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Success, failure in first two weeks shape the school year

By Thomas R. Guskey

We soon will experience the most important time in the entire school year for children: the first two weeks. What happens during this critical period pretty much determines how the rest of the year will go.

When children return to school after the summer break, their perceptions about school and themselves as learners are mostly uncertain. It's a new year with new teachers, new books, new classes, new schedules and new friends. All of these new things come with the hope that this year could be different and better than all previous years.

That uncertainty in students' perceptions continues only until teachers administer the first quizzes and tests near the end of the second week of school. When teachers assign grades to those first quizzes, the grades put students into categories. And getting out of a category is really difficult.

Students who receive a C on that first math quiz, for example, begin to see themselves as C students. Their uncertainty suddenly becomes fixed, and they accept the idea that they are likely to earn Cs in math for the rest of the school year.

When the second quiz or test occurs, they expect to receive another C. When they do, it reinforces their perception. Similarly, if they receive a failing grade on that first quiz, they think all following grades will be the same.

But if they succeed on that first quiz and receive a high grade, that, too, is their perception of all that might follow.

This means that teachers must do everything they can to ensure students' success in the first two weeks. And not fake success, but success in something challenging. The key to motivating students rests with that success. Students persist in activities at which they experience success, and they avoid activities at which they are not successful or believe they cannot be successful.

This is the reason that truancy and attendance problems rarely occur during the first two weeks of the school year. They begin to occur after the first graded quizzes and tests. In students' minds, the grades they receive on these first quizzes establish their likelihood of future success. And why come to school if there is so little chance of doing well?

Parents, too, must be genuinely involved in their children's education during the first two weeks. Routines established at home in this critical period profoundly affect the likelihood of success.

Daily conversations about school activities help children recognize that their parents value success in school. Providing a quiet place for children to work on school assignments and limiting the time they spend watching TV or playing on computers further increase chances for success. Checking with teachers to make sure children are well prepared and ready to succeed also can help.

Successful experiences during the first two weeks of school do not guarantee success for the entire year. But they are a powerful and perhaps essential step in that direction.

Teachers and parents need to take advantage of this critical time and use it well. It can make all the difference.

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