and respect. Invest some time and energy “networking” with other teachers, administrators, and community members. Sit with veteran teachers at faculty meetings, attend local events, and work to meet and get to know your administrators. Consider 2000 Delta corps member Laura Bowen’s account of her relationship with a veteran teacher at her school:

“Well, it looks like we’ll be teaching together this year,” Mrs. Nero said as she walked into my classroom in mid-August. It was our first teacher workday at Carver Elementary and I was overcome with emotions after my first glimpse of my school, my colleagues, and my classroom. I had also just found out that I would not be team-teaching with [fellow corps member] Rachel Schankula, as we had previously thought. Instead, I was paired with Mrs. Nero, whose reputation as a larger-than-life fifth grade teacher is legendary at Carver, as is her paddle named “Bessie.” Misbehaving children at Carver apparently are threatened with Mrs. Nero’s discipline in their kindergarten year! Within the timespan of that first day at Carver, I found out (from another teacher) that Mrs. Nero is often assigned her share of the “difficult” students and that she most likely was not going to be ecstatic about being teamed with a young, white, TFA teacher for the school year. Needless to say, I was daunted by the task that lay before me.

Fast forward eight months—it is now a beautiful Sunday morning in early April. I walk into a small country church and immediately notice that I am the only white person present. However, I soon forget the color of my skin as I am welcomed with a warm embrace. The smiling woman who embraces me and introduces me as “her friend” is Mrs. Mae Bell Nero, a woman who has become a trusted colleague and a supportive friend. A few days later Mrs. Nero sent a note to my classroom in which she expressed her happiness that we had worshipped together. I was also invited to return to share the church service at any time. On the return visit, I was again treated as an honored guest. These events have caused me to reflect on the evolution of my relationship with Mrs. Nero, a teacher who once looked at me with doubtful eyes. How did the expression in her eyes begin to change? When exactly was I welcomed?

Looking back on these eight months, I now realize that there was no huge event that changed my status at Carver or with Mrs. Nero. Nothing spectacular happened to integrate me into the group of fifth grade teachers. There are simply a series of things that inevitably happen if you approach a new environment with respect, humility, and love. These things that happen are small building blocks that chip away at old prejudices, past threats, and deep doubts; and since all eyes are on us during our first

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

few months, all actions and words are noticed and remembered! Thus, the cheerful hallway conversations, the long afternoons, the dedication shown to kids, the willingness to help out, and the hard work is noticed. No one will give you a medal for all of these things, but believe me, they will notice and they will be appreciative. And so, Mrs. Nero's eyes, the eyes that were watching me the closest, took in all of these things and she slowly began sharing herself with me. She would bring me supplies for my classroom, introduce me to family members, back me with certain difficult parents, and most importantly, she supported me in front of the students of Carver. There has never been a time when she questioned my methods in front of others and I am very sure that this isn't a result of her not questioning my methods! Instead, she chose to see the successes rather than the failures of my first year. Despite our disagreements over discipline (I know she thinks I "baby" my kids!) and over the workload (reading groups aren't yet considered real work!), we have managed to forge a strong relationship, one that benefits the both of us.

From my part, the relationship was necessary—in short, I needed to work with Mrs. Nero in order to be successful at Carver. However, I realize that she did not face that similar need. She very well could have ignored me or put up with me for the duration of my stay. Instead, she welcomed me as a friend and colleague even though she wasn't aware that she wanted to! Her spirit, character, and her strength have made my experience thus far a far more valuable one. I know that next year at Carver will be even better, in part, because I will again be teaching with my friend, Mrs. Nero.

The point of this reflection is that we all encounter colleagues who aren't too sure of us. That is an obstacle that either has faced us all or will face us at some point in the future. However, there is always a way around the obstacle, but only if you choose to overcome it. I did make that choice on the very first day and for that, I will be eternally thankful. I can honestly say that all of the unease was worth it – I know that I have been changed and I think that if you asked Mrs. Nero, she would probably admit that I have affected her in the same way! However, be sure to catch her on a good day!

My first-year of teaching I was fully committed to doing anything I could to impact student achievement, both inside and outside the classroom. Putting in the hours, having administrators visit my classroom, and building strong relationships with my fellow teachers that improved my own teaching led to an incredible opportunity my second year: being a representative on the Superintendent's Advisory Council. Being able to sit on that committee and directly affect the policy decisions that were shaping my students' education was invaluable—it gave me a whole new perspective on school and district leadership, and the tough choices that our administrators face in running effective and high-performing schools.

