

Does respect play a role in student learning?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

Respect in schools has come up in many discussion threads throughout Students Speak Out (SSO). Students and teachers agree that there is often a lack of respect between teachers and students, students and students, and teachers, students, and parents. Students report that respect in the classroom is vital for the success of each student. They say teachers need to be respected by the students in order to effectively teach and students need to be respected by their teachers in order to learn. The students brought up many situations at their campuses where respect worked well and many situations where disrespect contributed to more problems inside the classroom. In this issue brief, readers will notice students working collectively to define the problem and create ideas for solutions.

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I think what it comes down to is **respect**. What I've noticed with teachers I've had is this: The teachers that students really feel **respected** by and have **respect** for are the classes they behave in. In these classes, the teachers constantly disciplining, [and students are] just running class.

Yes, students know better when they're talking and messing around. But when teachers yell things like 'You're my worst class of the day!' and 'I'm not being paid to babysit you!' (I especially hate that one) it's **disrespectful**. And when students don't feel **respected**, they don't feel like the teacher deserves their **respect**.

It's not about enforcing a bunch of laws and being all tough...a teacher should build a relationship with students so they care enough to listen. It's like with friends...you **respect** your friends enough to not interrupt them when they're talking. It should be the same with teachers. When students feel like a peer, not looked down on like a little child being 'babysat', they'll be more inclined to **respect** the teacher.

Also, it's about consistency and stability. If a kid is messing around, and a teacher threatens to send them to the office, please send them out. Otherwise students get no idea of boundaries, because there aren't any...they're constantly broken. Which isn't fair to the students. How can you expect them to be perfect angels when they don't know the limits? If they don't think they'll be punished, they'll act out...because why not?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "You don't have to like everyone, but you can **respect** them. I don't really think just because I am **disrespected** I need to do the same back, I like to always **respect** my adult peers. The problem is that many kids if they are not **respected**, are not going to do the same as I would. I don't think you should ever just **disrespect** adults back, but many kids will have the attitude saying otherwise."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "**Respect** is really important, and it goes in both directions. I can **respect** someone for who they are or what they do or just because I should, and they may or may not **respect** me back. It is really important for me to know that my teachers **respect** me, and that makes it easier to **respect** them back. This can also fuel trust, which I believe is just as important."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... Automatically, students should be given the benefit of the doubt...teachers shouldn't walk in on the first day and lay down a set of really strict rules and punishments. They should sort of assume mutual...I want to say **respect**", but that's not it, because as you pointed out [in the previous post a participant had made the distinction between courtesy and respect] **respect** develops.

... If students are treated more like peers and less like little children, they'll be more likely to behave. I've had some really condescending teachers who pull the 'I'm the teacher so you have to listen,' card. It reminds me of the movie Matilda, when Matilda's dad and Ms. Trunchbull would say 'I'm big and you're little, I'm smart and you're dumb, I'm right and you're wrong.' That is not a good basis of relationship and does not create an environment of **respect**. Yet some teachers say this, trying to force students to have more **respect** and behave better.

A lot of teachers don't know how to have that off-the-bat '**respect**', and some can never find it. I had this teacher who complained tirelessly about certain students who didn't behave. ... I think sometimes, when teachers see a student misbehaving, they label the student 'bad'. They don't try to **respect** or find the good in the person, they just see them misbehave and write them off as 'bad'. I know that sometimes there are people you don't like. That's human. But as a teacher, you can't be biased or judgmental and you have to try to find the good in everyone and find something that you enjoy about them. It's hypocritical, really, for certain teachers to have the expectation of students being tolerant and accepting when they can't be themselves.... and this is so important as a teacher and human being!"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I agree there is a lack of **respect**, but it does go both ways. I am a student who is well behaved and I **respect** my teachers, but at my district school I was just as **disrespected** as the teachers were. So were the parents. I think people have to work on overall **respect**. Avalon has great **respect** throughout the school. The reason is because we focus on our social aspect of school and value the community we have. We work on making it positive and try and enforce good habits with it. I think the district schools do not always do that."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I completely agree! I had a teacher who would always say things like 'I'm the teacher, you have to listen to me!' and 'I'm not being paid to babysit you!' She'd also say things like, why do we ask stupid questions and why do we waste her time by talking? She demanded us to behave when we all felt so **disrespected**. How can we possibly be expected behave when we're not at all worthy of her **respect**? Why should we have **respect** for her if she has none for us? We are expected to automatically **respect** teachers, but teachers get away with **disrespecting** us. That's definitely not how it should work. I mean, hmm...is the only reason we're expected to **respect** them because of their job title? Because they're adults?"