Crystal Brakke, North Carolina '99
Vice President - Institutes
Teach For America

Team Up With Students' Families. In particular, invest time and energy building relationships with students' families. They can be your greatest ally in leading your students to academic gains, and their support when you are trying to effect broader changes is crucial.

Maintain the Highest Level of Professionalism. Professional conduct is one of the keys to building positive relationships with colleagues, supervisors, students and community members. Following the conventions of your school – although some of them may at first seem restrictive or odd to you – is the most effective way to become a trusted member of the faculty. As a newcomer to your school community, your behavior will likely be under the scrutiny of those who wonder who you are and what you're about. Behaviors that may at first seem peripheral to your core objectives – like dressing appropriately,

submitting accurate attendance records, lesson plans and gradebooks on a timely basis, and arriving punctually – send strong messages to all those who are observing your behavior. These habits demonstrate that you are dependable, and that you respect your job and the people with whom you’re working. They also help you build social capital to obtain the resources and make the changes you need to serve your students best. Here are some concrete tips to help you do so:

- **Dress appropriately.** For a new teacher in a new community, appearance counts. Your colleagues and your students will draw conclusions about you based on how you dress. They will respond to you in particular ways based on those conclusions. In order to avoid conclusions that will make it more difficult for you to be effective, you need to think critically about the messages your appearance sends. Do you come across as casual? Disrespectful? Disorganized? Rebellious? Young? Not serious? If so, how might these impressions sabotage your efforts to assert your authority, to build relationships with older, potentially more conservative colleagues, to win the confidence of families and to communicate to your students the value and seriousness of education?
- **Attend school every day.** While there may be an exceptional reason why it is necessary to miss a day of school, corps members aiming to reach high levels with their students are in school consistently. If you need to stay home because of a serious illness, call the appropriate school official as soon as possible. Develop a substitute teacher’s folder in case of emergency. You should also “sign out” in the main office if you need to leave school during the day for any reason. Doing all these things communicates that you take your teaching responsibilities seriously and that you want to ensure that every moment of classroom time – even those when you are absent – is used as well as possible.
- **Cultivate a relationship with your principal or key administrator.** Your principal is your boss and the school leader, and it is your job to defer to his or her instructions. In addition to realizing that your principal has much more experience than you and often faces difficult judgment calls with many variables at play, you can take proactive steps to build a strong relationship. You might update your principal on what is going on in your classroom, invite him or her to a special class presentation, or slip a copy of your class newsletter in his or her mailbox. You should also consult with your principal or key administrator before planning any type of school trip, or watching a movie in your classroom that could possibly be considered frivolous or objectionable. Not only can your principal be a valuable advisor to you, but he or she is also ultimately responsible for everything that happens on school property and may want to be kept abreast of any plans that could be considered out of the ordinary. For an example of a carefully considered request of your principal, see the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit** (p. 9: “Sample Letter to Principal, With Author’s Intentions”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖
- **Comply with regulations.** Different schools have different expectations for their teachers, and you may not immediately understand the importance and rationale behind all of the regulations at your school. You may need to reserve audiovisual equipment a week in advance. Doing so may seem an unnecessary hassle when you come up with a great idea the night before a lesson and need a

Professionalism means saying “Good Morning and Good Evening” to all of the faculty—the secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, fellow teachers, etc. It means handing in your lessons on time each week and being early to staff meetings, even if it’s just to chat with your colleagues. It means wearing clothing that doesn’t show a tattoo, your belly, your exotic piercings, or your undergarments. It means smiling, listening, and talking to your hallway neighbors, and it means asking for help from those who have been there longer than you.

**Cheryl Bratt, New Orleans ‘01
Judicial Law Clerk, Eastern District of
Pennsylvania**

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

TV/VCR to make it a reality. You could be required to provide students with a blue pass before sending them to the nurse. You may feel that it is more important to focus on teaching your class than it is to interrupt your class to fill out a blue pass. There may be a special procedure for covering textbooks, for notifying the office if someone is planning to observe you teach, or clipping your attendance to the door by 8:15 a.m. Some of these regulations may seem unnecessary or even burdensome to you. It is important that in this area, as in others, you seek to understand the point of view of those who have put the regulations in place, that you trust that they have done so with good intentions, and that you comply with these regulations. If you get the reputation of someone who is insubordinate or who won't follow simple rules, it will be much harder to gain the support of your fellow teachers and your administration when you need it in order to best serve your students. The office secretary or a veteran teacher down the hall can help you get up to speed on these regulations. They can also be very helpful in providing you with background information that will help you to understand the rationale for these regulations—and may be able to help you find a way to get the TV/VCR after all.

- **Be careful with records and documents.** Teachers are expected to juggle a lot of paperwork and documentation: attendance, grades, assignments to grade, schedules, notes home, lunch menus, permission slips, special education documents, and discipline referrals – for starters. In most cases, this documentation is required of your school by the central office or state department of education. If you do not complete them, your school may suffer penalties or be exposed to potential lawsuits. If you need to write a discipline referral, maintaining accurate records allows you to be taken seriously by administrators. It is far less effective to say “Paul’s always late to class” than it is to report that “Paul was late five times in the past two weeks – 12/12, 12/13, 12/15, 12/19 and 12/20.” In addition, be sure to remain official, factual and dispassionate in your communications, particularly if you are responding to a family’s complaint or an administrator’s request. Consider having a friend or your regional program director give such letters a second pair of eyes. Written documents have a way of coming back to haunt their well-intentioned authors, so you will want to be sure you can stand by every word that you’ve chosen.
- **Uphold school rules.** If you are not much older than your students, students may pressure you to bend rules and be “the cool teacher.” But by doing so, you would be undermining the authority of your colleagues who stand firm to uphold school policy. Learn the rationale for school rules, such as no gum chewing, and communicate this honestly with your students. If your school has a dress code, you will need to enforce it. Some schools expect all students to be silent during the morning announcements. If there are students who have not submitted their Internet permission slips, it will be up to you to plan an alternative activity for these children while the rest of the class is doing research on the Web. You are also responsible for monitoring the halls and supervising students on the school grounds, and you may be expected to oversee student arrival, lunch, recess or dismissal.
- **Maintain your boundaries.** You will want to avoid any suggestion of an inappropriate relationship with a student. By touching students, driving students in your car without parent or guardian consent, or scheduling one-on-one tutorials without anyone else’s knowledge, you are opening yourself up to potential allegations of misconduct. If you need to detain a student after class, alert another teacher before doing so and be sure to keep the door open. Also, you should stop students from flattering you about the way you look, or talking about your romantic life. If you are unsure whether your comments or actions are inappropriate or not, err on the side of caution.
- **Professionalism extends outside of school.** When you’re acting out of “teaching mode” (for instance, at a bar or a dance club), avoid venues where you’re likely to bump into students or their families. This does not mean abandoning your social life during your entire teaching career, but it

does mean being aware how you may be viewed in your community and paying attention to where you let your hair down.

- **Be discreet.** Like a doctor or lawyer, you will learn specific and personal details about your students and their families. Keep sensitive information to yourself and avoid gossip. (There may be times where you learn information – for instance, about physical or sexual abuse – that you are required by law to report.) You should also avoid making comments about other teachers in front of your students or colleagues.
- **Express your gratitude.** The librarians, secretaries, janitors, bus drivers, food service workers, security guards and other school personnel work extremely hard so that your school runs smoothly every day. Be friendly, and be sure to acknowledge their contribution to your work.
- **Remain flexible and stay positive.** The copy machine may break. Supplies may run out. Faculty meetings may be scheduled the same afternoon you need to grade midterms, and it would be rude to do paperwork while your principal is addressing the faculty. A fire drill may interrupt your most important lesson. You will need to muster your patience and ingenuity to rise above these inconveniences; dwelling on circumstances outside your control is mental energy you'll want to save for helping your students. You also need to call upon your generosity of spirit to remind yourself that your colleagues are most likely not intentionally creating obstacles to make your job more difficult. Rather, they too are doing the best they can to work with a system that can be challenging, disorganized and unpredictable. As a member of your community, your energy and emotions affect the tenor of the environment. You play a role in creating a positive or negative vibe at your school.

Learn About the History and Culture of Your Region. When you arrive in your region, you will be afforded opportunities to learn about the region, its history, and its culture. Take full advantage of those opportunities, even if you are already familiar with the community you will be working in. While no workshop or tour can give you a full picture of a new community, beginning to explore your region provides foundation on which to build your knowledge of your community throughout the year. Moreover, your interest in learning about your region will be another sign of your respect for your new community.

III. Conclusion: Do Choose Your Battles—Wisely

You have joined Teach For America because you want to change things. As mentioned above, we do not want to suppress that interest and energy because such an attitude is exactly what it is going to take—in both the short- and long-term—to close the achievement gap for students from low-income communities. We do, however, want to encourage you to choose your causes carefully, strategically, and purposefully. Generally, when you decide to take on existing practices, it is wise to recruit allies within your communities who can help you determine how best to approach your goal and perhaps even help you in the pursuit.