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "... For some, once the lack of **respect** has been instilled into their lives, there is no clear way of solving the problem. Does it take a no-nonsense teacher or parent to show them that **respect** is mandatory? Maybe the answer is that it needs to start at the beginning of the school year or somehow with the parents, although that can be impossible in some cases. Could it be that instead of depicting **respect** as unkind, harsh authority we could show that **respect** can bring something good for everybody?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think that there are (I have experienced them in school) times when teachers **disrespect** students or abuse their power. I think that **respect** should work both ways and that there are some students who will always be somewhat of a handful, but most kids will behave if there is **respect** coming their way from the start. At Avalon we have a responsibility to the community, ourselves, and our peers. We are taught to be **respectful** and that here are the consequences of your actions and how it affects the community. What do we need to do to correct it and prevent it from happening in the future, and we work on it...We need responsibilities and obligations at school for our behavior and the community. Kids have to learn to be good adults somewhere, and it needs to be done differently than the way my previous district school was doing it."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... [I suggest you watch a movie] called 'To Sir, With Love'. It's about a teacher who takes on the difficult task of teaching a class full of extreme trouble-makers and misfits. But really, teachers should watch this film (as well as students) because the teacher in the movie makes the discovery that if you teach your class as if you're teaching kids, that's how they'll act. But if you treat them as if you were teaching real young adults, the students sort of step up to the plate and act more mature (because that's how they're being treated.)"

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "...I would never purposefully **disrespect** a teacher because I didn't feel **respected**. I try to find something about them to **respect**, because it's important to look for and focus on the good in people...other students don't feel the same, however...which, is understandable. It's hard to **respect** someone who doesn't **respect** you, unless you try. Some people don't feel obligated to try. They feel like the person doesn't deserve their **respect**.

Other times, if you really can't find a way to **respect** them, isn't it sort of about grinning and bearing it? I mean, even if you don't **respect** someone, there are times you have to put on a smile and pretend...which some people have a hard time doing. The teacher I was talking about above had a hard time doing that. If she didn't like **respect** someone, it showed. It's about politeness and courtesy, I think...you can't be really rude and **disrespectful** even if you don't **respect** or appreciate them. Does that make any sense whatsoever??"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think they go hand in hand, because teachers can stop taking crap from students if trust levels are not good, or when you are establishing trust in the classroom it may require teachers to crack down on things so we have order. Once you have that trust between teacher and student, things become more relaxed. ...If that trust is broken, the only way to instill order again is for the teacher to crack down, and do what it takes to ensure safety at the school. If you can't get trust between a teacher and a student, then just cracking down on not taking crap so they realize who to **respect** is what it will take until they realize it, or until they are no longer that teachers responsibility."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "The teachers at Avalon try to base their school lives on the motto: "Life isn't fair, and in order to keep education as fair as possible, everyone must be treated differently." I really **respect** this, but I imagine that it can also be difficult to achieve the desired level of **respect** when there is no one set form of discipline that is enforced. What then is the balance?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "At Avalon you get a small share of students who were kicked out of their old schools. They get to Avalon and the way the community works and the **respect** levels how the school functions they turn around completely. I think the way the systems at traditional public schools are now we don't have the same way of making kids feel like they have a responsibility to behave."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Let's face it. Without good teachers we would be getting no where in education. But that made me wonder, what sets one teacher apart from another? In my experience it's been that my favorite teachers have had a deep passion for the subject they're teaching, and a **respect** for the students they are teaching..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "... the biggest thing we try and focus on is a positive community with supportive **respectful** peers. It is kinda based off peer pressure actually which can be used to your advantage. When we have a lot of kids who are saying "hey that's not how we work at Avalon, you need to change your behavior," you would be surprised with the results we get. Also the small school size is a big contributor, but it's not impossible to do this at a regular high school. When you have the pride that comes along with going to your school and saying, 'Hey I go to South, go Tigers!' Or whatever it may be, there is a lot to work with there. You can change those attitudes to include some **respect** that goes along with the name like what we do at Avalon."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "We spend 7 hours a day with our teachers. Then some of us have sports or after-school activities...we see our teachers more time than we see our parents. We get to know them and have trust and **respect** for them. Sometimes you don't like a teacher, but you deal with it...it's kind of like a family at school..."

Pang (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "...I'm not discriminating any teachers' way of teaching. I only ask and encourage if they can (not will), put a bit fun and heart into this when you get the chance too. By fun I don't mean as in teachers having to place themselves into the position where all of the sudden the students starts being rebellious or where the teachers feels helpless prior to be able to handle the class anymore.

In cases I've seen many times teachers/staffs cry in front of the class because of the lack of discipline and **respect** the students shown to the teachers/staffs. It's rather depressing."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Relationships with teachers (like we are advocating for) is different than friendships with them. I agree friendships can cause some problems, but relationships can be between anyone and is established even with students who do not get along with their teachers. Evaluation is based on a lot of things, how those interactions or relationships play out will help determine that. I think a lot of how that evaluation turns out is up to students, and teachers will **respect** those kids who address things in appropriate ways even if they are not in agreement with each other. If you want a good "evaluation" by your teacher there are clear ways to achieve it, I think most not so great students choose not to take those paths to get a good one."