Making wise choices about what issues to tackle means choosing just those causes that align with your core mission as a teacher of students who are on the losing end of the achievement gap. Your litmus test for investing energy in any particular quest for change should be whether or not the change will positively affect students' academic development and if you're in a good position to bring about that change.

You may find yourself pulled in many directions by many motivations as opportunities arise for leadership in and around your school. Many of those motivations may be absolutely valid and worthy, but they may not actually be for the benefit of students' academic growth. You might, for example, see the need for a

Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

recycling program in your school. Or, you might disagree with the application of a certain item in the dress code. Or you might disagree with a principal's insistence that you remove a particular bumper sticker from your car. You must ask yourself: Is this worth the energy it would take to see this issue through? Will my work on this issue actually advance my students' learning? Given the precious value of your time and energy, we believe that you should focus your leadership energies on those "battles" that will truly help to close the achievement gap for your students.

In deciding whether to pursue an agenda that requires change outside of your classroom, newcomers to communities must evaluate the implications, challenges, and potential consequences of questioning family, community, school, and district norms. Herb Kohl, a well-known education reformer and advocate for social change, reflects in his book, *Creative Maladjustment and the Struggle for Public Education*, on his mistakes in questioning the system when he was too early in his career. He writes:

Several times, students from other classes have asked me questions like, "Why do your students ride that bus? My teacher says if I don't do my homework, I'll have to ride the retarded bus." Each time, my stomach turns. I explain that my students don't live near enough school to walk, and I spend some time thinking about how best to approach this teacher. This fall, I decided to address the issue school-wide, by presenting at a staff meeting and simply explaining why my students are in a Special Day Class and how I would like teachers to field questions about my class. The staff was tremendously supportive, and several people approached me later to share things they had said to their class without thinking but would avoid in the future. Just by putting this issue in the open and trusting my colleagues' intentions, I got the support I needed.

**Lisa Barrett, Bay Area '02
Partner, The New Teacher Project**

When it is impossible to remain in harmony with one's environment without giving up deeply held moral values, creative maladjustment becomes a sane alternative to giving up altogether. Creative maladjustment consists of breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one's place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty – that is, it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and of not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary....

Sometimes decisions to maladjust are made without thought and can lead to trouble. Such trouble befell me twice at the beginning of my teaching career. During my six weeks of student teaching I got into trouble for trying things that clashed with the style and practice of my supervising teacher. I was accused of getting too close to the students, of being too informal, and of replacing structured learning activities with open-ended, cross-disciplinary projects. When I was asked to do things that in my judgment were detrimental to student learning and self-respect, I changed them without asking permission. This maladjustment made sense in terms of maintaining my integrity and helping my students, but it was suicide for a student teacher who didn't have his or her own classroom and who had no status within the school. Two weeks before the end of my student-teaching assignment, I was unceremoniously terminated by the supervising teacher and ordered out of the school by the principal....

The same thing happened during my first teaching assignment.... At that time, my maladjustment was neither creative nor effective, and I continue to wonder how much more useful I might have been to the school and the community had my responses been more tempered and my maladjustment better thought-out.

However, as a beginning teacher I found myself with too much to learn, too little support, and an inflated sense of how much reform I could accomplish by myself without having experience or friends or allies within the community or the school district.¹²⁸

As Kohl implies, it is important for you to ask yourself whether pursuing a change will compromise your ability to succeed in your core mission. For example, if it will cost you your job, by definition the change prevents you from expanding the opportunities available to your students. If your actions make your school principal resistant to your efforts, they may compromise your ability to pursue other initiatives that are equally or more important. While it is admirable to act according to your convictions, you must do so strategically and think about whether the end results of your efforts will truly be in the best interests of your students.

I learned early on in my teaching career that creating change in my school was a delicate procedure. You have to choose your battles—follow the lead and advice of experienced teachers in your school. While you might initially be frustrated with some of the administrative goals in your school, as time passes you will find that you have a greater ability to make things happen. But, in the words of Confucius, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The first steps will be moderate and cautious, but as the year passes you will be amazed how far you've progressed.

Richard Reddick, Houston '95
Assistant Professor and M.Ed. Coordinator, The
University of Texas at Austin

¹²⁸ Kohl, Herbert. *"I Won't Learn From You" And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*. New York: The New York Press, 1994, p. 130-132.