Wes (Lake Harriet Community School) "...There are plenty of students in our public schools that have fantastic ideas about how to improve our school. I feel that since the whole point of schools is to help us, we should be able to give input and let it be seriously considered. Setting up this website is a good start to listening to students, but it alone isn't enough. We need to talk to teachers and principals about setting up in-school programs where students can submit their ideas. Even if a box was put in the school office where kids could say what was on their mind. The adults who lead our schools are very concerned about things like budget cut, when in reality, I bet not 2 out of 3 of my friends could tell you what budget cut even means. We need someone to listen to us, by whatever means it takes. We, as students, are much more interested in things like the quality of equipment and technology our school has, how much our teachers **respect** us, what the material we're learning is, and the quality of things like textbooks. ... We need teachers and parents to talk to their students and children and explain to them the benefits of getting an education. They also need to understand how it all builds up, or else they may think that something like diagramming sentences will never come in handy in life. The majority of the students drop out because of things like this, and the rest are just bored out of their minds. ... We also, of course, need to crack down on bullying (and not by suspending bullies, but by trying to make the bullies understand why what they're doing is bad). We do talk about issues like these in school, but changes rarely occur. The students can help come up with the ideas, but it's really up to the district, teachers, and parents to effectively make changes since, after all, it's their job. However, with the right encouragement, I don't think they would have any trouble finding students to help them out."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) [This response was to a post about the difference between men and women teachers in regards to **respect**.] "I've been in classrooms with female teachers where the **respect** meter isn't too bad. But with the same students in a classroom headed by a male teacher, things are much, much worse. I think this is because some students have a difficult time having a male in charge, other than their fathers etc. I'm not sure it's completely a matter of **respect** but maybe more on the trust side. With Brett's quote of a teacher not taking any crap, I think that demands the **respect**, but can show that there is trust going between the student and the teacher."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "This reminded me of the 3rd grader who was sent to stand outside his school with a sign about how he was **disrespectful**. I bet he will never be out of line again! I think you're right, it just takes a teacher not taking any crap."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Yes, I'd say there is a **respect** issue...I have a teacher who doesn't **respect** us (or the rules) enough to turn off her own phone during school...then she laughs when her phone goes off during class. 'Ooohh...I got a text message!' I definitely think teachers need to step it up and follow simple rules so that students will feel more inclined to."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “And once that trust is established for the student, they will probably work harder to not violate it. On the other hand, giving students too much of a free leash can have negative results. Students can become cocky and think they can get away with almost everything. I think this is where the discipline comes in.”

In the SSO Goes Alternative group some students reported that the first time they felt respected (at school, and sometimes in their lives) was in the family-like atmosphere at their learning-alternative. Some parents were respectful and involved, but the students felt disrespected/not cared about at their traditional school, which impacted their ability or willingness/motivation to learn.

Joe (Phoenix Learning Center) “Yea there was a big difference in Phoenix Learning Center, they treated us with way more **respect**. Well, the assistant principal told me that it would be a good school for me, so I didn't really know what he meant by that and I still don't really know.”

Kari, Riverbend ALC “ALC (area learning center) schools have a message that no other schools can deliver to their students. ALC schools make you aware that you are welcome; that you can have trust in them, and that you'll fit in among the other students. They don't judge you even if you came from the streets. They give you the hope and encouragement to graduate and move on to better things in life. If you've never gone to or visited an ALC you're missing out. At traditional schools, the teachers didn't care whether you were there or not, all they cared about was piling more and more work on you. They were inconsiderate and didn't care about what each individual student was going through like the ALC does.”

Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC “There is a more of an "everyone knows everyone" thing going around [at ALCs]. And I think the smaller environment is one big thing to that. Cause there are less students so everyone knows who it is if someone wants to start something. And most the kids in my learning alternative are probably their cause they don't want to deal with so much peoples crap. In my school there is no social standard and that's one key thing. No kid likes to be told they are lower than someone else. That makes kids wanna live up to something. Make themselves seem better then the person who lowered them. And if you completely eliminate that then there is no problem.”

Molly, Riverbend ALC “Before I started going to ALC I never wanted to go to school because classmates of mine would make fun of me and didn't seem to care how I felt. When I started at the ALC I met the nicest most caring people there. For the first time in my life I wasn't shy to talk to new people. People were friendly and I felt comfortable there. Since I have been going to the ALC I know now how it feels to get **respected** by my classmates.”

Shaine, Phoenix Learning Center “In alternative schools there is a lot more freedom. They let you do what you need to do without making you do what you need to do. The best thing is the family in it. The worst thing is we have to go home on the weekends. The best thing about mainstream schools was leaving there. The worst thing was the teachers treated you like a child.”

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding respect, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: studentspeakout@map150.org